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Marian C. Rynearson Memoir

R991. Rynearson, Marian C. (1899-1994)

Interview and memoir

1 tape, 40 mins., 11 pp.

FIRST CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH

Rynearson, member since 1932, discusses Springfield's First Congregational Church: women's activities, the 1956 church fire and rebuilding.

Interview by Henry Russel, 1980

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Preface

This manuscript is the product of a tape recorded interview conducted by Henry Russel for the Oral History Office on October 26, 1980. Linda Jett transcribed the tapes and Tim Jones edited the transcript. Mrs. Rynearson reviewed the transcript.

Marian Rynearson was born in Watertown, Wisconsin in 1899. She is a mother, grandmother, and has been a member of First Congregational Church since 1932. She served the church as a Sunday School teacher and leader of Naomi Guild. Her special interest presently is the Prayer Group. She is known for her friendliness and since a recent broken hip has used the telephone in ministering to others. At the time this interview was conducted, Mrs. Rynearson was active in Naomi Guild and Dorcas Guild.

Henry Russel is an employee of Illinois Bell Telephone. He is a part-time student at Sangamon State University majoring in History. He has been interested in his own church's history for many years. He undertook this project because he felt that capturing his church's history by doing numerous interviews of people whose membership spans a period before the fire of 1956 until the present time would give the listener and reader a more comprehensive view of the totality of church membership.

Readers of the oral history memoir should bear in mind that it is a transcript of the spoken word, and that the interviewer, narrator and editor sought to preserve the informal, conversational style that is inherent in such historical sources. Sangamon State University is not responsible for the factual accuracy of the memoir, nor for views expressed therein; these are for the reader to judge.

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Marian Rynearson, Springfield, Illinois, October 26, 1980.

Henry Russell, Interviewer.

Q: Mrs. Rynearson, approximately how many years have you been a member at First Congregational Church?

A: Approximately I would say since 1932, which would be 48 years.

Q: Why did you join First Congregational Church?

A: Probably the main reason was that I was reared in the Congregational Church from the time I was a small child. I was confirmed in the Congregational Church in Watertown, Wisconsin and always attended Sunday School. And when we moved from Watertown to Sparta, Wisconsin again we went into the Congregational Church. When I married I still was in the church. And when we came to Springfield we felt our church home was at the Congregational Church and we've been there all these years.

Q: Who was the minister at this time?

A: Reverend Hudson Pittman.

Q: Are you able to recall any special qualities he may have possessed that appealed to you?

A: Yes. His concern in our coming to the community and that we were interested in his church so he was eager to have us become members.

Q: I know you have been one of the more active members of the congregation and have served in many capacities. What were and are some of these jobs?

A: I must say I didn't accept some of the organizations as their leader much to the disgust of some of my friends. But I felt I was more of a follower than I was a leader. But whatever organization I belonged to I tried to be as active as possible and loyal to that organization.

Q: How are women's activities in the church organized?

A: That's hard to answer. I really don't know. Women know that they have to be organized in order to accomplish things in the church and so we have had to reorganize various women's organizations. One of the first was the women's fellowship and out of the women's fellowship has grown a number of guilds as we call them. And they are still going today.

Q: How often do these guilds meet?

A: They meet once a month. And at present the one guild to which I belong is a very active one. And we are very proud of the turnout that we have every month.

Q: And what is the name of that guild?

A: That guild is the Naomi Guild. It meets the third Monday of every month.

Q: Are officers hard to find?

A: Yes, I think probably now--now in our Naomi Guild it is not quite as hard because we are a group of older women who are no longer employed. But in younger groups there are so many women nowadays who are employed that it is hard for people to be able to accept that responsibility.

Q: Have you ever been an officer?

A: Yes, I have. In the Naomi Guild I've been their leader for a couple of years. And I enjoyed it.

Q: Does women's fellowship have a budget in addition to the regular church budget?

A: Yes. Because there are many obligations that the women of the church have to come up with. So we have our own budget. And we have dues that we are expected to pay once a year. This year we have been asked to increase what we usually give because everything has grown so expensive.

Q: How is the budget of women's fellowship met?

A: You mean by that how do we meet it?

Q: Yes.

A: Well, by trying to first of all encourage women to give their all as far as money is concerned. And then we do have money making projects. The biggest one, which is our salad luncheon, is given in April of every year.

Q: Does women's fellowship have rummage sales to make money to underwrite their budget?

A: We used to. Years ago in the old church rummage sales were a big part of our activities. And the women really came forth and gave whatever they felt they could give. And we really had crowds. In fact, when our rummage sales were advertised, people came knocking at the door before time for the rummage. Often we had them in the evening. But more often we had them in the afternoon. Usually in the evening, if the rummage was to be in the afternoon, we women would go and make preparations in sorting out all the rummage in various departments. That is where our people came and we used to have fun buying some of the things that were brought

in because we felt we could use them. Norabel and Nancy were two of our helpers. They used to love to come. If they were in the millinery they had fun trying on the hats. If they were in the lingerie they had fun displaying that. Now in the new church we have never had rummage sales.

