EAST WHITE OAK CHURCH BUILDINGS

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References and sources of quotations

1. "History of the Central Conference Mennonite Church"
   Author: William B. Weaver Published 1926
2. "East White Oak Church" -- Written reminiscences by
   Walter Ropp of Normal About 1928
3. Various newspaper articles through the years
4. Conversations with E.W.O. members

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Buildings -- Background

By 1890, the large membership of the North Danvers Church was scattered over a very large area. A number of the families lived about 10 miles east of Danvers in the White Oak district -- "long miles in summer -- impossible miles in winter". As numbers increased steadily, the need became evident for a house of worship located somewhere in their midst.

A small Sunday School was organized in the spring of 1891, meeting at the Maple Grove school house north and west of the present E.W.O. site. The families included the Troyers, Schads, Kings, Millers, Augstines, Mears and perhaps a few others. When winter came, the school house was closed for a few months and the meetings were missed by all. It was apparent that a fair-sized congregation would gather if a church house and ordained minister were located in the community. A committee of five were selected to see what could be done -- Manasses Troyer, Joseph King, Jacob Schad, Christian Miller and John Mears.

The rest of the story is a fascinating tale -- especially for those who are descendants or relatives of the early families. The story is continued in a section on the Origins of our church -- it just seems appropriate to include this brief background as a preface to the description of the building phases which have followed -- all on the same location at the southeast corner of White Oak Township (at the intersection with Hudson, Normal and Dry Grove Townships).

1892 - Original Building

John and Mary Ropp owned the south half of Section 36, and they donated the land needed for the church location. Discussion produced a plan to build "a prairie school-type box, with 5 windows on each side, two doors at the south end -- an entry room for each door with a baby room between -- and arranged inside to keep the men on one side and the women on the other".

Construction began in the fall with Jacob Ropp in charge and Jacob Schad as treasurer -- "gathering in subscriptions in chunks and fragments from good old-time friends from all over the area". The hauling and much of the carpenter work was donated by the interested men. For the plaster, about 10 teams were gathered to haul sand from a sand bank at Sugar Creek, west of Bloomington. The construction went on into the winter and produced a rectangular building, about 40' x 60', with a slate roof and heated by wood-burning stoves. The new church house was dedicated in February 1893, with Bishop Stuckey of the North Danvers Church leading the service.

1908 - Northwest Wing

Such a large number of children came along through the years that they didn't know where to put them during Sunday School time (94 children on the platform for one

special program). The solution was to build a 26' X 26' addition to the west at the northwest corner of the church for the primary department of the Sunday School. Folding wooden doors allowed use of the addition for expanded sanctuary seating, also. Mr. G. B. Ropp supervised the building of this annex.

1915 - Horse Sheds

It was decided to build a row of horse sheds at the west of the church yard, running straight north from a point even with the north wall of the church house. The combined sheds were 190 feet long, each stall 10 feet wide and long enough to cover horse and buggy. (Those having autos were to occupy the stalls at the far north end of the line, to avoid frightening the horses.) Average cost of each stall was $19.95 and the 18 members buying stalls voted to pay also for Rev. Troyer's stall. The large church yard also had three rows of maple trees under which were the hitching racks, with room for 60 to 70 teams.

1916 - Parsonage

The present parsonage was built by Rev. Emanuel Troyer as his private home (he farmed 160 acres around the church). The church bought the parsonage from a subsequent owner in the mid-1970's.

1917 - Basement and Major Remodeling

Overcrowding, difficulty in heat distribution and "20 years of bright financial sunshine" for farm folks led to thinking about significant improvements for the church house. A committee of five was appointed in the winter of 1917 to get specifications and plans. "When spring came, the building was lifted, a story put under, kitchen, steam heat, art windows, sloping floors, electricity and a nest for the choir." Wood pews were placed in the sanctuary with an aisle down the middle. Another writer described it as "modern throughout, being equipped with Edison lighting plant, water system and vacuum cleaning system". Modern restrooms were off the basement entryway. Most of the stained and leaded glass ("art") windows were donated by Sunday School classes or other groups (a small panel in each window showed the name of the donor or group). "We have a showier, roomier, handier, more modern building -- of course, there's nothing Amish about it at all -- not a speck!" This time, there was need for an outside contractor, Mr. E. J. Metcalf of Normal. In December 1918, " we rededicated and restarted in the new modern house".

