

LOOKING FOR THAT BLESSED HOME.

In a few weeks I shall be passing the eighty-second milestone of my pilgrimage on earth. Early in my life I realized that God, in the beginning of creation, said it was not good for man to be alone, but provided for an helpmeet for him, I chose, a companion of same age, 21, adorned with Christian virtues, to help tread the paths of life. In the meantime God moved upon our hearts to give our lives and service to Him. In the year 1867, we gave our hearts to Him and united with the Tunker Church in Canada. Three years later, being called to the ministry, we stood under each other's arms and shared one another's joys and sorrows and burdens, thus fulfilling the law of Christ. In the burden and heat of the day we were one flesh until the half was taken away after fifty-seven years in the struggle of life. In all the ups and downs of life, we often remarked to each other that the Lord was good to us, for He says, "The twain shall be one flesh," and when the half of that flesh is taken away, especially the "better half," there isn't much left; nothing, but a poor old care-worn, frame going down the tottering paths of life, leaning upon the strong arm of the Master, like Jacob of old when blessing the two sons of Joseph, "worshipped leaning upon the top of his staff." Heb. 11:21.

I have been made to exclaim with the patriarch David, "I have been young and now am old, yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken nor his seed begging bread." Psa. 37:25. "Truly the Lord has been good" at this advanced age. My hand is nearly as strong as at the age of twenty, yet it is strong because in our younger days we decided temperance and moderation in all things while traveling in the flesh and spirit from this world to that which is to come. In all these long years, the Lord has been good to "us" for the love and zeal for His cause made His yoke easy and His burden feel light.

During my lifetime I have officiated at over three hundred and fifteen funeral occasions and over one hundred in the matrimonial contract. While I have been made to drink of the bitter cup of sorrow and dark hours have overshadowed my path, I have the hope that as the sun sinks in the west the gloom will soon vanish and the silver lining will appear as the cloud breaks to let in the light. Faith and patience was always our motto.

Dear friends, let us stick to the right a while longer and all will be over, when He says "Come up higher."

Yours in Him,

A. Beares, Ridgeway, Ont.

MY EARLY DAYS IN THE OLD CHURCH AT BEMBLE

In the recent past my esteemed brother, Dr. C. O. Wittlinger, suggested that I write some things I observed in the earlier days of our church. Since I have passed my eightieth birthday my opportunity for registering what I remember of former conditions of church life may soon terminate. The sunset of my life may not be very far in the distance.

They tell me I arrived in the Levi Winger home on November 17, 1883 at Ridgeway, Ontario. Being the first son in Levi Winger's home, also the first grandson in Asa Bearss' family I was specially honored. They gave me the odd name of Alvin Leroy. Who named me I never have found out. Then I lived nearly fourteen years until I met another Alvin. This person was Alvin Berry in Clarence Center, New York. When the name Alvin was mentioned I certainly knew they meant me and not Chester, David, Marshal, Walter, Paul, Jesse, Warren, Allen, Fred or one of the other numerous Winger boys who attended the old church.

My mother or grandmother Bearss usually had charge of me at church. The only thing I had to entertain myself when the preachers preached so long, as I thought, was my mother's picture when a small girl in a small black case and a ladies' watch chain. This chain I would let run down through a hole in the back of the seat then pull it out again. Would you believe it after seventy five years the same hole is in the same seat still in use situated where it always stood in the church? The only alterations of the church seats since then is an additional board on top. Yes, different paint has altered their appearance.

A large wood box stove stood on an unpainted floor about in the center of the audience room. Six coal oil lamps were suspended from three

small ropes running through six small pulleys fastened to the ceiling. They were so arranged that when the janitor pulled one lamp down to light it the one on the other end went up toward the ceiling. Usually there was one or two lamps on the long narrow table behind which the preachers sat on a long seat.

Perhaps at this point I should mention two things of interest to some. One was a pail of drinking water and a tin cup located just outside the door of the entrance into the back room. Some of the little folks would get very thirsty during service so must march up in sight of all to have a drink. Once in a while some youngster would dip in too far. The left over was poured back into the pail. This made no difference to the next one. Very few were germ conscious those days. This pail and the custom associated with it became obsolete years and years ago.

The other was the large double cradle in the back room. It is still in excellent condition somewhere. David Climenhaga made it or had it made for his twin girls, Carry and Sarah. Many and many a babe had a sleep in it. I believe John Climenhaga has said I crowded him out. We are yet friends.

