

MUSIC MEMORIES

1855 - 1973



**CHRISTIAN
CHURCH**
(DISCIPLES OF CHRIST)

FIRST CHRISTIAN CHURCH
(Disciples of Christ)

Warrensburg, Missouri

ORGAN DEDICATION, SEPTEMBER 23, 1973

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1850 - 1890

During the first thirty-five years following organization of the congregation in 1855 in the original Johnson County Court House (now a National Historic Site) the members worshiped in three locations. The Old Courthouse on "Old Town Hill" was used until 1859 when a large brick church was built on the north side of West Gay Street somewhat east of the intersection with North Main. The congregation scattered at the beginning of the Civil War and the founder and trustee (Archibald H. Gilkeson) was directed to sell the church to pay the debt. In 1866, upon reorganization of the congregation, the fund remaining from the sale was used to erect a small white frame church at 218 West Gay Street on a lot donated by the founder.

While the new congregation met in the Old Courthouse, there could have been no more than a tuning fork used by the leader of congregational hymn singing. He probably lined the hymns. There is no record of a musical instrument in the large brick church built in 1859. Neither is there record of an organ in the frame church on West Gay Street though it seems reasonable that a reed organ could have been used - certainly there was singing.

The congregation grew and the present structure (on a lot given by the founder's son, Hugh P. Gilkeson) had been completed and a pipe organ installed when the dedication ceremony was held on January 12, 1890.

1890 - 1920

Not too many of the current members of the First Christian Church know of the 1890 organ though some members remember it clearly. This manually-operated small pipe organ was used for thirty years. Those who provided the description of this "little organ" attest to its sweet tone and to the excellence of the music.

From the beginning, the church has had well-trained organists and choir members. Mr. Odessa Sterling, later of Seattle, Washington, must have been one of the earliest, at least he is so recalled. He was well-trained and also played the piano beautifully. Professor Robert E. Wadell, Professor of Music at the Normal School (1888-1899) served the church as organist and choir director for one period from about 1917 until past 1920, and it seems that he might have done so earlier. His conservatory with numerous teachers involved was an institution in itself for many years. Lena Bell Newkirk (Mrs. Herk), a graduate of the Wadell Conservatory and a current member of our church though living in Kansas City, recalls that she was playing the little organ in 1906 in the year of her marriage. She says that there was no choir director at that time. The late Miss Lura Lemon also served as organist during the early years. She taught away from Warrensburg at some time and was on the normal school faculty, 1915-1917, perhaps later, too. She was playing the church organ in the 1920's at least for awhile. Mrs. Newkirk held many of her student recitals in our sanctuary and she recalls one which packed the building on April 22, 1915. She and Rudolph King, a ten-year pupil of Tschaikowski, played a two-piano duet and he a solo.

Eleanor Conway Wade (Mrs. Homer) was organist for a time after 1912 or 1915. Familiarly known as Nell, Mrs. Wade is now residing in Independence, Missouri. Later, when living in Kansas City she returned at times to substitute at the organ for Miss Lemon.

The boys or girls who pumped the little organ did their part in providing good music, though perhaps somewhat tardy in response at the close of the sermon. They sat behind a screen along the east wall and pumped the organ with a long handle. It was a temptation not to sleep during the sermon. Continued research might disclose more of their names. Mr. Frank Burchfield remembers that he and any boy he could enlist as partner often pumped. Mrs. Russell McDowell's brother, the late Gail Faulkner, also took his turns. Two young sisters, Lena Trader (Mrs. Lena Corum, Sedalia) and Pauline Trader (Mrs. Pauline Flora, Decatur, Illinois) pumped perhaps as early as 1904. Ruth Samuels Briscoe (Mrs. Harry) and her brother Tracy, took turns with the twins Willina (Mrs. M.L. Riley) and Sherman Moore (now living in California) when their father (Rev. S.B. Moore) was minister (1909-1915). Very young John Sidney Gilbert (now living in California) pumped for a Children's Day Rally program.

There are nostalgic memories of a number of early choir members. Josephine Conway Brown (Mrs. William) and Mercedes Vernaz Brock (Mrs. E.A.) began their pre-church choir experience when they were little girls in Sunday School. They were singing duets when they were fourteen. Upon becoming members of the church choir, they often sang in a quartette with Mae Foster Corum (Mrs. Dallas, Sr.), and Vada Gaubert Campbell (Mrs. Harry), or Louise Hickman Rowland (Mrs. John). Mercedes Vernaz and Vada Gaubert were soloists also. Josephine Conway also sang with Ethel Lobban, soprano, her brother, Carl Lobban, tenor, and Harley Harrison, bass, with Miss Lemon at the organ. Of these groups, only Mrs. Brown is now living. Mr. Lonna L. DesCombes remembers that he sang in the choir for three years before he entered the U.S. armed services in 1918.

