

## **Our Years in Northeast Pennsylvania**

*by Thelma Proof<sup>1</sup>, 1970*

Walter<sup>2</sup> asked me to marry him in the winter of 1932, and the engagement became official when he gave me my diamond on Valentine's Day of that year. After some consideration, we decided on May 25<sup>th</sup> as the date to be married. Walter was the pastor of the Choconut Center and West Chenango Methodist Episcopal churches of the Binghamton District of the Wyoming Conference, and we planned on living in the Choconut Center parsonage, which was not far from Johnson City NY. The salary was \$1200 a year.

Annual Conference in those days was in April, and it was then that Walter was offered a three-point charge in Pennsylvania with a raise in salary of \$200 a year. Of course, he accepted it. Two hundred dollars was quite a sum in those days. The churches he would serve were Rome, North Orwell and Lake Wesawking<sup>3</sup>.

### ROME, NORTH ORWELL & LAKE WESAUKING

After getting permission from the pastor at Rome, we went down one evening to have a look at our first home. I think I had imagined that all Methodist parsonages were as beautifully furnished and taken care of as the one that stood next to the First Methodist Church in Endicott. What a sad awakening!

The Rome parsonage is large (ten rooms) and quite modern in appearance. It is located in the downtown section of Rome, while the church is at the outskirts of town across from the cemetery.

The pastor admitted us and he and his wife showed us through the house. On the first floor there was a kitchen, dining-room, two living rooms, and a

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<sup>1</sup> Thelma A. Hanley Proof (1908-2005) wrote "Our Years in the Churches" when her husband retired from the ministry in 1970, which was apparently part of an even more extensive autobiographical work. Only their first two charges as a couple were in the Pennsylvania portion of the former Wyoming Conference. This volume of *The Chronicle* reprints the portion of that longer document that applies to those two charges. Both Rev. and Mrs. Proof were raised in the First Methodist Episcopal Church in Endicott NY, to which place they eventually retired, and they are buried in that city's Riverhurst Cemetery.

<sup>2</sup> Walter H. Proof (1904-1986) was a young man teaching Sunday School and working with the Epworth League when he felt called to full-time Christian ministry. He resumed his education at Wyoming Seminary, attended Colgate University, and finished his ministerial training by completing the Conference Course of Study and taking extension courses at Syracuse University.

<sup>3</sup> The charge today consists of Rome and North Orwell. As the number of churches on the Rome charge drops from 3 to 2 in 1942, it is assumed that the Lake Wesawking appointment was dropped at that time and the building sold. All that is known about this building is what appears in this paper. Lake Wesawking [more commonly spelled as Lake Wesauking] is 2.5 miles due north of the village of Wysox.

bedroom. Upstairs there were four bedrooms, a hall, and the pastor's study. But where was the bathroom? Good question! When we asked, they said there was no bathroom – just outdoor accommodations!

The parsonage was furnished very shabbily. The few pieces that looked fairly good, the minister's wife told me, were theirs – and they would take them when they moved. In fact, she confided she was compelled to use wooden boxes for furniture in some places. We could see that the couple had dogs and the rugs were badly soiled and worn. Both the minister and his wife inferred that the condition of the parsonage was due to the miserly attitude of the parishioners.

I began to wonder if I was really cut out to be a minister's wife – and as soon as we were back in the car, I burst into tears.

"Oh, Walter," I wailed, "what are we going to do? That house looks awful."

Walter appeared calm. "Don't worry," he said, "I think everything will turn out all right."

I don't know where he got his optimism, but I accepted it and dried my tears.

The next week Walter moved his few possessions to the Rome parsonage and began the job of preparing sermons and getting acquainted with the Methodist people of Rome, North Orwell and Lake Wesawking. Some women from the Ladies Aid Society came to look at the parsonage and decided to do some papering. When Walter called their attention to the rugs, they said, "Take them out and burn them. They aren't fit to be used." The church trustees voted to take space from an upstairs bedroom closet and put in a nice bathroom. Walter tackled the job of cleaning up the downstairs floors. He used a sander to clean the stains and was happy to find beautiful light-colored hardwood floors. Then, instead of varnishing them, he proceeded to wax and polish them. They were really lovely.

