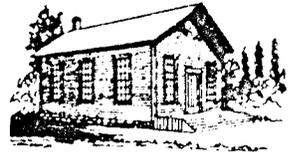




"WE are the end-product of our history."

# FLASHBACKS



Revealing glimpses of our creative past

Official newsletter of the

UNITED METHODIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WISCONSIN

Vol. 15 No. 1

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## 1987 HISTORICAL PILGRIMAGE CELEBRATES 150th ANNIVERSARY OF AZTALAN CIRCUIT

The United Methodist Historical Society of Wisconsin celebrated the 150th anniversary of the Aztalan Circuit, "Mother of Circuits," with a pilgrimage to Whitewater United Methodist Church on Saturday, Oct. 3.

Following a delicious meal served by the ladies of the church and a business meeting led by President Charles Sanford, pilgrims adjourned for the program.

The filmstrip, "Peter Cartright, Frontier Preacher"; a touching dramatic presentation by Lourinda Sanford on the memories of Frances Cartright as she waited for her circuit-rider husband to return from his preaching missions; and an historical view of some of the human interest stories surrounding the lives of early circuit riders helped pilgrimage-goers to better understand some of the harsh realities and circumstances surrounding the early circuit riders and their families.

Through Frances Cartwright, as portrayed by Lourinda, we learned that Peter Cartright preached 14,600 sermons to 10,000 members; performed 8,400 baptisms; served 50 years as a presiding elder and died in church. Perhaps the most touching scene was the final one in which we see Widow Cartright sitting quiet and pale, "waiting for the chariot" to come for her.

Bill Jannusch pointed out that those circuit-riders on the move held leadership in the conference. Between 1773 and 1801, 250 preachers were on trial but never accomplished full connection in the ministry. Between 1769 and 1823, 57 were expelled.

"It was difficult to be married," Bill said. "There was no sympathy for married life. Salary was \$ 36 per year, no housing, school house services. By 1848, there were 18 parsonages and 14 churches built."

"When Jesse Halstead came to Aztalan, he spent the winter walking," Bill said. "He worked for 10 years before they had an established church."

## LOIS OLSEN RECALLS EARLY ASSOCIATIONS WITH HER CHURCH AND ITS HISTORY

Lois Olsen, newly-elected membership secretary of the United Methodist Historical Society of Wisconsin, was recently asked about her interest in the history of the church she serves so well.

"My association with the Evangelical Church dates back to my great-grandfather, Fredrich Nickel, who was pastor in the Wisconsin Conference in the 1870's," she recalled.

"My grandfather, Albert Hess, was an active lay member to conference, attending 39 sessions," she went on. "He also was a member of General Conference twice."

Lois said that her relationship with the United Brethren Church was twofold: Her father was a member of the United Brethren Church in North Dakota before he returned to Wisconsin where he became a member of the Evangelical Church. He served as pastor of that church for 40 years.

"My initial service as a missionary was in Sierra Leone, the site of the first missionary endeavor of the United Brethren Church in 1855," Lois related.

"I am particularly interested in the history of our mission projects," she said. "In 1980, I spent seven months in Liberia, the country to which Melville Cox became the first missionary in 1833."

## Celebrate Our Heritage

April 24

Heritage Sunday—reflect on our denominational history—evangelism, education—

Taken from the Journal of Wisconsin Annual Conference, M.E.C., 1892.

To the Wisconsin Conference Historical Society:

The Constitution of this Society requires me to make an annual report as to its state and operation. Perhaps the most truthful report I can make now is, Nearly dead by sheer neglect.

Our Society was formed in obedience to the direction of the General Conference. Its object is to preserve our current history. It started with a membership of fifty-two. We have never had a satisfactory annual meeting. I have urged in my reports all the reasons I could think of for increased action. In my last I gave extracts from the discipline setting forth the duty of pastors and presiding elders in collecting and preserving historical data. I know not how they have met those demands, nor is it my prerogative to inquire. But it seems to me that in some way this should be known. I fear its importance is not generally realized. At some future time a "Mightier than I" will come, and in writing up our history in this state will find it difficult or impossible to collect information that is now easily obtained and recorded.

At first our constitution required an admission fee of fifty cents and annual dues from the members of twenty-five cents each. Last year both of these requirements were abolished, making membership free . . . . This change should secure more general and more successful cooperation.

