

We Remember Luthers Mills

by Bishop Dwight E. Loder, 1976

editor's note: Dwight Ellsworth Loder (1914-2002) was born in Waverly NE and received his call to the ministry after a year of graduate work at the College of Law at the University of Nebraska. He transferred to the Boston University School of Theology, from which he graduated in 1939. He was ordained by the Central New York Conference and served North Towanda charge (Luthers Mills and North Towanda) 1939-41 and Blossburg 1941-47 before joining the staff at the prestigious Hennepin Avenue Methodist Church in Minneapolis MN in 1947 and becoming senior pastor there in 1950. He was named president of Garrett Theological Seminary in 1955 and elected to the episcopacy in 1964, serving until he retired in 1984.

Bishop Loder contributed the comments that follow for the 1976 booklet *We Remember Luthers Mills*, published in celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Methodist Church at Luthers Mills. In this volume of *The Chronicle* that recognizes both prominent and ordinary people within Central Pennsylvania United Methodism, this article does double duty. At the same time that Bishop Loder recalls the lives and contributions of many of the everyday saints at Luthers Mills, he gives us insight into his own character. It is no exaggeration to say that through Bishop Loder the influence of ordinary Methodists in Luthers Mills (and North Towanda and Blossburg) extended across the entire denomination.

I. Luthers Mills was a beautiful place for my bride to learn the terminology of the country and the farms. Mildred had always been a city girl. She knew little about farming and less about farm language. I recall some occasions at Official Board meetings at the home of Grove Lane when she asked questions which might have caused great hilarity. The people were very kind and courteous in giving their answers, but we both knew after we left that they had a good laugh about it. Everyone made us feel at home, and Mildred got her first lessons on how to be a parsonage wife from the people of Luthers Mills and North Towanda. Those lessons gave her a magnificent start, for there has never been a better parsonage wife

II. It was at Luthers Mills I discovered one of my hidden talents. I became a rural barber. There were three elderly gentlemen at different places on the parish whose hair I cut when I visited them. I carried a pair of hand clippers, shears, and a comb. I am sorry I cannot remember the names of any of them now – but I remember the breathlessness with which I would trim their hair, wondering if I could balance one side against the other. After a time I became quite

proficient. In fact, in later years when our sons were small boys, it was not uncommon for me to trim their hair. Just another chapter out of the country parson's notebook.

III. We remember Jake Bailey as one of the most interesting and challenging people – not only of our years in Luthers Mills, but of all our years in the ministry. You will remember that he lived up on top of the hill by himself. He was then, I believe, in his seventies and had been a bachelor all of his life. He showed all the characteristic signs of bachelorhood. He was well read, politically astute and committed, religious, and (I always suspected) reasonably prosperous. He was in the highest sense of the word a character.

Jake used to drive his cattle down the middle of the highway from his barn to the pasture, and all of the bus lines, the truckers and frequent travelers down Route 6 had that hill marked with caution. They knew they were apt to see Jake Bailey and his cattle occupying the entire highway when they came over the brow of the hill. So far as he was concerned that was his road: he was there before it was ever built.

I used to pick him up on the way to church Sunday mornings and on the way to Official Board Meetings. One Sunday he confessed to me that he had walked all the way to church on Saturday thinking that I had forgotten him. He had gotten fouled up on his days and was a day off, thinking it was Sunday morning. One night when I stopped to pick him up for an Official Board Meeting, he had forgotten about it. He was in the barn getting ready to do his chores. I told him to go ahead and bed the animals down, and I would milk the cow. He gave me an incredulous look, handed me the milk stool and the pail and walked away. Then he came creeping up on the other side of the cow, where he thought I could not see him, and stood with his ear cocked in my direction until I make the milk rattle in the bottom of the pail. Then he went off into the back of the barn laughing out loud and saying loud enough so I could hear him, "Well I'll be danged, what do you know about that, the preacher can milk a cow. Ha! Ha! Ha! The preacher can milk a cow." We were both a little late for the Board Meeting, but it was worth it. Jake discovered his preacher was just a farmer at heart, and he was happy about it.

He prided himself on the fact that he had never gone to sleep in church from the time we had arrived. This went on for nearly a year, and then one Sunday in the middle of winter the cold air outside and the warm air inside proved to be too much for him. Even before I got started on the sermon, his head was back and he was sound asleep. By the time I started to preach, his mouth had fallen open and he was snoring and puffing. I have no idea what I preached about that day, nor did most of the people in church. That was Jake's Sunday! I told him at the end of the service he had broken his record, that he couldn't brag about not going to sleep in church any more. He swore up and down he heard every word of the sermon, but I could never get him to tell me what I had said.

