

Chapter VI

WE THE PEOPLE

For many years important work in the Park Church has been done by laymen's organizations. We have already read something of the work of the Sewing Society during the Beecher period. An account of the earlier work of the society is taken from the booklet issued at the time of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the founding of the Church; -

The formation of the First Congregational church was quickly followed by the formation of the sewing society, an organization designed to promote acquaintance and friendly relations among the women of the church and society, but chiefly to make garments for home and foreign missions.

The early gatherings of this society were held Friday afternoon at the homes of the members taken in alphabetical order.

The woman at whose home the society was held each week prepared a simple supper for all the workers, to which the husbands and fathers were invited. All extravagant outlay for this supper and all spirit of emulation were held in check by a law limiting the supplies to bread and butter, tea, and one kind of fruit, one variety of cake and some cold meat. The young people usually gathered in the evening when more attention was given to the social interests than to the sewing, although this was not laid aside entirely.

The large, old fashioned willow basket, filled with the sewing society work was heavy, and was carried from house to house with difficulty. There was no city express, and there were few horses owned by members of the church. Mr. Selover's old horse Dobbin was frequently chartered for this service, and the larger boys of the various households would sometimes carry this precious basket of work and patterns to the next appointment.

The Following from the records testifies to the work done during the Civil War:

October 30, 1862- About seventy spent the whole day and packed boxes for the 107th Regiment.

May, 1863- Mrs. Gilbert, Mrs. Crane, Mrs. Ballard and Mrs. Sayles cut 79 flannel shirts for the soldiers. Paid Strauss \$70. for the flannel.

December, 1865-110 pairs of mittens knit and sent to the 107th Regiment by our society.

The Army nurse bears witness to the incessant activity which sent large kitchen, and linen and money supplies to hospitals in Virginia and Maryland, beside the great demand for home work for the Sanitary Commission. Would that the never-to-be-forgotten grateful eyes of sick and wounded soldiers could write their record for those who worked and gave by faith, not sight.

A report of the work done in 1863 says;-

During the past year the sewing society has turned out twenty-five quilts and comfortables, sent a valuable box of bedding to a colored school in Alabama, and since the first of September last have completed one hundred and fifty pieces, mostly garments, for the needy about us.

The missionary society was formed because of the interest of Mrs. Beecher. It was for the benefit of this society that Mrs. Beecher made the famous "Beecher dolls." Her own account of this industry is given here as she wrote it for a women's edition of the Elmira Advertiser in 1895:-

Ten years ago in The Park Church of Elmira, for years icy cold toward foreign missions, there sprang up a new interest and a small though earnest auxiliary was formed to the 'W.B.F.M.'

As ever at such times the women sought about for ways to fill their empty treasury. One of them happened to have a little niece, who was in that February to pass her sixth birthday. The auntie said to herself, "Nothing would suit this child better than a doll, extremely fat around the waist, very short in arms and legs, staring and moonlike in face, and dressed in an infant's cap and robe!"

Sitting one day mending a pair of unbleached hose, an inspiration came to her from some angel lover of the missions, 'Why not tie up the top of this stocking into a head, cut the lower part into forked members, stuff the middle very large, put on fat arms made from the mate, turn up and stuff the ends into feet and toes, paint an expressionless face with very red cheeks, and top off all with yellow worsted hair!"

No sooner said than done – a characteristic of this missionary enthusiast – and on the birthday the six-year-old rejoiced in a pretty good imitation of a month-old baby. Such accounts were sent of this child's ecstasy that her aunt thought she would try an experiment with another baby made of ancient flesh colored silk stockings of her own young days.

This infant was improved by ears and by features pulled in with threads and a snub nose, and was given to another niece named Madeline with the same exciting results and reports.

Then came a chance to sell a baby at a fair, for fifty cents, and the missionary rag baby, improved by various dimples in arms and feet, was fairly launched upon an eager child public. All profits of course went into the still starveling treasury of the little auxiliary. The demand grew. Many leisure hours were occupied in the production of doll-babies from material freely sent by friends who wore silk underwear.

The "Department of Philanthropy" in full force waited one morning upon the inventor of these dolls to demand NOT ONLY the foregoing story of the babies, but also the statistics of this modest little industry.

The 'doll book' of TEN YEARS was studied.

Dolls sold, half of which were made without assistance, the remainder with friendly or paid help, 950.

Money received	.	.	\$1,510.38
Expenses	.	.	<u>398.49</u>
			\$1,111.89

Distributed between foreign and home missions. Mrs. Thos. K. Beecher.

Today the sewing society about which we have read, and the missionary society for which Mrs. Beecher made dolls are united in "The Park Church Society for Women's Work." The activities of this society are varied: study of, and contributions to foreign missions; contributions to local organizations such as the Community Chest, and the local chapter of the American Red Cross; sewing for the American Red Cross and local welfare agencies. The society has also planned and paid for many improvements in the church such as new kitchen equipment and new upholstery for the pews, when such things were needed. The serving of church dinners, sometimes as a means of earning money, sometimes simply as a contribution to the social life of the church, has been a continuing service of this society.

During the current year (1945-46) the society has been divided into eight groups which are again meeting in members' homes, the better to further fellowship among the members.

A group of twelve men called "The Patriarchs" was an important influence in the church for a considerable time beginning in the early eighties. They began as an informal social group but did so many things for the welfare of the church that they gradually came to be popularly regarded as a church organization although they remained most informal in their methods, and had neither president, secretary, nor treasurer. The original twelve were John Bally, Joseph H. Barney, Robert A. Hall, Delos L. Holden, Judge Seymour Dexter, Dr. Theron A. Wales, Edward P. Bement, Irving D. Booth, Arthur S. Fitch, Charles E. Rapelyea, William N. Eastabrook and Edward Dickinson. This list was taken from an early account which says "I have named these in order of seniority of years, and if any are curious to know their patriarchal names, compare with the Bible narrative of Jacob's blessing of his twelve sons."

