



Established in 1854

## **A History of the Arcola Presbyterian Church**

At the spring meeting of the Palestine Presbytery held in Charleston, Illinois in April of 1854, a committee from Palestine Presbytery met with eight residents of the Fillmore area, Coles County, to organize the Okaw Presbyterian Church. It was to be under the care of Palestine Presbytery in connection with the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church commonly called "Old School" of a strict Calvinistic interpretation. The members included Mr. and Mrs. Richard W, Hawkins, Mrs. Mary Logan, Mrs. Amanda Moore, W. H. Randolph, Mrs. Dorcas Rice, Mrs. Mary Kingery, and Robert McCraig, On the following sabbath, the first worship service was held with the Rev. R. A. Mitchell delivering the sermon. Following the service, W. H. Randolph and Richard Hawkins were elected and installed as elders while Robert McCraig was the new church's first deacon. The Rev. H. T. Venables was the first regular pastor, and he served the church for four years.

Services were held in the various schoolhouses and in homes in Fillmore, located about three-fourths of a mile south of Chesterville; in Flat Branch, which became Humboldt when the community moved to the railroad; and in Bourbon until 1858. At that time the church was permanently located in Arcola, a new village built on the new Illinois Central Railroad. The following year, 1859, Coles County was divided, and the northern part became Douglas County.

The oldest organization in the new town of Arcola was the Presbyterian Church. By 1860 plans were made for a church building. According to the June 17, 1910, issue of the Arcola Record Herald, "on August 15, 1960, Dr. F. B. Henry made a deed to the trustees of the Presbyterian Church to lots 15 and 16 of block 4 of Henry's addition and shortly afterwards a church building was erected on this site. During the building a severe storm blew down the unfinished building, but it was re-erected and finished expeditiously...!" The sills and heavy timbers of the frame building were hewn and hauled by Mr. Calvin Jones and his sons. The rest of the lumber was supplied by the Blackwell Lumber Yard.

In December 1883 the session of the Arcola Church with the pastor, the rev. R. M. Roberts, acting as moderator, met to effect the organization of Bethel Church which was to be located two and one-half miles west of town on the Springfield Road. William T. Moore and his wife Margaret Louthan Moore gave the space for the new church which was to be located on a knoll just West of the old "Hermitage Inn".

Fifteen persons by letter and one by confession of faith made up the charter membership list. Four of them were daughters and four others were daughters-in-law of one of the original founders of Fillmore. Mr. Claus Stolley and J. F. Bouch were elected as the first elders. The pastor was to serve both churches. The new members began to solicit subscriptions for the

church building on 25<sup>th</sup> day of September 1883 just ninety days from the time of the first solicitation of subscriptions, the building was completed, the dedication services were held on October 7 1883, clear of encumbrance. The services were conducted by the rev. R. W. Roberts assisted by the Rev. Mitchell. The Rev. Roberts selected the name of the church, which was to called Bethel Chapel. The cost was \$2,000.00. On March 30, 1984, the first Sabbath School was begun. In 1895, with the help of Rev. J. R. Skinner, the two churches subscribed \$1,200.00 for the building of the manse which was constructed to face West on Pine Street. The manse was moved to its new location facing Jefferson Street when the present church was built.

The Rev. E. C. Lucas came to the pastorate in 1906, two years later plans were started for the amalgamation of the Arcola and Bethel Churches. By the spring of 1909 sufficient plans and money was available to engage Badgley & Nicklas, church architects from Cleveland, Ohio to draw up blueprints for the present edifice. The last of August 1909, the cornerstone was laid. The Rev. Henry A. Thompson from Tuscola gave the address.

