

Early Church History as recounted by Norma Noble (nee McCrea), born in 1911
(printed from www.geocities.com/essonvillechurch)

Essonville Church was built in 1888, around the same time the Orange Hall was erected just east of the church. We always understood that the trees which had been cut from the property the church was built on were hauled to the sawmill belonging to my grandfather (Richard Dunford) to be sawn into lumber which was used to build the church. The windows were made in England and were brought over by boat. Grandpa (John James Noble), born in 1865, helped in the building of the church.

I believe Mr. James Mackness and Vida Somerville were the first couple married in the church. Fred Dunford and Catherine (Katie) McCrea were also married there (I don't know the dates of either).

One of the earliest Anglican ministers to be stationed at the church began a night school in the Orange Hall during the 1890s. My father (Alexander McCrea) was born in 1867 and purchased property in Essonville in 1882. He was married in 1898, attended the school and learned to read and write there – I think that was the only schooling my father ever had. I never knew that Anglican minister's name.

The earliest Anglican minister's name which I can remember was a Mr. Stone. He lived in Wilberforce. I suppose I was probably 10 or 12 years of age when Dad (Alex McCrea) took us to a concert in the Orange Hall put on by the young people of Wilberforce under the direction of Mr. Stone. I think that particular concert stands out in my memory because of a song they sang which we enjoyed trying to sing afterward:

Mr. Stone from Wilberforce
Drives a crooked legg'd horse
Chew tobacco, chew tobacco
Spit, spit, spit

Audrey Mulloy from Wilberforce
Thinks she's pretty nice of course
Chew tobacco, chew tobacco
Spit, spit spit (and so it went...)

I don't know if the parsonage was originally built for that purpose, but many of the ministers lived there. Mr. Battersby (later Canon Battersby) was stationed there when Francis Noble was born in 1910. In fact, Francis was named after him. Grandma (Elizabeth) Noble told us that when Francis was a few days old, the doctor said he would have to be circumcised. Thinking they should first have him baptized in case the surgery had complications, Francis was taken to Mr. Battersby to be baptized. Francis was taken back to the church when he was a bit older to be baptized again by Mr. Battersby.

A number of ministers served the church in its early years. A Mr. Waithom, who lived in Bear Lake, was one of the early ministers. An Anglican minister by the name of Mr.

Groves, who lived with his wife in the parsonage to the west of the church, enlisted in World War I directly from his posting in Essonville. Mr. Alfred Dowdell married Katie Saunders during his time of service. A Mr. Urquhart was posted at the church when Grandma (Elizabeth) Noble died on June 24, 1950.

A number of servants were active in leading the services as well. In the late 20s and early 30s, a Miss Taylor worked as a deaconess. A lovely lady, she had her own car and lived in Wilberforce. In 1945, a Miss Millicent Houldcroft carried on the services. She was the school teacher in Gooderham and used to ride up to Essonville on her bicycle during the summer. I'm not sure how she came in the winter but she always came at Christmas time and delivered the clothes and toys (called "bales") sent annually from the Anglican Church in Toronto. These "bales" clothed many a child in Essonville. Millicent was an amazing person – strongly built with an amazing personality and a heart of gold.

In later years, we had a number of church army captains who were trained under an evangelical movement within the Anglican Church. Some (perhaps not all) of the names were: Captain Eric Stringer, Captain Brede, Captain and Mrs. Barclay, Captain McFarland (who assisted Mr. Gillings of the Associated Gospel Church in the funeral and burial service for my father in March, 1943), Captain Tomlinson, and Captain John and Ivy Eyre.

The Anglican Diocese deconsecrated the building in the mid-1960s. At that point, the building was given over to Monmouth Township which, according to the rumour mill, intended to demolish the building. Arthur Saunders and Francis Noble approached the municipal council and promised to give any assistance they could toward the upkeep of the building if the municipality agreed to leave the building standing as a historic site. The council agreed and waived all taxes on the property.

The first task was to paint the exterior. The municipality paid for the paint and Murray Ackley painted the building. A few years later, Francis went to Minden and approached Ontario Hydro about reconnecting hydro to the building. However, having been advised that new wiring and a new fuse box would have to be installed, council rejected the plan.

It was also in this era that the idea of holding a Memorial Service each summer was planned. Mrs. James McCrea (Mary) and Mrs. John Sibley (Amelia) organized the first service. The service carries on to this day.

Unfortunately, after Francis and Arthur made the promise to keep the building in good shape, Art took his first stroke and was never able to carry on. Francis continued to maintain the building, including construction of the vault under the east end of the building in the 1970s and shelving. Mr. Len Traviss assisted by doing masonry work in building the cairn which stands by the church to commemorate its history.

Note: These events are as I remember them. My apologies if there are any errors.

Norma Noble