Later some of those named dropped out or moved from Elmira and their places were taken by Horace C. French, John R. Joslyn and Edward L. Adams.

In 1882 there remained an unpaid balance of \$12,000 on a mortgage covering the new church. The twelve patriarchs undertook to raise the \$12,000. This they did in an incredibly short time and thus freed the building from debt.

The men's organization which we know as "The Men's Own" started as a Sunday School class in 1913. A contemporary account of its first year's work reads: -

A class of men approaching fifty in number with the unique name "The Park Church Men's Own," has been organized. That they are a vital force for the betterment of the church and city is attested by their activities. In cooperation with the Federation for Social Service, they are making a housing survey of the city which, it is hoped, will form the basis of a building code to be adopted by the Common Council; they have shared with the Calendar Club the expense of new hymn books for the auditorium, and have given to the church for use on special occasions a large flag. Now Old Glory is flung to the breeze on national days. Mr. Eastman would like to see it bordered with white as a prediction of the time soon to be when the nations shall learn war no more. The class has also put electricity in the lecture room, which is the beginning of the electrifying of the whole east end of the church. Jervis Langdon is its efficient president.

"The Men's Own" has continued to make repairs and improvements in the church a major concern. For a good many years a minstrel show sponsored by this group was a pleasant feature of the social life of the church as well as a source of income.

At about the time of the founding of "The Men's Own" a corresponding class of young women numbering about fifty was organized and named "The Annis Ford Eastman Class." One of its services was to present the church with a fine pulpit Bible in memory of Mrs. Eastman. During its first year the class held social hours, with refreshments served, to which employed young women living away from their own homes were especially invited. Mrs. Theodore C. Rose and Miss Esther Satterlee gave years of devoted service as leaders of this class.

Many laymen who have served as officers of the church have already been mentioned. To single out even a small proportion of the many others who have done important work for the church is impossible within the limits of this history. At the certain risk of leaving out others whose work was equally important, we have chosen a few to represent the laity, without whose loyal service a church cannot function.

Mrs. Henry Sayles was for many years known to the whole congregation as "Grandma Sayles." She was beloved by everyone and worked tirelessly for the church, particularly for the missionary society. Mrs. David L. Whittier was another staunch supporter of missions giving generously of both time and money. She was also a valued member of the music committee for many years and occasionally played the organ. Mrs. Robert Hall was another pillar of the missionary society serving as its secretary for many years.

Mrs. Robert Parmenter, Mrs. O. H. Denny, Mrs. Edgar Denton and Mrs. Leonard Gridley were others among a truly remarkable group of women whom Mr. Beecher called "steam engines" because of the speed with which they worked.

Women have also been active in the Sunday School. Among others Mrs. Robert Parmenter, Mrs. Max Beers, and Mrs. Frederick West are each remembered by scores of Park Church people who began their Sunday School experience under one or the other of these faithful teachers. Miss Julia Carrier, Miss Anna Crane, and Mr. Ben Nate are all remembered because of their long services as clerks of the Sunday school.

Mr. William Eastabrook, a pioneer in the development of telephone service in Elmira, served as superintendent of the Sunday School for many years, and is remembered with affection and gratitude by many leaders of the church today.

Mr. Rufus Stanley, widely known as a pioneer in boys' club work, is remembered for his unfailing interest and valuable counsel in every part of the church work having to do with children and young people.

For many years Miss Lizzie Nafe was official hostess in the "Park Church Home." She spent each week day in the parlors, not only as housekeeper but as hostess for the many who in those days used the church parlors as a community center. Miss Emma Andrews later served as church hostess and carried on the traditions of friendliness for which The Park Church was, and still is, known.

Many members of the church speak with special affection of Mr. Charles H. Gridley and Mr. Norman Thompson who not only served as Sunday School teachers, deacons, and trustees but were also unofficial "greeters" for many years. They stood in the front hall before as well as after service, greeting all those who came to The Park Church. During this period Mr. Lee Stanley was in charge of ushers and it is said that those three men were in no small measure responsible for The Park Church reputation for friendliness.

The Hall brothers have a unique record in the history of The Park Church. Over a period of many years, Sunday after Sunday, the usher list was not without one of "the Hall boys" as they were affectionately known to the congregation – Charles, Frank, Julius or Robert, Jr.

Mrs. Theodore Crane was an outstanding lay member of the Park Church not only in the quality of her devotion but also in the length of her service. As Susan Langdon, daughter of Jervis Langdon, she joined the church as a girl of sixteen in 1852, and for seventy-two years gave to every phase of the work a devotion, loyalty and skill beyond praise.

For many years Mrs. Crane arranged the pulpit decorations bringing the flowers from her own garden and her greenhouse. For many years she cared for the Communion table, baking the bread, caring for the linen and arranging the table each Communion Sunday.

Mrs. Crane was an outstanding example of the fact that leaders in The Park Church have also been leaders in community life. At a time when the movement for more sanitary production of milk was new throughout the whole country, she became the pioneer in the production of certified milk in Chemung County.

She undertook this at considerable expense to herself and without thought of financial gain. The physicians of the county and all those interested in public health wanted a leader in the production of better, safer milk, and Mrs. Crane undertook it "out of appreciation of religion as a practical, helpful thing to gladden lives and make them wholesome and happy."

At this point we must beg the indulgence of our readers, and ask each one to complete this list of laymen as his own memories and affections dictate.