

Carrie Barge House Party: The Tradition Continues

In recent years the United Methodist Women of the Central Pennsylvania Conference have begun reaching out to future members by sponsoring “junior UMW societies” on college campuses and an annual Girls’ Gathering for God. The idea is not a new one, however, as one of the most successful efforts in that direction existed from 1923 to 1960 – the Carrie Barge House Party.

In 1923, the Woman’s Home Missionary Society of the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church offered its first Carrie Barge House Party both to provide missionary education to young women and to present the challenge of home missions as a vocational calling. After considering the idea of a summer camp for some time, the WHMS took final action at its November 9, 1922, Executive Board meeting at Grace Church in Harrisburg. The minutes for that meeting state that Mrs. O.M. Keefer, secretary of the Young People’s work...

presented her report for the young peoples’ societies. In reference to the summer camps, the committee has gone ahead and made their plans. They have secured the use of Dickinson Seminary, Williamsport Pa, with the payment of \$10.00 for light and \$10.00 for cleaning – with costs to be \$7.00 a week for boarding and \$1.00 registration fee. The different Districts shall be asked to contribute \$25.00 towards the expense of missionaries, speakers and leaders. The course consists of study, recreation and inspiration. Mrs. E. Fred Rowe moved that we accept this report and that the conference Executive Board sanction this movement. The motion carried.

While the minutes of the committee that planned and carried out the actual event have not been preserved, the Executive Board at its July 13, 1923, meeting expressed resounding approval for that initial venture. Those minutes indicate that...

a motion was made by Mrs. E.R. Heckman that we as an Executive Board recognize the decided success of the Carrie Barge House Party held in Williamsport June 18 to 25; that we extend to Mrs. O.M. Keefer our great appreciation and thanks for her untiring efforts for success of the same; and that we recognize the organization effected at the close of the House Party and endorse the action taken.

This after-the-event reference is the first surviving use of the name “Carrie Barge House Party” in any surviving minutes, and it would be interesting to know exactly how and when the name came to be. The only readily available information is what the Carrie Barge House Party literature

states. The 1947 25th anniversary program historical statement, for example, includes the following two paragraphs...

Twenty-five years ago when a committee from Central Pennsylvania Conference was making plans for establishing a missionary camp, one Miss Carrie Barge was an inspiration to them, and thus her name was chosen.

Miss Carrie Barge was a native of Delaware, Ohio. She was a graduate of Ohio Wesleyan and very early in life gave herself for full time missionary service. At the time she was ready for her life's work, there was no door open into the field which she had chosen. Just about that time a call came for a leader among girls of the Methodist Episcopal Church in our own land. Miss Barge answered the call and devoted her entire life to girls work throughout our nation.

Exactly who proposed the name and whether Carrie Barge ever had any direct contact with the Central Pennsylvania Conference remain a mystery. Other than the fact that a Carrie Barge Hall exists as a female residence at Bennett College in Greensboro NC, one of United Methodism's historically black institutions of higher learning, further information about the elusive Miss Barge is presently difficult to obtain. While she was once a well-known Methodist figure, the missionary camp bearing her name existed only in the Central Pennsylvania Conference.

Miss Barge graduated from Ohio Wesleyan University in 1897 and involved herself in Christian Education in Tacoma WA. In 1900, as part of the organization needed for WHMS participation in Methodism's *Twentieth Century Thank-Offering* campaign, she became the organizer of Young People's Work for the Pacific Coast. The WHMS soon recognized her unique commitment and spiritual gifts, and in 1901 Carrie Barge was made the first national field secretary for the Department of Young People. In 1910 she was elected the first field secretary for college work and developed a successful and enduring student program. In 1914 Miss Barge joined the Board of Trustees of the WHMS, and in a 1916 structural reorganization she was made the director of the all the field secretaries. She also served as chairman of the WHMS literature committee 1922-25.

Carrie Barge administered the Department of Field Work until 1926. Not content to be a mere overseer and effective trainer of others, she led by example and carried on her own extensive and intensive field work that brought her to many colleges and conferences across the denomination. It was likely an appearance within the Central Pennsylvania Conference that encouraged Mrs. O.M. Keefer and others to plan for a summer missions camp and to name it in honor of Miss Barge.

Failing in health, a victim of Parkinson's disease, Miss Barge resigned from national office in 1926. She was succeeded by one of the products of her years of mentoring, Miss Ida L. Kahlo. That devoted friend assumed a dual role as General Secretary of Field Work and companion for Miss Barge.

Following the 1930 Golden Jubilee of the WHMS, a thorough re-evaluation of the entire organization eliminated the Department of Field Work. Although offered a high-level position within the new structure, Miss Kahlo requested to stay with Carrie Barge. The WHMS honored her wish and made provision for her to remain as a companion and helper to her mentor, which she did until the death of Miss Barge in 1934.

But the name Carrie Barge lived on in the Central Pennsylvania Conference. The Carrie Barge House Party continued until the conference's Woman's Society of Christian Service [WSCS] began its annual School of Missions in 1959. The last documented use of the Barge name appears to be in 1961, when a "Carrie Barge Girl's School of Missions" at Dickinson College in Carlisle was held a week before the regular School of Missions there.

Thanks to some of the early organizers and participants associated with the Carrie Barge House Parties, the conference archives has virtually a complete of advertising brochures, programs, photographs, and other memorabilia from the first gathering in 1923 to the very last one almost forty years later. For some reason the 1943 and 1944 gatherings were held at the Methodist Training Camp near Newton Hamilton, but the others were held on the Williamsport Dickinson Seminary campus in Williamsport.

Among the many who can testify to the impact of these gatherings on their lives is retired diaconal minister Laura R. Hess – interviewed in the summer of 2004..

In the years of my youth, 1940-50, women of the Methodist Church claimed the task of educating young women and girls for missions. In each local church, teens would be invited to join the QUEEN ESTHERS – begun in 1903 as a denominational program to involve young ladies in the missionary work of the church. Each summer Queen Esthers from across the conference would gather at what is now Lycoming College for a week of fellowship, information, inspiration, and opportunity for life dedication to Christ.

At the heart of the event was the challenge that faced Queen Esther: "Who knowest if thou art called to the Kingdom for such a time as this?" Included in the week's programming were morning studies (Bible, missions, hymnology), recreation (picnics and campfires), the Carrie Barge Birthday Party, morning and evening devotions, prayer groups, meeting with missionaries and deaconesses – and the ceremony for crowning a queen. This special closing ceremony would be re-written each year, and those chosen for the court would have to learn their lines and practice.

The most satisfaction came from finding God opening exciting doors. Almost everyone returned home deeply re-committed to Christ, and many discovered God's call to careers of service. I remember some vividly. Blanche Beck of Sunbury would go to the Congo as the wife of missionary Charles Britt, Gene Maxwell would join the staff of the Women's Division and have mountain top experiences with the women of Korea, and I was privileged to give myself to youth work and Christian Education in the Central Pennsylvania Conference.



Staff and attendees at the first Carrie Barge House Party in June 1923.



The closing ceremony – crowning Queen Esther in the 1940's.