

Extra Mile Willingness

**A History of the
Big Rapids Branch
of the Grand Rapids Stake
of the
Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints**

"....blessed are they who are
faithful and endure." (DC 50:5)

10 January 2015

**Please call Myrl Thompson
with Questions/Corrections**

231-796-6903

**A Special Thank you to
Lynne Stewart
Karen and Jim Hoerter,
Lon Green,
Charlotte Thompson,
Carol Smith
and
Others
for their assistance
as we continue to discover
Treasure Chests
of Historical Information
and Pictures.**

Big Rapids Branch EXTRA MILE WILLINGNESS

The 48 year history of the Church in the Big Rapids, Michigan area begins with the arrival of LDS "Modern Day Pioneers". They brought with them levels of leadership experience, faith, determination, and a willingness to press forward and "go the extra mile" that bear testimony of the words of the Lord when He said,

"....blessed are they who are faithful and endure." (D&C 50:5)

BIG RAPIDS INDEPENDENT BRANCH MEMBERS of today continue to build on the foundations set by those earlier Modern Day Pioneers. They currently meet in a Stage-Two sized building centrally located in the western mid-Michigan area...as they look forward to the day they will become a Ward.



Big Rapids Branch "Extra Mile Willingness" and endurance displayed in the early stories of the local church speak of more than just the hundreds of miles traveled to distant meeting places and teaching appointments. We find they also pressed

forward, going the "Extra Mile" to establish themselves locally in the Big Rapids area by successfully facing events that included:

- Experiencing Periods as either a Dependent or Independent Branch meeting in rented non-LDS Church buildings, member homes, or purchased facilities.
- Facing Re-Organization that dissolved the Branch and called Big Rapids members to attend and support the growth of adjacent LDS areas.
- Going the "Extra Mile" and Receiving Permission to continue ongoing local Big Rapids area Relief Society and Primary Meetings that preserved their local identity from 1966 to the current day.

The history of the Branch reflects the testimony of the early LDS members in the Big Rapids area that included the family of Olie Larson and his wife Esther. The Larsons arrived in 1966 in response to a job offer from what was then Ferris State College. The following description of those early days is based on histories written by the Larsons, considered by many to be the "Father and Mother" of the Big Rapids Branch.

The Modern Day Pioneers in the Big Rapids and its surrounding area were deeply rooted members who were attracted to the western Mid-Michigan vineyard by opportunities. These early members included:

Larson and Hummel families - hired by Ferris State College in Big Rapids

Tombs and Monical Families - moved into the Big Rapids Area.

Cranney Family - Potato farming in Idaho to Morley/Stanwood area

McMurray Family - in Response to West Michigan Oil Exploration

Nellis Family - Dairy Farming in the Chippewa Lake area

120 Mile round trips to Sunday Meetings became a regular part of their lives. When the Larson Family arrived in Big Rapids, they were at first unable to find any other Latter-day Saint families in the area. Then in 1968, the LDS Monical and Tombs families arrived in Big Rapids. They began to meet with the Larsons and together they discovered a group of LDS Church members meeting in what is now known as the Greenville Ward. In the days prior to the existence

of the Big Rapids Branch, early Big Rapids members began to realize they lived in an LDS "neighborhood" that extended over several thousand square miles.

Long distance travel to mid-week Primary and RS meetings posed problems that needed to be addressed. The sisters in the early Larson, Tombs, and Monical families joined with the Stewart and Herrick families and immediately rose to the occasion. They approached Priesthood leaders and applied for and received permission to officially organize local Big Rapids Primary and Relief Society groups, in addition to attending the Greenville Sunday meetings. The strength and determination of these early Pioneer families is further demonstrated by the fact that once started, these local Big Rapids Primary and Relief Society meetings were conducted almost continuously up to the current day...over a period of 48 years.



Big Rapids attends a Party and Play
at Mt Pleasant, 1976



Sisters Larson and Joan Herrick
in RS Meeting in March 1982



Esther Larson in Big Rapids Primary Meeting - 1982



Christmas Play Dec 1978

For anyone acquainted with either the early or current Big Rapids RS sisters, it is no surprise their early initiatives helped anchor the Church in the Big Rapids area.