1920 - Date

On January 20, 1920, a new pipe organ was installed by the Bethany Circle one of three women's groups in the church. These women, through their organ fund group, worked long and hard to earn their contribution for this organ.

It is this organ which has been rebuilt after fifty-three years of service, and with proper care it should be in use for seventy-five or one hundred years. We are deeply indebted to Mr. Mike Quimby, for his skill, wide organ knowledge and in designing, ordering, and assembling parts. In a deep sense, it is his organ.

The fifty-three years following the advent of the 1920 organ are replete with excellent organists, choir directors, and choir members. A roll call of either is impossible, however, due to lack of records and to memories that can fail. Each church member probably has had a favorite.

There was no abrupt change with the coming of the new organ. Professor Waddell must have continued as organist and choir director for awhile, and Miss Lemon may have returned. There were Sunday School choirs and evening services in those days and all required music.

Around 1928, Mrs. Lena Bell Newkirk developed an orchestra which played for Sunday School and Sunday evening services. Miss Lemon accompanied on the organ with Mrs. Newkirk directing at the piano. The orchestra sat on the side in the present parlor area. This orchestra attracted very favorable statewide attention by broadcasting two programs from the radio station in Jefferson City.

Perhaps the family to provide the greatest number of choir members for the church has been that of Mr. and Mrs. W.J. Frost. This family spans the choir years from 1930 to the present. Mrs. Frost and her late husband both graduated from the Waddell Conservatory. They and their five children plus a son-in-law, a daughter-in-law, and grand daughter, make a total of ten

choir members. Mr. Frost and daughter, Mary Florence (Mrs. Virgil Verts) joined the choir in 1930. Frank Frost entered the choir in 1932, and after absence when teaching and in service in the U.S. Army has sung tenor steadily since 1945. His wife, Arleta, sang for a time. John Frost, also a tenor as was his father, sang tenor for several years. Martha Frances Hodges has been singing soprano since 1948 and her husband Jay Hodges sang for some years beginning slightly before she did. Their daughter, Sammy Ann (Mrs. Sherman Boswell) was a member for a time. The eldest son Redmond, sang in our choir for a brief time, wherever he has lived he has sung in a choir and is still doing so.

There may have been other choir families. Presently, the entire family of our present esteemed director, his wife Pat, Randall, and Bruce are singing as did Carolyn until she became organist. There have been several husband and wife teams in recent years, among them: Ronald and Margaret Boeth, Carl and Annette Baxter, Hal and Martha Gardner, Sam and Linda Sharp, Gene and Nancy Rutherford plus their son Bob, Larry and Judy Cammack. Mr. Don Patterson and wife Miki, parents of Anne, were a husband and wife team. Don has remained a member.

Mrs. W.B. Palmer sang many years in our choir as did Ruth Briscoe (Mrs. Harry). There are still many others whose names we cannot call.

Memory supplies still more choir members who were faithful for years although specific dates have not been found as yet. The late Oscar Smith and Ben Couch were singing bass in the 1940's and had for years. Miss Ritta Park who had a fine alto voice must have held her alto position for possibly forty years.

On this organ dedication day we should recall Geraldine Greim (Mrs. Joseph Spanbauer) a choir member early in the 1940's. Upon the death of her mother, Mrs. Lillian Greim, Geraldine made a memorial gift to our church to establish an organ fund. It was this fund which grew and made possible the rebuilding of the organ. The most recent addition to the fund was from Mrs. Josephine Conway Brown (Mrs. William) from the Conway family.

Young daughters and occasionally a son of our church members have been valuable choir participants. Three daughters of Mr. and Mrs. C.H. Smith sang and the fourth was an organ substitute occasionally. Rev. and Mrs. Woodruff's daughters, Mary Gay (Mrs. Richard Craig) and Lonnie Ann (Mrs. Paul Vanture) sang during their college years. Jodi Rogers (Mrs. Frank Greiner of Liberty, Missouri), a soprano soloist has been a choir member as well as director of the Junior Choir. James R. Garrison, elder son of the late Judge James R. Garrison, began his singing experience in our choir and graduated in music from Northwestern University. He continued singing through his military service and he is now located in New York City. The late Kathleen Bartholomew, daughter of Mrs. Paul Bartholomew, sang in our choir and was a soloist. Steven Sill, now studying for the ministry, was a faithful choir member - his brother Bob also for a time.