So far I have reported only a lack of success. I am now compelled to report a disaster: On the 28th day of last September, the documentary data which aided materially in the construction of the "History of Methodism in Wisconsin", together with some additional matter of historic interest afterwards obtained, were consumed by fire. This renders the action required by our Society the more important. Will not every member write, or cause to be written, a history of his charge this Conference year?

P.S. Bennett, Cor. Secretary.

From the 1893 Conference Journal at the conclusion of Historical Society report they adopted the following resolution:

1. That each person having a pastoral charge be and is hereby requested to write a historical sketch of his charge, and forward to the Corresponding Secretary at or before next Conference.
2. That to aid in this, the secretary shall prepare and send circulars with blanks to be filled, the expense to be paid from money in treasury.

From the 1894 Conf. Journal - Historical Society report-

(It was reported that the blanks were sent to all the preachers and I quote just two sentences)

"Of the whole number sent out, three only have been returned. surely this does not indicate an excess of enthusiasm."

There then follows the account of the first class being formed in Wisconsin at the U.S. garrison at Fort Howard on July 22, 1832. He closes his report:

"Sixty-two years ago one class of a half dozen members represented the entire force of Methodism in what is now the State of Wis. Today we have within the same limits 38,369 communicants, with about the same number of children in Sunday Schools, 373 preachers in active service, 527 church edifices, and one prosperous University, all concentrating their influence in rolling back the tide of error and vice and bringing in the reign of truth and righteousness."

(Copied by Lowell Reykdal)

MADISON FIRST UNITED METHODIST CHURCH CELEBRATES SESQUICENTENNIAL IN FALL 1987

Sesquicentennial events from September through November of 1987 traced the 150 year history of the First United Methodist Church of Madison with dinners, picnics, a pictorial history of Methodism in Madison, talent show, silent auction, UMW bazaar, turkey dinner and a historical play put on by United Methodist Women.

The milestone was observed with displays of photographs and other items of historical interest; a church history booklet compiled by Louise Marsh, a Council of Ministries "futuring" display; and an oral history of the church coordinated as an on-going ministry by all age groups. Church Historian Louise Marsh wrote,

"Believing that the word 'church' does not refer to a specific building, but rather to a group of people yearning to worship God and seeking the guidance of the Holy Spirit, our congregation recognizes its beginning as an event that occurred only one year after Wisconsin became a territory in 1836."

Here is the fascinating chronology of the growth of an idea:

- 1837 - First sermon preached in Madison, new territorial capital of Wisconsin, by Rev. Salmon Stebbins, Presiding Elder of the Milwaukee District of the Methodist Church, Illinois Conference. The service was held in the bar room of the American House, a hotel on the corner of North Pinckney St. and East Washington Ave., where the American Exchange Bank now stands.
- 1838 - Rev. Samuel Pillsbury held a Methodist service in a log barn belonging to A.A. Bird, one of the builders of the new territorial capitol building, on Doty St. between King and South Pinckney Sts. Inside the barn were 36 capitol workmen and 4 families, including that of Eben and Victorine Peck who were the first settlers in Madison. Outside, the barn was surrounded by 300 or 400 Indians!
- 1839 - The first recorded members of the fledgling congregation included Ruth Starks and Mr. and Mrs. Benjamin Holt. The entire life of this congregation is encompassed by the lives of three generations of women in one family: Ruth Starks Trevoy; Harriet Trevoy Holum; and Fay Holum, who now resides in the Methodist Health Center. Fay gave to the church the beautiful china cabinet which had belonged to her grandmother. It stands in Fellowship Hall today.
- 1840 - Rev. Alfred Brunson, an itinerant Methodist preacher and a member of the Territorial Legislature, held Methodist services in the Assembly Hall of the capitol building, the only available meeting place.
- 1848 - Wisconsin became the 30th state and its capital, Madison, was thriving. The growing Methodist congregation decided to build its first church building. A lot was bought on the corner of East Mifflin and North Pinckney Sts., originally owned by Daniel Webster, now the site of the YWCA.
- 1853 - The completed church was dedicated and attracted a larger group of persons hungry for spiritual nourishment. In a few years they began to feel that they were outgrowing the little church on Capitol Square.