Q: Dorcas Guild is a mission minded group.

A: Yes.

Q: Are you a member?

A: Yes.

Q: What are some of this group's projects?

A: At present with winter coming on, hot blankets are being made for a day care center. In fact 120 are needed and the women are working hard to get that many blankets done in time for this cold weather. Other projects are collecting food and clothing for the Kumler M. E. Church where Kathy Howell of Kumler distributes these things that are taken to the church. That is a very worthwhile project.

Q: How often does Dorcas Guild meet?

A: Always the second and fourth Fridays of every month. It not only is a work day but it is a fun day, with fellowship and always a pot luck luncheon with more food than any of us can eat.

Q: Recently a new home mission group was formed, the Handy Andys. What is it they do?

A: Well, I can say from experience they have helped me immensely. They are a group of retired men who are capable of doing many kinds of things and are very willing. They do not want money, but for us to feel that we want to do something. What we want to give we give to women's fellowship. And that usually is given to Dorcas.

Q: Have you ever been a Sunday School teacher?

A: Yes, but so many, many years ago, so many that I recall very little. It was of the little ones, first and second grade.

Q: What was Sunday School like in those days?

A: It's hard for me to compare because I know nothing of the Sunday School today, not having been active in it. As I recall at that time we were active, we had a group of loyal teachers, and good attendance in the Sunday School.

Q: When you think of Christmas in the church are there any traditions that are maintained by our congregation?

A: The one and only big thing that I recall is that my husband, Earl Rynearson, was a Santa Claus for many years. He made a wonderful Santa

Claus. In fact when our daughter, Nancy, was too young to not to believe in Santa Claus, she had no idea that her daddy was a Santa Claus. At that time when we first started it, a Santa Claus suit was rented. It was okay but not too great. So some of the women of the church decided that Santa Claus was important and he should have a very fine suit. So Martha Helen Nelch and a couple of other women made him a red velvet suit. That stayed in the congregation for many years.

Q: Mr. Rynearson will be remembered for his Santa Claus character but this man served in so many other capacities too within the life of the congregation. In 1957-1958 he was moderator, the highest lay position in the church. Do you remember this particular time?

A: Yes, I do because it was a difficult time in our church. It was after our church had burned and there were many decisions that had to be made. Which way are we going to turn? What are we going to do? And of course the moderator was included in all the various meetings to first of all decide on the location. There were some people who were opposed to coming out here to Bates and Cherry Road thinking it was too far. There were some who still leaned on the downtown location. Now I think everyone realizes what a mistake it would have been to relocate downtown.

Q: I understand your daughter, Nancy, was married in the old church and it was a very traditional wedding. Could you share some of your memories of that day?

A: Yes. Because the church of that day and the church of today were quite different. Dr. Meyers had the service. It was a beautiful day. A very, very hot day and of course in those days there was no air conditioning. The people suffered along with Nancy and Bob and all the rest of us. The reception was held in the church basement. The Priscilla Guild gave the reception with Inez Groan as chairman. Those ladies did a beautiful job. Nancy and Bob were almost the last couple to be married in the church, before it burned, on June 23, 1956. Patty Clark was married in August of that year. That ended the weddings in our church. On November 11, 1956 our church burned.

Q: Forefather's Day dinners have been observed in our church for many, many years. Have they always been known by this name?

A: No. I still have a hard time calling it the Forefather's Day dinner. It was always the New England dinner. The name still clings in my mind. In those days it was really quite a formal affair. Each table had a host and hostess. Each hostess brought her own linen tablecloth, her own pieces of silver for the serving and when the people, the girls were asked to serve, they felt it an honor. They dressed in their best so it really was quite a festive occasion. (pause) I would also like to add that when I first came to this church, I of course offered my services. I was very new, and young and my offer to help was accepted. So I went on the day of the New England dinner and I was asked to open a two quart jar of maraschino cherries. Unfortunately, the jar slipped out of my hand. The two quart jar of maraschino cherries fell to the floor and I was chagrined. A very fine lady from our church who had worked for days getting ready for this dinner, Mrs. Lily Cresse, who we all adored, got

upset. Of course I was new. She really didn't know me. She had worked so long, so many days and she was completely exhausted. I forgave her for getting upset at me. After she regained her composure, she apologized to me. From then on, Lily Cresse and I were the best of friends. In those days the New England dinner always started with a fruit cocktail and it was topped with the maraschino cherry. Well on that particular dinner we had no maraschino cherries.

Q: Have you ever been a member of a couple's group at church?

