

## **Epworth Guards: A Forgotten Youth Movement**

Most adults raised in the Methodist Church can identify the Epworth League as the predecessor of MYF – Methodist Youth Fellowship, that cherished organization that provided healthy social interaction for teens of the 1940's, 50's and 60's. The more knowledgeable can even assert that the Epworth League was formally organized in 1890 and functioned until the 1920's – when it was absorbed by the General Board of Education in an attempt to unify the educational programs of the denomination.

There were, however, subtle behind-the-scenes influences motivating the creation of the Epworth League and one of its little-known components, the Epworth Guards. Using materials transported to the conference archives when Stevens Memorial Church in Harrisburg was closed in April 2004, this paper examines those early days of youth work within the Methodist Episcopal Church.

While it's difficult to identify one particular moment at which to begin this study, we select February 2, 1881 – the date of the formal organization of Christian Endeavor by Dr. Francis E. Clark, pastor of the Williston Congregational Church in Portland ME. Recalling that moment, Rev. Clark later wrote: "In the winter of 1880 - 81, in connection with some Sunday-school prayer-meetings, quite a large number of boys and girls of my congregation seemed hopefully converted... The question became serious. How shall this band be trained, how shall they be set to work, how shall they be fitted for church membership?"

From the beginning, the stated purpose of Christian Endeavor was as follows: "The organizing principle of the society was that once converted, the young person needed to be trained and equipped for churchmanship." The distinguishing philosophy of the movement was that it was to train by practice, not instruction.

To put it mildly, Christian Endeavor enjoyed wild popularity. Among denominations just recognizing the importance of reaching young people, and not knowing where to begin, Christian Endeavor was embraced as the paradigm for youth ministry in the church. The organization grew rapidly both nationally and internationally.

Clark was especially adept at utilizing the newspaper. He selected 500 newspapers from all over the country to publish the pledge, purpose and meeting information of Christian Endeavor. The purchase of the Golden Rule publishing company in 1886 gave Christian Endeavor the resources to mass produce newsletters and other Christian Endeavor resources, and to distribute them world-wide. With regards to the growth of Christian Endeavor, one

could argue that Clark's business savvy was as influential as his insight into the needs of youth

But the movement to not go uncriticized. Some complained that CE was drawing youth away from the church – even though Clark's goal was to prepare them for work in the church. Others objected to the role of young women in the group – that allowing females in leadership positions was unscriptural. Despite its strong emphasis on the Scripture, CE was also criticized for having recreation and fellowship activities in the group meetings. The use of recreation/fellowship activities was relatively unheard of prior to this time – and the “mingling” of young men and women at a church function, not to mention the idea of having fun within the church, was suspect to say the least.

In the end, these criticisms did not deter the growth of Christian Endeavor. Some denominations attempted to start their own programs, but almost all eventually reverted back to welcoming Christian Endeavor Societies into the church. Within United Methodism, for example, CE proved to be an important and effective part of the early youth work in both the Evangelical and United Brethren denominations.

The Methodist Episcopal Church, however, was the single major denomination large enough, and with sufficient physical and financial resources, to provide its young people with a competing program. In addition to the criticisms voiced above, Methodism was particularly concerned about the “congregational” origins and general philosophy of Christian Endeavor – that the independence from church structure and ecumenical spirit of Christian Endeavor would undermine the strong episcopal and authoritarian concepts upon which Methodism (at least as perceived in the Methodist Episcopal Church) was founded. It was against this backdrop that the Epworth League was created in 1890.

After further discussions and clarifications, the General Conference of 1892 officially recognized and adopted the Epworth League – with Bishop Fitzgerald as its first president, publications which were the official organs of the league, appropriate structure and boards at all levels, and Article One of the Constitution of the Epworth League which stated that “the pastor shall have general supervision of the League.”

