

# History of Au Sable Grove Presbyterian Church

BY MRS. MARY LEITCH HALL.

When I first began searching thru the early church records, I was thrilled to meet intimately, face to face, people of whom I had only heard, people of whom I had never heard; of how they had unconsciously cooperated for a common end; how they met their difficulties, and adjusted themselves each to the other; and how, out of apparently trivial circumstances, great events grew. I could only come to this conclusion, this simple-certain fact: "In the beginning God . . ." And it came to pass, when the God of all the universe was looking upon His creation, He beheld the place where we are today. He saw that it was a goodly land, a place of hills and streams, of rolling prairies with great depths of soil; a place for flocks and herds and growing grains. A place for man to conquer and make homes and glorify His name. And He said, "I will bring here a people who, thru the Spirit, will build for Me a church, where they and their children and the stranger may satisfy their hearts in worship; where they may learn of the God Who is seeking for their souls, and of the Savior Who died to cleanse those souls from sin."

## Journey West in 1837.

And so, it came to pass: In 1837, Dr. Townsend Seely, his wife, Millicent, his son, Edmund, then a boy of 10, and several smaller children came to Pittsburgh with their possessions. They took passage on a new boat, still unfinished, came down the Ohio river to the Mississippi, up the Mississippi to the Illinois river, and up the Illinois to Peru. Dr. Seely remained three years in Peru, practicing medicine, owning a drug store. Then he came to Bristol, following the same routine, living there three years. A married son, Francis, having come from the east, they moved out to the Cherry farm beside the creek. While there a cyclone blew away the shack in which they were living. The son, Francis, returned to the east, but Dr. Seely and his family came to the place which we know as the Seely farm. On the spot where John Schobert now lives, they built a log house 16'x20', and they called it "home."

The people are coming now, Wheelers and Johnsons from Vermont, Jessups, Howells and more Seelys from New York, Shepards from Massachusetts, Sextons from Connecticut, the McClains and Hopkins from Ohio. Pennsylvania made her contribution and many others. On the boat on which Dr. Seely had come was a young carpenter, 20

ter once in two weeks. The next spring the Union school house was built, and services were held in it, Mr. Chapman still preaching to them.

## Organize Church.

I quote from the first minutes made in the first session book: "Previous notice having been given, Mr. Chapman being appointed moderator, Alanson K. Wheeler and wife, N. W. Graves and wife, Edmund Seely, and Townsend Seely and wife, resolved to organize themselves into a Congregational church, to be known as the church of Au Sable Grove, and resolved to have the sacrament administered on the ensuing Sabbath. Meeting opened and closed with prayer. Mr. Chapman delivered an appropriate lecture preparatory to communion." Then February 27, "The Lord's Supper was administered agreeable to appointment" and a record of the first new member: "Ellen, wife of Jeremiah Shepard, having been duly examined and approved was received into full communion." The Jeremiah Shepard's home was where Carl Schobert now lives. They were the parents of Mrs. Cecelia Satterly who recently passed away in Chicago.

The larger body to which the Congregational church of Au Sable Grove belonged was the Fox River Union.

Thus, for six years, such recordings were made in the minutes, new members being added from time to time. On June 11, 1854, we read that the church unanimously "Resolved, for the interest of religion among us, to change from the Congregational, to the Presbyterian form of government; and that we be dismissed from the Fox River Union and be recommended to the Presbytery of Chicago." This was done, and we are now a Presbyterian organization, meeting in a schoolhouse once in two weeks. The first elders elected were James McClain, Townsend Seely and Oliver C. Johnson. The next Sabbath the first two were installed but Mr. Johnson wished time to consider. This was granted and he was later ordained and installed. In May, 1857, the church chose trustees, and we became a corporate body. At that time it was deemed expedient to change the name to the Presbyterian Church of Au Sable Grove, and that it shall be known and distinguished by that name hereafter. Signed, "Townsend Seely, Clerk."

## First Manse in 1857.

The first manse was built in 1857. It was called "The Parsonage House." The church was built in 1866, tho there is no recording in

choir was moved to the northwest corner to the right of the pulpit.

Dr. Townsend Seely was a unique character. The church visible was his particular care and concern, body, mind and soul. In his later years, he had a chair placed directly under the pulpit, facing the congregation and with an ear trumpet turned toward the minister, and a couple of pairs of glasses on the congregation; he was able to overcome nature's handicaps. Up to 1867, when he moderated the tenth annual meeting, his name appears in almost all the minutes. Ten years later there is a new recording in the family Bible on the page marked Deaths and that very definite final recording on the stone in the cemetery: "Aged 83 years." He founded a library fund, and the Bible which is used on our pulpit today was purchased in 1892 as a memorial to Dr. Seely.

Prior to 1873 we had nine ministers, some of whom were never installed.

The record of a church organization is largely a record of its leadership.

## Student Jessup Comes.

The first minister whom I remember was the Rev. Theodore F. Jessup. In July, 1873, there is a session recording "T. F. Jessup, a student, supplying our church." Then in December, that same year, a recording of "Rev. T. F. Jessup, now our minister." Mr. Jessup remained with us 14 years. During this time there was a steady growth in membership, about 70 being added to the church. And I do not hesitate to say that during this time the spiritual growth was very perceptibly deepened. Mr. Jessup was quiet, dignified, scholarly. He knew us all intimately. He smiled easily but his smile was full of sadness, great sympathy and longing. He was married while here to a young woman from Troy, New York, Miss Belle Cooke. She was a beautiful, gracious lady. Thru her efforts the Women's Missionary society was organized and she was its first president. In 1887 they moved to Booneville, N. Y., where he died, having preached there 29 years.