1951 - Southwest Corner

The need, again, for additional Sunday School and sanctuary space led to the addition of a room filling in the southwest corner of the building -- squaring off the west side. This addition was built largely by the efforts of church members. Sliding partitions allowed use of the main floor level as a Sunday School room, then opening

up to become part of the sanctuary. The basement portion provided children's Sunday School rooms.

1961 - North Education Building

A three level education wing was built to the north of the sanctuary. The upper level was devoted to 4 classrooms for teens and a larger assembly/classroom. On the main level were 4 adult classrooms, two small restrooms and a small pastor's study. (One of the adult classrooms later was converted to a library.) Lower level space provided 7 children's classrooms and a heating/utility room. The children's classrooms were separated by concrete block walls and curtained doorways. At the same time, the front (north end) of the sanctuary was remodeled, providing a choir loft, baptismal tank and expanded platform. This building project was supported by a material gift from Mr. John R. O'Neal, a friend of the church and radio ministry.

1977 - Fellowship Hall addition

Space for fellowship activities, an expanding Awana children's ministry and a variety of other needs led to a major addition (60' x 140', 2 stories -- about 12,000 square feet). This addition to the west includes the Fellowship Hall/gym, a new and larger kitchen, studies for the pastor and associate pastor, larger modern restrooms, several nursery and toddlers rooms/classrooms, storage/utility rooms, a covered northwest entrance and a ramp/stairway/entranceway between the new and earlier buildings. The Fellowship Hall is carpeted, with an Awana circle pieced into the carpet and has basketball backboards with sideline markings. This room also is used for receptions, fellowship dinners and other social gatherings. During the summers, our worship services were held in the Fellowship Hall because it is air conditioned. This major addition also was built primarily by church members, under the leadership of Jim Young of Kappa. The steel beams and some other materials were donated. Construction was financed about 50/50 between gifts to the building fund and an internal loan fund for the balance.

1994 - Fire Destroys Sanctuary and Education Building

The next "building" event at E.W.O. began with a before dawn lightning strike on July 19th! The resulting fire was first seen breaking through the roof at about the north wall of the original sanctuary. In spite of the quick response and gallant efforts of many township fire departments (including many men with E.W.O. ties), all of the pre-1977 structures were reduced to smokling rubble. Along with hose streams from outside, firemen with hoses standing inside (at the top of the ramp between the buildings) kept blasting the fire back so that the entire 1977 structure was preserved. What a blessing -- we still had a place to continue our worship together during the two years of clean-up, planning and rebuilding!

As we worked with the insurance adjusters in establishing the nature of the destroyed structures, and room-by-room contents, a second major blessing became evident. Our

insurance was written on a "replacement cost" basis, because of many unique features of the buildings -- leaded, stained glass windows, slanted hardwood floors, antique pews and so on. The calculated cost to replace the structures and contents as they were (as nearly as possible) resulted in an insurance settlement that was very favorable. The settlement provided 80% of the cost to build our new, very attractive, functional and much larger worship center, completed in 1996. Yes, we lost much of real sentimental value in our old sanctuary -- but our Lord has made it possible to have a new facility much better suited to the ministry He has for us today, and for the future.

1999 - New Addition

Following the move into the new building in 1996 the East White Oak congregation experienced a growth spurt. Two Sunday morning services became the norm and the need was apparent for additional education and special activity areas. A building committee was formed and charged with addressing the current needs. Late in 1999 the congregation moved into the new addition. The 1977 building was remodeled for primarily education rooms. The balance of the new construction centered around a new full-size gymnasium, a specious kitchen/banquet room and additional class rooms for people of all ages. A 60 x 60 garage/storage building was also added at that time. Sunday attendance had moved to over 1000 in the early 2000's. The 1999 addition more than doubled the existing square footage of the building.

At the date of this writing in 2017, the "new" construction was now over 20 years old. Remodeling and updating projects are being addressed along with exterior updates and parking lot paving and lighting. The parsonage which was acquired in the 1970's has been demolished.

As the church celebrates its 125th anniversary, we must thank our Lord for His provisions for this property, which has housed the ministry for these years. For the many who have passed through these structures over the years, we must thank our Father for the changed lives of those who have attended a service or event on the corner in White Oak Township.