

Grand River Mission - Past and Future (by Enos T. Montour)

Twenty-two years ago this spring, the Grand River Mission lay in a semi-circle from Willow Grove, through New Credit to Martin's Corner. There had been no resident Minister there for several months. The church buildings were in a dismal state of disrepair.

Only in Ohsweken was there hydro, gravelled roads, phones or indoor plumbing. When the frost went out in the spring, the side roads became impassable. In all this, there was one visible and promising asset; the United Church people. Men, women and children were there; ready to respond to spiritual leadership.

Near Smoothtown, the Delaware Church had only recently been reopened after ten years of disuse. It sat flat on the ground without basement or hall. It was heated by an ancient wood stove, had a wheezy old organ and was lighted by fizzing gasoline lamps.

The Grand River Church sat along the river far away from where the action was. Its brick veneer was sagging, the rear wall was bulging out and it had no tower or porch.

New Credit had its 100 year old brick church with tall spire and spidery long stove pipes that rose to the high ceiling. The Band Council looked after its upkeep.

The Stone Ridge (yes, Stone Ridge) was the best kept of all the United Churches. Built of stone and brick, and with a devoted volunteer janitor, it was kept spotless inside and out. A small devout group met there awaiting the arrival of the new minister. At that time, there was no suitable residence for the minister. Of course at New Credit there stood a red brick parsonage built in the early 1820's. It was falling apart with age and neglect. Its doors swung open, not with welcome, but with neglect. Presbytery oversight was casual.

About that time an historic meeting was called in the rented Orange Hall in Ohsweken. It was a banquet or pot-luck supper, and its aim was to centralize and co-ordinate all the United Church work. It was unique and a bit awkward since it brought together three different tribes as well as church districts. The venerable Dr. Dorey was there from Toronto, arriving a bit late. The meeting decided to take steps to build a Manse in Ohsweken and centralize the Reserve work. The renovation of the churches followed, with local meetings to decide and plan.

At Delaware, they came over dark and muddy roads to the church lit by fizzing gasoline lamps, casting an eerie glow over the room. After much discussion, a little tense at times, it was decided to put a basement under the ancient church. Next day "all hands" pitched in. One devout lady filled the wagons at 10 P.M., after the men had finished the day's work. A local engineer was found to supervise the lifting of the old church. At Grand River the church board met and, with the co-operation of the Presbytery and Home Missions Board, renovation was planned. The contract, for the removal of the sagging bricks, was let to the Davis Bros. of Gainsville. Wilbur Monture built a cement buttress at the rear, and a tower was erected at the front entrance. New Credit and Stone Ridge Churches needed no special work.

Gala opening ceremonies were held on Sunday afternoons for the reopening of the Delaware and Grand River Churches. A special one was held for the dedication of the modern Ohsweken Manse with attached garage. On opening day, this large sign graced the front verandah "Akwekon kwahonkarawis omisaway!" (ask Rev. GSS to translate this.) Womens Associations arose at Delaware and at Grand River. There was already a Ladies Aid at New Credit with the faithful Flo King as Director and worrier. A strong central Manse Committee was appointed and enjoyed their work. These womens groups have gone under several names, now UCWs - but the dear ladies, called by any other name, would be as, er-nice!

The spiritual side was not neglected. Many young parents now, on and off the reserve, had their "Hour of Decision" when, after study and prayer, they walked up the isle to sign the Book of Faith. Some may still remember this sublime occasion. The Reserve Ministerial met regularly to plan Religious Instruction in all 13 schools. A special one was for the visit of Lord and Lady Alexander to dedicate the war memorial at Ohsweken. "Mr Canada", John Fisher paid us a visit and left an autographed copy of his book with the minister. When the council farewelled lawyer Lemieux, the U.C. minister was asked to address him in "high school french" (C'est magnifique, mais ce n'est pas Francais!) The Social Hall (Rumpus Room) at New Credit was built and equipped for basketball, played largely without rules. CGIT groups and Boys Clubs were organized. Welding and rope tying were taught, and a CG Rally was held at Ohsweken during a March storm. Brantford CGers came down to mingle with us. (cont'd)