

BRIEF EARLY HISTORY OF THE CHURCH OF JESUS CHRIST OF LATTER-DAY SAINTS IN GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

The earliest mention of church members in the area was that of the John Postma family coming to Grand Rapids in 1908. There were six children in the family. The parents would hold Sunday School every Sunday morning during which they would read scriptures and sing the songs of Zion. The scriptures were first read in Dutch and then in English. After a few months they were read only in English, thus they schooled themselves in the language of their new land. The missionaries would come by about every 6 months and baptize those of age as well as keep them in touch with the church.

Eventually, other members came along; but many, after a time, would migrate to Utah. Consequently, the church would struggle to keep enough active membership to constitute a formal organization. Early on, members met in each other's homes and later in various rented halls. One such was the A.A.S. Hall on North Ottawa. Another was a room above the Majestic Theater on the corner of Library and North Division. Average attendance was between 8 and 12 people, including the missionaries.



Front row-L.to R: Arnold Hough, Eugene Jensen, Bertha Hough, Mary Counterman, Flora Mohneke, Ed Mohneke
Second row: Vern Hough*, Sister Kirby (Missionary)
Third row: Kate Dalrymple, Rhoda Mattison*, Levi Walter Davis* (Branch President)



Francis Pearl Atwood, Marie Davis, Daisy Peterlein, Rhoda Mattison, Sister Counterman, Byrdie Sarkees, Marjorie Mattison, Missionaries
Richard Peterlein

In the late 1930's ('37-'38) meetings were held in a small building (pictured above) on the corner of 6th and Scribner. It was adjacent to a meat market, which provided something of an unpleasant odor during meetings. Toward the end of 1938 they moved to the Federal Square building on Pearl Street. It was much nicer as the dining room was used for the meetings. However, on Saturday nights the room was used for parties, so before meetings Sunday morning, beer bottles had to be picked up and cigarette butts swept away.

The Mattison* family was very faithful and dedicated much effort to genealogy. They were very helpful to others in their family history work. Remarkably, each Sunday they would come into Grand Rapids for services from Holland, where they lived. Brother Mattison could drive, but didn't see well enough to do so, however, Sister Mattison could not drive, but was able to direct her husband when to stop, proceed and turn.



[About 1941]

In time the church began to increase in numbers as the missionary effort continued. In the early 1940's numbers continued to fluctuate as before, but membership did gradually increase. While

all were not active, there were those who, by their faithfulness, significantly helped move the work along. Among them were a couple of new families who moved into the branch, one from Lincoln Nebraska - the Melvin Gillie family, and another from Battle Creek - the Waldo Stoddard Family. Another very contributing family that moved in (from Washington, DC) was the John and Laura Hughes family with their daughter, Charlene. They weren't able to locate where services were held until happening upon a listing for the church in the Federal Square Building. Inquiring after more information, Brother Hughes was given the name of President Walter Davis, and then learned of the meeting times and place. He recalls those in attendance at their first visit were Brother Peterlein and his two children (Sally and Richard), Vern and Mitzi Hough, Cecil and Nellie Wadsworth, Eugene Jensen and his two children (John and Loreen), Sister Dalrymple and her son, Eva Meyers and daughter (Ruby), Brother and Sister Mohnecke and two lady missionaries.

It was soon decided that they should begin a building fund, that one day they would have their own chapel. The sum total of the first donations was \$7.65. Eventually, with the help of Brother Waldo Stoddard and Brother Melvin Gillie, Branch President Walter Davis* made arrangements to purchase an old Michigan Bell building, at 242 Carlton Avenue, for \$7500. Another \$2500 was raised for needed renovations.

Once the building was purchased, there was much work to do to prepare it for services. Nellie Wadsworth remembers that one evening three brethren – her husband Cecil Wadsworth, Vern Hough* and Waldo Stoddard – worked to remove a tin ceiling in what would become the chapel area, which took them into the early hours of the morning. At 3:00am she received a call to pick them up at the Peterlein home a few blocks from the building. When she arrived at the home, the interior was dark and she could see no one until Vern opened his eyes (they were probably dozing by the time she got there) and she saw only the whites of his eyes because the men were black from the dirt and soot that came down with the ceiling. They were exhausted from the work and the hour of the day, but commented on how Brother Stoddard sang “Oh, what a beautiful morning” as they worked.

