Bethel AME: Church Building History & Bell. March 13, 2021

My name is Liz Stewart and I’ve been a member of the Chico Heritage Association for many years. I didn’t grow up in Chico, but like many newcomers I became interested in local history soon after I moved here. I worked for the county library in Paradise, but I am an amateur historian. This past year while we were forced to stay home was made easier in one way: years of old Chico newspapers were digitized last summer and what a vast world has opened up for researchers.

Newspaper accounts can be misleading, but they do contain clues.

Chico has had at least eight differently named Methodist churches; some were newly adopted names for the same congregation in a new building. We believe that the white Methodist Episcopal Church, South was the earliest. Then came another white ME Church, North and, later, the African Methodist Church. There were various Methodist meetinghouses which sprang up here and there about which I know very little. There was a First Methodist, a Broadway Methodist, a Free Methodist, the Bethel African Methodist Episcopal, Trinity United Methodist and Aldersgate Methodist. Maybe there’s a church historian who’s got a handle on this!

There has been a long-term connection between the white ME Church, South which built this building and the Black Bethel AME Church to which it was given. The white congregation built and occupied it for 39 years; it has belonged to the Black congregation for 115 years. For 50 of those 115 years it was at 6th & Flume until moved here in 1956.

The African Methodist Episcopal church in California has been around since we became a state, one of the oldest.

The white ME Church, South in Chico was founded in December 1858, but in “The States” as people referred to our eastern, southern and Midwestern states, it goes back much earlier, before the Civil War, when the white M. E. Church split into North and South, with the M.E. South congregations supporting slavery and segregation.

The building committee of the white M.E. Church, South congregation met to decide on the size of the church and select who would build it. They chose G. L. Broadwater. It was dedicated in April of 1867., and stood where Jack’s Restaurant parking lot is today. One member of the building committee was a Mr. Bradley; he was the secretary and collector. I think, but am not 100% certain, that his construction company built the first African Methodist Episcopal church.

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Previously attenders had met in schools or halls, maybe even “Methodist meetinghouses”. When first completed it had neither a belfry, nor a tower, as you can see on the 1871 Bird’s Eye View Map of Chico. A belfry was completed and the Meneeley Bell, probably shipped by train from their foundry in W. Troy, N.Y., was installed in October 1873.

The first African Methodist Church was built a 4-minute walk from the white M.E. Church, South; it was actually right on the “edge” of Old Chinatown, so their history was well known to Blacks who lived nearby. Peter Powers, a freed slave from Warsaw, Missouri, was one of the advocates for a church. He had crossed the plains in 1857 with his wife, 3 wagons and 250 head of cattle, landing first in Marysville. He came to Chico as a widower with young children and declared he would not stay if there was no school for them, nor even a church. He was introduced to John Bidwell who donated town lots for a church. Right away Powers got a donation of 1000 board ft. of lumber from a town trustee. The church trustees hired Briggs, Bradley, contractors and architects to build it. You can see their small building on the same 1871 Bird’s Eye View Map of Chico.

The irony of the white ME Church, South’s donation of their building to the Black congregation is part of our local history and cannot be ignored.

I’ve promised to not get too far into the weeds, but there are newspaper accounts that are important to read in order to understand the history of people, both Black and white who lived in Chico and whose stories tell so much about us. There is Rev. J. C. Simmons, a long-time very popular pastor of the white ME Church, South who lectured all over California on “The Role of the Negro Before the War” a telling that many would consider racist. There is also the story of Peter Powers, a man who had been enslaved and then freed who was well known in Chico; from the very beginning he was an active supporter of education and voting rights for Blacks. He dictated his biography to the local paper shortly before he died in 1912. Another story is about George Daily, the elderly Chico barber who received quite a shock when he learned he was about to shave the son of the man by whom he had been enslaved forty years before. And, finally, the Chico E.- R. editorial about the life of Rev. George J. Strong, by all accounts an exceptional man. Mr. Strong, along with his wife, Luella Strong, advocated for and supported the 2nd move of this building from the same block as the Trinity United Methodist Church to this location, 9th & Linden in 1956.

This binder contains all those stories; the last mentioned ones are on the Chico Heritage Association website. I have loved doing this research and have lots more, so please don’t hesitate to contact me. We haven’t resumed regular office hours, but if you leave a message at 345-7522 we will try to answer your question.

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liz95928@gmail.com