It may be argued that the preceding paragraphs give a gross oversimplification and a biased presentation of the formation of the Epworth League. The Epworth League represented, in fact, the coming together of five predecessor organizations: the Young People's Methodist Alliance, the Oxford League, the Young People's Christian League, the Methodist Young People's Union, and the Young People's Methodist Episcopal Alliance. But even the oldest of these, the Young People's Methodist Alliance, only came into existence on August 25, 1883 – illustrating the frenzy created as the denomination struggled to enter into youth ministry.

The following two paragraphs, part of a longer article in Charles Taze Russell's *Zion's Watch Tower*, appeared immediately following the Second International Epworth League Convention of June 27-30, 1895. While this commentary from the Jehovah's Witness denomination may not be unbiased, it is typical of those who argue that the Epworth League was formed in some sense as a reaction to the YPSCE [Young People's Society of Christian Endeavor].

But "Christian Endeavor" had its rise amongst Congregationalists, and bears the stamp of their love of liberty in that its officers, etc., are selected by general ballot. The astute managers of Methodism soon saw that the Young People's movement had come to stay, and that if as young people they got the idea of managing their own affairs, selecting their own leaders, officers, etc., it would not be long before they would get to be old folks and have the same ideas respecting conferences, choosing their own ministers, etc.; and this would mean the destruction of the Methodist Episcopal polity, by which the bishops or clergy now manage that denomination's affairs so successfully.

As a result the Epworth League was organized, to handle the young folks of the M.E. Church; and in an unobtrusive manner accustom them to the recognition of Episcopacy in their affairs. Otherwise they are identical with the Y.P.S.C.E. This movement also has scored quite a success. It has just held a convention at Chattanooga, Tenn., where nearly fifteen thousand delegates were in attendance. The M.E. young people are being withdrawn from the Y.P.S.C.E. and from the "Boy's Brigade" into the "Epworth League" and the "Epworth Guards," in which the Church Pastor always has the control. As the Episcopal *system* made the Church of Rome powerful and great, so the same *system* is daily adding power and influence to the M.E. Church.

It's the next to the last sentence above, that the Epworth Guards were formed as a reaction to the Boys Brigade, that directly relates to the title of this paper. In the late 1890's, the directories of the Thirteenth Street Methodist Episcopal Church [which became Stevens Memorial Church when the present building was erected in 1909] contain the usual lists of congregation members and officers of the various organizations – including those for the Epworth League: president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, chorister, etc. But one of the officers in the Epworth League is "Captain of the Guards."

A separate page lists the officers of the Epworth Guards, and indicates it was organized October 17, 1895. In addition to the captain who was listed as an officer of the Epworth League, there are other positions – all with military titles: first lieutenant, commissary sergeant, musical sergeant, corporal, bugler, etc. While the officers of the Epworth League could be of either gender, the Epworth Guards was clearly an all male organization.

To make the story short, one could simply say that the Boys Brigade is really the Boy Scouts and that Methodism formed the Epworth Guards for the same reason it formed the Epworth League – to create an organization patterned after a successful youth movement, but an organization over which it had direct control. While that shortened version is essentially true, there are important differences between the Boys Brigade (started in 1883) and the Boy Scouts (started in 1907).

In 1873, nineteen-year-old William Smith was converted during the great Moody-Sankey revival in Glasgow, Scotland. Ten years later he was

