

Elma United Methodist Church
November, 2003

1. IN THE BEGINNING

The Methodist Episcopal Church was formed in Baltimore in 1784. In 1810, the Genesee Conference was organized in Lyons, New York. Included were most of New York State, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Michigan, part of New Jersey and all of Canada.

After the Revolutionary War, the United States' westward expansion began. In 1797 the Holland Land Company bought from the Seneca Nation, land in Western New York. The part that is Elma was held until 1842, when the Thomas Ogden Land Company completed the final purchase from the Seneca, making Elma the youngest town in the county. There was a Seneca village on the Big Flats, which referred to the area along Buffalo Creek, now Elma Village. This part of town was known as the Lancaster side, and the imaginary line that ran about where Woodard Road is now, places everything else on the Aurora side.

The first settler in Elma was Taber Earl in 1828, on the Aurora side, but it wasn't until 1841 when Bowen Road was laid out from Lancaster that George Standardt arrived. He was given his choice of three lots in the Big Flats in exchange for releasing his rights to a mill in Gardenville. He chose lots covering the area from (now) Bullis to Chairfactory Roads on the east side of Bowen Road. The first mill was on Pond Brook, just south of (now) Chairfactory Road.

Arriving in 1843 was Eleazer Bancroft who had the contract to chop and clear Bowen Road. The hill going up to Clinton Street needed extra work to be gradually sloped because it went through a swamp, and was too steep for wagons originally. (As you drive north from the church on Bowen Road, look to the left to see both the swamp and steepness.) In the summer of 1844, he built the first bridge across the Buffalo Creek, about the same time as lots were open for sale in the area. (Mr. Bancroft was a man of stern convictions; he was a Superintendent of the Underground Railway in this area.)

The Seneca had planted corn over the area on both sides of the creek, which had to be cleared when Joseph B. Briggs, Hiram Clark, Clark Hurd and Allen Clark bought land up and down Bowen Road in 1845. Briggs and Hurd soon bought out the Clarks, and built a mill and lumberyard. The land was thickly covered with trees. They had to cut hemlock boughs to sleep on, and cooked meals over open fires. They dug the channel for the millrace, (which is but a trickle of a creek today) and put in the dam on the Buffalo Creek behind the church site.

2 The Church Built with Firewood



Dam built by Clark Hurd and Joseph Briggs on the Buffalo Creek behind the church.

By 1849, Standardt had built a mill and a home on the Buffalo Creek near what is now Knabb Road. In July of that year, his daughter, Samantha, age 12, died. Samantha's brothers wanted her to have a true church funeral, so they rode to Lancaster to find a minister. Reverend George Havens, who was pastor of the Methodist Episcopal Church there, agreed to come to the home. Samantha is buried near the Buffalo Creek near the corner of Knabb and Handy Roads. Handy was once named Standardt Road, and crossed the creek to meet Bullis Road.

After the funeral service, Reverend Havens talked with the settlers about their need for some sort of religious guidance. He offered to ride over every other Sunday afternoon, at 2 PM when the roads were passable, for an informal service. The original group that met was George Standardt, Mr. & Mrs. Joseph Briggs, Florina Briggs and Mrs. William Standardt. (Mrs. Briggs had two brothers who were Methodist pastors elsewhere, and had been raised in a strongly religious household. Her parents, Charlotte and Cyreneus Wilbor had relocated to Elma also.)

The first schoolhouse in the area stood on the lot where the church is now. It was run by Miss Celina Standardt but was quite small, and was torn down after a year of service. The new schoolhouse was built on top of Bowen Road hill, now the location of the Jacobs' home. Part of the lumber from the first school was used to build the second one. It was decided to meet there with the group of worshippers.

Reverend Havens contacted the Lancaster Presbyterian minister who agreed to hold services on alternate Sundays when Havens was speaking in Bowmansville, so from the start, the ministry was ecumenical. Most people attended every Sunday, regardless of who was pastor.

The Church Built with Firewood 3

Reverend Havens came only a few times. By September, Reverend Chauncey Baker came from Lancaster, continuing the ministry to Elma, as did the preachers who followed him. The group of worshippers were formed into a "class", somewhat like church school. They sang hymns, studied the Bible, and asked questions, but had little formal doctrine.