As a church goer my conception of truth was about the time English preaching superceeded any of the Dutch or German, so do not recall anything but English singing, praying or preaching.

All singing was soprano sung from the small black hymn books without notes. I have my father's book yet in my possession. I can almost hear yet Bishop Abram Winger quote these lines "Jerusalem my happy home oh how I long for thee. When will my sorrows have an end, thy joys when shall I see."

My uncle Elie Winger and Abe Winger were the first base singers.

Marie Beam (Climenhaga) was the first alto singer. We had the opportunity of attending singing school or class in Brother Johnnie Winger's home.

The first Sunday School superintendent I remember was George Detwiler, one of the ministers. The beginners, both small boys and girls, had their class in a separate room. The first teacher I remember was Sarah Climenhaga who later became John Engle's wife. At Sunday School small cards about one by one and one half inches were given to every one present. These cards had short scripture verses printed on them. When we had ten we could exchange them for a lovely large card about four by six inches to keep. May I say in my estimation Brother George Detwiler, our superintendent, made one mistake when he took Walter O. Winger and Alvin I. Winger out of the back room and placed us in a class of all girls in the audience room. At that age neither one of us liked girls too well. But we both changed our attitude later in life. Brother Detwiler must have seen his mistake for next Sunday we were more comfortably situated in a class of boys even if we were younger.

Prayer meeting was held in the homes of members every Wednesday night. One of the ministers conducted them. Around fifty years ago some bible study classes were held in different homes in the district. They were well attended by the younger and older members of the church. The responsibility of those classes rested on me.

The Semi-Annual Love Feasts were sometimes called the "Big Meeting". All members wanted to be present so made an effort to be there. A Friday evening service seemed to belong to the occasion. Services began at ten o'clock Saturday morning and continued until evening. The Feet Washing and Communion Service closed the evening service. Very seldom was any member absent. The Sunday morning and evening services were always

larger than the ordinary week end services. The Wainfleet ministers seldom missed being present with other members on Love Feast occasions.

It might surprise you to say that in those early days we crossed the Welland Canal on a float. Well, what is that. The float was something built like a bridge lying in the water. It was only long enough to accomodate and carry a team of horses hitched to a wagon or carriage. There was no railing on either end or on the one side. The opposite side had two posts through which a fairly heavy chain passed. Each end of this chain was securely fastened to the bank on opposite sides. This chain was always stretched tight when in use but must be lowered to the bottom of the canal to let boats pass. The float was slowly pulled across the canal by one man. He fastened his stout stick on the chain then pulled the whole outfit across by walking back and forth and pulling. I have less tension writing this than when I experienced my first ride. We never stayed on the wagon for fear the horses might back off yet some blocks were always placed behind the wheels. It was a silent ride. We all breathed easier when we stepped on mother earth again. The excitement all faded away when we met the brethren at the church and enjoyed the fellowship which followed. Non-members in the community expected all church members to be present for Saturday service. One instance--years ago a brother Sider by name on the Saturday of Bertie Love Feast was in his field on his farm. Dan, a cousin of Bishop Bert Sherk, came along and stopped-- "Levi, what are you doing here?" Levi's answer---"Working." But Dan said in no uncertain language-- "Levi, your place is up there at the Love Feast." So it was. Dan was not a Christian. Brother Levi publicly confessed all this later.

My memory takes me back to the meals on these occasions. A separate

table was always provided for any who were not members. Such people were always welcome. When all were seated at the tables they sang a hymn before one of the ministers asked the blessing. In closing some one always gave thanks. The deacons were in charge in the basement. We have not forgotten the tin soup dishes for special soup that was always served for the evening meal. Some of these dishes are yet preserved somewhere. Tin cups provided drinking water for all. No tea or coffee was served in the early days.

Sheds were built around the three sides of the church yard for the protection of the horses. At the noon hour the brethren fed hay and watered the horses while the sisters gathered the dishes and washed them. When I think of the congestion of people, horses and rigs after church especially without a yard light at night I marvel that no serious accidents were ever reported.