- 1873 - On September 30, the congregation laid the cornerstone for a larger church on the corner of Wisconsin Ave. and East Dayton St. The nation-wide financial panic struck in the fall of 1873 and building was delayed for three years. During this time, the stone walls remained unfinished and the floor timbers were exposed to the weather. The first service in the new building was held on November 5, 1876. At two services on that day, \$6,600 of the remaining \$10,000 debt was raised but the bishop could not dedicate the church until the debt was totally erased.
- 1887 - On November 20, the congregation met for the dedication service of the finally completed church. Under divine guidance, they had indeed travelled a long way in fifty years, from that first service in a bar room!
- 1924 - The Oxford Building, back of the church along East Dayton St., was erected to provide space for the growing Sunday School. It was a three-story brick structure and is still in service today as part of our total building complex. The first floor contains the parlor, church library and the music room. Because of the depression, the struggle to pay the debt incurred in this expansion was severe. From 1941 to 1946, the Oxford Building had to be rented out to government agencies because the staggering debt threatened the very life of the congregation, in spite of the valiant sacrifices made by its 1300 members.
- 1946 - Finally, the debt had been reduced from \$140,000 to \$30,000 over a 22-year period. The renters could be asked to leave and the church could once again use its entire building for the education of its youth, the inspiration of its members, and Christian service to the Madison community.
- 1953 - During the 1940's, the two congregations of First Church and University Methodist Church were inspired by Bishop Schuyler Garth to explore the possibilities of merging. Under the able leadership of Rev. Merrill Abbey, a valiant attempt was made to harmonize the divergent interests of the two groups of Methodists. Plans were drawn up for a new church building to house the combined congregation. However, on May 19, 1953, a congregational meeting voted to dissolve the merger permanently.
- 1960 - The Education Wing was added to provide a new dining room and kitchen, plus two upper floors for additional space for church school classrooms. It now houses the First United Methodist Church Preschool and Kindergarten and the Magic Penny Day Care, formerly Headstart. The meals for the children are prepared and served in the lower level. The playground, near the church parking lot, is a lively spot! The Fireside Room and youth classrooms are on the lower level, also.

- 1968 - On the national level, the Evangelical United Brethren Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church united to become the United Methodist Church. Our congregation purchased the former First EUB Church building, on the corner of East Johnson St. and Wisconsin Ave., on the lot now occupied by our new sanctuary. It had been hoped that the EUB congregation would join ours en masse, but the majority of them preferred a smaller church. So the former First EUB Church merged with the former Trousdale Methodist Church, on Vilas Ave., to become Trinity United Methodist Church. Only those who chose to join our church were transferred to our membership rolls. The others automatically became members of Trinity. Our congregation has been blessed by the former EUB members who came to us.
- 1975 - Because the City Building Inspector had condemned the old stone church structure as unsafe, and had denied to the congregation the option of repairing it, the membership had no choice but to undertake the building of an entirely new sanctuary. With deep regret and many tears, the old sanctuary was demolished. Gone were its vaulted ceilings, the pews made out of solid cherry; and the outstanding stained glass windows. A concerted effort was made to save the windows, but when they were removed it was discovered that it was impossible to reconstruct them in their entirety. A few were renovated and can be seen in our present chapel today. The lower level of the sanctuary addition houses the chapel, church offices, UNW room, study center and the food pantry. The new sanctuary, with its beautiful faceted-glass windows, was dedicated to the glory of God on February 2, 1975. May it have a long life of inspiration and service for many, many years to come!
- 1987 - The membership of First Church, nearly 1500 strong, celebrates the 150th anniversary of its founding. We treasure our collective memories of what this church has meant to all of us who hold it inexpressibly dear. It has inspired devoted service and untold sacrifice over the years by those who love it deeply. As we approach the twentieth century, we covet for it a high mission of Christian service by the people called United Methodists.
- 2037 - What will our church be like on the 200th anniversary of its founding as a yearning for God's guidance in a raw frontier community in the first six months of its existence? What new vistas of community service will be open to our congregation? May the Holy Spirit guide us as we move toward a new century and, indeed, a new millenium! As we seek to follow in the footsteps of Jesus, the Christ, the boundaries of our dreams are limited only by our vision.

## THE AZTALAN CIRCUIT OR "MOTHER OF CIRCUITS"

The Rev. Dick O'Neill presented the following history of the Aztalan Circuit:

About a year after Wisconsin became a territory and only five years after the first Methodist Episcopal Circuit Riders made their way into Wisconsin, a large Circuit was established which later would be referred to as the "Mother of Circuits". This was known as the Aztalan Circuit which was created at the 1837 Annual Conference held in Jacksonville, Illinois (We were still a part of the Illinois Annual Conference and the Rock River Conference would not be established for another three years and the Wisconsin Annual Conference would not be established for another eleven years.)