Pictured below is the Carlton building spoken of above, with some of those pioneers.



Another major task was that of soaking the glue that had been used to secure old tile to the floor. Once soaked it could be scraped up. Sister Hughes and Sister Gillie spent endless hours at the task, while having to carry many buckets of hot water obtained from new neighbors across the street. Then there was the pulling down and replacing old plaster, and walls and ceiling to be painted, building a rostrum with a railing and podium, steps, a backdrop of arches draped in rich blue velvet. The sisters did a significant amount of the work, even helping to score the cinder block with hammers and chisels resulting in many blistered hands. There were 50 folding chairs purchased for the congregation along with several armchairs for the stand. It

was a formidable project, but great rewards were found in the unity of the members and a great delight in having a lovely chapel of their own within which to worship.

As the church grew in the area the missionaries were more involved and even helped solidify the church organization. About the time that the building on Carlton and Lake Drive was being renovated, President Leo Muir of the Northern States Mission called for a Conference of the West Michigan District to be held in Grand Rapids. This motivated the local saints to double their efforts to have the building presentable for the occasion, which, as usual, helped the members, become closer and more dedicated. At this conference (held September 19, 1943), President Walter Davis was released as Branch President and called to serve as the President of the West Michigan District. Brother Melvin Gillie, who was transferred a few months earlier from Nebraska by W.T. Grant Co. to be the local manager of the business, was called to be the Branch President.

As the work continued on the building, President Muir was released and David I. Stoddard was called as the new Mission President. The Atwood family, along with others, was a great help in strengthening the church. However, they had their difficulties as well. Roy Atwood, who was a stalwart member in the family, had an infected tooth and while under anesthesia for the operation, passed away. President Stoddard attended and spoke at the funeral – the first in the new building. It might be mentioned here that the Stoddard brothers (David, Howard - from Lansing, and Waldo – who had earlier moved to Grand Rapids to be senior vice president of Michigan National Bank) were a significant support to the church in the area.

A couple of years later, in the early part of World War II, President Stoddard was released, President Creed Haymond was called; President Gillie was transferred to St. Louis, President Davis moved to Florida, the Hough's moved to Idaho, Cecil Wadsworth went into the Navy. The Armstrong/Atwood families moved to Detroit to work in the defense industries, with other family members moving to Arizona. Other families in the Branch moved to the west. During this time, however, Nephi Davis (a missionary) was called to serve as Branch President and the Kenneth and Betty Simons family joined the church, contributing considerably in the work and growth of the Branch.

When President Nephi Davis was released and returned home to Arizona, another missionary, Max Engeman, was called as Branch President. The remodeling continued with the building of a kitchen in the basement. This, along with tile on the floor and paint on the walls and ceiling, gave the branch a place for socials, and fund raising dinners that helped with the purchase of pews in preparation for the dedication. At this time there were about 85 members with 35-40% activity. The missionaries brought in some new members, and some of the members who had moved away were returning, as well as service members who had been away.

When President Engeman was transferred to Ohio, President Sheffield (another missionary) was called to serve the Branch, as president, and the Branch grew in spirituality and the members continued to grow closer. Before the building was dedicated, President Engeman, was transferred back and the West Michigan District had grown to include Lansing, Flint and Saginaw, along with the original Branches in Battle Creek, Grand Rapids, Kalamazoo and Muskegon. President Erwin Eyre was called to preside over the district with Sylvan Wittwer and Ruel Jensen as counselors.

The dedication of the building finally arrived, with President Haymond presiding and offering the dedicatory prayer. Others who spoke were President Eyre, Ruel Jensen, Sylvan Wittwer, Waldo Stoddard and President Engeman. It wasn't long before President Engeman's mission was concluded and he returned to Salt Lake City. John W. Hughes was then called as Branch

President with Walter Peterlein and Waldo Stoddard as counselors. Sister Eleanor Anderson was called as Relief Society President, but after a time she decided to move to Salt Lake City to accept a proposal to marry Max Engeman, and Betty Simons was called as Relief Society President.

As a small struggling branch, Sacrament Services were held immediately after Sunday School (whereas, traditionally, Sunday School was in the morning and Sacrament Service in the evening on Sunday). Relief Society was on Tuesday and priesthood meetings were whenever they could get a group of brethren together. Many times the only sisters to attend their meeting were Sister Simons and Sister Hughes, who, after an opening song and prayer, discussion of the lesson, and a closing song and prayer; would go to a movie together at a nearby theater.

