

A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN STAKE 1975 - 1999

To tell this history we must start back with the Lansing, Michigan Stake. This Stake was created February 18, 1962. Being the 349th Stake of the Church, with boundaries from Traverse City to Oscoda to Lansing then south through Battle Creek and Kalamazoo to St. Joseph. Then north through Muskegon to Ludington with many cities in between.

LEADERSHIP HISTORY

On March, 1975, Grand Rapids, Michigan Stake was spun off of the Lansing, Michigan Stake. The Grand Rapids, Michigan Stake boundaries are from Ludington to the north; Kalamazoo and St. Joseph to the south; Muskegon to the west and Battle Creek and Hastings to the east; with Grand Rapids as the center of this stake being numbered 604 in the Church archives. In the late '70's the Grand Rapids, Michigan Stake boundaries were reduced by the development of the Kalamazoo Stake. This deducted from the Grand Rapids, Michigan Stake the wards of Battle Creek, Kalamazoo, St. Joseph and Benton Harbor.

Glenn Goodwin was the first Stake President with Darrel Thomas and David Wadsworth as counselors. President Goodwin was set apart by Thomas Monson. Betty Simons carried on as Stake Relief Society President coming from the Lansing, Michigan Stake for a short time. Sister Simons was followed by Jean Emery, Mary Larkin and Keena Price consecutively. Also, Kenneth N. Simons continued as the Stake Patriarch in the Grand Rapids, Michigan Stake. He was the 813th Patriarch (ordained by Thomas Monson) who served over 25 years. Currently Theodore Blackmer serves as the Stake Patriarch with Brother Simons and George Morris as Patriarch Emeritus.

When Glenn Goodwin was released as Stake President on 9 December 1985. He recalls phenomenal growth in membership during his tenure. The chapel in Grand Rapids on Carlton Avenue was bought in 1943 and sold about 1959. A new larger building was dedicated by Robert L. Simpson at 3181 Bradford, NE in 1960. The present Stake Center was built in 1985 at 2780 Leonard, NE. The Grand Rapids Ward, the new Grand Valley Ward and the newly formed Deaf Branch shared this facility.

Next, Kent Price was called as Stake President with Grant Worth and Larry Sheneman as his counselors. Ordained by Rex Reeve of the Quorum of the Seventy. Lee Van Kammen was called as Relief Society President. Following her were Chris Hurst and then Mary Ann Atkisson. During his term as Stake President the wards began to strengthen and missionary work went ahead vigorously. Many members were called as temple workers and all units owned their buildings.

On 9 October 1994 Kent Price and his counselors were released and the first Patriarch was retired. Charles Stoddard was called to be the new Stake President with Charles Perry and Dale Fegel as his counselors with Richard Blackmer (ordained by Donald Ladd) called as Stake Patriarch. The total members as of 30 July 1999 totaled 4121. Pam Wadsworth was called as the Stake Relief Society President. Following her as president was Judy Emery who currently has the calling.

AREA HISTORY

The Gospel was brought into the west part of Michigan in 1831 by missionaries who would hold camp meetings once a year. This tent meeting brought people from all around the area, mostly for some as entertainment, but the Gospel seed was planted in some souls.

There has been a softening and acceptance by the city of Grand Rapids and the surrounding vicinity toward The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints and it's members. This was mainly because of their honorable character and conduct. The recognition and activities of the LDS membership in the community especially by the three succeeding Stake Presidents has brought a greater awareness by media, business and government leaders.

As memory recalls there were Mormons living in Grand Rapids area and they did baptisms in the Grand River near the Village of North Park, circa 1929.

These few members held meetings in each other's homes until they could afford to rent space in various halls. Some of the earliest families were the Young's, Dalrymple's, Wadsworth's, Atwood's, Harvey's, Armstrong's, Peterlein's, Mattison's, and Hough's. From this meager beginning the gospel spread from Grand Rapids to Muskegon in 1941 and from there to what is now the Grand Rapids, Michigan Stake with 13 wards and branches.

Sister Rhodanna Mattison introduced the genealogy (now called Family History) program into the Grand Rapids Branch. She and her husband would drive from Holland, Michigan to Grand Rapids for meetings, a distance of over 30 miles.

One of the earliest members who will be greatly blessed in the eternities is Waldo Stoddard who worked physically to make a telephone building a proper House of Worship. He taught the Plan of Salvation for 20 years and made it possible to financially have a House of Worship. We are most grateful to this beloved brother in the Gospel.

CURRENT INFORMATION

(As of July 1999 the Grand Rapids, Michigan Stake, with occasional comments from early members)

Big Rapids Branch (214 members)

First Branch President was G.D. Larson with Gene Tombs as counselor in 1968. Currently serving is Clark Volz with Harold Smith and Kent Herrick as counselors. Esther Larson as Relief Society President in 1978.