BIG RAPIDS MEMBERSHIP BETWEEN 1966-1968 expanded to the point that a Big Rapids Dependent Branch was formed in the Midland Stake....and met in rented space at the Big Rapids Seventh-Day Adventist church between 1968-1971. Between 1971-1972, the Midland Stake recognized Big Rapids as an Independent Branch...and then made boundary changes that absorbed Big Rapids into the Mt. Pleasant Ward from 1972 to 1976. Additional boundary changes in 1976 returned Big Rapids to an Independent Branch in the Grand Rapids Stake, with local meetings again being held in the rented space in the Seventh Day Adventist Church.



After Big Rapids became part of the Grand Rapids Stake, Sunday meetings were eventually held in member homes.... that included the Olie and Esther Larson home located on a beautiful site on Clear Lake. Sacrament was served in the round parlor located on the right in the photograph.



Sacrament Meetings were also held in the home of Morris and Lynne Stewart in Big Rapids. The Stewart family is shown from Left to Right: Morris and Lynne Stewart, and children, Laura, T.J. Amy, and Michael in front.



The Clear Lake beach site (left), the Muskegon River, and Chippewa Lake served as the baptismal sites for early Big Rapids members waiting for the completion of a building with a font. Once in the Grand Rapids Stake, the stake font became a fourth option.



In 1979, a restaurant/real estate agency on old US. 131 was purchased and completely remodeled by Big Rapids Branch members to include a chapel, meeting rooms, and a Branch President's office....but without a baptismal font.

The Dedicatory Service for this remodeled building included a statement on the program bulletin that acknowledges the "Extra Mile Willingness" of the Big Rapids Branch with the following statement:

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

"Throughout the entire renovation process the sustaining force has been the sacrifice of the members. Most of the contractors and other specialists who helped in the construction have been touched by the spirit of sacrifice (and) given the Big Rapids Branch unusual consideration in the billing of their services, sometime even donating portions of their labors. It is our prayer that each participant will be richly blessed for the time and effort put into the building of this branch of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints"

GROWTH CONTINUED AND THE TIME CAME when Big Rapids qualified for a new building. The following information based on the November 29, 1991 edition of the local Big Rapids Pioneer, written by Branch member Lynne Stewart, describes the project to build the current building.

" Autumn brings many changes, and for the Big Rapids Branch members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Autumn of 1991 brought the ground breaking for a new building. After five years of searching for and finally purchasing a site, and meeting Church attendance requirements of 106 each Sunday, the ground breaking was as eagerly anticipated as an over-due infant. Completion of the building is scheduled for the summer of 1992."

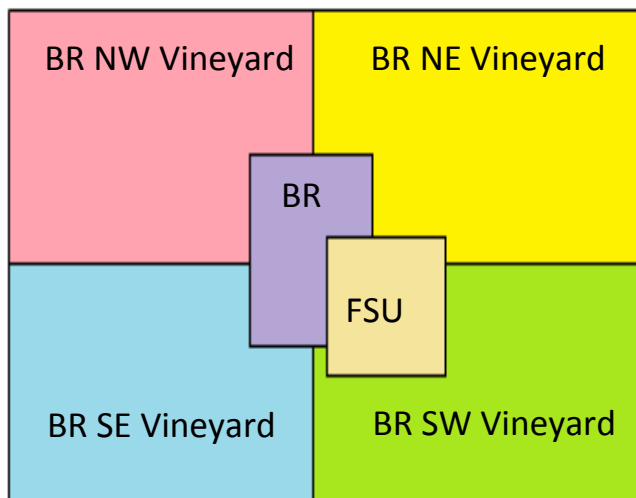


November, 1991 ground breaking Ceremony shows Branch President Scott Crowley (left), Lon Green (center) representing the Stake Presidency, and Glen Goodwin (right), Stake High Counselor in charge of Facilities Management, happily turning sod for the foundation of the new building for the Big Rapids Branch.



The Big Rapids building was completed, thoroughly inspected under the direction of Church Authorities, and dedicated in 1992, much to the delight of members who had pressed forward through the years. The Big Rapids Branch Members finally had their own Baptismal Font.....available to them on a year-round basis.

COMMUNICATON HAS BEEN ONE OF THE KEYS to the survival of the Big Rapids member identity for the past 48 years.....based on visits by Home Teachers and Visiting Teachers, Newsletters, and efforts such as a 2003 "Six Vinyard" pilot project patterned after an example in the Saginaw/Midland area.



The "Vinyard" project called for six Member Missionary Assistants. One for each of the 4 corners of the Big Rapids Area, and one each for the City of Big Rapids and Ferris State University....put in place to help ensure that all members, both active and inactive, and non-member friends and neighbors had opportunities for communication and contact with the church on a regular basis.