The missionary effort was a struggle as there was a lot of opposition in the area, but missionaries diligently continued to work and eventually brought some stalwarts to the fold, such as Barbara Peterlein (Ybema), Barbara Armstrong, Harold Streeter, the Wickes' and the Wilders. They added strength making it possible to hold priesthood meetings in the morning before Sunday School and Sacrament Service in the evening. A Primary Presidency was called with Sister Nellie Wadsworth as President and Sisters Barbara Peterlein (Ybema) and Barbara Armstrong as counselors. Some of the teachers were Sisters Donna Shave, Violet Armstrong, Pearl Young and Jean Peterlein – and Primary Sacrament Services were as popular then as they are now.



There was much dedication on the part of many members who would often travel great distances to conferences and other meetings. When the Great Lakes Mission was created out of the Northern States Mission and President Haymond was released, President Burton was called with the new Mission headquartered in Fort Wayne, Indiana. There were occasional visits of General Authorities from Church Headquarters in Salt Lake City, Utah. Among them were Elders Alma Sonne, Bruce R. McConkie and S. Dilworth Young.

Further evidence of the growth of the church here was the division of the West Michigan District, separating out Lansing, Saginaw, Flint, Jackson and some other branches for a new district, leaving Grand Rapids, Battle Creek, Kalamazoo and Muskegon as the West Michigan District. This came about when President Burton was released and Lorin S. Richards was called as Mission President. It was about this time that Kenneth Simons was called as the new President

of the West Michigan District. John Hughes was released as Branch President and called to the District Council. In his stead, Cecil Wadsworth was called as Branch President.

Eventually, plans began to form for a new building and, with the help of Stanford "Bud" Stoddard who had just moved into the branch, a search for property upon which to build, was begun. Eventually, a five-acre plot on the northeast corner of East Beltline and Bradford Road was selected and acquired for approximately \$11,000. When President Richards' was released, Ruel Christiansen was called to serve as President of the Great Lakes Mission and was instrumental in getting approval for the purchase of the property from Church Headquarters.



In late 1958 Sterling W. Sill visited as a General Authority and foretold the continued success of the church in this area – and so it continued. With the property purchased, a groundbreaking ceremony was conducted in conjunction with a barbeque social. At this time the members in the area included: Simons, Emery, Ybema, Wadsworth, Farmer, Savage, Meyers, Armstrong, Atwood, Moravetz, Pfaff, Streeter, Stoddard, Tuttle, Schumaker, Wicks, Williams, Palm, Shave, Hammer, Peterlein and Wilder families along with Hazen Root, Aldon Marsh and Pat Leahe, among others. Soon Austin Child, a construction supervisor, was sent out from the Church Building Department to coordinate the efforts of member volunteer labor and contractors. In those days the members could donate certain kinds of labor in lieu of some financial contributions. In July of 1960, construction began on the new building, and the building on Carlton was sold for about \$20,000.

By this time, President Cecil Wadsworth was released and Kenneth Simons, being released from the District Presidency, was called as Branch President and, with his professional background in building construction, oversaw the building of the new chapel, at least the initial phase, as it was to be completed in three stages (classroom wing, chapel and then the cultural hall). President Simons served with John Hughes and Elmer Heid, as counselors with Dale Emery as clerk. Soon Brother Hughes was called again to serve in the District Council and Brother Heid moved with his family to the state of Washington – whereupon, Dale Emery and Richard Armstrong were called as counselors to President Simons. Under their leadership, the members - men, women and children - worked very hard, and unselfishly put in many hours of labor.



The first two phases of the building consisted of the chapel and two wings of classrooms - which included office space. Finishing the classroom wings was the first objective so that the branch could begin to hold meetings there. Completed in the fall of 1961, the classroom wings also began providing space where dinners and socials could be held to continue efforts in raising building funds for the completion of phase one and two, and prepare for phase three.

While the Missions of the church had provided much leadership and other support over the previous years in the area, the branch had gained sufficient strength to carry on with less support, and also saw a time when missionaries began to be sent out from here. Sister Ruthann Farmer served a mission in Michigan, David Wadsworth served in southern California, Richard Farmer served in northern California and Richard Pfaff served in Germany, all in the early 1960's.