Elizabeth Wilson, in her book "Methodism in Eastern Wisconsin," described the beginnings of the Aztalan area by saying:

"High on an eminence above the Crawfish, a tributary to the Rock River, then navigable to the Mississippi, two newcomers to Jefferson County discovered on October 31, 1836, a pre-historic monument, the nature of which is not fully known even after a century.

The men were Thomas Brayton and Timothy Johnson; the monument was an earth work partly built up with tiles, covering about seventeen and two-eighths acres of land, and found to contain implements of human civilization of such nature that Dr. N. F. Hyer, who explored it shortly afterward, named it Aztalan from its resemblance to Aztec ruins, and made it the subject of a descriptive article which he published in January, 1837, in the Milwaukee Advertiser.

Mr. Brayton located near there, rolling up a log cabin where landhunters and travelers were entertained, for this was on the old Indian trail from Milwaukee to Madison (Highway 30) touching Waukesha and Summit, Lake Mills and Cottage Grove. A man who fixed his home in Lake Mills in September, 1837, recalled the situation thus:

But few settlers within the present limits of Jefferson County. There were settlements at Watertown, Aztalan, Jefferson, Ft. Atkinson and Lake Mills comprising only a few settlers in each point.

Captain Brayton opened his home for all community purposes, secular or religious, and in Aztalan the first Methodist class in this section was presently organized; hence it was selected as head of a circuit by the Illinois Conference of 1837, when it appointed those two probationers, Samuel Pillsbury from the Root River mission, and Jesse Halstead from Troy Conference to the Aztalan Mission circuit."

In 1837 the immigrants who were coming to the Milwaukee area were beginning to move west of the Milwaukee, Racine (Root River) and Kenosha (Southport) area. They began to move into the Waukesha, Jefferson, Walworth and Rock Counties. The movement into the southwest part of Wisconsin had not begun to get beyond the Madison area. With the new immigration into an area which had not been travelled before by the old Methodist circuit riders, the Illinois Conference decided to send those two probationers, Pillsbury and Halstead.

Wesson G. Miller in his book Thirty Years in the Itinerancy published in 1875, said "The old Aztalan circuit was organized at the session of the Illinois Conference of 1837, and embraced all the settled portion of the Territory east of Madison and west of the Lake Shore Missions." Elizabeth Wilson goes on to say that "published historical material credits them (Pillsbury and Halstead) with having established preaching places; and in some instances, classes, in the following centers that conference year (1837-1838):

Jefferson County - Aztalan, Ft. Atkinson, Watertown, Lake Mills  
Walworth County - Whitewater, Round Prairie (La Grange), Meacham's  
Prairie (Troy), East Troy, Spring Prairie, Elkhorn, Hudson (Lyons),

Prairie (Troy), East Troy, Spring Prairie, Elkhorn, Hudson (Lyons),  
Geneva, Big Foot  
Waukesha County - Prairieville (Waukesha), Oconomowoc, Menominee Falls  
Racine County - Caldwell's Prairie, Rochester, Foxville (Burlington)  
Rock County - Janesville  
a total of twenty."

This material on the names of the possible preaching places and classes are also included in W. G. Miller's book of 1875. Elizabeth Wilson just put them in Counties to make it easier to identify.

Some of the origins of these churches and preaching places are very obscure and other are very distinct. Elizabeth Wilson says:

"A Watertown pioneer tells of the first meeting there in the Autumn of 1837, in the log cabin of Timothy Johnson, the first white settler. While the exhausted Mr. Halstead rested from his journey (he frequently traveled on foot, carrying his own saddle bags), the children were sent about to announce an evening gathering, at which twelve or fifteen people congregated to hear him preach. After this, regular meetings were held once a month.

Ft. Atkinson can report:

The first sermon preached in the settlement was by the Rev. Mr. Pillsbury, a Methodist clergyman, in the winter of 1837, at the house of E.N. Foster.

Afterwards the Revs. Pillsbury and Halstead preached occasionally.

Whitewater received its first population in April, 1837, and the first preacher - Jesse Halstead - that same fall. As was customary, meetings were held in private homes until a new school house was built, and used by all denominations. . . .

In LaGrange township east of Whitewater, New Englanders began arriving in 1837. Gabriel Cornish and sons settled at Round Prairie (LaGrange - on Highway 12), and in his house the first religious services were held.