Now, what about furniture? The bedrooms were furnished with old beds and dressers. The only living room furniture was a library table and two oak chairs, Walter brought his desk and a table. I would bring my piano. When they saw the situation, a Mr. and Mrs. Kinney who were well-to-do church members gave Walter a check for \$200 with which to buy furniture.

There was an ad in the paper for a big sale at a furniture store in Binghamton, so we went up to see what we could find. For \$200 we bought a three-piece living-room suite, a complete dining-room outfit, and two Cogswell chairs<sup>4</sup>. The furniture dealer threw in a little rocker. Walter explained that we were not yet married and the house was not ready for the furniture. The company agreed to keep our furniture until we were ready for it.

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<sup>4</sup> A Cogswell chair was an upholstered easy chair, open underneath the armrests, with curved ornamental front legs.

I had saved a hundred dollars from my meager earnings at the E.J.<sup>5</sup> Sales Building. Walter sent me the measurements for the parsonage windows and doors, and I bought what was needed for curtains. I chose pretty cottage curtains for the kitchen, lace curtains and drapes for the living rooms, and ruffled tie-backs for the dining-room and bedrooms. I was given several bridal showers and received some useful gifts.

As the marriage date drew near, Walter suggested that he bring me to the parsonage and we would spend the day putting our things in place. My mother frowned on the idea and said that I should not spend a day down there with him before we were married, as the people might talk and there would be gossip. When I told Walter about her objection, he said, "Very well, ask her to come with us." I did and she did. And so it was that the three of us worked at the parsonage one day, washing windows and cleaning cupboards, and putting up curtains and drapes, and laying bedspreads on the beds.

We were married on May 25<sup>th</sup> as planned. It was a Wednesday morning at ten o'clock. My wedding dress was a medium shade of blue crepe and had a yoke of white material. It was short-sleeved with a cape of the same material that was held together by a large jeweled button. It cost \$25, the most I ever paid for a dress, but this was my wedding dress and I could afford to splurge. A large white hat complimented the dress.

We were married in the Endicott First Methodist parsonage. At the end of the ceremony, Walter gave the minister, the Rev. John Frey, \$5.00, which was the usual payment at that time. The minister gave the money to his wife, and she gave it to me.

When we came out of the parsonage, a group of young people threw rice at us as we ran to the car, which they had decorated with signs and tin cans tied on the back. And we started our trip to Niagara Falls.

It was not a lengthy honeymoon, but it was an eventful one. We were arrested! At one point on our trip, Walter suggested that I drive a ways. I had a learner's permit and he had been teaching me to drive. We hadn't gone far when we were stopped by a state trooper who asked to see my license. The learner's permit had expired! He took us to the office of the justice of the peace and we were fined – I for driving, and Walter for letting me drive. I do not remember the amount of that fine, but I am sure it put a dent in the amount Walter had planned to spend for our trip.

We were back in Endicott Saturday afternoon and, after buying a few groceries, we went to Rome to begin married life. I might add that the market where we bought our groceries was on Washington Avenue, in the building

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<sup>5</sup> The prosperous Endicott-Johnson Shoe Company was the largest employer in that part of New York's southern tier.

owned by my brother Ray. It was a beautiful modern building he had put up to replace the four little shops I mentioned in my first journal.

The next day I went to church in Rome and North Orwell and could feel the eyes of the congregations as I walked down the aisle. Let me tell you about those two churches. They were both one-room wood structures. As I entered the sanctuary, I saw a big black stove with a chimney that went a long way to the ceiling. The floors were rough and bare. At one side in the front was an organ that had to be pumped by foot. Around the organ there were five or six people known as the choir. They did not wear robes, but were clothed in their Sunday best. At a certain point in the service, these folks stood up and sang a hymn referred to as the anthem or “special music”. The church in Rome had lovely stained glass memorial windows, but I think the North Orwell windows were plain glass.

After the benediction, I was greeted warmly by the congregation as they filed out of the church.