About this time, President Christensen was released and Clifford Gledhill was called as Mission President. He helped prepare the saints for the creation of the Lansing Stake. In February of 1962, Howard W. Hunter and Alma Sonne organized the Lansing, Michigan Stake, with Sylvan Wittwer as President and Brothers Packham and Majeska as counselors. High Councilmen included Ruel Jensen, Kenneth Simons, George Johannesen, Perce Reeves, Edgar Hansen, Harold Streeter, John W. Hughes and Kelly Thurston. Among the speakers on the occasion, along with the General Authorities, the Stake Presidency and several Bishops and Branch Presidents, were several strong Auxiliary and Relief Society officers. Also speaking was George Romney. Another note of interest may be that Ken Simons left the conference early so as to return to Grand Rapids, for the baptism of his mother-in-law, Irene Dannenberg.

This organization also precipitated the formation of the Grand Rapids Ward from the Grand Rapids Branch with Kenneth Simons being called to the Lansing Stake High Council, necessitating his release as Branch President. Becoming a part of the new Lansing Stake, the ward was organized with Bill Tinney as the first Bishop. There were several other strong leaders called in the new ward, but it wasn't long before they were called to positions in the stake. Sister Barbara Ybema was called as ward Relief Society President and did an excellent job, but was soon called to the Stake Primary Presidency to serve with Nellie Wadsworth as president and Jean Emery as the other counselor – which Presidency served successfully for several years.

After the completion of the first phase of the building, it was decided to wait a year before beginning the next phase, so that additional funds could be generated. At that point Bishop Tinney accepted employment out of the area, and was released. John W. Hughes was then called as the second Bishop of the ward, being charged with the challenge of raising funds for the next phase of the new building, along with raising funds to contribute to the building of the

new stake center in Lansing. The financial condition of the ward was not good at this time, but they moved forward and by the dedication date of November 6th, 1964 the building was completed and paid for, and contributions were made to the construction of the new stake center. This largely came about as a result of many members contributing time and money. Some members contributed as many as 600 hours of labor on each phase of the building, as well as contributing much on the stake center.

The effort of the Relief Society Sisters cannot be over emphasized when it comes to the contribution made by the members. Serving in the capacity of Relief Society Presidency, Jean Emery, Barbara Ybema and Lucille Ranney, with Laura Hughes as secretary, not only strengthened the faith of the sisters, but also raised \$100 a month for many, many months toward the building fund – to say nothing of the physical work they performed on the building. Among the many members who contributed to the efforts of the ward were: the Simons, Wadsworth, Streeter, Tinney, Emery, Ybema, Armstrong, Farmer, Palm, Shave, Bohn, Polack, Dannenberg, Goorhouse, Atwood, Robinaugh, Pfaff, King, Babcock, Moravetz, Sherd, Puffpaff, Ranney, Schumaker, Tuttle, Wicks, Wilder and Young families along with Byrdie Sarkees, Emogene DeCamp, Genevieve Addis, Sharon Christensen and many others.

The dedication services were the crowning event to the long years of planning and working to have this lovely new facility for worship and service. A banquet arranged by Richard Armstrong preceded the services, a printed dedication program was prepared under the direction of Sister Byrdie Sarkees, and Bishop Robert L. Simpson of the Presiding Bishopric spoke and gave the dedicatory prayer. The ward choir, under the direction of Jean Emery and Lola Tuttle performed “This House We Dedicate to Thee”.



The next several years were filled with continued growth in the area, with socials and other activities focusing on the family and increasing faith in the Lord, and strengthening the youth of the church in firming testimonies. Of particular note in this latter, is the effort extended in “Road Shows”, which were the result of original music, script, costuming and sets created by the youth and their leaders in such a way as to make the performance portable, with the idea of “taking it on the road”. These were generally under the direction of Pauline Streeter in those days, as one with a particular enthusiasm for this type of theater. Also, now that there was sufficient growth in the number of youth and space in a new building, the first early morning seminary for high school students was begun in the fall of 1964.



