

First Baptist Church of LeRoy

Two Hundred Years

by *Lynne Belluscio*

LeRoy's Baptist Church was officially organized on June 25, 1818. (Actually, to be correct, the church that is now known as the First Baptist Church of LeRoy was the Second Baptist Church in 1818. The First Baptist Church was formed at Bailey's Mills in 1816 and a few years later it became the First Baptist Church of Pavilion.)

In 1968, the Church celebrated its sesquicentennial and an excellent history was written by Joyce Jordan. She included one of the earliest church covenants: "to refrain from anger, lascivious talking, foolish jesting, evil speaking or tavern haunting, to attend church and its appointments, to keep the Lord's Day, to indulge in private prayer and to keep a faithful watch over each other." When the members met once a month, the clerk recorded transgressors. Aurelius Sparks confessed to using the Lords name in vain and playing cards. The Sherman family was cited for not living peaceably together. The clerk reported that Ebenezer Curtice used "spirituous liquors to excess time after time." One member was reported for acting as a doorkeeper at a circus. Oliver Langworthy had anger management problems and was admonished for "getting mad and spitting in Mr. Bachelder's face and using unbecoming and abusive language to Mr. Bachelder and his wife."

The early church congregation first met in the Langworthy school northwest of the village. In 1823, the Baptists built their church on land donated by Deacon Chamberlain, near what is now 123 East Main Street. The sawn lumber was drawn all the way from Dansville by Austin Phelps. He would start out at 2 or 3 in the morning with a lantern in order to complete a round trip in one day. The early church did not have a stove and so services were only held

during mild weather. But finally in 1829, they installed a stove..

In 1835, the church building was moved to Church Street to be closer to the center of the village. It was said "If you would catch rabbits you must place your traps where the rabbits run." "It must have been quite a sight to see 25 yoke of oxen hitched to the church, inching it up the street. The church, with a 75- foot tower, faced west. Worshippers entered a vestibule behind the pulpit. Latecomers had to walk past the minister, and face the congregation as they came in. "It was a little box of a church with a gallery around three sides. The choir sat in the back. The pulpit looked like a half-bushel sawn in two and reached by a narrow winding stairs. "

In 1838, a hole was cut in the ice of the creek and fourteen people braved the cold water and were baptized as a crowd of 500 looked on. These Baptists were brave souls. Three of the men, Rowland Perry, Rufus Glass and Elijah Cheney had been part of the LeRoy militia that had marched to Niagara in the winter of 1813, to protect Buffalo from the British. From the Baptist congregation, there were some brave women who became missionaries to foreign lands. Joanna Brown, an Ingham University student, married Rev. Van Husen. After a five month voyage, they served as missionaries in India. They returned six years later. Her husband was an invalid and she cared for him and their three young children. Another Ingham student, Melissa Nottingham, followed them to India, as a missionary. Much later, Howard Covell, son of Rev. Milton Covell, and his wife, Charma Moore, were serving as missionaries in Japan, but then moved to the Philippines. They were to return home to the United States in 1942, but all communication was lost after the



Japanese invaded. In 1945, it was learned that they had been captured and beheaded by their captors. Fortunately, their three children were safe in the United States. The church raised funds to erect a mission residence in memory of the Covells in Central Phillipines College.

The Baptist Church through the years has undergone many physical changes. In 1902, the building was moved once again. This time to East Main Street, where the church stands now. This past Sunday, folks gathered at the church for a rededication and a celebration - - not of the building, but of

the congregation that has kept a faithful watch over each other.

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