One time Jake's niece came and papered his house for him. It had never been papered. When I stopped to pick him up one Sunday morning several weeks later, Jake did not answer the horn. I went to the house and batted on the door. I always had a fear I might find Jake dead in bed or somewhere around his property. I opened the door slowly and felt like "Chicken Little" when she said "the sky has fallen." The paper from the ceiling in his kitchen had let loose and was swooping down, scarcely above the cookstove. The whole ceiling was like an inverted rainbow. I stooped down and walked over to the kitchen stove, which was entirely covered with broken egg shells, except for a small area where there were two cooking pans. I began to call for Jake and he answered me from his bedroom. He was changing his clothes to go to church. His clock had stopped and he had no idea what time it was. I was glad to find him alive, I waited for him and gladly took the minutes we were late out of the sermon time. It was more important to have Jake in church than it was to preach.

He was a memorable old man, and I honor him because he had a brilliant mind and a very gracious spirit.

IV. Then there was the church janitor. He lived next to the church. His name was Welles Hollenback. He did his best to keep the church clean and comfortable and warm in the winter, but he was not always successful in doing one or the other. I shall always remember our first Christmas service. Dear friends of ours from Boston came to visit us. We arrived for the Sunday morning service, walked into the church, and it sounded like an army in the basement beating on cold washtubs. Welles was in the basement trying to start the fire. The church was no more than twenty degrees. He had been unable to get the fire to burn that morning. We were chagrined. The hammering and beating and shaking went on during much of the service until at last he pulled a couple of pipes apart and the whole room filled with smoke. It got so thick you could not see from the front to the back or the back to the front. Our eyes burned, our lungs burned, and finally we gave up. We had had about half of the service, people standing in the aisles and in the pews with their overcoats and hats on, beating their arms against their sides trying to keep warm. It would have made a great picture for a Normal Rockwell.

It was not uncommon for Mr. Hollenback to feel it necessary to go to the basement and shake the furnace just at what I felt was a crucial point in my sermon. I tried to get him to work out a signal system with me so that I would know when he was going to shake the furnace, but somehow we never managed to get it synchronized. He was a willing soul, however, and always did his best.

V. We remember the fried chicken dinners the women in Luthers Mills used to prepare for the public. That was always an event. Can my memory be correct, that the price was seventy-five cents and the quantity was all you could eat? It seems that way, and it was delicious. I can remember that as the interest and activity in the church increased, the women of the community became more

active and worked with greater zeal than ever before. We had great times at the chicken dinners. It was especially delightful because this was the first time in history Luthers Mills had raised money for world service, and some of the money went in that direction.

VI. We remember the youth of Luthers Mills. They became very active and supportive. We had great times together. We had parties at the Carmans or the Madigans, or at the church, time and again. I especially remember one ice skating party at Sugar Creek, down in front of the church below Carman's house. We built a big bonfire by the ice. I had braced up my football knee and was skating for the first time in many years. It was great sport. We had a good crowd. I believe it was Andy Finnerty who rigged up floodlights on the bridge facing up the creek toward the Carmans. We played pom pom pullaway. Two of the youth chased me to the baseline, and when I arrived safely I straightened up and coasted on under the bridge. When my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I suddenly realized that I was coasting right into an area of the creek where there was rippling water. My reflex action was to dig in my heels. I sat down very hard on the ice, and the ice under me gave way so that my seat was hanging into the water under the ice – and there I sat! The young people were making so much noise that no one could hear me, and the edge of the ice was no more than fifteen feet in front of me. I knew it was thin enough to break away under my seat. What was I to do? I began to roll over very slowly, and I rolled over and over until I was back safely under the bridge. I spent most of the rest of the evening by the bonfires trying to dry out.

VII. Above all else I remember the faithful – the families who made the church the center of importance in that little community during the time we lived there. It was the hard work and faithful service of those who had always been a part of the church that made it possible for us to fill it up with people. I remember full well how disgusted I was when the District Superintendent informed me that the Bishop was moving us to Blossburg. We did not want to go, but we went. My thoughts about bishops were not too kindly, and now perhaps the Lord has arranged to help me understand better the problems that Bishops face. I must say, however, I have never moved a minister if the parish wanted him to stay and the minister did not want to go. Perhaps that goes back to my experience at Luthers Mills.

Mildred and I cherish our memories of this wonderful beginning, not only for our ministry but also for our home and family.