

SUUC Pre-Centennial History Update #2

Reclaiming Our Heritage

With streets named 'Ridgeway' and 'Stansfield,' a restaurant called 'Bradford,' and a Commons development named 'Yorkshire' in the immediate vicinity of our church, it didn't take me long to realize there had to be a strong connection to the part of England I called home until the age of sixteen. My curiosity piqued, and armed with the knowledge that Thomas Goodall, founder of the Sanford mills, came from Dewsbury, a wool-manufacturing town near Bradford, Yorkshire, I set out to connect the dots leading to the establishment of our town and our church. It has been an interesting and fruitful journey, which I would like to share with you as we prepare to celebrate 100 years in our sanctuary.

Full of questions for our "over fifties," I probed the memories of Maurice Cobb, Pat Herrick, Ruth Leipold, Elizabeth Fraser and Martha Keefe, who took me to interview an aging Evelyn Waterhouse, our only remaining direct link to our distant past. Though each person had tantalizing nuggets of information, collectively we came to the realization that much of the church's history had been lost to time. No one alive knew much about those spiritual forebears Pat Herrick aptly named "The People of the Windows." And therein lay the challenge for me: to try to recapture our church's past as an enlightened gift to our future. It proved to be a four-year odyssey, culminating in a book I had never intended to write.

Picture, if you will, Bill Ouellette in the dingy recesses of a forgotten closet-sized room in the basement, unearthing box after dank, grimy box of our church's past that had been relegated to near-oblivion. When he showed the room's contents to me, it was unappealing enough to make me want to leave it all in place, but curiosity and a belief in the sanctity of historical preservation got the better of me, and so Bill brought much of it into the light of day for the first time in decades, and I set to work, hardly knowing where to start.

As I related in a recent article on the history of The Corner Cupboard, what is now our basement library had recently been emptied -- first of obsolete risers, then of heavy wooden storage shelving -- in an exchange where the Goodall Hall book cases were restored to their rightful place. Originally a ladies' cloakroom in the days when the vestry was used for lavish formal gatherings, the tiny room had become a nursery before being relegated to storage space. With its dark wainscoting and matching bookshelves, it is more suited for use as the library it has become after we installed a carpet, curtains, filing cabinets, a large wooden table and a reading chair and lamp, and this was where I worked for long hours each day, when I wasn't culling information from the Sanford and Springvale libraries. In fact, I became such a fixture that Rev. Sue used to joke about my spending more time at the church than she did! (Not true!)

It was enthralling, addictive work as I delved ever-deeper into the lives of those who emerged from names on a page into full-fledged personalities. Because they had been recent immigrants from Yorkshire, brought to Sanford by Thomas Goodall for their skills as weavers

and dyers, I came to view them as "my people," who spoke in the thick Yorkshire dialect that is hard to understand even if one is raised in its midst.

When I wrote the series of sonnets for the cemetery walk among their graves, I listened for what they had to say, and let them guide my thoughts, so that the poems seemed to write themselves. Before one of the performances, my heart skipped a beat when I came upon a costumed Don Reusch as Edward Hussey and Gary Peck as William Miller chatting together at their juxtaposed graves. For a split second they came to life again, just for me to see!

I read the contents of most of the somber black books that contained the business of the church, and learned to read between the lines also. I wrote their titles in white ink and arranged them in chronological order so they could be used for reference into the future. Newsletters went into the filing cabinets in order, a great source of information about individual contributions to our church over decades. I compiled books of obituaries, different ministers' tenures, anything with a common theme, and photo albums, and the room began to function as a library. When the Second Century Team needed architectural charts and original drawings, they found them protected in treated boxes to forestall further deterioration.

The very few artifacts we have left were put on display at the Springvale Historical Society during our 2009 Centennial, but they only served to highlight the loss of much of our tangible history over the years. My greatest regret is the disappearance of a wonderful scrap book before I could delve into it, remembered because it contained a personal letter of thanks to our church from Emmett Till's mother shortly after her son's murder, a rare local connection to history writ large.

One of our new minister's first tasks will be to lead us through our Centennial celebrations into our Second Century. Much has been accomplished to prepare the church buildings for the anniversary, yet there is more to be done to reach our centennial goals. I know you have many thoughts and ideas, as do I, regarding the celebrations, and soon we will gather to make plans and take on the tasks that will culminate in the weekend festivities of November 3 and 4, 2018.

I hope you will join me in a winter and spring of joyful, purposeful Centennial preparations that will take us beyond our walls and into our town.

Helen Kane, Church Historian
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