Brothers Oliver and Elon Clark moved to Elma in 1850. Warren Jackman, his father and brothers James and William came in 1851. The Jackman family and Mrs. Briggs were all originally from Alexander, NY; they may have known each other growing up.

In 1851, Cyrenus Wilbor began the Community Sunday school class, which met in the schoolhouse before the regular service class. Other superintendents were Theodore Noyes (a Baptist), and James Clark. Later George Townsend was superintendent of the school before he went to fight in the Civil War. (Unfortunately he was killed in a battle in Cedar Creek, VA. His body was brought home, and he was buried in the Elma Cemetery.) In the 20th century many folks remember John Heather, Milt Bender, Sarah Hill and Beth Pitman in this post.

In 1853, the group decided they would like to affiliate with the Genesee Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church and made application. The request was confirmed on December 23, 1853. That is the official birthday of the church organization. The charter notes December 28th, probably the date Warren Jackman wrote the document.

At a meeting of the male members of the Methodist Episcopal Church and congregation of Elma, held at the school in the Village of Elma on the 28th day of December in the year of our Lord 1853, pursuant to the public notice previously given of which notice the following is a true copy-

NOTICE

There will be a meeting of the male members of full age of the Methodist Episcopal Church and congregation of Elma held in this house on Wednesday the 28th day of this month at seven o'clock in the evening for the purpose of incorporating said church according to law.

Said meeting having convened as before mentioned being at the time and place designated in said notice...

RESOLVED by said meeting that this society shall hereafter be known by name and title of "The Elma Methodist Episcopal Church"

Signed by James R. Jackman, Clerk of the Board

4 The Church Built with Firewood

The first trustees were: Cyrenus Wilbor, James Jackman, Joseph B. Briggs, Elon Clark, Warren Jackman, Joseph Clark and Deforest Standardt. By coincidence Bowmansville Methodist was incorporated in the same year. In 2003 we have a lasting connection with them: their first pastor was our first pastor, and their current pastor was a member of our congregation for many years!

The group met throughout the 1850's, planning for a church building. It was a bad time for the economy in the country and several members of the original group died. Events were happening in Elma Village though: in 1852 when a post office was needed, Joseph Bancroft suggested the town be named for the large elm tree that stood at the corner of Clinton and Bowen Roads. Elma became the official name for a town previously known as Milford, Briggs' Mill, Hurd's Mills, or Big Flats.

In 1853 Oliver Clark died. It was decided by village residents that Joseph Briggs' hilltop land north of the creek would serve best as a cemetery. He generously donated an acre and a half of land where today we may see Oliver Clark's headstone, along with generations of Hurds, Briggs, Clarks and a multitude of others. The church does not own it, but it is sometimes referred to as the Methodist Cemetery.

In 1857, the Town of Elma was formed, with the Aurora and Lancaster sides joining together. The first meeting was held in Clark Hurd's house when it stood north of the church site. It is noted in Jackman's history that neither side really wanted to come together, especially Warren Jackman. He was named the first Town Clerk however, and his records provide meticulous details about the early days in Elma and the church.

2. A BUILDING BY BARTER

By 1859 the Board of Trustees decided that a church building was now necessary to accommodate all those who wished to attend the services. Mr. & Mrs. Joseph B. Briggs offered land if some way could be devised to finance a structure. The problem was that no one had any money. The financial situation throughout the country was critical, with currency greatly debased. The settlers in Elma never had been people of wealth, in terms of money. They did most of their buying by "store trade", i.e barter. At that time, the only source of heat and power was wood. Thus, cordwood was in great demand, and Elma had a forest full of wood. (It is said that most of the homes in Buffalo from the time frame are made with wood from Elma.)

Two of the younger trustees, George Townsend and Harry Wilbor, worked out a plan. The plentiful lumber in the town could be bartered in Buffalo for materials

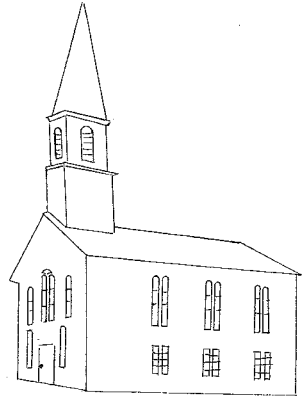
The Church Built with Firewood 5

that could not be supplied locally. The idea was presented to the residents who were interested in a new church. Nearly everyone owning land in Elma Village signed up to provide lumber, stone, labor, or cordwood when called upon. Available supplies not needed for the building were to be bartered.

