

# BEN AVON AREA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

## NEWSLETTER

Vol. XVI - Number 2 April, 2001

### HOLY ROLLER

by Darlene Phillips

Nestled on a knoll in the quiet Borough of Glenfield a small frame church built in 1867 by German and Swiss members of St. Pauls Evangelical Lutheran Church was about to be demolished to make way for the new highway I-79 in 1970.

The 103 year old church got a new lease on life when the congregation of the Allegheny Baptist Temple from Ohio Township bought the Church for one dollar. Plans were then made to move the church from Glenfield to Ohio Township.

The stained glass windows, originally inscribed in German but later repaired and translated to English were covered, the steeple was removed and cables anchored to machines were attached to the rear of the building to brake the descent from the knoll where it stood.

Members of the St. Pauls congregation who had just merged with St. Pauls Lutheran Church, Sewickley and Allegheny Baptist congregation members as well as dozens of Glenfield residents, saw the church lifted from its foundation onto a house moving flatbed trailer to begin its journey of three miles from Glenfield to a new site on Nicholson Road in Ohio Township.

The Allegheny Baptist Temple was organized in 1966 by Reverend B. H. Barrs, a graduate of the Baptist Bible School in Springfield Mississippi. Rev. Billy Barrs was formerly the Minister of Music at a Fort Worth, Texas church. While attending a convention, he heard a speaker read a list of the number of Independent Baptist Churches in the major cities in the United States. The Pittsburgh area had only one. Rev. Barrs decided right then and there what God had chosen for him to do. He was to establish an Independent Baptist Church in the Pittsburgh area, knowing he would have no financial help from a ruling organization.



**Rev. Billy H. Barrs with the Holy Roller**

After several unsuccessful attempts to find housing for his family of three, Rev. Barrs found a house in Gibsonia. After moving in, Rev. Barrs then started to search for a place to establish a church. He read an advertisement for an empty store at 10 Ben Avon Road, formerly Bishoff's grocery store, and rented it sight unseen.

After renovations were completed, the first service of the Allegheny Baptist Temple was offered on the first Sunday of April, 1966. The congregation consisted of Rev. B. H. Barrs, Mrs. Barrs, daughter Melody and another family of four.

Within seven months the congregation had swelled to 40 members. The meeting place was soon outgrown and services were then moved to the Mr. Nebo Grange on Mt. Nebo

Road. A building fund was started in 1968 to purchase a five acre site on Nicholson Road, Ohio Township. Rev. B. H. Barrs held to his conviction that God had directed him to establish a church and so with faith, determination and help from his flock a church would soon be on the site.

The "moving experience" commenced on August 17, 1970 and took three days to complete. Since the church was build on a hill, a special roadway had to be prepared to get the church down the grade to Center Street in Glenfield. Interstate I-79 was not yet opened to the public, but with the cooperation of the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, the Allegheny Baptist Temple was the first "traffic" on I-79 between Glenfield and the Mt. Nebo exit.

Crews from the telephone and electric power companies were kept busy removing lines from its path as it moved through Glenfield, along I-79, up Mt. Nebo Hill and turned the corner onto Nicholson Road. Women from several congregations provided cookies and cool drinks for the "church watchers" while many tried to find a shady spot to rest on a hot day.

"That is the most photographed church in the country today," said Rev. B. H. Barrs. Photographers from Butler, Beaver, South Hills, North Hills and Pittsburgh newspapers were snapping pictures. Television crews were there, too. Three days later the Allegheny Baptist Temple was placed on a concrete foundation at the five acre site on Nicholson Road. The moving cost was \$6,000.

On May 29, 1971, the newly renovated church was dedicated. Pastor Barrs stated, "We give God the Glory for what has been done. We expect to outgrow the building within a year and have plans for a Christian Day School." The church has a deaf ministry and operates buses to their services. "Don't watch us grow; come grow with us" is the congregation's motto.

In 1998, Rev. B. H. Barrs "moved on" to other areas to work for the Lord. Today (2001), the Allegheny Baptist Temple congregation holds services in a new church built in 1979 which seats 400. Christian education is offered to grades Kindergarten through 12 in three school buildings.

The small frame church building, resting serenely in its place for the past 31 years, is now used for small group meetings, art and music classes.

*Editor's note: The transportation of the church may well have been the first authorized traffic before I-79 opened to the general traffic. However, since the Mt. Nebo intersection and road north was completed long before it was connected to other portions, many local auto enthusiasts found the temptation for "high end" performance testing irresistible.*

*Let's go back to the beginning and follow the twists and turns of the Presbyterians. We'll pick up the other denominations in our next newsletter.*

### **Avonworth Churches - Part 1**

by Henry Herchenroether

Farms and small residential settlements began in the early part of the 19th century. The early settlers in western Pennsylvania were mostly Scotch-Irish Presbyterians. The people who came into the North Boroughs and North Hills areas were part of that group. They sought Presbyterian churches and soon organized their own congregations of the same faith. As residents who had other religious beliefs moved into the area, they organized churches of other denominations.

