

East Plains, 175 Years Ago

A **church anniversary** is always a joyful celebration of our spiritual heritage. Today I'll tell you just a little of what we know of the early years of this congregation, just up to 1907, since I have only a few minutes to do this. What we celebrate today is that in 1843, that is, 175 years ago, a small wooden Methodist church first appeared on this site. To do this I'm depending heavily on the history written by my late wife, Pat, for the 150th anniversary in 1993. She studied everything deposited in the East Plains archives, and also interviewed some old timers who were still with us 25 years ago. I also got some additional information from our present archivist, Warren Mcree.

But before we think about 1843, we should take note that there were Methodists here in the Aldershot area long before that. We know that the first English speaking settlers came to this region in the late 1700's, some of them from the United States, including some Empire loyalists around the time of the American revolution, and others came directly from Great Britain. They settled here on what was originally the territory of the Mississauga aboriginal people. They cleared the vast, thick forest – no chain saws available - and began to farm on the fine, rich soil that exists here on the plain. The whole area gradually became a thriving market garden, producing abundant vegetables and fruit. Many of the farmers employed local indigenous people as laborers on their farms. We know that there were Methodists among those first farmers, who wanted to practice their faith.

To understand how this church got started, we need to know a little about Methodism. It originated with John Wesley, that great Anglican evangelist and social activist of eighteenth century England. Methodism was at first a movement within the Church of England, and only gradually became a separate church. Wesley's program involved outdoor preaching, in the fields and the towns, reviving Christian faith in great numbers of people. It became a mass movement, especially among the poor folk of Britain, and of course it spread to the British colonies, including the United States and Canada. Wesley had "methods," methods for spiritual growth. His critics labeled his movement, "Methodism," – a title which Wesley embraced gladly. The genius of Methodism was small class meetings. All Methodists were asked to meet weekly in these small groups, where they studied the Bible and prayed, sang hymns, told each other what God had been doing in their lives that week. They confessed their sins to each other, shared their troubles and joys, comforted and challenged one another. They also contributed one penny each week for the relief of the poor. Wesley's Methodism in England was also a social activist movement. It notably fought against slavery, child labour, and later, in the next century, was closely associated with the workers' union movement. It was remarkable for its outreach and service to the poor. Many Methodists were poor themselves, but were nevertheless challenged to assist those worse off than themselves. That, of course, is why our Wesley Centre in Hamilton is named, after John Wesley.

Now, here in what we call Aldershot, in those early colonial times, Methodists at first did not have a church building. They met first in those Wesleyan class meetings. Sometimes, but not always, there were separate class meetings for men, and others for women. We have a picture of one such class meeting, consisting of six women. There must have been lots of Methodists in this general area, because we know that in 1838 they hosted a large conference and revival meeting for the whole Niagara Methodist region, right here on this very spot. It was then the land of the farmer Joseph Lyons. That was 1838. So there were lots of Methodists meeting here before any church building existed.

Five years later, in 1843, that same farmer, Joseph Lyons, donated this land from his farm for the building of a church, and for a cemetery. He himself supplied most of the materials and did most of the building himself. It was a small wooden church, 26 ft. x 36 ft. Joseph himself is buried in our cemetery (you can see the Lyons family stone just opposite the double doors on the north side of our building). His wife Mary died, still very young, in 1844, and is buried there also. You can see a small stone for "Mother," and another for "Father." Joseph was buried there in 1872.

Another notable family of that early time was that of Aaron Emory and his wife Jane Van Norman (who were ancestors of Brenda McMaster and Janice Quinn). Aaron was a leader among the Methodists in this area, together with Jane, who was an uncommonly well-educated woman at the time. So Aaron and Jane were the great-great grandparents of those who lit the candle of Joy this morning: Janice, her daughter Andrea, and grandchildren, Carter, Keegan and Riley (seven generations of the Emory family still here at East Plains!) Jane Van Norman Emory, that great-great grandmother, started the first Sunday School here in 1858, and for many years Aaron was the Sunday School superintendent. Around that time there were 77 church members, and 98 children in the Sunday School.

The Wesleyan class meetings eventually were replaced by Sunday School classes, including many adults. We have a picture of an adult Sunday School class taken around 1900.

Now that first little wooden country church of 1843 was called Lyons Wesleyan Methodist Chapel. The congregation was part of the larger Wesleyan Methodist Church. This congregation was first part of an Oakville circuit, later called the Freeman circuit, wherein several congregations from Oakville to Hamilton, were served by one minister, a so-called "saddlebag preacher," who rode horseback around his large circuit of churches, which depended heavily on lay ministries. A little later the church was called Plains East Methodist Church, and was part of a three point circuit, the Plains-Appleby circuit, together with congregations at Appleby and West Plains. By then the minister had a horse and buggy, and the first parsonage was built in the late 1880's, well east of here near the Burlington station.

We know that in 1900 there were, in the Plains Appleby circuit, besides one ordained minister, three lay preachers and seven class leaders.

We don't know very much about the intervening years. We do know that in 1892 a new, somewhat larger church replaced the small wooden structure. It was a fine brick building, right there where our Gathering Place is, with stained glass windows. It remained, however, for only 15 years, because in 1907, that church burned to the ground.

Reportedly, it happened on the occasion of a Wednesday night prayer meeting. Wednesday night prayer meetings were a regular feature of Methodism in those days. The little church would be nearly filled. People prayed out loud, they sang, but also gave testimonies. The story goes that a very devout gentleman was on his feet, giving his testimony, saying "My all is on the altar, and I am waiting for the fire!" (that is, the fire of the Holy Spirit). But then someone smelled smoke, and yelled "Fire!" An overheated furnace had set the building aflame. Everyone got out safely. But despite the efforts of a bucket brigade, the church building was totally destroyed that night, though the horse sheds were saved. Yes, horse sheds – just on the west side, where our west parking lot is.

That was a cold night in Feb. 1907, but by November of the same year a new brick structure, similar to the old one, was built on the same spot, on the same foundation. You can imagine the effort and sacrifice it took to rebuild that church so quickly. It cost over \$9,000. Can you imagine the fund raising, and the bake sales and special teas held by the Methodist women, to raise that money?

Our present Gathering Place is a renovation of the 1907 church, which was integrated into this larger church when it was built in 1955. When you stand in the Gathering Place today, know that you are standing on the original sight of that first wooden country church, and then the brick buildings of 1892 and 1907.

Well, that's all the time we have for history today. Rev. Barbara has suggested that, throughout the coming year, we should hear more, from time to time, of the story of East Plains, and so grow to appreciate our Christian roots here in this place.