Visitors were always welcomed and entertained over night. We could name the following visiting ministers whom we have seen and heard. On these very important meetings of the church one or more were present and preached--J. W. Hoover from Cayuga, Abram Winger and Chris Winger from Springvale, Fred Elliot from Richmond Hill, Dan Heise from Clarence Center, Bishop John Sider and Chris Sider from Wainfleet, Bishop John Reighard from Fordwich, Bishop Charles Baker and Isaac Swalm from Duntroon, Simon Cober and others in later years.

All weddings were held in the bride's home or at the minister's residence. If a coming wedding was announced in public for three consecutive Sundays the bridal pair needed no license to get married. Church weddings were unknown when I was married.

A divorce was an unheard of affair in our community. Divorce was

considered unscriptural and a very, very wrong *act*.

I do not remember the first Bishop, John Winger of Bertie District. The other three older ones, Abram Winger, his son Jonas Winger and Bert Sherk, I have visited in their homes--later Bishop Wm. Charlton, now living. When a boy and later in life I have enjoyed the hospitality in the homes of the following deacons--David Climenhaga, Christian Bitner, Ben Barnhart, Andrew Sider, Daniel Climenhaga, Levi Winger (my father), John Winger, Warren Winger, Norman Winger, Manuel Pretz, Fred Climenhaga, Peter Sider and others later. When I was ordained at Bertie in 1915 by J. R. Zook there were seven ministers--Nicolas Michael, Asa Bearss (my grandfather), Jonas Winger, Girven Bearss, Bert Sherk, Jesse Winger and Alvin L. Winger. Albert Reigle and Warren Winger were chosen later after I moved to Gormley in the Markham District in 1921.

All elections for church officials were done by ballot. Anyone receiving the highest number of votes was declared elected by the church. Such elections with very, very few exceptions were owned and blessed by the Lord. Such candidates made good by the help of the Lord. In Bertie they did not wait long until ordination. One example---brother Jesse Winger and myself were elected in February and ordained in March.

No elder (bishop) or minister received any special remuneration for church services such as funerals, weddings or weekly services. Sometimes an evangelist would receive a free will offering or have his train fare paid.

May we name some evangelists of former days whom the Lord used to stir hearts here at Bertie--J. W. Hoover (an outstanding Canadian evangelist), B. F. Hoover, Jacob Engle, J. R. Zook, Noah Zook, John Myers, J. B. Jehman, M. L. Doner, Wil^{le}w Myers, Ray Witter, Vernon Stump and

Frank Breckbill. Lafayette Shoalts and Bert Sherk were frequently absent in evangelistic service across the line as Canadian Evangelists. Other worthy and faithful God-called evangelists who later served the church could be mentioned.

Many of the four week revival meetings were certainly owned and blessed by God. The Spirit took over. Many were added to the church. Going to revival meeting was the most important thing forty and fifty years ago. There was not much other work done except go to church at night and support day prayer meetings. They were great days, great revivals and great results.

It might be of interest to some today that I remember when we had no altar service. Anyone under conviction with a repentant heart would simply stand where they were sitting when an invitation was given. Such sincere response meant salvation for the Spirit was faithful in doing His work in the heart. Such converts were with few exceptions ready for baptism and church membership as soon as opportunity presented itself. Baptism was often administered in Lake Erie. There was no trouble to get converts to conform to the plain way and adhere to teachings of scripture as practiced by the church. It was true a few fell by the wayside. When a convert became a member he stayed in and pulled with the rest.

Funerals were much different than our modern ones today. All dead were laid out and if embalmed it was done in the home. Some friend, neighbor or distant relative took part in the wake. This was the old custom of watching a dead body prior to burial. Such individuals, usually two, always remained up all night while the family retired. It was my duty and privilege to accompany my cousin Melvin Sider on one occasion in Clarence Center. The night seemed rather long.

I well remember Mr. Chris Climenhaga, the undertaker. He had almost

all the funerals around Stevensville. He was attired in a long black coat, a plug hat and black gloves. His black hearse was pulled by a well matched black team. This was the outfit which served the public in those early days.

One time when Mr. Climenhaga needed a black horse to make a matched team for his hearse he purchased one from Ben Climenhaga who lived near Richmond Hill. Some one either rode this horse horseback or drove it hitched up the one hundred and twenty miles home.

