

A Brief History of the Muskegon/North Muskegon Ward

Germination Period 1941 – 1960

Have you noticed the huge oak tree near the south entrance to our building? Our Ward is something like that oak tree – it started out like a little acorn, became a twig, then a “Branch” and a bigger tree, shed some acorns which turned into other trees (“Branches”) and has now developed into a larger, sturdy, beautiful enduring unit of the Church. A lot like our oak tree!

Although there were missionaries who traveled through this area as early as 1915 or so, the actual start of the Muskegon Branch happened quite by accident. A fellow named Louie Schroeder (a Utahn via a brief stay in Chicago) was working at Teledyne (Continental Motors). One day he met a young Mormon girl named Gloria Nelson who was clerking at Woolworth's. She had met Brother Schroeder earlier in Chicago and he remembered her. Brother Schroeder and his wife Nadine had been attending church at the Grand Rapids Branch. They had been able to contact Cecil Wadsworth in Grand Rapids and would ride the bus there and back each Sunday.

At this time Sister Nelson's husband David was not a member of the Church. In a short time, however, eleven members were in the area and a dependent unit of the Grand Rapids Branch was organized on August 24, 1941. The original eleven members were: Louis and Nadine Schroeder, Mary Carr and her daughter, Marietta, Gloria and David Nelson, two aunts and a cousin to Gloria and David, Ellen Bloom and Emma and Doris Enewald, Mary Nelson, Gloria Nelson's maternal grandmother and Florence Nelson, David Nelson's mother. (The number happened to be eleven, not nine, because David and Florence Nelson were baptized, in Duck Lake, that very day!).

With only eleven members, Muskegon really was a twig. Louie Schroeder was the Branch President and Nadine Schroeder was the Relief Society President. As Brother Schroeder was the only Melchizedek Priesthood holder, he conducted meetings, blessed and passed the sacrament, and spoke at meetings.

At this time, Muskegon was part of the Northern States Mission, which consisted of Illinois, Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, Wisconsin, and Iowa. A short time later a district was organized, which covered Western Michigan; its headquarters were in Gary, Indiana.

By the “Summer of '42” there were two lovely lady missionaries in Muskegon – LaVon Meeks of Alberta, Canada and VaLoy Andreason of Salt Lake City. (Sisters, of course – remember this was wartime). Sister Schroeder tells what happened:

“In order to pass literature in the city, they had to get a permit from the police. There was a young reporter in the station at the time, and he interviewed them and gave them a good write up in the paper. The effect of this was immediate. The ministerial association demanded that we be expelled from the “Y.” The elderly lady who ran the “Y” was very upset over this and tried to refuse but was told the churches would withdraw financial support, without which it could not function, so she had to tell us to leave.

“The next day Lou received a call from a man who identified himself as the minister of the Church of Spiritual Light. He said he was a member of the ministers association, but was sort of an outcast also. They had a small church and held their meetings on Sunday afternoon. He offered us the use of their meeting house Sunday mornings. We were most grateful to these kind people.”

By the time the Schroeders left Muskegon in February of 1944, David Nelson held the Melchizedek priesthood and he was made the Branch President – again the Branch was in the position of having just one priesthood holder. Sister Nelson became Relief Society President, and the work continued.

Membership expanded beyond the original eleven: Ardelle and Jean Bloom, Harvey, Georgia, Julia and Carolyn Kieft, Harry, Drucilla, and Sherry Nash, Kenneth, Nola, Sandra, Kaye, Nola (Jackie) and Karen Carr, the Homer Pease family, Sylvia Wood and Lorraine Murphy.

Meetings continued to be held in rented buildings and members would arrive early to sweep dust, papers, and cigarette butts from the previous night's activities. Church conferences were held in Flint – approximately 140 miles away, or Lansing,

approximately 100 miles – one way! District leaders from this time period were Irvin Eyre, Sylvan Wittwer, Ruel Jensen, Waldo Stoddard and Walter Peterlein.

At about this time, the Great Lakes Mission was formed and consisted of the states of Ohio, Indiana, and Michigan. Also about this time, 1947 or so – the first elders were assigned to Muskegon, and that was much appreciated by the Branch members.

One problem with little twigs and branches is that it's tough to have a full church program of auxiliaries and activities. However, the Muskegon Branch did get a YM President – Harvey Kieft, who was not yet a member. The first Primary President was Ardelle Bloom. Sometimes the entire Primary crowded into her Pontiac convertible and went to the drive-in movies. Most activities involved the entire membership and were low-cost affairs – picnics, watermelon “busts,” games of “capture the flag” played in the sand dunes which are now part of the Hoffmaster State Park.