Randy Stein is the existing Branch President as of July 1999 with counselors Theron Josephson and Allen Smith with the current Relief Society President Yvonne Young.

Fremont Branch (194 members)

Fremont Branch is a break off from the North Muskegon Ward. Currently serving is President Harvey Shriver with counselors Douglas Cengiz and Mark Walters. Kathy Westbrook as Relief Society President.

Grand Rapids Ward (558 members)

In the early 1940's Walter Davis was the Branch President followed by Nephi Davis. There have been many Bishops of this Ward with much of the early membership coming also from here. Currently serving as Bishop of the Grand Rapids Ward is Brett Merrell with counselors Jeff Lewis and Gary Fredline. Shelby Carter is serving as President of the Relief Society.

Grand River Branch (55 members)

"The Deaf Branch" is dependent on the Wyoming Ward. It is interesting to note that the Deaf Branch (which is now called the Grand River Branch) was developed by Brother David Harmon's daughter, Anita Harmon, who is deaf. She brought her deaf friends to Church and Sister Inez Harmon, Anita's Mother, learned sign language and taught Anita's friends the Gospel. Scott Bloomfield was called as the first Branch President in 1986-1987. Pat Phillips is the current Branch President.

Grand Valley Ward (532 members)

This Ward was taken from the Grand Rapids Ward. Presently Bishop Kaplin Jones serves with counselors Kenneth Richmond and Alpine Jennings. The Relief Society President is Susan Robinaugh.

Greenville Ward (450 members)

Currently serving as Bishop David Rowell with counselors Maynard Failing and Todd Koemer. The Relief Society President is Catherine Richardson. Before Bishop Rowell, Richard Armstrong was Bishop. During this time a building was completed and dedicated by Charles Stoddard in the spring of 1995.

Hart Branch (135 members)

Currently Branch President Douglas Brown serves with Daniel McClellan a counselor and Pam Tracy as Relief Society President. Jorge Olivas was instrumental in bringing many Spanish speaking into the Church. We must not forget Brother Harold (Jake) and Sister Marian Jacobs who were for many years the backbone of this branch.

Hastings Branch (247 members)

At the separation from Battle Creek Ward the Branch was just a Home Sunday School in 1956. This was an off-shoot from the Battle Creek Ward. In 1965 with Kent Gibson was President with Robert Buckner and Robert Atcheson as counselors. Wilma McMillian, the first member, was called as Relief Society President.

In July 1999, Kenneth Stewart is Branch President with Robert Henry and Edward Dobbins as counselors and Cynthia Jenkins as Relief Society President.

Holland Ward (347 members)

This was a dependent Branch with the Grand Valley Ward until it moved into the building at 1340 East Right Street Holland, Michigan with Chester Bartels as Bishop, Steve Gotschal and Bart Wheeler as counselors. The Relief Society President is Donna Kaiser.

Ludington Branch (135 members)

This Branch was taken from the Midland Stake in 7 January 1979 with Robert Newman as Branch President and Robert Overholt and Wally Deeds as counselors. Sister Newman and Sister Overholt headed the Relief Society. As current leadership, Rick C. May is Branch President with Leigh Rasmussen and Chance Ellis as his counselors. Linda Carpenter is the Relief Society President.

Muskegon Ward (453 members)

Muskegon started as a Branch in 1941 taken from the Grand Rapids Branch. At that time there were about 20 members filling the Branch with David Nelson and Harvey Keif't were it's Leaders. Today, the Branch has grown to a full Ward with Kenneth Otto as Bishop with William Phillips and Brian Carlson as counselors and Jill Thornock serving as Relief Society President.

North Muskegon (280) members)

This Ward was taken from the Muskegon Ward in 1995 with Stanley Brown as Bishop and Ron Wehl and Cary Peoples Sr. as counselors. The Relief Society President is Sarah Wilson.

Wyoming Ward (494 members)

Established in April 1995 with Dan Stevens as Bishop, David Pace and Kevin Jefferson as counselors. Joyce Linville was called as Relief Society President. The Ward was created when the Grand Valley and Grand Rapids Ward were split. Wyoming Ward started in a new building at 2670 56th Street, Wyoming, Michigan.

THANKS

As compilers of this information we give our utmost thanks to all those who gave us histories of their Wards and Branches. We ask for forgiveness for any errors or omissions, as they are the fault of the compilers and not intentional.

Following are the names of those who have contributed, but not in any order. Barbara Ybema, Richard and Barbara Armstrong, Pauline Streeter, Nellie Wadsworth, Pam Wadsworth, Gloria Nelson, Brother and Sister Robert Overholt, Allen Smith, Wilma McMillian, Marcia Stevens, Dale and Judy Emery, Kent and Keena Price, Glenn Goodwin, David Harmon, David Thaler Sr.,

Our special thanks to Martin and Francene Molnar for their editing and typing of this history.

May the Lord Bless Us all

Kenneth N. and Elizabeth (Betty) M. Simons