

Owen Sound B. M. E. Church Monument to Pioneers' Faith Altar of Present Coloured Folk

History of Congregation Goes Back Almost to Beginning of Little Village on the Sydenham When the Negros Met for Worship in Log Edifice, "Little Zion" – Anniversary Services Open on Sunday and Continue All Next Week.

This article is as it appeared in the *Owen Sound Daily Sun Times*, February 21, 1942. *Republished with kind permission of the Sun Times.*

By Dorothea Deans

"How Amiable are thy tabernacles, O Lord of Hosts," quoted from the 84th Psalm opened a general conference of the British Methodist Episcopal Church of Canada some years ago in Toronto and might well be taken as the key-note of the long religious aspiration and experience of the coloured congregation of Owen Sound, whose church history goes far back into the antiquity of the little village of Sydenham River.

The need of the altar is one of the deep and abiding characteristics of the Negro nature – to establish a place for worship, prayer and repentance, was one of his first efforts when released from slavery. Despite the economic struggle, which has dogged his footsteps ever since the day of his freedom, he has built and maintained his church.

"We must preserve our altar," says Rev. J. Ivan Moore, pastor of the Owen Sound B. M. E. Church on the eve of another anniversary in the long history of this congregation. "Today some will say that our little church has no future that cannot grow, that its service is limited. Those same words, no doubt, have been heard many times during the last century, but always the church has managed to continue . . . We must keep our altar.



The BME Church on Eleventh Street West is the fifth in a series which has served as an altar for this congregation during the past century. The comfortable little brick edifice was formerly Westside Methodist Church and became the BME Church when the present Westside United Church was erected a little over 30 years ago.



Rev. J. Ivan Moore, who came to the local BME Church in 1939 as a pastor.

Mr. Moore is very proud of the long church history of his people in Owen Sound. Though his congregation is small, he has welcomed twelve members during the past three years.

Rev. J. T. Jackson of Windsor, Ont., the oldest man from the standpoint of service in the General Conference of the British Methodist Episcopal Church, will be the speaker at the anniversary services at the local B. M. E. Church on Sunday and will remain throughout the coming week, speaking every night. The public is invited to attend these services and share in their inspiration. Many of the older residents will recall the days when the saintly father Miller used to deliver his fervent messages in an earlier church. And white friends from the neighbourhood and many other citizens stood around on the grounds as his richly beautiful voice floated through the windows with his story of salvation and glory.



Beloved pioneer coloured citizen of Owen Sound, who regularly conducted services in the BME Church. Father Miller was not only an outstanding Christian character, but a compelling speaker. His grandson, Wilson Woodbeck of New York, who recently sang in recital in Carnegie Hall, inherits his rich voice.

Nearly as Old as City

The local B. M. E. Church is almost as old as the city itself. Its history goes far back into the roots of Owen Sound. It was established in the early

days soon after the first coloured folk, who were mostly slaves escaping from the American colonies, came here one by one to find a sanctuary in the little village of Sydenham. In 1833 an act was passed in the British



Rev J.L. Dawson, conference superintendent of the BME Church at the present time, who has visited the local church on many occasions. There are 15 churches in his jurisdiction, including Owen Sound and Collingwood.

House of Parliament abolishing slavery in all British Dominions and one year later all slaves belonging to British subjects in all parts of the world were free. This forward step had an influence upon conditions in the American colony and although it was not till after the Civil War that all slaves were declared free, long before that time many of the more adventuresome had found their way over the border to freedom, while those held by British subjects living in America were automatically free men.

Earliest information on the subject of the little coloured colony in Sydenham village, now Owen Sound, finds this place a link in a series of missions or religious centres dotted across Ontario from the head of the lakes to which the escaped slaves, who reached Canada by the “underground railway route” were passed on. The newcomers were received and given aid in the spirit of religion and assisted to make their way to other points or else remain and eventually settle down and seek their livelihood.

Canadian Conference

The need for spiritual leadership among the coloured people, who had found their way to Canada from across the border, manifested

itself as early as 1834, when certain ministers of the American Methodist Episcopal Church came over to preach to them and help them organize in communities. For the most part the people were of the Methodist persuasion. Bishop Brown and other ministers of the A. M. E. Church organized a Canadian Conference and after due consideration overtures were made whereby the Canadian Conference would be a self-governing and responsible body. In 1856 the ministers and delegates met in their chapel in Chatham, Ont., and constituted an independent body which has been known from that day as the British Methodist Episcopal Church. Right Rev. Willis Nazrey was elected the first Bishop and during his first term of office was instrumental in establishing a conference in Nova Scotia, as Canada East, while Ontario was called West. Rev. J. L. Dawson is the present Conference Superintendant and has visited the church here on many occasions.

Though the local B. M. E. congregation has only occupied its present edifice for 31 years, its beginning goes back to when the first coloured families came to Sydenham stride by stride with the white man a 100 years ago. In the woods and swamps these first coloured residents eked out a precarious existence, but with the characteristic faith and fervour of their race they persevered in their spiritual life, meeting together in a shanty here and there for prayer and praise. In other words their church was the pivot and focus of their lives.

On the Banks of the Sydenham



Granny Taylor, who kept a store close to where Eighth street bridge spans the Sydenham River today was one of the devout early coloured citizens, who worked to collect funds to establish "Little Zion", the first church for the coloured population, a log shanty near the site of the present Market Square. Granny Taylor with her hamper of apples was a familiar figure on the streets of Owen Sound many years ago.