Now I must tell you about the little church at Lake Wesawking. That, too, was a one-room building. The interior walls and ceiling were covered with beautiful light-colored narrow wainscoting. There was no electricity. Kerosene lamps lighted the church. There was a lamp at the pulpit and one at the organ. In the center of the ceiling there was a chandelier that could be pulled down to the desired height position. Around the circumference of the chandelier there were more kerosene lamps. There may have been others around the church. I don’t remember.

There was a woman, a Mrs. Miller, who did the janitor work at the little church – and it was her job to see that the lamps were filled with kerosene, the wicks trimmed, and the chimneys cleaned. Mrs. Miller’s husband had recently died and she was left with small children to raise. I felt very sorry for her. There was a hymn we used to sing that was called, “Does Jesus Care?” and the chorus was

*Oh yes He cares, I know he cares;  
His heart is touched by my grief.  
When the days are weary, the long nights dreary,  
I know my Savior cares.*

I always associated that hymn with Mrs. Miller – and if I were to hear it today, I would think of her.

During the winter we went to Lake Wesawking services in the afternoon because of bad roads, but in the summer we had services in the evening – and it was so peaceful to worship in that lovely little church with its flickering lamplight. The services were attended by a few members, mostly farmers, and by city folks who were summer boarders at the lake. Occasionally a farmer would open his home for a public dinner. What good dinners we had for 25¢.

The next week after we were married, Walter and an Endicott friend who was in the trucking business went to the Binghamton store to get our furniture. It is hard to imagine their shock to find the store in bankruptcy proceedings and nothing could be taken out until the case was settled. Walter went to a phone and called Mr. Humphrey, a lawyer friend in Endicott. Mr. Humphrey told him to go to another lawyer in Binghamton and tell him the circumstances.

“Then,” he said, “go back to the store and I think you will be able to get your furniture.”

Walter followed his instructions and sure enough, he was able to take the furniture. The company had sold the dining-room set we had ordered, so Walter paid \$25 extra and got a better one.

The parsonage looked lovely with our new furniture, and we settled down to a routine. The people of our churches had a shower for us in the Methodist Hall in Rome – and I think all the townspeople were invited, as there was a large crowd. We were given gifts of household items and some food. I remember getting vegetables, canned chicken and maple syrup. The Rome church gave us a living room clock. It had to be wound and had a pretty chime. The North Orwell church gave us a floor lamp, and the people at Lake Wesawking gave us a pressure cooker.

I attended church services with Walter and sang in the choirs. I did not take part in Sunday School, but helped the young people in other ways. I remember coaching a one-act play, *The Blue Teapot*. We took the play “on the road.” I attended Ladies Aid Meetings and did my part at church suppers. I frequently called on the people with Walter, and we grew quite close to some of them. We were invited out to meals often, and I remember that sometimes there were several deserts on the table – pie, cake, donuts, etc.

We had been married a little over a month when my brother Ray appealed to us for help. His wife Grace had been taken ill with what the doctor thought was tuberculosis. He said that she should go away for complete rest at Raybrook Sanitarium in the Adirondacks. They had a little boy Bobby, not quite two, and Ray asked if we would take care of him while Grace was away. Neither Walter nor I knew anything about taking care of children, but I am proud to say that without hesitation we said, “Yes.”

And so Bobby came with his bed, his clothes, some baby food, and his toys. He settled very easily into life at the Rome parsonage. He taught us a great deal. I tried to take him to church, but when he saw Walter going to the pulpit he got away from me and ran down calling, “Uncle Wauk.” I was embarrassed and took him out to the car. If I could do it over again, I would have more patience and would have taught him to be quiet in church. Ray told us he would pay a woman to stay with Bobby at church time. We were able to hire a widow, Mrs.

Campbell, to baby-sit for 25¢ an hour. These were depression years and she was glad to earn a little money.

My sister Vivian and her husband Clifford had had the family Thanksgiving dinner ever since they were married, but that year they decided to attend a big lodge meeting in New York and announced that they couldn't have it. Walter said, "Let's have it." I knew very little about getting a meal of that kind, but Walter was a good cook and was confident we could do it. On Thanksgiving Eve he had a service in the North Orwell Church, and I put Bobby to bed and began to make a crust for a pumpkin pie. I was having a struggle to roll out the crust when Bobby came back downstairs.