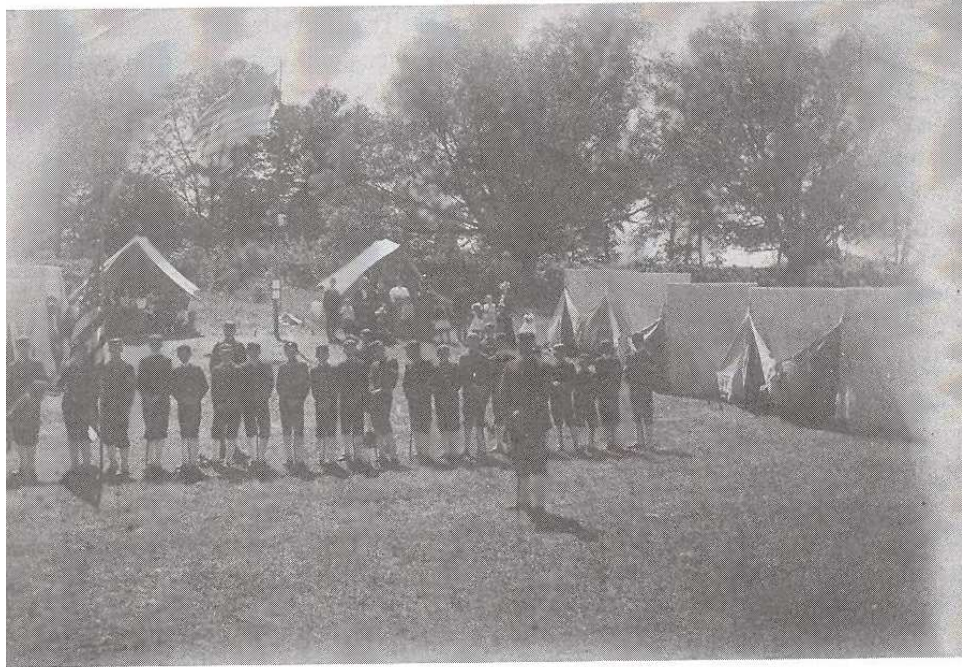
teaching a Sabbath School class in which he found the older boys were bored and restless. He compared this with the time he spent Saturday afternoon as a lieutenant, when he had no difficulty making 100 young men obey his every word of command on the nearby drill ground. Why not turn the Sabbath School boys into a volunteer brigade with the same military order, obedience, discipline and self-respect as the volunteers? He planned a program combining games, discipline, gymnastics and sports. A simple uniform completed the idea and the Boys Brigade, the first uniformed youth organization in the world, was born in Glasgow on October 4, 1883.

After three years the movement numbered 2,000 – mostly around Glasgow. Soon thereafter the Boys Brigade filtered southward into England, and then Ireland and Nigeria, and across the Atlantic. Smith's visit to America in 1895 greatly encouraged the work in this country. The first camp was held in 1886 – despite the public horror boys sleeping out in “the wilds.” Through it all, the purpose was “the advancement of Christ's kingdom among boys and the promotion of habits of reverence, discipline, self-respect... towards a true Christian manliness.”

Robert Baden-Powell was a career soldier who successfully trained young soldiers as scouts by giving them badges as they reached various levels of competence. His 1899 book *Aids to Scouting* was intended for military leaders. When he returned to England in 1903, he found that his book was being used by youth leaders and teachers all over the country. It was then that William Smith, in an effort to introduce more variety into the Boys Brigade, invited Baden-Powell to teach scouting at the annual brigade conference. Seeing the possibilities, Baden-Powell began re-writing his book *Aids to Scouting*, this time for a younger and non-military audience. In 1907 he held an experimental camp and, as they say, the rest is history.

One could oversimplify the preceding to say that Boys Brigade is a Christian organization with a physical and disciplinary component, and Boy Scouts is a skills-based organization with a strong moral component. When the Epworth League and Epworth Guards were formed, the Boy Scouts did not yet exist – but the growing success of the Boys Brigade encouraged the Methodist Episcopal Church to develop such a program for its own young men.

The two remarkable July 1900 photographs on the next page were found among the materials transferred to the conference archives when the Stevens Memorial Church closed in April 2004. It is unknown how many other area Methodist congregations had an Epworth Guards organization for their older boys.



Visitors' Day. Camp Al K. Thomas. Aqueduct. July 1900.