Finances were always a problem – there just was never enough money. The Church had a different system then for building of acquiring meetinghouses and paying expenses than is now in effect. And for less-affluent units, this constant struggle to “pay the bills” was indeed a burden. Coupling this situation with a critical need for a meetinghouse of their own, Branch members re-doubled their efforts and, in March of 1952, were able to purchase an old, cramped, run-down and generally neglected building at 3033 Ninth Street, Muskegon Heights, from the Bethlehem Lutheran Church. Sister Nelson describes it:

“We appreciated the improvements, although it was far from ideal. The space heater made a lot of noise, which made it difficult to hear the speakers. There was no hot water in the restrooms. The space heater in the basement was inadequate for comfort. We put in carpeting and the Relief Society made some blue velveteen drapes. We painted the walls and pews, put in some new light fixtures and purchased a used piano for \$35.00. We made some tables for basement classrooms and hung some divider curtains and put in an asphalt tile floor. Also, the exterior needed to be painted.”

One of the Branch Presidents of that time, Brother Harry Nash, said that he became well-acquainted with the credit managers of all the local utility companies! Classes were held in every nook and cranny, and attendance continued to increase, both from missionary conversions like the VanKammens and Breadens and from move-ins like the Hakes and Wasiuras.

There were many attempts at fund-raising. The Priesthood tried many projects – most of which failed, like the Christmas-tree project. They did unload boxcars at Keene Lumber Company for which they received payment. The Relief Society held two bazaars a year and many dinners. The members realized that a more adequate, attractive building would enhance the local missionary effort. So, the ever-resourceful Relief Society sisters did more in their meetings than quilting, candy-making and listening to lessons. They began to plan for a way out of their dilemma.

Growing Period 1961-1971

The Muskegon Branch was blessed with some wonderful cooks. These sisters were not gourmet, Cordon-bleu trained chefs. They were just good, plain cooks. They were, for the most part, not employed outside their homes. However, they were excellent managers and organizers. And they were determined! (They were also very busy – many of the most active sisters in the fund-raising effort were also at the same time the Stake Relief Society leaders – a stake that took in all of Michigan except Detroit). They decided to make money doing what they knew best – cooking – and so Service Caterers began.

Things started out slowly, but through some fortunate connections including Sister Doris White's husband John, Sister Martha Hakes' husband Jack, and Troy Vernon's husband Roy, they were able to get more and more jobs. These men were all non-members, but their help was very important to the success of this endeavor. The magnitude of the effort and commitment to the Service Caterers' project cannot be over-emphasized. When a catering job was accepted, it simply had to be done – vacations, jobs, “home work,” sick (or well) children – nothing could interfere. Recruiting enough volunteer help was always the hardest part of each catering job.

Most jobs were taken at locations with no cooking facilities, so all food, dishes, tableware, etc. had to be brought on site, and then taken back to church or to members' homes. Assignments taken included many weddings and parties as well as large dinners – sometimes for 800 people – at Brunswick, Westran, Lincoln Golf Club, Polish Falcon Lodge, Muskegon Women's Club, the YMCA, etc. One entire weekend of meals was provided for a racing event at the Muskegon Yacht Club. For many years the Toastmasters lunch was prepared each Friday by Service Caterers. Everything was made from

“scratch” - including the mashed potatoes! Thousands of pounds of potatoes were peeled – often by priesthood holders such as Harvey Kieft and Max Petersen. The Branch President (and later first bishop of the ward) Sidney Buck was a potato farmer in Ravenna (via Idaho) and he donated many of the potatoes used.

Fortunately, the Branch had more members by this time, and many contributed greatly to the work, helping to increase the unit numerically, spiritually and financially. Some of these members included the Carlson, Carter, Dunham, Hakes, Hellem, Petersen, Straub, VanKammen, Wasiura, and Weihl families.

During this period, the old West Michigan District was dissolved and a new Lansing Stake was created on February 17, 1962. Construction for a stake center was begun in November, 1963. Also in 1963, the first missionary to be called from our unit left for California – Tom Hakes.

The first phase of the present building was begun November 15, 1966. Sister Gloria Nelson made a big sign proclaiming to all the community that we had a building site and would soon have our own meetinghouse. After working hard to earn money for construction, the members did most of the finish work on this first phase. Before and during construction, meetings were held at the Reeths-Puffer Junior High School on Giles Road. The Ninth Street building had been sold to a Baptist congregation about the same time construction was started on the new building. While the school was not ideal, it was larger and meetings were held there for several months.