I said, "Bobby, why don't you stay in bed?"

"Can't sleep," was his brief answer.

Well. Of course, you can't expect a fellow to stay in bed if he "can't sleep." So I picked him up and rocked him. When Walter came home, he saw the hopeless situation – a little boy that couldn't sleep and a pie crust that wouldn't roll out. He carried Bobby back up to bed and said, "Goodnight, Bob," and that was settled. No more little footsteps coming down the stairs. He took the pie crust outdoors and did something so that it would roll out.

We had a turkey to cook and didn't have a roaster large enough, so he put it in a dripping pan on the top of the stove, placed a laundry tub over it, and steamed it until it was done. Then it was put in the oven to brown.

I think it was probably a good dinner. Walter went to Endicott to get my patents and Grampy Thornton. Ray came from Cortland, so there were six adults and Bobby at our first Thanksgiving table. I will never forget it.

In December Grace was allowed to leave the sanitarium, and in January Bobby went back to Cortland. Needless to say, it was sad for us to see him go – but we knew Bobby belonged with his parents. I became more active in the churches. We moved out of our bedroom, which suddenly seemed too large, and went to a smaller bedroom downstairs.

One day one of the farmers came to our door with a big chunk of beef. "There," he said, "that is my contribution to your salary."

Walter looked at it and said, "I'm not going to accept that front quarter of beef as salary. If it were the hind quarter I would, but not that."

The farmer was surprised and said that he could not afford to give us the hind quarter. He picked up the meat and stalked out of the house. A half-hour later he was back with the hind quarter. I wondered what we would do with it, as we didn't even have a refrigerator. We cooked some of the meat for use right away. Walter cut the rest into small pieces and canned it in the pressure cooker. We had some delicious stews that year.

At the beginning of our second year, Mr. Cadman, the school principal, asked us if we would board a music teacher, Gertrude Barnes. We decided to do it – and to save the board money to buy a washing machine. We understood the board money would be \$6.00 a week. (She went home weekends to Towanda.) When the teacher arrived, she said she thought the board would be \$5.00 a week. We settled for \$5.50 a week.

In April of 1934, Vivian's husband Clifford<sup>6</sup> was killed in a hold-up, and we knew we would be coming to Endicott more often. Miss Barnes went to another home to board. We had saved enough, though, to buy a small ABC<sup>7</sup> washer which served us well for many years.

During the winter of 1934, Walter had a bad time with sciatic rheumatism and was in bed for two weeks. The district superintendent had scheduled a church conference for that time and went ahead with it even though Walter was not able to attend. At that conference the church officials said they could no longer afford to pay \$1400 a year, and the salary was set back to \$1200. Walter was angry and said they took advantage of his sickness. He was ready to move. Mrs. Kinney persuaded him to stay another year, however, and said she would add another hundred dollars to his salary. We stayed, but at the end of the third year we were glad to shake off the dust of Rome and move to Great Bend – even though there was no increase in salary.

As in every church, there were people who were easy to live with and those who were very disagreeable. There was one man in the North Orwell Church I can only describe as mean. Walter told me that at the close of his first service at North Orwell, this man asked Walter if he knew why his predecessor had left. "He left because he wouldn't do the things I wanted done." This man had no respect for the church as a house dedicated to God. He sometimes spit on the floor and then ground the spittle into the floor with his shoe!

I want to speak of a custom in the Rome Church that I thought was a very loving gesture. Once a year in the summer, the people were asked to bring wild flowers to the church. After the church service, we went across the road to the cemetery – where we spread out across its width and walked down its length,

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<sup>6</sup> Clifford H. Clark (1892-1934) was killed April 14. Clifford and Vivian Hanley Clark had only one child, Clifford Raymond Clark, who was born in November 1917 and lived but four days. As reported in the April 26 Auburn NY Citizen-Advertiser: **A widespread search was under way in the Southern Tier today for the slayers of Clifford H. Clark, 42, Binghamton Press collector in Endicott. Clark was shot fatally in the neck last night in a scuffle with two men who entered the office and demanded the day's receipts, which they failed to obtain before fleeing. Clark's wife and his assistant were forced to lie on the floor while the men left.**

<sup>7</sup> ABC stands for Altofer Brothers Company. As a youth, Henry Altofer built a crude washing machine for his mother to make her washdays easier. That proved to be the beginning of the ABC Company, which grew into a major appliance manufacturer. The old abandoned factory is still standing in Peoria IL.

strewing flowers on each grave. Then Walter had a short memorial meditation and prayer.