Warren Jackman drew up plans for the Colonial style church building and kept records of all transactions. (In those times it was thought that an upstairs sanctuary placed people closer to heaven. Apparently Warren Jackman agreed.) He planted trees over the churchyard and looked over the landscaping. The ladies cooked for the work crews. Young folks tended the teams. Young boys handplaned the woodwork and dressed the lumber. Started in July 1859, the building was completed in 1860. Furnishings included the (present) stained glass windows, an organ (melodeon), a bell, stoves and decorating at an estimated cost of \$3,400 without a cent of money changing hands. The prime medium of exchange was firewood. The pews sat about 150 people and our congregation used those seats right up until 1997. The people of 1859 were thinking large! (The original pews were taken out in 1997; some now grace local homes and some were used to make the miniature church models produced by Henry Heck.)

February 9, 1860 was the dedication service, conducted by Rev. Glezen Fillmore. He was the first Methodist minister to come to Buffalo when it was being settled in 1808. He was over 70 when he dedicated the church.

The Presbyterians continued to meet every other Sunday afternoon in the new building, until about 1873.



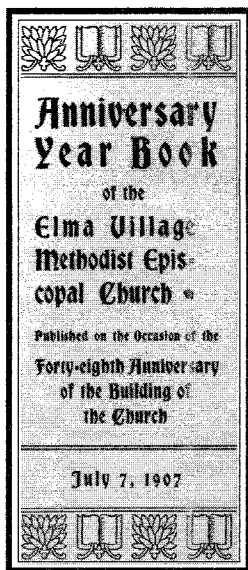
The Methodist Episcopal Church joined the Evangelical United Brethren Church in 1968 and became the United Methodist Church, the title we use today.

The church's two birthdays have been celebrated through the years, with anniversary yearbooks printed at different times, now available for review in the church archives.

In 1960, there were several celebrations through the year. A highlight was a production of the play "The Church Built With Firewood," written by Esther Forsberg. A cookbook was produced and special services were held. In 1985, the 125th anniversary of the building had a full celebration, with the "Church Built with Firewood" reworked into pamphlet form.

6 The Church Built with Firewood

Western New York Bishop Forest Stith, and former pastors attended the service.



At the come home service in September, 2003 the congregation met at the site of the original schoolhouse atop Bowen Road, then walked back to the church for a special service. Former members and friends joined the congregation.

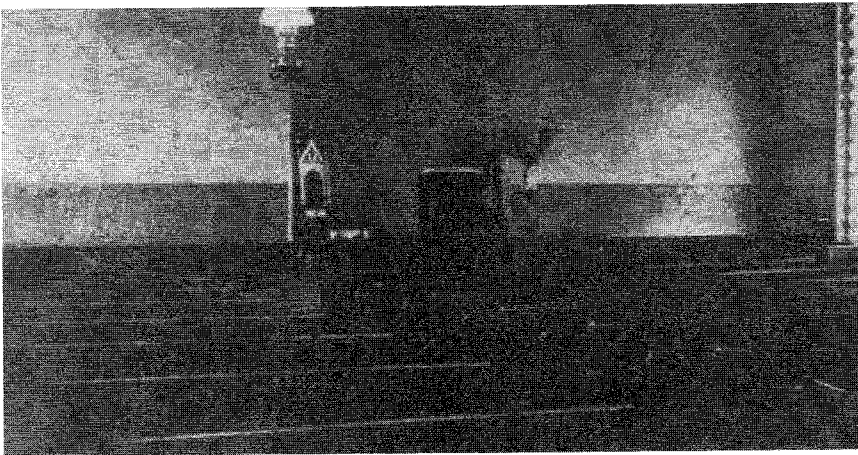
In 2003, the 150th year of the congregation charter was celebrated with a float in the Elma town parade, printing of special historical place mats for the festival, a new banner for the sanctuary and ceramic plates and ornaments becoming available. At a Come Home Service in September the congregation met at the site of the original schoolhouse atop Bowen Road.



Ethel Schuetz giving Children's sermon at the September 28, 2003 Come Home Service.