In star formation at Camp Al K. Thomas. Aqueduct. July 1900.

of the congregation. In 1900, Al K. Thomas was in his early 20's and living at home (440 S. Sixteenth Street) with his parents (Findlay I. and Agnes E. Thomas) and sister (A. Blanche). He had, however, served as president of the Epworth League for several years. By 1916 he was married, living at 2107 Jonestown Road [now Walnut Street], and providing a home for his widowed father [his mother died in 1908 and his father, a Civil War veteran, lived until 1922]. He was also in his sixth year as superintendent of the Sunday School at Stevens Memorial – which, with 1,828 members, claimed to be “one of the 38 great Sunday Schools” in the denomination. After serving as superintendent for several more years, he became the long-time teacher of one of the ladies' Sunday School classes.

Professionally, Al K. Thomas started as a cashier at the East End Bank and rose to become vice-president of the East End Trust Company. This building, with the name engraved across the top, still stands at Thirteenth and Market – although it no longer serves as a bank. His children included at least two sons: Alfred K. Thomas Jr (1908-1991), a lifelong United Methodist who was a member at Grace Church in Mechanicsburg at the time of his death; Robert F. Thomas, a ministerial son of Stevens Memorial Church who served various conference congregations 1934-40 before entering the ministry of the Episcopal Church and serving congregations in Pennsylvania, West Virginia, North Carolina and Kentucky.

The Thomas family joined at Thirteenth Street by letter of transfer in 1890. As his father was one of the original trustees of Stevens Memorial and secretary of the official board for over ten years, Al K. Thomas was part of a family with least three generations of active participation in area Methodism. He was also involved beyond the local church, for page 25 of 1925 conference journal states that, “By permission, Mr. Al K. Thomas of Harrisburg presented the financial needs of the Epworth Church of that city.”

While one can only assume that the July 1900 gathering bore his name because he was the young man who pushed for it to happen, the fact he did go on to become a significant leader in the church certainly justified the designation. There is one other possibility that bears mentioning: Since Mrs. Al K. Thomas is listed as joining at Thirteenth Street on August 1, 1900, the gathering may have been named in honor of Al's wedding and/or the recognition that this would be the last Epworth Guards event that the soon-to-be-married Mr. Thomas could attend. Attempts to learn more about Camp Al K. Thomas from either the family or the congregation have not been successful.

The place of the gathering is identified as Aqueduct, assumed to be to location of that name northwest of Duncannon and southwest of Duncan's Island where the canal aqueduct crossed the Juniata River.

Other material at the conference archives indicates that there was also a uniformed organization for Methodist boys called the Knights of Methodism. This organization was created as the boys division of the Methodist Brotherhood – the forerunner of United Methodist Men. It appears that the organization was sponsored jointly by the Epworth League, the Methodist Brotherhood, and the denomination’s Board of Sunday Schools – probably so that the boys of a congregation could be formed into a Knights of Methodism chapter so long as the congregation had one of the sponsoring organizations.

The various uniforms, rings and other items of the Knights of Methodism appear to mimic those of the fraternal societies – which is strange, because the Methodist Brotherhood had no such costumes. Furthermore, the motivation behind the creation of a denominational fraternal-type society for boys is vague – not only were such groups were never a threat to Methodism, but its members and leaders proudly identified with them.

Members of the Knights of Methodism progressed from Loyal Prince, to Victor, to Lion-Hearted. The pictures and prices displayed on the back covers are taken from Knights of Methodism catalogue printed about 1915. Be aware that the pants and shoes on the Loyal Prince are not part of the costume, but the proper attire for a well-dressed young lad of that day. It is unknown whether any conference church had an active Knights of Methodism organization.

The Epworth Guards and the Knights of Methodism apparently were both connected in some way to the Epworth League. The exact nature of their relationships to the Epworth League and to each other appear to have been lost, and very little information about either organization is available from the usual sources for historical Methodist denominational information. Anyone with any knowledge, memories or memorabilia concerning these forgotten organizations is asked to contact the conference archives.