Front row – L to R: Terry Fowler, Jackie Hanson, Toni Sherd, Pam Streeter, teacher- Richard Armstrong
Back row: Russell Emery, Ken Palm, Mark Streeter, Trent Wadsworth, general secretary - Larry Sheneman

Missionary work achieved only moderate success through the next few years as it was considered a difficult area to find reception. Eventually there were some missionaries, lead by Elder Leonard Anderson, who seemed to ignore that perception. Through their own diligent efforts they brought 96 members into the church during their mission. A report by the Mission President reflected that a year later all were still active in the church with 75 to 80 being very active and contributing real strength to the church.

In 1968 Bishop Hughes was released to serve on the Lansing Stake High Council, and Donald Robinaugh was called as Bishop. Bishop Robinaugh served for about a year, when the ward was divided and the Grand Rapids 2nd Ward was formed. George W. Felch was called as Bishop of the Grand Rapids Ward, with Donald Robinaugh serving as 1st Counselor. Fred Purdue was called to serve as Bishop of the Grand Rapids 2nd Ward. Bishop Felch served for about a year when he changed jobs and moved out of the area. David Wadsworth was then called as Bishop of the Grand Rapids Ward with Harold Streeter and Charles T. Sherd, as counselors. Bishop Purdue also served for a short time and moved from the area, being succeeded by Larry Sheneman as Bishop of the Grand Rapids 2nd Ward.

The church was growing to the point that there would likely be continued growth in the Grand Rapids area, with other wards coming as time went on. There was, though, a great need for growth yet to come. As the church was moving forward, there were still the pioneers of earlier days carrying the load of much of the leadership. In the Grand Rapids Ward the Relief Society President was the Bishop's mother, his father was a clerk, and his father-in-law was his 1st counselor, the Bishop and his wife were the Young Men's and Young Women's Presidents. Soon others were called to take opportunities to grow, such as, Bernice Atwood as Young Women's President, David Harmon as Young Men's President and Melvin Northup as Elders Group leader. There were also those being called to serve in the new stake. Of particular note was the call of Kenneth Simons as Stake Patriarch, where he served for 25 years, his wife being called to serve as his scribe.

During this period, wards needed to pay a portion of operating the building as well as other financial needs of the ward, so efforts continued in raising building funds. Each month an auxiliary organization (Relief Society, Sunday School, Primary, YM & YW, etc), was responsible to contribute through some kind of a fundraiser. One such event was a ward dinner that had a tropical theme, complete with a volcano mockup in one corner of the cultural hall reaching nearly 12 feet to the ceiling.

There also were efforts to reach out to the needy through welfare projects. In one instance, the non-member husband of a devoted sister (Ann Gerner), arranged a donation of hundreds of pairs of shoes from Wolverine World Wide, a shoe manufacturer in the area, where he was an officer. These shoes were distributed to the needy, both within the church and out in the community.

The nearest temple during this time was in Salt Lake City, so there was limited temple work or attendance, but there were those who were diligent in doing genealogy work and submitting family names to the temple.

Another reflection of the times was that General Conference attendance was enjoyed on a very limited basis. It was received over telephone lines from Salt Lake City, in audio only. At times, still images of those speaking were projected on the wall or a screen; otherwise attendees just sat and listened. Some families would share in a potluck in the building between sessions.

In 1973, ward boundaries were adjusted, affecting a change in the Grand Rapids Ward Bishopric. Bishop Wadsworth was succeeded by Robert Briem, who had moved from the west for employment in the area. Bishop Wadsworth was called to serve in the Grand Rapids 2nd Ward Bishopric for about six months before being called to the Lansing Stake High Council.

In 1975, the Grand Rapids Stake was formed, comprised of two Grand Rapids Wards, Kalamazoo, Benton Harbor, Muskegon and Greenville Wards, South Haven, Holland, Ludington and Hastings Branches. Thomas S. Monson presided over the proceedings when Glenn Goodwin was called as President, Darrell Thomas and David Wadsworth were called as 1st and 2nd Counselors, respectively.

It must be noted that much of this record is available through the reflections of some of these early pioneers in West Michigan, some of whose names are mentioned here. Of particular note is the record provided by the memories, experience and observations of Cecil and Nellie Wadsworth, Ken and Betty Simons, and most significantly from those of John W. Hughes who arrived in the area in June of 1942 and served in many ways, as noted above, until August 1974 when he retired to the West. (Compiled by David Wadsworth)