

# BEN AVON AREA HISTORICAL ASSOCIATION

## NEWSLETTER

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### **Avonworth Churches - Part 2**

by Henry Herchenroether

*Editor's note: Here's the promised second part of the church history to review the other denominations in our area. As with all our articles, we mean to inform our readers, but also to learn more from you. If you can add details or have anniversary or celebration bulletins or booklets, please drop us a line.*

*While not a church with a congregation, many residents have been curious about the friary hidden deep on Rostrevor, or out of sight up on the hill from Brighton Road. Part 2 ends with a brief review of this quiet, but mysterious, building.*

A Methodist Sunday School was begun in the Emsworth schoolhouse (the same building used by the early Presbyterians) in the mid-1880's. The first regular services were held in 1887 with the minister from the Bellevue church preaching on alternate Sunday afternoons when he was not preaching on Neville Island. A lot was purchased on Hilands Avenue, Ben Avon, when the church had 72 members. The Sunday School was finished and dedicated July 15, 1888. The building was finished and dedicated July 29, 1889. This building was used for 25 years. The purchase of a lot on Breeding Avenue was approved on January 5, 1905 and Thomas B. Wolfe selected as the architect for a new building. The chapel wing was dedicated in January, 1915. The original plans for the sanctuary were never used and the existing building was remodeled in 1951 and 1958. The original name of this church was Emsworth Methodist Episcopal Church and changed to Ben Avon M.E. Church in 1919. Episcopal was dropped from the name in 1939 upon the merger of the North and South M.E. Churches and the Methodist Protestant Church.

The Ben Avon Methodist Church was dissolved in 1987. Many of its members moved to the Greenstone Methodist Church in Avalon or Community Presbyterian Church of Ben Avon.

The first Lutheran service in the area was held on April 7, 1907 at the Emsworth U.P.

Church. An organizational meeting was held in August 1907 when the name St. James Evangelical Lutheran Church was adopted. The first communion was held in January, 1908 at the Emsworth Methodist Church when the first confirmation class was confirmed. The church was chartered on June 13, 1909 and admitted to the Pittsburgh Synod in 1909. The church was connected to the Mount Olivet Church on Spring Hill as a mission church.

The present site of St. James Lutheran Church was selected in 1908 and the building completed in 1913. In the meantime meetings and Sunday School were held in either the Emsworth Odd-Fellows Hall or the Emsworth Methodist Church. The sanctuary was completed in 1928 and an educational wing added in 1958.

Roman Catholics were first served at St. Mary's Church in Glenfield. St. Mary's began a mission in Emsworth. The first services were held in the Boleky Home on Center Avenue, Emsworth. Sacred Heart Church is a parish of the Holy Ghost Fathers who also operate Duquesne University. The first church sanctuary was built on Walnut Street between Locust and North Avenues in Emsworth and dedicated in the Fall of 1892. The parish did not expand significantly until the Pittsburgh Railways extended the trolley lines to the west end of Emsworth in 1906.

The parish purchased property for a school between 1902 and 1918. The school opened in 1924. In 1950 a decision was made to build a new church. Ground was broken on November 21, 1924, the cornerstone laid in June, 1950 and the church building was dedicated on December 10, 1955.

Sacred Heart continues as a vibrant Catholic parish, although the school was discontinued in 1995(?) and the school building converted to other parish programs.

The settlers and residents of the Avonworth area brought their religious life into their new communities, beginning with more or less informal house meetings and soon expanding into formally organized congregations and parishes. Each

group maintained their own particular denominational ties and practices but cooperated in community programs. New religious groups were offered space accommodations; pastoral services were provided when vacancies occurred, permanently or temporarily; and joint services were held during summer vacation periods and on special religious celebrations. The churches and their members have also supported and worked extensively in community projects in the wider North Boroughs and North Hills areas.

#### ST. ANTHONY'S FRIARY

The Franciscan Brothers, headquartered in Wisconsin, established St. Anthony's Friary on Brighton Road in Ben Avon in 1935. They intended to establish mission house to serve Polish communities roughly between Detroit, Michigan and Scranton, Pennsylvania. There were up to ten friars in residence in addition to lay brothers to take care of housekeeping, gardening, cooking and other chores needed to operate and maintain the Friary.

The brothers were a quiet presence in the community as they traveled their assigned area to serve mostly Polish communities. In addition to the "working" brothers, the Friary served as a retirement home for older brothers in the Franciscan community.

The Friary is a large building (for Ben Avon) containing fourteen bedrooms, five bathrooms, kitchen, cook's apartment, dining room, library with a reading room, living room, various other rooms and a rather large chapel added to the original front of the building. The altar in the chapel is said to have been hand carved by one of the brothers. There is a large basement with a boiler room, laundry and a number of storage and workrooms. The Friars converted a large family residence to an institution style.

Membership in the Franciscan Order has diminished over the years until only one or two brothers lived in St. Anthony's Friary. The Order has decided to close the Friary and sell the property.