Mr. Carson came next, but owing to the illness and frailty of his wife their stay was short.

The Rev. Henry Arlen remained for five years and he did a good work among us. The Gospel which he preached was pretty stern but perhaps we needed it so. Mrs. Arlen, of whom we were very fond, passed away while here. There were three girls and a boy in the Arlen family who, despite their father's



years of age, from Maryland. He finished the boat during the trip and he and Dr. Seely became friends. He, too, came, married later and built him a home. His name was Robert G. Gates.

Late in that same summer, 1846, quoting from the history written by Edmund Seely 40 years ago, "feeling some public religious services were needed in the community," Dr. Seely invited his friends and neighbors to come to his house on Sunday afternoon and hear the Reverend Mr. Chapman of Plainfield preach the Gospel. These services were continued into the win-

the minutes of this fact. We can just read between the lines: "Nov. 14, 1865, annual meeting held in the school house." "Nov. 15, 1866, annual meeting held in the church."

When the church was built there were two broad, tall front doors, under the steeple, facing the south, which entered into a vestibule the width of the church. On either end of this vestibule there were two entrances; and just inside the church in either corner was a tall round stove. Between the doors was the choir dais, three steps up. The first organist which I remember was Mrs. E. M. Sexton. Later the

sternness and their mother's gentleness, were a normal capable group. The Rev. James Aiken Smith was never installed, having a longing for the west, where he was soon called.

March 21, 1900 Edmund Seely passed away. He had been an elder 34 years. Life was never easy for Edmund Seely, but he met it like a true soldier of Jesus Christ. His life stands out in my mind as a great masterpiece wrought in human clay, but filled with the Spirit.

The Rev. M. E. Todd was with us over three years. During this time we had very successful revival

*meetings, and over communicants*

A letter was read at the church serv-  
ice Sunday morning, from the Rev.

180. Our Sunday school hour was then changed from 12:30 to 10 a. m. which hour still remains. There were 205 on the Sunday school roll. Mr. and Mrs. Todd filled the old ~~chapel~~ with six or seven boys and girls who mingled well with our own young people. The chapel or lecture room as it was then called was added at this time.

It is now 1903. The Rev. David Taylor Robertson came to us, with Mrs. Robertson, a girl and three boys, the whole sextet a lovely, lusty crowd. Mr. Robertson took his Ph. D. degree while here. He loved to preach. Not so long ago in prayer meeting, one of our elders had occasion to refer to the "powerful preaching" of Dr. Robertson.

In 1905 William Jessup's life went out. He had been an elder 37 years. Our church has always been blessed in its eldership, past and present, the incumbents meeting the requirements as Paul gave them out to Timothy. Just a few days ago, a lady told me of how when a girl of 13, she was impelled to come into the church. One Sunday morning unknown to her family she presented herself alone before the session. William Jessup talked to her about the step she was taking, saying about other things, "always remember that praying will keep you from sinning and sinning will keep you from praying." That was over half a century ago, she has seen much of life, many people, heard many words, but these she has always remembered.

Then came Mr. McCain, of whom, when we did not use his title, we spoke of as the "bee-man." He had what he was pleased to call an "eagle eye." There were no misdemeanors committed under his penetrating gaze. A baby daughter

seminary. A quiet, conservative, Godly man sharing our joys and our sorrows, he lived among us a life above reproach, and Mrs. Nansen, Delores and Jimmy have a warm place in our hearts. Mr. Nansen was instrumental in starting a building fund for a new church. The first offering was taken at Thanksgiving, 1926. This fund has grown with the years. Also in May, 1926, the session approved Mr. Nansen's plans for a daily vacation Bible school. This present summer we held our eleventh vacation Bible school with an average attendance of over 50.

Wesley L. Kosin has been with us over two years. He, too, can pray, he is teaching us to pray. The theme of his preaching is the pre-eminence of Christ and his great objective is our souls' salvation. His is a mathematical mind and each of us presents to him a particular problem. And he will not cease his efforts until the solution is correct even to the fourth decimal place.

At our last annual meeting we voted to increase our eldership to eight members.

Ninety years is a long time in the annals of man but in the calendar of God it may be still "in the beginning . . ." The work is not finished and we, who constitute the Au Sable Grove Presbyterian church, have a very definite call to go on.

(This church observed its ninetyeth anniversary in special services and a picnic dinner Sunday, August 21, attended by 350 members, former members, former pastors, their families and friends. The above history was read during the program that day.) 1938

penetrating gaze. A baby daughter died while they were here which so saddened their lives they did not longer care to call this place home.

The Rev. George A. Harris and Mrs. Harris and Margery came to us straight from Dundee, Scotland. He was a scholar, an artist, the highest type of Christian gentleman, and withal the most honest man I ever met. He had a hobby, boys, boys in their teens and there was a large group who responded to his teaching. Mrs. Harris had a hobby, too, women, missionary minded women. Thru her efforts our missionary meetings became all day sessions. More than once I have seen and heard her at most unexpected times, shake her finger at us and shake her curls, berating us because we were so satisfied just to do our duty. "Ye are so apt to fall a wee bit short. The Lord likes to see the heart of ye bared occasionally." But then she would smile and we knew she loved us.

Mr. and Mrs. Liggett came and went and then the Martins, Elmer and Katherine. They were the first to occupy the new manse. She had not seen many years and we thought they needed us. We gave them our best and they gave us their best, a happy relationship which still continues.

#### **Bingamans Come.**

Then the Bingamans came. He could preach, he could pray, he was a good pastor. Aside from that we called him "bookish." Mr. and Mrs. Bingaman, Imogene and Billy, how fond we were of them!

The Nansens were with us ten

*years. Like the two men preceding him, Mr. Nansen was just out of seminary*