At the funeral service when the preachers had completed their part the funeral director opened the casket in the church. The congregation including all the relatives then took their last look. No flowers were ever on display anywhere. I do remember a very small sheaf of wheat placed on top of the coffin one time. Whose funeral I do not know. Upon arrival at the cemetery the casket was carried and immediately placed into the rough box. The cover was then fastened by the undertaker. The six pallbearers lowered it to the bottom of the grave. The minister in charge read the burial rite and offered the closing prayer. Before the relatives and friends left the open grave two men filled in the grave. The first funeral I remember attending was my Grandmother Winger's. It was a very solemn occasion. Since that day long ago I have read beside many an open grave, earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust.

As far back as I remember preaching always followed Sunday School between eleven and twelve o'clock. One minister opened with a hymn and scripture reading. Then two prayed. The last one only prayed what is frequently termed the Lord's Prayer. One did the speaking. Another minister would give some closing remarks and announce the closing hymn. The whole congregation again knelt when two prayed again, the last one repeating again the Lord's Prayer. The Bishop gave the announcements usually

ending with these words " if the Lord will and we live." Singing the Doxology closed the service.

In those days no special notes or sermon outlines were ever used. It was true some preachers did considerable wandering away from their texts or subjects.

The sermons contained and upheld the great need of repentance and conversion. The definite work of the Holy Spirit was plainly taught. They always included consistent Christian living. Taking part in politics, acting as a juryman, or going to law or going to war was considered very inconsistent for any member of good standing. These things were frequently preached against along with belonging to Lodges, Secret Orders or having your life insured. Meeting your financial obligations was expected and required of all. Plain attire was the outside mark of a good church member. But a heart full of love, compassion, kindness, humility, long-suffering and forgiveness was not to be lacking. Putting off the old man and his crucifixion that the body of sin might be destroyed (Rom. 6:6) was upheld and taught. I remember my great uncle Nicholas Michael relating and comparing his experience in killing a fox to the destruction of the old carnal nature. He killed or thought he had ^{killed the} fox. Then he put his fox (supposedly dead) in the smoke house until he had a convenient time to bury him. The next day was Sunday. Uncle wanted to show his friend the fox. Well when he opened the door to his great surprise the fox was standing up. So he had to be killed over again. Then in comparing the death of the old man to the fox --if he is not really dead you should make sure that he is. Rom. 6:6.

Missionary activity was a live issue with some. Grandfather Bearss and Chris Winger of Springvale left their homes for Evangelistic Meetings

in the Houghton Area about seventy years ago. I remember Grandfather bringing home some sweet chestnuts for me. They sowed the good seed. From time to time special services were conducted there. This was the first place I preached away from home. Later the field was more thoroughly worked by John Nigh and Bishop Edward Gilmore and others. Today we have established congregations there.

We should not overlook the days and days the deacons spent in their yearly visits to all the members. This seemed to be a great help in keeping order and unity in the church.

The council meetings were well attended. We sometimes listened to some warm discussions which seemed necessary to keep the good work moving.

Our conclusion can only be--if the Wingers planted, the Bearsses and others watered, God gave the increase. The old church is still on the map. Her light has not gone out. The present congregation is owned and blessed of the Lord under the faithful ministry of Bishop Wm. Charlton and his co-workers. Plans are laid for enlarging the present building to better accomodate their large Sunday School.

In conclusion of these meditations and memories of the past, I must thank my Saviour and Lord for what I have heard and seen and experienced in the old church at Bertie. It has so colored my life that I can never get away from it. Why some may ask. Because in the old church the first sermons I ever heard were preached, there I felt the Spirit's conviction for the first time, there I was made conscious that my sins were all forgiven, there they accepted me as a church member and I took my church vows on the day of my baptism in Lake Erie, there I gave my first public testimony of being saved, there the church chose me as one of their ministers, there I had my feet washed and took communion for the first time, there I

was ordained to the ministry by Bishop J. R. Zook, there I preached my first sermon from 1 Cor. 10:12.

In the adjoining cemetery are the marked graves of my father and mother, my little brother Leslie, my four grandparents and my first brother-in-law, Albert Riegle. The mortal remains of my brother ministers who stood with me in the pulpit are lying in their graves until the first resurrection. The grass may have grown green over their graves but it cannot cover the memory of pleasant experiences enjoyed together.

The summer's sun or the winter storms of forty two years away from the old church has not faded the pictures that hang on memory's wall for they are not written but deeply engraved on my heart.

The Bertie Church is a sacred spot on earth for me.

By Bishop Alvin L. Winger,
January, 1964.

Gormley, Ont.