The original site of the building was approximately three acres extending from Brighton Road to the alley behind the homes built on Church Avenue between Hilands Avenue and Rostrevor Place. The size the lot was reduced when most of the back yard was sold in 1994 to Community Presbyterian Church of Ben Avon for construction of the parking lot to serve the church.

The Friary property was one of the outstanding properties in Ben Avon. Mary Bailey, a sister of Robert Dalzell, one of the earliest settlers in the area, purchased the land in 1868. She built a 30 room, three story brick home facing Brighton Road and the Ohio River. The original building was in the Italianate style with a low slate roof in which three large dormer windows were built. The house was likely a very gracious late 1800s home with hardwood floors, crystal chandeliers and other amenities common to such houses at the time. Perhaps much of the original woodwork remains under the changes made by the Friars.

It must have been a secluded location at that time it was built; even as it is now. The development of Church Avenue and Hilands Avenue on which homes were built facing those streets, added to the seclusion. The first Presbyterian church building may have been built about the same time the Bailey house was built. Later, the property was sold to Charles and Alice McNally who had 18 children. There is not much known about the McNally family except vague remembrances of a few older residents of Ben Avon (as of 2001) of some of the McNally children.

There is a rather long and fairly steep gravel driveway up the hill from Brighton Road with a circular drive at the top. In recent years, most vehicles have used Rostrevor Place for access. The front yard is fairly level until it slopes down to Brighton Road. The yard has many trees and shrubs more or less obscuring vision of the house from Brighton Road.

The house as originally built (without the chapel which the Friars added to the front) was one of the oldest and most outstanding structures in early Ben Avon.

*The enclosed insert allows you to order a copy of "DEAR EMSWORTH" by or board member Jim Knox. Jim's storytelling ability comes through in this "collection of fond remembrances about Emsworth Borough and some of its people in the form of letters or short essays.*

*Learn history while you learn about memorable people. The following extract is a sample of this 60 plus page book. It includes many old photos as well.*

**Ake and Anna Johns**  
by James W. Knox

Where Shop 'N Save now stands was formerly a bowling alley, a large parking garage, for new Ford automobiles. Originally, it was built by the Pittsburgh Railways Company as a streetcar barn. All repairs were made there and streetcars were dispatched from that location. Many of the big cars pulled a trailer car behind.

Across from the car barn, a little restaurant was started by a Mr. Hoover to serve meals to the motormen and conductors of the Railway company. When Mr. Hoover died, the store came under the management of Aiken (Ake) and Anna Johns. It was a small, but cozy little place with an excellent menu of hot meals from the large steamtable. Many unemployed men, walking through the Borough during the Depression (1929-1934), were treated kindly by "Ake" and Mrs. Johns.

These folks were a great asset to our community. Besides serving meals, they kept a supply of bread and milk for the neighbors. They were people with a great sense of humor. They kept a large case of penny candy for the children. One day, after beer was permitted to be sold, and while a State inspector was in the restaurant, a couple of kids entered and bought a nickel's worth of candy. When they left, the inspector said to Mr. Johns, "You can't have children coming in here. You are liable to lose your beer license." Mr. Johns went to the wall and removed the framed license and said, "Here ... take it. I want the kids." What a great guy and neighbor.

*In keeping with the religious subject of this newsletter, this second extract is selected from the essay "The Church & Religious Faith"*

Sunday was a quiet day in Emsworth. Other than going to church, it seemed the only other activity was walking. It was indeed a way of fulfilling the Biblical Admonition "Remember the Sabbath Day, and keep it Holy." Most people followed this tradition.

I recall one of the customers on my paper route would subscribe only to the daily Pittsburgh Press, but not the Sunday edition. This customer would pay the 18 cents on a Saturday afternoon for the six daily newspapers. As I was going to deliver papers to the other customers on the street, this lady's son came running after me saying, "here's 10 cents. Leave the Sunday

paper. I will get up early and get it before mother sees it. I'll put it away, and read it on Monday." These folks were indeed serious about "keeping Holy the Sabbath Day."

People generally were good neighbors, friendly, and considerate of one another. I'm sure it was because of their religious faith and their reverence for God. There was peace and tranquility in our community, and it still is that way. Young people in large numbers attended Sunday Church School. In public and parochial schools, the bible was read each day ending with "The Lord's Prayer."

## UPCOMING EVENTS

DELTA QUEEN  
at Emsworth Locks  
Sunday, September 9, 2001

The riverboat is scheduled to leave  
Pittsburgh at 7:00 P.M. and should arrive  
at the locks before 8:00 P.M.  
The log house will be open.

The History and Economic Impact of  
Pittsburgh's River System  
a talk by  
ARTHUR PARKER  
Thursday, October 25, 2001  
7:30 P.M.  
At Emsworth U.P. Church

Mr. Parker is retired from the River Trade  
Association and has written a book about  
the Monongahela.

**Memberships and Contributions**

April, 2001 through June, 2001

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

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