The "Six Vineyard" Mission Project included at least once-a-year activities in each local area that provided excellent results, as reported in an article in the "*The Paper Plates Newsletter*" published by sister Lynne Stewart.



03 June 2003: The Barryton Vineyard Activity was a rousing success. Missionaries, Elders Spratling and Paukstys, "Sang for their Supper", singing "Nearer My God to Thee" in a rendition that slipped into a modern-day, popular style of harmony that immediately riveted the attention of the audience.

The pleasantly surprised (and now relaxed) group of active and inactive members and their friends and neighbors, then gathered to partake of a spectacular Potluck BBQ. After the meal, a wild, wonderful Whiffle-Ball game for all ages ensued. The game resembled an elementary school gym class...where the big kids "let their hair down and had a good time"...while "less athletic" participants struggled to learn the game.

Highlights in the game included:

- Margarita Ralston who hit like a pro, but repeatedly forgot to run the bases
- Michelle Thornton...who could not be struck out.....
- Elder Spratling who killed the ball flat when he hit it out of the park
- Maria Thompson, who could connect with the ball but not the bases
- Pat McCall and daughter hit home runs with the help of fumbling fielders.
- Pat McRoberts and Deb Seitler who regularly swatted balls past pitchers
- Elyse Thompson, who struggled to keep her umpire husband under control
- Pat Glover who got so excited on hitting the ball she had to be escorted around the bases by the umpire.

Many of the middle age and above Vineyard attendees developed symptoms of "having gone the extra mile" during the Vineyard Event. They were easily identified the next day....as those who were limping between Sunday Meetings.

A BIG RAPIDS TIMETABLE provides a list of Presidents over the past 48 years.

Dates	Branch Pres	Comments (based on history files in RS and Clerk office)
1966-1968	---	BR Members find and attend Greenville Ward
1968-1972	Olie Larson	Dependent BR Branch (Midland Stake) attend in BR
1972-1972	Harold Smith	Independent BR Branch (Midland Stake) attend in BR
1972-1976	---	BR Branch dissolved and attends Mt. Pleasant
1976-1983	Clark E. Volz	Independent BR Branch (Grand Rapids Stake) meets in SDA building until 1978, in homes, and finally in 1980, a remodeled "cozy curve" Building.
1983-1983	Tim McMurray	
1983-1987	Olie Larson	
1987-1991	Lon Green	
1991-1992	Scott Crowley	Meetings In New Stage-2 Building on a Journey Toward Becoming a Ward.
1992-1994	Ray Edge	
1994-1999	James Hoerter	
1999-2004	Randy Stein	
2004-2007	Craig Westman	
2007-2011	Reinhold Hill	
2011-2014	Lee Lewis	
2014-	Ralph Williams	

Big Rapids has a history of nurturing strong families, members, missionaries, and leaders not shown in the above timetable....such as Ferris Graduates and other members who moved to other areas to positions of support and leadership. Carol Smith remembers the Branch was at one time locally known as a "Train Depot" as members moved in and out of the area. In fact, the family of Allen and Carol Smith Sr. was one example, when their home ended up outside new Big Rapids Branch boundaries and Allen became Bishop in the Greenville Ward from 2005 to Aug 2007.

BIG RAPIDS YM/YW PROGRAMS provided opportunities for growth and service for both our youth and their adult leaders. In one example, Sis Carol Smith pushed for early morning Seminary, a scripture study program that in Big Rapids has been typically scheduled from 6:30-7:30 AM prior to start of the Public School Day.

YM and YW Programs also included regular year-round campouts, week-long adventures, gospel lessons, and service projects that, in the case of the YM and their friends, included membership in Boy Scout Troop 119 .



Big Rapids Sisters sit around a fire with their evening meal, sharing insight about the day's events. (Left) Karen Hoerter, (Right) Becky Yawney.



Basketball was a Big deal in the Branch, with Eric Weimer and Allen Smith Jr. leading Big Rapids to a win in a 1980's Stake playOff. In 2008, YM and friends dyed and stenciled *Gospel Trotter* game shirts for early morning pre-school-day Big Rapids games. In a mixed Young Men vs Old Men game shown above, we see (L. to R): Ryan Bennett, BP Reinhold Hill, James Herrick, and Trevor Quist.



Wait ! Is that our Branch President with the ball under his shirt ?.....sneaking his way toward the basket ?

YES, it is President Hill, but he didn't really sneak a ball toward the basket under his shirt. This "doctored" up photo represents a sample of ongoing YM/OM game teasing.