Mrs. Robert Hornby of the east hill, whose legendary father, "Daddy" Hall, was one of the very first settlers in this community, states that the first church for the coloured folks was a log building on the banks of the Sydenham River, practically on the site of the present Market Square. When Mrs. Hornby was born about 90 years ago on what is now Victoria Park there were ten or more coloured families in a little settlement there and all worshipped in the tiny log church home in the valley. Thomas Green, whose father was an escaped slave, who settled here in the very early days of this community, has the same story to tell of the first place of worship. The church was called "Little Zion." Mrs. Mary Taylor, who kept a store on Eighth Street Bridge, was one of the devout early coloured residents, and was among those who worked hard to collect funds to establish the little church. Grannie Taylor, as she was familiarly known, specialized in selling apples and usually carried a basket with her wherever she went. She was a very popular and respected citizen.

Five Churches

The next church home of the coloured congregation was a log shanty in the vicinity of Twelfth Street East between First and Second Avenue. The third church was on the east hill on the corner of Seventh Avenue and Ninth Street. Eventually the little brick edifice was built on Second Avenue West, between Seventh and Eight Streets and there the coloured people held regular meetings until Westside Methodist Church building was taken over when that congregation built its present commodious edifice a little over 30 years ago.

First Pastor in 1856

Rev. Josephus Obanion is the first ordained minister known to have served at the B. M. E. Church and he came here as long ago as 1846. In addition to a long list of pastors during the years that have since elapsed, the early years of the church were marked by many local preachers or members of the congregation gifted in eloquence and religious fervour.

Community life in the early days was marked by a delightful harmony and appreciation existing between the coloured folks and the white population. Members of the pioneer families took a deep interest in the welfare of the Negroes which has persisted to this day. Representatives of the early families still cherish old tales of childhood days and experiences in which the gentle coloured folk figured. Many of those recollections have to do with the church life of the coloured people, their fervent speakers and the simple and vital Gospel they preached. There can be no doubt but their childlike trust and dependence upon God was often a rebuke and an example to their white brothers, while certain of their numbers, such as the saintly Father Miller, exemplified an unsurpassed Christian personality in humility, uprightness and trust.



Rev. L.C. Gow who was local BME pastor from 1929 to '32, was a graduate of McMaster University. He came to Canada from South Africa where his father was a bishop in the BME Church. His intentions were to study dentistry, but then he became converted and entered the ministry. In 1936 he went back to South Africa.

Father Miller's Grandson

This influence is still alive today and is demonstrated in different spheres, such as in the success attained by Wilson Woodbeck, baritone, who sang a few weeks ago in Carnegie Hall, New York, and received the favourable criticism of the music world. Wilson Woodbeck is a grandson of the late Father Miller and as a lad he sang in the church which his ancestors founded, while his program in Carnegie Hall included many of the exquisite old Negro spirituals which the members of his race brought with them from southern plantations to the tiny settlement on the Sydenham River. Writing to the pastor a few days ago, Wilson Woodbeck said, "It was the training I received in the same church that you are pastoring that inspired my work in the music world. Small churches in small towns are definitely responsible for a major part of our culture."

Besides Father Miller, local preachers in the early days of B. M. E. church included Ned Patterson, John Green, and Francis Molock. The honour roll of very faithful early members include men such as Ringo, Branscombe and Hooper and Grannie Smoots, Grannie Crosby and Grannie Taylor.

The Owen Sound B. M. E. Church is operated under the old binary system similar to the Methodist Church prior to the union and for this reason the records give a long list of pastors who have been stationed here since early in the century.

The list compiled by the present pastor reads as follows: - Rev. W. A. McClure, 1907-13; Rev. W. Hamilton, 1914-14; Rev. L. Johnson, 1914-18; Rev. H. M. Lewis; Rev. A. R. Plummer, 1922-23; Rev. E. A. Richardson, 1923-27; Rev. H. F. Logan, 1927-29; Rev. L. C. Gow, 1929-34; Rev. G. E. Crawford, 1932-34; Rev. F. O. Stewart, 1934-37; Rev. J. Ivan Moore, who came in 1939. Still earlier in the records, the church was served by Rev. S. Lucas.



Rev. S. Lucas

Rev. H.F. Logan



Rev. E.A. Richardson Rev. W.A. McClure

The above pastors are among the many who have served the local BME Church and carried on the unbroken ministry since the early days of Owen Sound. Rev. S. Lucas was here early in the century. The late H.F. Logan came in 1927 and passed away here in 1929. Rev E.A. Richardson was a graduate of the Toronto Bible College and a very popular pastor here from 1923-1927. Alonzo McClure ministered to the congregation from 1907-1911. Alonzo McClure, who resides on the east hill, is the son of the early pastor.

Fifteen Churches of Canada

The local congregation is one of 15 in Ontario, namely: Toronto, Windsor, Buxton, St. Catharines, London, Brantford, Guelph, Stratford, Woodstock, Dresden, Harrow, Fort Erie, Niagara Falls, Collingwood and Owen Sound. All these churches come under the conference of the British Methodist Episcopal Church, which since 1856 has been responsible for the local ministry. Ten times this Conference has met in Owen Sound for its annual sessions. The rich racial gift of harmony and song has always featured the activities of the coloured congregations and has attracted many citizens to attendance at various events held at the church. Besides the regular Sunday Service a series of mid-week meetings are maintained. The sailor's supper has been custom for many years and has long been a popular community function.

Monument and Altar

The Owen Sound B. M. E. Church is proud of its unbroken record of Christian worship and service since the days when a few deeply religious coloured folk met in the valley of the Sydenham to declare their faith in God to care for them in this new country and their new homes. Today their church stands as a monument to the faithful who sacrificed to establish it and who have guarded its permanence for so many years. Though its present membership is small, during the three years Rev. J. Ivan Moore's pastorate

twelve new members have been received. Today it stands as an altar – a tabernacle, a church home for the faithful.