Philip P. Bliss, the great hymn writer, had lived across the street from the Methodist parsonage. In the Rome Cemetery there is a cenotaph honoring the memory of Mr. Bliss.<sup>8</sup>

The salary from the Rome church was not paid by check. I remember that Mrs. Kinney came to the parsonage on Monday mornings and counted the Sunday offering into Walter's hands.

As we were preparing to move to Great Bend, Mrs. Kinney told us she was not going to leave that good furniture in the parsonage. I don't know what she intended to do with it, but when Walter told her we would pay \$100 for it, she accepted the offer. Of course we didn't have the \$100, but we would pay it little by little each month. And so this almost new furniture went to Great Bend with us – and we were happy to have it, as you shall see.

#### GREAT BEND & HALLSTEAD

When we moved to Great Bend in the spring of 1935, we had a grey cat. He was a longhaired Manx (tail-less) and he rode in the car with us, lying across Walter's shoulders most of the way.

The minister at Great Bend was an older man and was taking a leave of absence because of poor health. Walter had called on him, and so he knew that the parsonage was across the street from the church. After we drove into the driveway, I was anxious to see the inside of the parsonage, ran up on the side porch, and peered in the window of the rear living room. The floor was bare, and the only furniture was an antique little table with a marble top and a straight chair. I must have breathed a prayer of thanks for the load of furniture that was soon to arrive in the van.

The Great Bend parsonage was large – with two living rooms, a hall, kitchen, dining room and study downstairs; and four bedrooms, two halls, and a bathroom upstairs. The only floor covering was a rug in the small living room and strips of carpeting nailed to the floor of one bedroom. We told the ladies of the parsonage committee that we would buy a congoleum rug for the dining room if they would put linoleum in the kitchen and study. We thought that we could take the congoleum rug with us when we moved. We stayed in Great Bend nine years, however, and the rug became quite attached to the floor – so we left it.

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<sup>8</sup> The former Bliss home is now the Philip P. Bliss Gospel Songwriters Museum, which contains information and artifacts and displays of the many gospel songwriters with direct ties to Rome PA. P.P. Bliss (1838-1876) died in the famed Ashtabula OH trestle collapse of December 29, 1876. His body was never identified and is assumed to be in the mass grave in Ashtabula prepared for the victims of the tragedy. The monument in the Rome Cemetery does not mark the site of his grave.

When we arrived, the parsonage was swept and clean. There was even fresh paper on the shelves of the kitchen cupboards.

The churches, Great Bend and Hallstead, were much larger than the Rome and North Orwell churches. The church people were more aggressive and were willing to work. There was one similarity, though – money was scarce and the salary was not paid on time.

After we had been in Great Bend a short time, Walter was approached by a committee from Gouldsboro in the Scranton District and asked to be their pastor at \$1400 a year. Walter told the superintendent about it, and he suggested that Walter mention this to the Great Bend folks – who decided that if he was worth \$1400 to Gouldsboro, then he was worth \$1400 to them. And we settled down for another few years.

It soon became apparent that something had to be done about repair to the Hallstead Church. The roof was leaking and big chunks of plaster had fallen from the sanctuary ceiling. Walter was able to organize a group of volunteer workers, and the church roof shingles were replaced. A man was hired to patch the plaster and the men of the church, with Walter leading the way, painted the sanctuary. It was decided that the pews needed varnishing, and that they should be washed with a solution first. The women said they could do that, and a brigade of women cleaned the pews and readied them for varnishing. I cannot emphasize enough the way those dedicated people worked long days and evenings to bring that church back to a beautiful place of worship. There were men who were not church members who helped us as well.