Senior choir members have directed youth choirs, junior choirs, and cherub choirs, for the children in our Sunday Church School. Among these leaders have been Don Wilson, the late Mae House (Mrs. Frank) who was also a senior choir alto soloist, Dr. Donald Tarbett, (a Warrensburg High principal), Joyce Miller (Mrs. Jerry), Mrs. John Lindsay and Jodi Rogers. Mrs. Gene Rutherford works with the Cherub Choir and has directed an Intermediate Choir. Anne Pettigrew has played for some of these choirs. Briefly in 1947, there was a young men's sextette composed of Dale Thurston, Don Wilson, George Wells, Howard Campbell, William Turnbow and Bill Hopkins.

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The late Mr. B.A. Richards Sr. and Mrs. Richards Sr.; Mr. and Mrs. B.A. Richards Jr.

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Among the organists, Kathleen Morse (Mrs. William) played almost five years (1948-53) and has been guest organist or substitute often since. Barbara Rogers (Mrs. J.C.), played a total of six years during two terms of her husbands duty at Whiteman Air Force Base (1954-57 and 1964-67). The late Mrs. Laure J. Chaney (Mrs. Walter) was a generous organist who gave freely of her time and talent to the churches of our city. She was employed many years as the American Red Cross Secretary in Johnson County. Miss Anne Patterson, daughter of Major and Mrs. Donald Patterson terminated seven years of organ service on August 26, to enter The Graduate School of the University of Michigan. The congregation held a reception in her honor on August 16.

Dr. Emma Lou Diemer, the youngest child of the late President and Mrs. George Diemer began her organ career as our organist, playing when she was attending college and continuing in vacations while studying for her advanced degrees at Eastman School of Music and Yale University. Composition has been her greatest interest. She taught at the University of Maryland while continuing with composition and is now living in Santa Barbara, California, teaching in an area college and composing.

Wanda Clements, daughter of Mrs. George Clements who was our choir director for a time, majored in music at Central Missouri State, filled in as an organist during her college years, and was employed about six months as our organist-director before her marriage and the family moved to Colorado.

Other organists have been: Jeannine Echohawk (Mrs. Walter) another Air Force wife who followed Barbara Rogers briefly; Mary Ann Massey Martin (Mrs. Ralph) who was a home girl and now lives in Raytown; Mr. George Wilhoit, local theatre manager and also an able organist who met our needs well; Mrs. Neal Tremble, Mrs. David C. Braught, Anthony Rhinehart, Mrs. Thomas McIntyre, and Tommy Hopkins (Dr. Thomas Hopkins, Sedalia physician) a home boy who played for a short time. Mr. William McCandless, Assistant Professor of Music at Central Missouri State University preceded Anne Patterson, while he was an graduate and undergraduate student. Mrs. Gene Rutherford has served as substitute organist. Carolyn Castle, daughter of our choir director, is the first organist of the rebuilt organ being dedicated today, September 23, 1973, thus beginning a new era in organ music at First Christian Church.

Directors of choral music have been more numerous than organ directors and can scarcely be considered apart from their choir members. In March, 1952, Mr. Lonna L. DesCombes completed his service to our church after four and one-half years as choir director. He enlisted a very fine tenor, William Rice, who is now head of the music department at Baker University. Mr. DesCombes remembers a quartette composed of Lloyd McMillan, Narry McMillan, Lillian Chatham, and Rita Mae Park. When a special anthem required a very high tenor solo, he asked Rev. Woodruff to sing it. Two of his choir members were Raudolyn Dow Eppright (Mrs. G.W.) now of the Chilhowee area and Doris Stacy Cull of Warrensburg.

Mrs. George Clements was recalled as a director for two periods, the latter in 1945 at a time when the choir membership needed to be built up. She worked most earnestly and patiently and succeeded in her purpose. Vivian Eller (Mrs. J.W.) was her delightful soprano soloist who remained in the choir for a number of years. Gladys Magee (Mrs. Russell now of Springfield, Missouri) sang contalto then. Mrs. Clements' daughters, Wanda and Cleora participated in the music program. Wanda was organist when needed during her college years and organist director about six months before leaving Warrensburg. Cleora's husband, Carl Finley, also sang and briefly directed the choir in the summer of 1946.

Mr. Ernest Elgert, a mature college student with experience in choir directing followed Mr. DesCombes for a few months. Mr. Elger also doubled at the organ when necessary.

Mr. Don McRoberts, apparently followed Mr. Elgert as choir director, efficiently directing five or six years, closing his work in the summer of 1960.

