

## Chapter VII

### MUSIC IN THE PARK CHURCH

When the people of the Independent Congregational Church in Elmira met in Temperance Hall, they had no musical instrument but a good quartette - Mrs. Jervis Langdon, Miss Azula Whittlesey who became Mrs. Sampsell, A.P. Roosa and Grandison Gridley. Mr. Roosa was precentor, and the quartette sang anthems as well as led the congregational singing. Mr. Roosa remained precentor for twenty years and served the congregation in three different buildings as well as in the theatre used during the erection of the present building.

When the congregation moved to its own lecture hall the quartette became a small chorus and had side seats upon a raised platform in the middle of which stood the pulpit.

When the frame church was built in Wisner Park, there was a choir loft at the back of the church facing the pulpit. In this loft was a melodeon. Miss Georgianna Converse, who later became the wife of Judge Thurston, played the melodeon for a short time. She was succeeded by Miss Sarah Bement, who was later Mrs. D. R. Davenport.

After Mr. Beecher came to Elmira a portion of the building back of the pulpit was torn away and a small pipe organ installed. The choir seats were placed in front of the organ, and Miss Bement became the organist. Miss Adelaide Dexter, writing in the Elmira Advertiser some years ago, said, "It was the first good organ brought into the city and of a very sweet tone. Mr. Beecher took great pains in ordering it and aimed to put the greater expense into the instrument itself and so had only a plain and neat wood case made for it."

Miss Dexter also wrote – "The arrival of the new organ was a great event among the people, and a grand concert was given one evening to christen it. Zundel, the famous organist and composer, was here from New York to give a recital, and the choir sang one of his anthems under his direction. In those times, combination stops were not yet invented, and Zundel, in order to increase the volume of sound, persuaded Miss Bement to stand by him during his playing and pull the stops continually at his bidding."

Another account of these early years says that Mr. Beecher had the organ built especially to "fit" Miss Bement who was small of stature. Miss Bement went to Boston for a year to study, and upon her return Mr. Beecher conducted a ceremony which he called "marrying " her to the organ and told her that she must never share her devotion to the organ with a mere man.

Mr. Beecher later said "This church has had many different organists, but it never had another organist who poured forth such soul inspiring music and so completely satisfied the people as did Sarah Bement."

During the time services were held in the theatre there was a male chorus, and cornet music by Richard Guion and Asa LaFrance. A band known as "Updegraff's Band" played frequently for the evening services and later was popularly called "Beecher's Band."

A Mrs. Gibson played the piano for the morning services in the theater.

To quote again from Miss Dexter:

"On October 15, 1875, the first Sunday service was held in the new, spacious and unique Park Church and the first regular quartet furnished the music. Mr. Chauncey Gardiner was the tenor; Mrs. Gibson, soprano; Colonel D.C. Robinson, bass; and Mrs. Robinson, alto. The first solo heard in Park Church was "Nearer My God Too Thee" sung by Mrs. Gibson, and the first anthem rendered by the quartet was "Te Deum in C," by Marsh. Mr. Cramer was the organist, who, though he was young, was an excellent German musician."

In 1898 when church services were still held each Sunday evening, the first Sunday evening of each month was a musical evening. There were organ, violin and harp solos as well as congregational singing. In speaking of this Mr. Beecher said, "In this departure we find ourselves in sympathy with the congregation of Israel of old - which in its best estate pressed cymbal and psaltery and trumpet and harp into its worship of praise."

During the four or five decades following the term of Mr. Cramer, already mentioned, The Park Church had a series of outstanding organists - Edward Dickinson, Miss Lottie Wells of New York City, John B. Marsh, George Carter, John Daulby Peake, an Englishman, and Merritt Welch.

Mr. Dickinson was Director of Music at Elmira College, as well as organist of The Park Church, and left Elmira to become a professor of the history of music at Oberlin College. While at Oberlin he wrote a book entitled "Music in the History of the Western Church." This excellent book is considered a standard in its field.

Mr. Marsh was clever at arranging music and even improvising tunes and marches, a talent that made him a great favorite with children and young people.

For a number of years Mr. Carter sponsored a concert series, bringing to Elmira such artists as Fritz Kreisler, John McCormack, and Geraldine Farrar. At first these concerts were held in The Park Church. When the demand for tickets made the church too small, the series were continued in the armory.

Members of The Park Church remember the late Merritt Welch as "a fine musician and a fine gentleman." He had the devotion of all who worked with him, and to be in his choirs was considered a privilege.

In later years Gwynn Bement, Charles Forlines, and the present organist, DeWitt K. Botts, have served as ministers of music. Mr. Bement is head of the music department at Elmira College and for a number of years directed the local symphony orchestra.

Mr. Botts has a wide knowledge and deep appreciation of sacred music and is anxious to develop good congregational singing as well as a good chorus choir.

Several times during recent changes in the musical life of the church, Mrs. Robert McDowell has graciously served as interim organist.

The present building has had two organs, the first one a special interest of Mr. Beecher, the second a memorial to him. At the time of its installation, the Beecher Memorial Organ was considered one of the finest in the country. Mr. Peake who was organist at the time, had known in England of the fame of Robert Hope-Jones who was then associated with the Skinner Organ Company of Boston. Through Mr. Peake's influence the Skinner Company was given the contract for the organ, which was largely designed and built by Mr. Hope-Jones.

Mr. Peake played the dedicatory recital on December 6, 1906. Since then most of the well-known American organists have played The Park Church organ in recital.

The Park Church has had many "sweet singers." The following all have a special place in the memories of the people for the church - Col. and Mrs. Robinson, especially revered for their long service; Mrs. Marie Gibson who had a beautiful soprano voice and was also beautiful to the eye; Robert Parmenter, an outstanding tenor, who served the church for many years; Elizabeth Slee (Mrs. Elwood Crocker) who had a high, sweet, well-trained soprano voice and was a great favorite with the congregation; Miss Anna Laura Johnson, a favorite contralto.

As it was with laymen, so it is with singers - both soloists and the members of the chorus choirs - we can not even begin to mention all those deserving our gratitude. Again each reader is asked to complete the list for himself.