During construction a conference was held and Muskegon became a ward. Yeah! President Buck became Bishop Buck on July 6, 1966. The original building on Giles Road was dedicated by Lansing Stake President Sylvan Wittwer on January 21, 1968.

Fruitful/Blooming Period 1972-1988

As with a big oak tree, growth continued – in many ways. Shortly after the first phase was finished, the second was started. Our Bishop at that time, Roland Anderson, had a fight on his hands to save our oak tree. Everyone involved wanted to take the tree down, but Bishop Anderson was adamant that the tree be saved, and he won that battle. The fund-raising efforts for the second phase were headed up by Chris Lyman. How we wanted a “real” chapel to meet in! The current Primary meeting room was packed and members had to stand in the hall throughout some meetings. Ever famous for our dinners, including Get Out Of Debt (GOOD) dinners, we couldn't seat everyone who attended. The first meeting was held in the second phase April 9, 1972; it was dedicated February 10, 1974.

We began to have more than one set of missionaries in the Ward at the same time, the highest number being ten – a missionary couple and four sets of young elders – in the summer of 1980.

During this time the Grand Rapids Stake was created by Elder (now President) Thomas S. Monson from the western part of the Lansing Stake and Glenn L. Goodwin was called as Stake President. He had some ideas as to how to control any “growth” problems Muskegon might have. Several times during this period, groups of members were taken from Muskegon to start new branches. These units were Grand Haven/Holland, Fremont, Manistee/Ludington and Hart/Shelby. The members who attended these new units took more with them than chairs and lesson manuals. They took strong testimonies, commitment and righteous desires to build up the kingdom of God in their own areas.

We were also blessed during this time to have a temple close enough to attend regularly – the Washington, D.C. Temple. Trips took about 13 hours one way, and many a member only woke up during portions of temple sessions. This was not due to irreverence or disinterest, but human fatigue. Many members consider the Washington, D.C. Temple “their” temple due to the many trips and sessions attended at this beautiful place.

Although the Ward had trouble recovering each time a division took place, it always did manage to make the adjustment. The early problems of not enough Priesthood holders, money and helping hands eased gradually, although it always hurt when a family moved away, or a ward member was called to a stake position. However, Muskegon began to offer a full church program for members, including complete YM, YW and Seminary programs. There is no way to gauge the impact this had, but many young members did serve missions and were married in the temple – again, many in the Washington, D.C. Temple, before the Chicago temple was built.

Muskegon was the first ward in the Grand Rapids Stake to have a name extraction program. This program provided thousands of names to be used at the Chicago Temple for ordinance work done there.

Our Ward finally realized a long-held dream when the last phase of our building was completed in 1988. Two generations of members missed out on having a cultural hall, but we finally got one! Not only that, we also had a dedicated Relief Society room, more classrooms and restrooms and a Family History Center which was very popular with members and many non-members as well.

To celebrate this historic milestone, a Ward reunion was planned. This took over two years of dedication by the planning committee, all the committee chairs and everyone who helped to make the reunion such a huge success. Those who attended still remember it well. The reunion was held the last weekend of July in 1989. More than 200 out-of-town former branch/ward members returned for an entire weekend of love, reminiscing, testimony-building. We had sailboat rides (thanks Conrad Kramer), Port City Princess Muskegon Lake/Lake Michigan cruises, dances, dinners, family banners, a balloon launch (many were found in Pennsylvania the next day), games, a talent show, sack lunches (more than 500 of them), and the dedication of our building by Grand Rapids Stake President Kent Price. An impressive remembrance book was prepared by the Hinze family and presented to the Ward. It remains today in the ward library. This all-out effort involved active and less-active members and strengthened many testimonies and relationships. Some folks wondered why the reunion wasn't held a couple of years later when the Ward turned 50 years old. We found out why when two weeks after the reunion Brother David Nelson, the second Branch President and valiant servant of the Lord, passed away. He was thoroughly involved in the reunion and enjoyed every minute of the renewing of so many friendships. This was a lesson to us all to remain stalwart and remember what is most important about this earthly existence.