When the tremendous project was finished, we invited the Baptists and the Presbyterians to join us in a Sunday evening union service. The Presbyterian minister was to preach the sermon, and the Baptist minister was to pronounce the benediction. I think it was probably a good service, but it seems ironic that the only part I remember is the benediction. The Baptist minister came to the front and said, “I will pronounce the benediction on that part of the service with which I am in agreement.”

He then told us all the part of the service with which he was not in agreement. He had not liked the sermon and told us that the scripture had been misrepresented, and he felt he must set the record straight. We, and I think everyone, were shocked. Walter was embarrassed and disgusted.

The next morning bright and early, the Baptist minister appeared at our door and told Walter he was sorry for his outburst. “But,” he emphasized, “the Lord told me to say it.”

“Well,” Walter said, “if the Lord told you to say it, don’t apologize to me!” Needless to say, we did not have another union service at our church.

I enjoyed singing in the choirs of both churches. It is surprising sometimes to see the numbers of talented people in the smaller churches. And these people gave generously of their time and talents, both vocal and instrumental. The Hallstead choir presented several programs of entertainment – and in addition to the music, I gave readings which added variety. When the collection plate was passed through the pews, the people gave quite generously.

Walter had a great many weddings. One year he had eighty marriages. I think this was the year that the New York State blood test law went into effect. In order to avoid a blood test, some couples crossed the state line into Great Bend to be married. Some of these people were very poorly dressed. One couple gave Walter a little bag of change that they had been saving to pay him. Walter gave the money back to them, as he thought they needed it more than he did.

Walter always asked if either party had been married before. In one case, the couple having responded in the negative, Walter performed the ceremony. After a short visit, Walter was surprised to hear the groom say, “Well, we’d better be getting back to the children.” The children! It seems they had been living together for some time and had children, but they were perfectly truthful when they said neither one had ever been married before.

One young woman asked if she could pick a few flowers from our garden so that she could have a bridal bouquet. Of course there were also some lovely church weddings and home receptions.

Yes, these were depression years and many people were out of work. I don’t believe there was any financial support from the government at that time, and each family had to look after its own members. So many of these folks came to the parsonage to ask for help. I recall one couple who had a little girl with them. The man was out of work and had been promised a job in Ohio – if he could get there. They were hitch-hiking to Ohio. They stopped and asked Walter for something to eat. He invited them to come in and then said to me, “Run down to Peck’s Market and get some pork chops.”

Walter began peeling potatoes and husking corn, and in a short time these people were sitting at the dining room table enjoying a good dinner. I suppose there were some who asked for help that they didn’t really need, but it was better to be fooled by ten of those people than to turn away one needy person.

Another case that comes to mind is that of a young couple that had been to a football game at Syracuse. They were on their way home, but near Susquehanna they couldn’t get over an icy hill because of smooth tires. They came to our door asking for help. Walter sent them to a store down the street that carried auto supplies. He told them he would call the store and vouch for them – so that if they didn’t pay, then he would. A short time later the girl appeared at our door and she was crying. She explained, “Frank had a bad spell while they

were putting on the tires, and he was taken across the street to the hotel, and the doctor says he can't go on tonight."

She said she didn't have any money and wondered if she could stay with us. We had Sunday night supper, and I made up a bed for her. The next morning while we were having breakfast, Frank appeared and was ready to drive home. The following week we received a check and a note of thanks – as did the tire salesman, the hotel, and the doctor.

During our years in Great Bend we had personal losses. Walter's mother died after surgery in December of 1937. In 1942 Grampy Thornton died at 95, and a few weeks later Ray died at 44 – and Ella Clark, Vivian's mother-in-law, died soon after. In 1943, the salary went to \$1800 and we felt rich.

In 1944, St. Paul's Methodist Church in Endicott was open, and a committee of men from the church came to Conference and asked that Walter be appointed as their pastor at a salary of \$2000. It was a good move in salary, and it meant working in just one church – and, of course, it meant coming back home where all the family was located.

This ended our work in Pennsylvania. There were good times and sad times – but I think the best testimony I can give about our years in northeast Pennsylvania is that I would like to live them all over again!