3. CHURCH UPKEEP & CHANGES

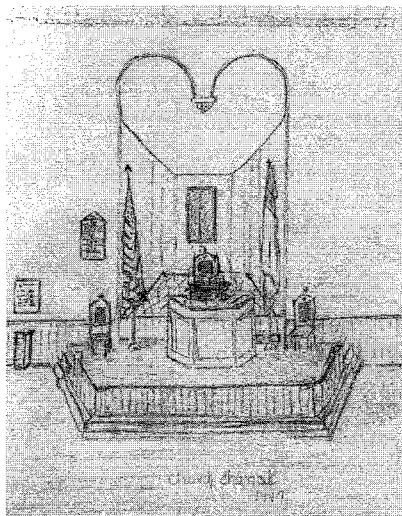
Originally the church interior was white. There were 3 stoves used for heating. The closets under the front stairs were used to store wood to heat the building. Oil lamps provided lighting for many years. In 1875 the chancel area was altered to add the platform and steps. In 1887 the color scheme was changed to dark brown wallpaper, pews and wainscoting. In 1889 sheds were added behind the church structure for rental to parishioners. (One of the sheds was taken down much later and reassembled at Bob & Donna Smith's place on Bullis Road.)



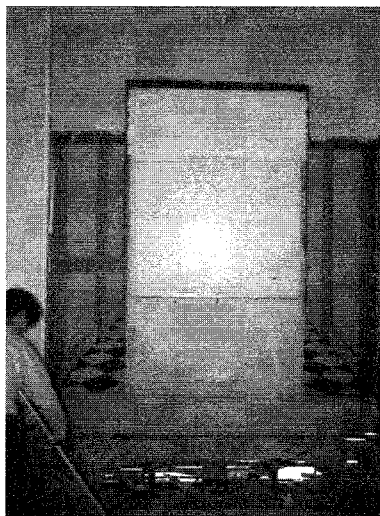
The Church Interior c.1905

8 The Church Built with Firewood

The mural behind the altar curtain was painted at an unknown time prior to 1930. It had been found and covered on several occasions, most recently when the building was renovated in 1997. Church members Claire and Ralph Paine were married in front of the mural, and some years later Claire remembered “the peaceful feeling one felt standing in front of it.”



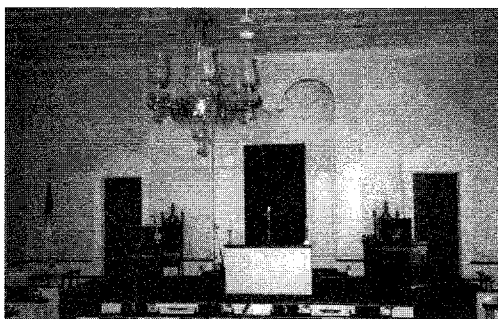
Church Chancel-1947



Part of mural found during 1997 renovation and expansion.

The church and parsonage were wired for electricity in 1923. At the 1930 renovation, the interior was repainted a more cheerful color, and general repairs throughout were done. It was repainted again in the late 1940's, in the 1970's and in 1997. In 1930 an office and kitchen (the old “country kitchen”) were added onto the ground floor, and the second floor with the hallway steps to that was added in 1947. The doors were cut into the wall on either side of the altar in 1947. Also in 1947 the organ was purchased and dedicated to the memory of 2 members who gave their lives in WW II. The railing on the curving stairs and the pew cushions were also added at this time.

After World War II, the population in Elma greatly increased and with it, the church congregation. Pastors Jessop and Woodruff were strong evangelizers, and brought many families to the church. As early as 1945 the congregation talked about increasing the building size. Sunday School classes



Sanctuary, June 1997

The Church Built with Firewood 9

were held wherever there was a spare spot-even in the choir loft!

The David Baker Memorial Nursery room was first used in April of 1953. It was located in the parsonage next door, and after the Christian Ed wing was built, it was relocated there.

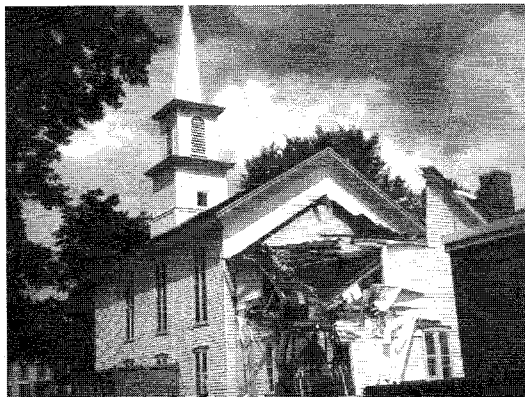
In June 1953 the Briggs family donated more land to the church; it was augmented by an adjacent purchase of land.