Our Ward continued to grow, and grow some more. We were divided into what was called the Muskegon and North Muskegon Wards on November 5, 1995. At the time of the division, there was a total of 869 members. The wards were divided north and south along Apple Avenue – M46. We received 350 members and Muskegon Ward received 519 members. Unfortunately, about 2/3 of the total membership was inactive or less active. Later, the Muskegon Ward would be renamed the Spring Lake Ward. The division was overseen by the Grand Rapids Stake President, Charles Stoddard. The new North Muskegon Ward's first bishop was Dennis Byers. The two wards shared the building on Giles Road until 2007, and we all had to become accustomed to alternating meeting schedules every year. After the Ward division, the Ward was affected twice more by boundary changes. In 1998 the Fremont Branch was re-established and separately, several active families in the Montague area were re-assigned to the Hart Branch when the ward boundaries were changed to split through White Lake.

Our Ward has always been known for its Ward choir and musical programs. These efforts were spearheaded by a small group of members, only one of whom was a professional musician. But these programs were considered missionary efforts and in fact, one of them was so successful that we had 400 non-members attend one of our concerts. Sometimes we took these programs “on the road” and we performed in other wards and on occasion at stake conferences. Several members joined the Organists Guild of America and through this association our ward choir performed in several community concerts along with the choirs from other area churches. Muskegon has also hosted two Mormon Tabernacle organists, several decades apart. Alexander Schreiner performed at Central United Methodist Church in 1938, and Richard Elliott performed at the same church in 1998. There is a fine pipe organ in this large church and “our” organists showed its capabilities off to perfection.

The Ward for many years had both home study and early morning seminary. Many of these students went on to become leaders in their wards and branches, due in part to the way that seminary helps to develop testimonies and people/leadership skills. Many of them also served missions throughout the world.

We don't have too many “famous” members or ex-members, but Jason Buck who grew up in Muskegon/Ravenna played professional football for the Cincinnati Bengals. David Kennedy, a banking executive from Chicago who later became an “Ambassador at Large” for the First Presidency, owned a home in the White Lake area and visited in the summer. General Authorities who have spoken in our building include David Sorenson, Earl Tingey and Craig Zwick. We also have many prior members who have gone on to positions of leadership in the Church, such as stake presidents and patriarchs.

We had times when the Ward really pulled together for reasons that were not not so pleasant. Ed Wasiura contracted Guillain Barre syndrome and almost died. He did fully recover, and that seemed to many to be a miracle. Kim Vogel developed cancer and spent months in hospitals. She recovered and is today an active mother to her children. However, Steve VanKammen passed away from cancer just a couple of years after he graduated from high school. Sister Maria Eldredge died in a freak accident in the church parking lot in 2013. A new challenge presented itself when in 2014 two children in the Bernhardt family were diagnosed with SanFilippo, a terrible illness for which there currently is no treatment. The Ward has started to help with fund raising to enable these sweet children to participate in medical treatment trials. Members also help with child care and in other ways when possible like putting up a fence so the kids can play and be safe at home.

We had services interrupted in 1998 when our part of west Michigan was hit by severe straight-line winds on a Saturday night at the end of May. Many of our members were without electricity for as many as 10 days! Fortunately, our building did not suffer any significant damage. The large oak tree at the south entrance to the building, though, was weakened by these winds. That damage, combined with some disease, meant that we finally had to have this beloved tree removed. However, an area behind our building was improved by a couple of Eagle Scout projects, so we can still enjoy some nature at our ward home.

Through these past almost 75 years, the North Muskegon Ward and its members have been reaching out to the community to make our influence felt – something like the branches of that large oak tree. While members have come and gone, each with his or her own strengths, weaknesses, dreams and ambitions, everyone has contributed, and for that we give thanks. We are all better individuals and the Ward is a stronger, more secure place. We hope that our unit can grow and be divided again and again, as we strive to grow the kingdom of God on Earth.

Branch Presidents and Bishops of the Muskegon/North Muskegon unit:

Louis J. Schroeder	1941	
C. David Nelson	1944	
Harry J. Nash	1954	
Kenneth L. Carr	1956	
Donald L. Dunham	1958	
J. Richard Carlson	1963	
Sidney Buck	1965	
Frederick S. Perdue	1968	
Roland H. Anderson	1969	
Ronald Weihl	1971	
Ronald Hindbaugh	1974	
Allan Miller	1976	
Ronald Hindbaugh	1978	
John Taylor	1978	
Al Geisler	1979	
Harvey F. Kieft	1983	
Curtis T. Atkisson	1986	
Mark Bingham		
Zach Soelberg		
Dennis W. Byers	1995	Ward split and re-named North Muskegon
Stanley Brown		
John E. Viraldo		
Alan R. Wilson		
Nathan Y. Avery	2013	