Carlie Baumer (left) helps to assemble shelves for a YM Service Project at a W.I.S.E. facility in Big Rapids. Shelves were cut and test-assembled, then re-built at W.I.S.E. .

A BIG RAPIDS YM-YW ETIQUETTE DINNER was held in May 2008...in the Edelweiss Flower Restaurant (the Cultural Hall). Preparation included a class and video that demonstrated both the "Rules of Etiquette" and eating out in a fancy restaurant. The dress for the evening was "Sunday Best". The Young Men were



surprised upon arrival to find they were each given a red cummerbund" and a bow tie to wear during the event...to simulate formal wear. They were also given a corsage and instructed how to pin it on their "YW Dinner Partner"....without injuring themselves or their dinner partner.

The "Dinner partners", by the way, were matched up in a random process by the YW....who picked a number out of a Flower Vase...and matched it up to numbers pinned to the YM cummerbunds. The event started out with an opening prayer and a "Seven Course" Menu written in a foreign language (our German version of Pig Latin)....to get their attention that this was a really, really posh event. Background piano music was played in the softly lit, well decorated hall.

Bro. Lon Green was the "Head Waiter" even though he refused to "dress up" as a waiter. He and the Young Women's President provided step-by-step Etiquette instructions during the event....starting with instructions to the YM on seating their dinner partners. It was a successful, enjoyable evening. The initial nervous giggling over the menu subsided and attendees began to relax and enjoy learning about the origins and the practice of etiquette in a formal dining situation. Sample menu offerings in "Germanese" (left) and English (right) for the 5th course of the 7 course meal are shown below.....

Fiver Coursen: Choosenhoffen...

Fowlengobblerhoffen der Crème mit
Noodlcheesensmacken mit Smallentotten
Peagreeners und SweetenBee Carrotoddlers

(or)

Spaghofen mit Ballenmeaters und
Portabellenhoffer und Sidesittendishen

Fifth Course: Entre Choice of....

Turkey Alfredo w/Cheddar Noodles
and Tender Garden Peas w/Garnish
and Honey Baby Carrots

(or)

Italian Spaghetti, MeatBalls wiith
Portabella Mushrooms & Side Dish

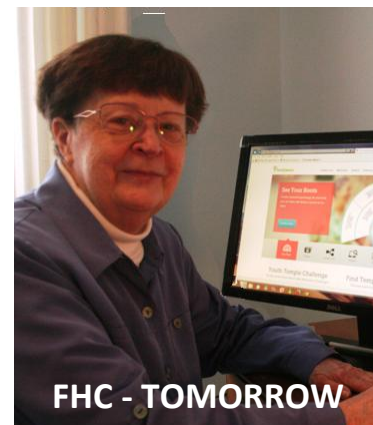
MISSIONARIES FROM BIG RAPIDS have served in many areas of the United State and around the world. YM and YW were inspired to go due to spiritual promptings, Early Morning Seminary programs, strong family and Branch support, and just plain old "Extra Mile Willingness" on the part of the youth themselves. One Missionary, Allen Smith, returned home to become a Grand Rapids Stake President.

Kristen Green Austria Vienna Mission February 1988 - August 1989	Anthony Gonzalez California Roseville Mission March 1996 - March 1998	Christopher John Hoerter Utah Salt Lake City Mission September 2002 - September 2004
Larry Larson Switzerland Geneva Mission June 1963 - December 1964	Laura Ann Pomeroy California Arcadia Spanish Mission April 1996 - April 1997	Jessica Lelani Malcom Belgium Brussels/Netherlands Mission August 2004 - February 2006
Joseph Herrick California Oakland Mission March 1990 - February 1992	Eric Jon Weimer California Carlsbad Mission November 1996 - November 1998	Eric Hill Josephson Washington Everett Mission October 2004 - October 2006
Erin Edge California Ventura Mission June 1990 - January 1992	Eugene & Fernanda Carnes Puerto Rico San Juan Mission February 1998 - February 2000	Ryan Stephen Malcom Utah Provo Mission November 2005 - November 2007
James Rowell Poland Warsaw Mission May 1992 - June 1994	Jared King Broderick Idaho Pocatello Mission August 1999 - August 2001	Janette Lynne Weimer Utah SLC Family History Center Mission February 2006 - August 2007
Allen Smith Portugal Lisbon South Mission September 1992 - October 1994	Daniel Cory Duckworth Taiwan China Mission October 1999-October 2001	Thomas James Stewart Nevada Las Vegas Mission December 1997 - June 1998
Michael Stewart Canada Toronto East Mission February 1994 - November 1994	Tyler Morris Josephson Mexico Mexico City East Mission November 2000 - November 2002	Timothy Allen Baumer California Sacramento Mission September 2010 - September 2012
Jordan Rowell Colombia Bogota South Mission April 1995 - April 1997	Krista Cramer Mississippi Jackson Mission December 2000 - June 2002	Jessica Pilling Salt Lake City Mission August 2013 - March 2015
Brad Smith Canada Calgary Mission July 1995 - July 1997	Victor Astley Broderick Washington Seattle Mission September 2001 - September 2003	Byron Terrell Williams Georgia Macon Mission February 2014-February 2016