July 1997 ground breaking for the renovation of the sanctuary. Left to Right: Christine Wantuck, Carl Baker, Sue Bernhardt, Rev. Joan Zimmermen, Allison Pitman, Jim Coatsworth, Bob Sweeney, Rev. Dr. Peter LeValley, and Rev. Larry Lundgren.

The Christian Education Wing with kitchen was completed in September 1957. Iroquois Central School used the rooms as classrooms during the week, and payment from them helped finish the mortgage off. (They were there during the flood of 1962.)

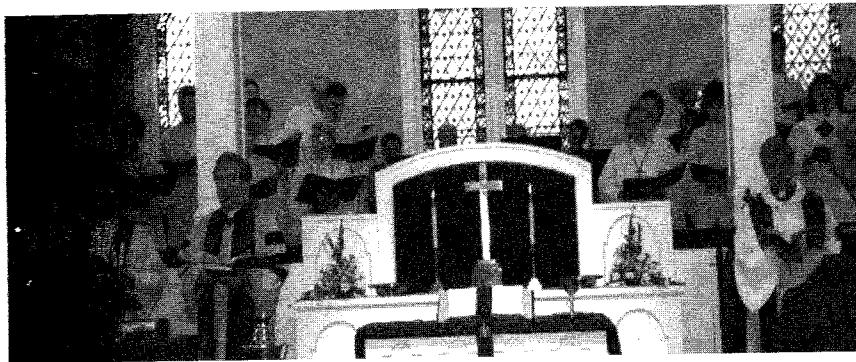
The pathway to the sanctuary was somewhat convoluted through the buildings, and the pew space was shrinking by the 1990's. The congregation made a commitment to increase seating and make the building fully handicapped accessible. The renovation that turned the seating 180 degrees to face the stained glass windows was complete in time for



July 1997, beginning of renovation of the church buildings.

10 The Church Built with Firewood

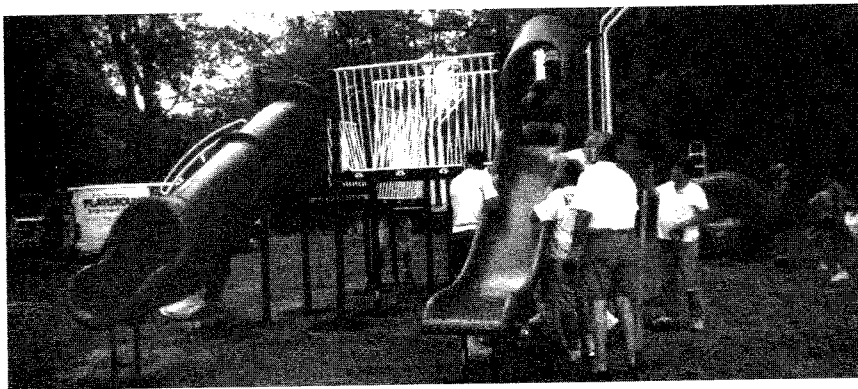
Christmas of 1997. Rededication of the building was on March 1, 1998.



Rededication Service with Choir; Rev. Dr. LeValley, Bishop Hae Jong Kim and Buffalo District Superintendent Rev. Dr. Larry Lundgren.

A matching stained glass window was added, in memory to the Shaver family whose estate donation helped finance the renovation. Downstairs, office and educational space was added. A storage closet was built on back of the stage in the Educational Wing, and the old hall closet became a new pantry. In 2000 the church acquired the house and lot just south of the church. The house was demolished, increasing green space around the church grounds.

In 2002-2003 several changes were made. The room directly under the sanctuary was previously made into a library in 1984. In 2002 it was renovated as a memorial to Molly Clark Diefenbach, a descendant of the Bancroft and Clark families. A new stained glass window was added on the front of the vestibule in memory of Marjorie Briggs. The vestibule itself (added to the church exterior in 1892) has been changed to a chapel setting. The Sunday school rooms also gained new furniture and lighting in recent years. The playground on the back lawn was probably put in the late 1950's, but was unsafe by 2001.



New Playground constructed in 2002