On September 1, 1960, Dr. Conan Castle became our choir director and is continuing at an even higher peak of accomplishment after thirteen years. Dr. Castle's doctorate degree was conferred late in March, 1962. His major field of study had been religious music and remains so, Rev. Woodruff was our pastor when Dr. Castle began his work and as interim minister recently said that he had been so grateful through the years for the fine work of Dr. Castle. Rev. Edward H. Kolbe, immediate past minister, likewise often expressed his appreciation with the same words.

Members of the present choir not yet named in the family and couples categories are Nancy McCulloch, Suzanne Holdren (Mrs. C.L.) who is a frequent soloist, Janice Wolff (Mrs. Fred), Mary Catherine Handly (Mrs. Lynn) who has been a choir member for years and Joan Rickman (Mrs. C.W.) also a member of long service. Two university students have just departed. Diane Parsons, soprano, grew up singing in our youth choirs, and has spent her four college years, just leaving in September. Anitra Turgeon has sung faithfully through the four years also and likewise is now teaching elsewhere. Joan Fitterling (Mrs. Myron) has now returned to the choir bringing her son, Ronnie, as a new member.

Our choir of First Christian Church has received considerable recognition in the Disciples of Christ brotherhood. In 1954 when Mr. Don McRoberts was director, the choir sang in Chillicothe at the State Convention of the Christian Church. Barbar Rogers (Mrs. J.C.) accompanied the choir. In 1965, when the State Convention was held in Sedalia, Dr. Castle was invited to take his choir to sing and Mrs. Rogers was accompanist again. In 1971, Dr. Castle was again invited to take his choir to sing and this time Anne Patterson was accompanist.

In the annals of musical memories, was one sponsored by the Open Door Sunday School couples class in February 1962. The more elder members longed to sing the hymns they had known best in the past. To meet the desire, the Open Door class arranged for a Sunday evening hymn singing. Rev. Herbert D. Woodruff, our minister, an excellent song leader led the singing. Rev. Woodruff had begun his ministry by singing and to hear him and join with him was always a joy.

There are happy memories throughout the entire Warrensburg community of the Memorial Carillon Bells and Tower Music System which was the gift of the late Mr. and Mrs. W.B. Russell and of Mr. and Mrs. H.H. Russell. Dedication of the gift was held formally on March 17, 1946. Mrs. W.B. Russell's great interest in the church had been the Cradle Roll Department and the system was dedicated to "the Glory of God and to the boys and girls who had passed through the Cradle Roll department of the Church." Lonnie Ann Woodruff and Marvin Faulwell, now a dentist in Raytown, perhaps others, took turns in playing the bells on special occasions such as midnight on Christmas Eve and on New Year's Eve. The organists provided the tower music program on Sunday mornings just before the morning church service began. Unfortunately, certain parts have worn out and can not be replaced.

A new era in organ history and of music memories now begins today, September 23, 1973.

Mrs. John Paul Morris
Historian, First Christian Church
Warrensburg, Missouri

REFERENCES

- Hedges, Mrs. Virginia Gilkeson, History of the Warrensburg Christian Church From 1855 to 1928.
- Morris, Monia Cook, Twenty-Three Years of History, The First Christian Church, Disciples of Christ, Warrensburg, Missouri 1967
- The First Christian Church News. September 28, 1945-date

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This fragmentary survey of music history in First Christian Church has been derived chiefly from the memories of those whom the Historian thought to contact or from unexpected sources. The weaving of the memories has been a labor of love. No omissions or errors are intentional. Memories fail us all, records are incomplete, telephone research is not entirely satisfactory and some possible sources are untouched because of time or doubtful value. The Historian will strive to continue working on the project and will welcome any information offered.

Especially, reliance has been placed upon the following: Juanita Vernaz, Nannie Belt (Mrs. J.E.), Ruth Briscoe (Mrs. Harry), Nancy Dorrance (Mrs. E.E.), Josephine Conway Brown (Mrs. William), Ponca City, Okla., Lena Bell Newkirk (Mrs. Herk), Kansas City, Missouri, Martha Frances Hodges (Mrs. Jay), Mrs. Lena Trader Corum, Sedalia, Missouri, Mrs. Pauline Trader Flora, Decatur, Illinois, Mr. Lonna L. DesCombes, Kathleen Johnston Morse (Mrs. William), Mr. Frank Burchfield, Raudolyn Dow Eppright (Mrs. George M.) Chilhowee, Rev. Herbert D. Woodruff and Dr. Conan Castle.

Gratefully,
Monia Morris (Mrs. John Paul)
Historian, First Christian Church
Warrensburg, Missouri