THE BIG RAPIDS FAMILY HISTORY CENTER testifies of the "Extra Mile Willingness" and "Press Forward Attitude" of the Big Rapids Branch. Early extensive Family History Extraction work, led by the efforts of Sisters Esther Larson, Pat McRoberts, and Pat Glover, submitted many thousands of hand extracted records that laid the foundation that initiated a project to establish a Big Rapids Family History Center.

Additional persistent Extra Mile Willingness of FHC Director Karen Hoerter, President Westman, and others guided Big Rapids on a technical journey from microfilm and microfiche records delivered by mail into the rapidly accelerating current generation of computers, high speed internet, and access to world-wide genealogical data both inside and outside of the Church.

Charlotte Thompson (below right) was called to be the Family History Director in 2013 and she and her brother, Myrl Thompson, maneuvered through a six-month period of climbing paper-work mountains that included hour-long phone calls with the Salt Lake Family History Center hand-holding experts. The result was



the approval, delivery, and installation of four new, up-to-date computers, infrastructure. and software that we have today... open to both members and the public on a regular schedule or by appointment. As technology continues to develop, we are now calling FHC Consultants to provide training and assistance to members and non-members who can access Family Search records on their home computers.

COMMUNITY SERVICE PROJECTS have been a regular feature in the Big Rapids Branch list of activities over the years.



The Big Rapids Branch Sponsored a Stake Project in 2008 to paint the Big Rapids City Play-Scape. Over 100 Stake YM, YW, adult leaders, and friends and neighbors spread a 50 gallon drum of stain in 5 hours....followed by a huge BBQ picnic for all. Community leaders took note and began to ask about "who are these Mormons".



Big Rapids members contacted the city in 2012 with offers of Community Service and were warmly recieved. A River-Walk Cleanup project attended by 11 members resulted in huge truck loads of brush, trash, and small trees, much to the delight of City officials.

Some Community Service was "spontaneous"....especially when it came from the youth. One memorable example was a trip home from a weeklong campout, when a voice from the back seat announced.....

"You just passed an old man back there stacking wood for the winter...I think he needs our help". There was dead silence in the car for the next few miles.....before my exhausted body put the car into a "U-turn" and took the boys back to offer our help. The old man and I stood in the autumn sunset as he watched in awe as the boys lined up to pass the wood from a dumped pile to long, well stacked rows of wood. I remember the old man asking, "Who are you guys anyway...do you belong to some kind of Church or something." I was more than happy to invite the boys over to practice their member missionary skills by explaining "Who we were" and getting a name and address for a Missionary Referral.

BIG RAPIDS BRANCH SERVICE extends beyond Community...into assisting other members.....typically in quiet, behind the scenes situations. In one case, however, the Lord assisted the "behind the scenes" service efforts of Amanda Sutton, who became a front page story in the Big Rapids newspaper. It all began when a local reporter was introduced to Amanda and her wheel chair and discovered her final service project, a book of hope and faith entitled:

"Whisperings from Within the Valiant Temple That is my Body".

The reporter listened as Amanda described her struggle to finish her book as she approached the end of her 20 year battle with Freidrich Ataxia, a fatal disease...and gained insight into the unimaginable "Extra Mile Willingness" of this sweet sister as indicated below.



"My book is my final purpose in life....to share my life journey in a wheel chair with other wheel chair victims and their families...to share not only the initial disbelief, anger, and dispair of my disease, but to also share the hope and peace I found in my search for a spiritual meaning and purpose to my life. As my disease has progressed, I can no longer write. I have lost the feeling of touch in my hands, feet, arms, and legs. I have begun to lose my eyesight, hearing, and ability to speak clearly...one cell at a time as the days go by, while my mind remains creative, alive, and alert.