In the beginning the settlers went to church either at Hilands Church in Perrysville or at a church on Neville Island (a short(?) rowboat trip across the Ohio River). In 1837 a group of people petitioned the Associate Reformed Presbytery of Monongahela to form a church in Ohio Township, the Mt. Nebo United Presbyterian Church. Land for that church was given by Hugh Thompson and William Duff and the first communion service was held in 1840. Another communion service was held later in 1840 when two elders were ordained and the congregation was organized. Church records indicate that prospective members were carefully examined and members were subjected to church discipline. The period, 1897 to 1905, seems to have been a time of turmoil in the Mt. Nebo Church, when elected elders refused to serve and Allegheny Presbytery appointed a Provisional Session to investigate and resolve a major controversy. The 50th communion service was held in 1902 - 62 years after the formation of the church.

Beaver Road was the main road from Pittsburgh along the Ohio River. Pieces of Beaver Road remain today, but the Ohio River Boulevard replaces it. Beaver Road and Lowries Run Road

(now known as Camp Horne Road) then formed the main road intersection in the community. Samuel Courtney had established a mill near that intersection early in the 1800s. His mill and home were on what is now known as Race Street a few hundred feet east of the intersection. The area came to be known as Courtneyville.

The residents of Courtneyville grew tired of traveling to Hilands Church or Neville Island and in 1859 petitioned Allegheny Presbytery to establish a congregation. Early services were held at the home of Col. William Courtney. Three ministers met with 21 residents and organized the Emsworth Presbyterian Church. Rev. Martin Luther Wortman, the pastor of both Hilands and Neville Island churches, was called to be the first pastor. Meetings were held in the stone schoolhouse then standing at the corner of Beaver and Lowries Run Roads. This schoolhouse became the focal point for community activities in the early days.

In 1867, the congregation voted to build a church on land donated by Alexander Hilands in Ben Avon where the present Community Presbyterian Church of Ben Avon now stands. The church was chartered in 1868. The congregation built a manse on property given by Letitia Sampson at the corner of Dalzell Avenue and Brighton Road. The name of the church was changed in 1904 to Ben Avon Presbyterian Church because it was physically located in Ben Avon Borough which had been created in 1892 and because another Presbyterian church had been created in Emsworth. The present building was built in 1911.

In 1865, James Fleming and James Gilleland began a Sunday School in the same stone schoolhouse at Beaver and Lowries Run Roads. In 1869, they and 28 others met to organize the Fleming United Presbyterian Church, the name of which was changed to Emsworth U.P. Church to agree with the name of the railroad station for the community. They met in a frame addition to the stone schoolhouse until 1871 when the congregation built a chapel on Beaver Road between Orchard and Pennsylvania Avenues in Emsworth. Approval to use a musical instrument in worship services was given in 1886. There was a need for a larger church and the congregation acquired its present property on Hiland Avenue (Emsworth) in 1893, dedicating the new building in 1894.

The Emsworth U. P. congregation split over the move from Beaver Road. The 30 unhappy

members organized the Clifton Presbyterian Church and built a church on Beaver Road (now Ohio River Boulevard) at the corner of Allegheny Avenue. This congregation was dissolved in 1934. The former Clifton Church building was recently used as an art gallery.

The Emsworth U. P. congregation purchased three lots on Center Avenue at Plumer Avenue in Emsworth in 1906 but nothing was done and the lots were sold in 1922. This development appears to have caused a split in the church which led to the creation of the Ben Avon United Presbyterian Church.

A group of seventy four members of the Emsworth Church and eighteen others wanted a church nearer their homes. They met at the home of Wallace Miller on Dickson Avenue on April 26, 1911 and started the Ben Avon United Presbyterian Church. The congregation first met in a storeroom on Church Avenue (the present barber shop). The congregation acquired property at the corner of Dickson and Woodland Avenues. A chapel was first built beginning in 1911 and dedicated April 28, 1912. A sanctuary was added in 1915.

The Presbyterian Church in the U.S.A. and The United Presbyterian in North America merged in 1958. The Ben Avon U.P. Church being younger than the Ben Avon Presbyterian Church, was required to change its name to avoid the duplication of names in the new denomination. The congregation chose Woodland United Presbyterian Church for the new name.

From 1932 until 1978, three formal attempts were made to combine the Ben Avon Presbyterian Church and the Woodland U. P. Church without success. In 1986 a new effort was made and the two congregations voted to consolidate to create the Community Presbyterian Church of Ben Avon. The consolidated church continued to use both buildings. The Dickson Avenue property was used for the church offices and weekday activities. The Church Avenue property was used for Sunday School and Worship services. The use of the Dickson Avenue property was forcibly terminated by a fire in October, 1991 which completely destroyed the property. All activities were moved to the Church Avenue property which was substantially renovated and enlarged in 1996-1997.

**Memberships and Contributions**

November, 2000 through March, 2001

We appreciate the support from all of you who made monetary contributions in excess of your membership.

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