A news article for the Arcola Record Herald of June 17,1910 makes the announcement of the dedication of the new church, recording the facts as follows: "The new church, while not the largest church in the city, is hardly surpassed in architectural beauty, style, convenience, and excellence by any church in this section of the state. The building is 68 x 78 feet inside measurement exclusive of the tower and is English Gothic in style. It is of rock-faced Bedford, slate roof (replaced in later years with shingles). And all metal work of cooper. The contract for the building was let to George A. Davis of Danville on May 17, 1909. The cornerstone was laid August 29, 1909. The heating and plumbing were done by Harvatt & Beazley of Arcola and the frescoing was done by William Peters of Chicago. The auditorium proper has a seating capacity

of 250, but the very wide aisles make it possible to put in fifty more seats without crowding. The auditorium is a beautiful room. The woodwork is of oak and southern pine, dark stain, with high backed benches to match. The ceiling is open with exposed beams. The frescoing is neat and the large art windows add to the beauty of the whole building. In the south is a large window showing the woman at the tomb after the resurrection of Christ and in the west is shown Christ talking with the two disciples on the road to Emmaus.

The window above the organ (now above the dorsal cloth to the North) shows Christ in prayer in the Garden of Gethsemane. In the month of May and June of 1910 the Arcola Church and the Bethel Church met to discuss consolidation and finally sent petitions to the Mattoon Presbytery on May 10, 1910. The permission was granted.

In the same dedication news piece, "The Arcola Record Herald" continues: The membership of the Presbyterian Church is about the smallest of any church in Arcola but these few are always very liberal and loyal in their support of the church. The Bethel Church, however, has voted to consolidate with the local church and their consolidation will take place Sunday. Bethel has a membership of 45, and so the total membership will thus be increased to 139. Of the amount raised for the new church, Bethel people contributed about \$5,000. The people of other churches in the city and those who are not identified with any church also were liberal in assisting in the work.

The Northern part of the church property is a lot which was owned by Samuel B. Blackwell. He donated this and the northwest portion of the present church is located on part of this land. On the Sunday of June 19, 1910. The present church was dedicated free of debt. The total cost was \$21,075.68. The amount of \$20,600.27 was received in pledges, and the societies of the church

gave \$475.41. The old Manse (cleric's house) was replaced in 1962 with a new, six room (three bedrooms) on the corner of Jefferson and Church streets (facing Church St.). In 1975 the church parlors were redone and newly furnished with carpeting and furniture. A special committee and the World Service Guild were in charge. In the fall of 1988, construction began on remodeling the church manse. The existing garage was converted into another bedroom/study with an added bathroom. A 1 & ½ car garage was added to the structure on the north end. These improvements were in the early spring of 1989.

On June 1, 1999, ground was broken west of the church sanctuary for an addition that would include a wheelchair lift and two handicapped accessible restrooms. One each level of the church. The addition was totally completed in February of 2000 with a service of dedication being held on June 11, 2000. The cost of the project was \$161,000.00, almost eight times what it cost to build the entire edifice in 1910, and most of the cost was absorbed by a most **generous anonymous donor**. The addition has enabled many parishioners to continue attending worship and other functions that go on at the church from time to time. Church planning Associated from Pesotum Illinois was the General Contractor. Homer Ramsey's artistry as stonemason is responsible for the wonderful matching of the old and new Bedford Stone on the exterior. Elder Allan Gray from the Session supervised the project. Other building improvement efforts have included refurbishing the nursery, remodeling the church kitchen, and adding a storage closet to the downstairs.

Much of the actual church work has been carried on by the women's societies. One of the early ones was the Ladies' Auxiliary along with the Bethel Foreign Missionary Society. In later years these were followed by the Westminster Society and the Missionary Society which eventually

combined. The other active group was the World Service Guild. The women's service organization for the church is currently named Arcola Presbyterian Women.

As of 1954, the Arcola Presbyterian Church had been served by twenty-eight (28) pastors. The Bethel Church joined with her parent church after admitting a total of 109 members, and as of transfer or confession of faith 524 members. 1954 was the year of the church's Centennial. Since 1954 nine (9) other pastors have been installed to serve the Arcola church, and the present pastor, the Reverend Paula Carmichael.

## **Information Sources**

- *The Arcola Record Herald*, June 17, 1910.
- The Arcola Presbyterian Church, Centennial Celebration, 1954.
- *Old Time Religion*, 1973.
- Arcola Centennial and Homecoming Article from July 1955.
- Session Minutes of Arcola Presbyterian Church (USA).