Continuing to quote from Elizabeth Wilson's book, O'Neill pointed out that the lakes of Waukesha County were also within the scope of Aztalan Circuit, but that Methodist preaching had already been done by Father Wheelock, "a local preacher who resided a few miles from Prairieville, quite advanced in life, a very earnest Christian and highly esteemed for his works sake."

Nathaniel Walton had assisted in cutting a road through to the new settlement of Prairieville in the summer of 1836, and in October began housekeeping in a rude cabin near Bethesda Spring, Wilson wrote.

"One devout Christian began immediately to observe regular hours of secret prayer," Walton related, "and on such occasions all the neighbors within a half mile could plainly hear his every word. The service for the first sermon preached was held in my house, the clergyman officiating was that good Methodist Father Wheelock."

Details of Oconomowoc and Menominee Falls origins are not so clear, according to Wilson. A local historical wrote, "In 1837, an itinerant Methodist preached at Joseph Smart's home, probably the first sermon in the town" may refer to Mr. Pillsbury or Mr. Halstead at Mukwonago, for Salmon Stebbin's diary entry on Feb. 1, 1938 reads, "Rode to Mequanago within bounds of the Aztalan Mission. Put up with Br. Simon Jones and family" suggests Methodist sympathizers were present.

In regard to the origins at Eagle, one record says, "The nucleus of the present church first held services at the house of Mr. Cross, and Rev. Mr. Halsey is said to have been the preacher."

Three Racine County points, Caldwell's Prairie, Rochester, Foxville (Burlington), are also known to have been reached this year by the circuit riders.

Milton, in Rock County, is said to have had preaching at the house of S. D. Butts on March 18, 1838, and each month thereafter. Rock County furnished one certain preaching point in the first Aztalan Circuit, for Jesse Halstead made his way to Janesville in October, 1837. It is said that he came to a log tavern seeking entertainment, but when he was known to be a minister, he was invited to preach. The liquor was put away, the bar became his pulpit and a dozen people were congregated.

Four Quarterly Conferences are known to have been held by Presiding Elder Stebbins. Elizabeth Wilson says that the first one was held at Aztalan, "head of the circuit", and that Stebbins arrived on "Thursday, November 30, 1837" and "according to his diary" he says:

"I put with Brayton.

Q meeting came on. The congregation on Sat (Dec 2) amounted to 12 besides the preachers. We had a good time.

Sat 3 we had a good Love feast though but few attended. There were about fifty at the public meeting and 13 besides the preachers at Sacrament. On the whole it was a profitable meeting"

Of the second he recorded:

"Fry 2 (February 1838) Rode forward to Br. Griffins (East Troy) were Q M is to be held.

Sat 3 Q M came on, I preached in the afternoon and attended prayer meeting in the eve. The Great head of the church was with us.

Sm Sat 4 [NOTE MISTAKE OF DATE] A most delightful season in love feast. about 20 present. Spoke with feeling. We had a good congregation during the day. About 25 communicants."

Elizabeth Wilson says, "Unofrtunately the facts covering the third Quarterly Meeting at Troy, and the fourth at Foxville [Burlington] as indicated in Mr. Stebbins July journal are not recorded."

Wesson G. Miller in his book writes "At the Conference of 1839, Aztalan circuit was divided. The eastern part was called Walworth, and Rev. James McKean was appointed Pastor. The western part, retaining the Rock River Valley, was now called Watertown, and Rev. H. W. Frink was appointed Pastor. Both charges were now put in the Milwaukee District, with Rev. Julius Field as Presiding Elder. P. S. Bennett says in History of Methodism in Wisconsin, "Watertown appears this year[1839] in the list of appointments, but it does not indicate entirely new ground. It took in the northern part of what was Aztalan Circuit of 1837 (called in 1838 Honey Creek), and left all the country, east and southeast, as far as Lake Michigan, to be explored."

This gives you a little background on the Aztalan Circuit. A lot of the information on this circuit can be found in Elizabeth Wilson's book Methodism In Eastern Wisconsin published in 1938 on pages 34-43; Wesson G. Miller's book Thirty Years in the Intinerancy published in 1875 on pages 82 and 83; and P.S. Bennett and James Lawson's book History of Methodism in Wisconsin published in 1890 on pages 43, 47 and 57.

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## FLASHBACKS

*Official newsletter of the United Methodist  
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Material of historical interest, such as church anniversaries, recollections, activities of local church historical committees, and historians should be sent to her at the above address.

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