After a 3 day near death-experience, I began to search for and found a purpose to my life....a search that led me to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. I was baptized and welcomed into the church. Before I was baptized I didn't know anything about God, but now I know Him and His son, Jesus Christ...I know what happens now...and where I've been and where I'm going. I know my purpose....to share what I found with others....I also found the help I needed to make it happen.

The resulting news article sparked assistance from Hospice of Michigan volunteers and others in the community who joined her Church member friends in helping her finish her book. Amanda passed away 15 May 2010.

ANNUAL QUORUM AND BRANCH PICNICS continue to be regularly hosted at the Church and at local parks, along with Hayrides at the local 1895 Farmstead of Myrl and Elyse Thompson.



Potluck food, Bon-Fires, and games and activities for all ages attracted friends and neighbors from Mecosta County and its surrounding area. These activities became great Missionary Activities as we learned the importance of.... "Standing in Holy Places" by the example we set.

Non-members became more comfortable with the "Peculiar People" who were LDS members in the community.



MORE THAN ONE BOOK OF MORMON has been buried along the Big Rapids Hayride Route for "discovery" by Big Rapids Youth, Single Adult, or other groups. A typical "mini-pageant" includes a pause in the hay-ride and a walk to a peaceful



hillside to a view of a young boy in the distance, kneeling over a stone box. The photograph is one of several sites that have been used for various events. Can you picture a young boy kneeling in the sunlight on the hillside up ahead ?....while someone in the group suddenly begins to narrate the Joseph Smith story of the discovery of the Golden Plates. It has caught the attention of more than one non-member friend who had been invited to the hayride.

A description of one similar event involving a "discovery" is described below by Bro. Thompson of the Big Rapids Branch.

"I will never forget one LDSSA Young Adult Group that hosted a BBQ event at the farm for themselves and their friends.... that included an evening sunset hike....to find a "pre-hidden" Book of Mormon. When they still hadn't returned by 10:00 PM, I became concerned they might have gotten lost or something, so I hiked out to the fields to see if they were okay.

I found them sitting in the middle of a hillside pasture in the light of a rising full moon..... over-looking a valley full of twinkling fireflies . The group of LDS members and their non-members friends weren't lost....they were having a Testimony Meeting."

ON 26 JULY 2014, A PIONEER PICNIC was held at the Thompson Farm, with a special visit from a "pretend" group of Pioneer Sisters walking their way westward. Their husbands had been called to join the Mormon Battalion and they reported they had just lost their horses. They were in trouble, were hungry, and stopped in to "Sing for Their Supper"..



The Pioneer "procession" included non-members who enjoyed the opportunity to participate and became comfortable in asking about "who we were and what we believed in". Big Rapids Branch activities provided opportunities for one-on-one discussions referencing the Bible and the Book of Mormon as companion witnesses of Jesus Christ ...where Christ spoke in John 10: 16 ,

"And other sheep I have, which are not of this fold: them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice; and there shall be one fold, and one shepherd "

MEMBERS OF THE BIG RAPIDS BRANCH OF TODAY are still Pioneers as they build the kingdom and set examples in their communities of integrity, service and righteousness. Their sacrifices are many and so are their rewards. Though as Pioneers of old, they may grow weary with their many responsibilities, they follow the words of Phil. 3:13-14

"But this one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before, I press toward the mark."

IN CLOSING WE SAY.....Press on, Big Rapids..... Press on.

APPENDIX

The following additional material is not intended for the History Book.....it is just added for the fun of it.....since I found it in the search for "history"

2004 CHRISTMAS PARTY included musical entertainment, dancing, a Hymn Sing, a potluck meal, and the arrival of Santa Claus.



Branch President Stein and 1st and 2nd Counselors DeVoe and Hill put their Christmas orders in with Santa Claus. Santa's rosy cheeks are the result of exhaustion....after having been asked to dance the Swing by Sister Stein., complete with under-arm twirls, side-by-side prancing, and a gentle glide at the end. The children, by the way, did eventually get their turn with Santa



Big Rapids Branch Food Storage Fairs attracted attendance from the surrounding area to church rooms full of Emergency Preparation displays. Elyse Thompson (left) explains that:

**"If an Emergency Occurs....You
May Need to Live from Your
Food Storage for 1 year"**

Outside, children sat in a huge Fire Truck in the parking lot as Fire Fighters taught Fire Safety in the Home to both children and adults.