A: Oh my, yes. A very active group. We were called married people's club. In fact, I think when we first organized, we called ourselves the young married people's club. As we grew older we thought we'd better take the young off. So then it was just the married people's club. I have many, many fond memories of that group. We had lots of fun. Some of Rynie's and my very best friends through all these years began through the married people's club. We had pot luck dinners. It was purely a fun group.

Q: If I mentioned the date Monday, November 11, 1956 what comes to your mind?

A: How could I forget it. My husband and I--first of all it was Armistice Day and the state workers and other people employed had the day off. So my husband and I decided we would drive to St. Louis for a day of shopping. We asked Inez Groan and Bud Groan to go with us. They did and we had a very nice day. When we returned we were going to take Bud and Inez home and their daughter, Lewann, came running out to greet us. She said, "You will never believe what happened today. Our church burned." Well, of course immediately we drove down to see the sad spectacle.

Q: Do you recall what your feelings were?

A: Oh yes, definitely. We thought, "Now what? What is going to happen? What will we do?" Nothing as tragic as that had ever happened to the church. And naturally we felt that. There are still a number of us left in the church who are BF, before the fire. We recollect all these things. But we came up and our slogan was "Up From Ashes".

Q: Was the cause of the first ever discovered?

A: As far as I know, I really don't know. But I think arson has been suspected all along.

Q: Was anything salvaged?

A: One thing I think that I see almost every Sunday, one of the old pews downstairs from the church, also pieces of the stained glass windows were salvaged. About two years ago some of that material was used to make crosses to put in your window called a sun catcher. That is a reminder of the church.

Q: Were many offers extended to our church for use of facilities while we were without a building?

A: Yes. Many, many were. And we finally accepted Temple B'Rith Sholom. That is where we met every Sunday for a long time. When the time came our church membership wanted to repay the Jewish people in a monetary way. They would not accept anything. This was great. Of course we have had through the years a feeling of fellowship between the Temple and our church. In fact, every February we have an exchange of pulpits. We felt so welcome every Sunday to participate and have a place that we could call our church home.

Q: Why was the Temple chosen?

A: I don't know whether they seemed more eager--I really don't know. But we were always very grateful and always very glad that we had accepted their offer. It might have been, for one thing their Temple is used usually just on Friday night. So on Sundays the Temple was free. In some of the other Protestant churches they would have had services at the same time as we would. I think maybe that was the real logical answer to it.

Q: Would you say our membership grew, stayed the same, or declined during the period we didn't have our own building?

A: I don't think it declined. As far as I know, I'm sure it stayed the same.

Q: How was the decision reached to build a new church at Bates and Cherry?

A: After much deliberation and all, the people were convinced that we should build ours here. They came around and decided that it was much better at this location. It doesn't seem to me that there was any problem after that.

Q: How did the congregation go about funding the new structure?

A: We hired a fundraiser, a gentleman who came and was within our midst. He met with us and explained to us what would be expected of us. It was kind of tough sledding to come up with. I remember people responded very well. One thing I don't remember was the certain way one had to contribute to earn a red necktie for the gentlemen and a red scarf for the ladies. I know that Rynie had the red tie and I had the red scarf. But how we earned that I don't remember.

Q: Was there a central theme or slogan used during the fund drive?

A: Yes. Up From Ashes.

Q: Did you participate in groundbreaking ceremonies on October 27, 1957 at Bates and Cherry?

A: I did not participate but I was in attendance and of course my husband was there. But it was really quite an occasion. We were all thrilled to think that this was taking place, and that we would have a new church on that lot.

Q: What was the weather like on that day?

A: As I remember it was a typical fall day.

Q: What did the area look like where the new church was to be built?

A: Well, that whole area was just a big cornfield, and one had to use his imagination to see what was going to go up on that corner. But when I think now that since our church has been built and all the beautiful homes that have been built around it, it is just amazing that in these few years that all this has developed.

Q: Did many members attend?

A: At the groundbreaking?

Q: Yes.

A: I really don't remember. I do know that we had a nice crowd, but whether it was very many I don't know.

Q: Did you get to use the shovel?

A: No. I didn't. I know my husband did.

Q: Do you have any idea where it is now?

A: I wish I did. I think it would be great for our church to have that. In years to come it will mean a lot and I wish it could be located.

Q: Within the total membership now would you say BF members are still fairly represented?

A: Yes. Yes, I would. And I think those of us who are a BF member are proud to still be a member and still be quite active. Many have passed away but I think we still have a very fine representation.

Q: On April 12, 1961 our congregation voted to affiliate with the United Church of Christ. Was it hard to sell this idea to the congregation?

A: Yes, I think to a degree it was. There was some people who had to be won over. When we came around I think there was a fairly good feeling among the members.

Q: Has the Sunday morning worship service remained fairly the same throughout your membership?

A: You mean in the way the service is conducted?

Q: Yes.

A: Yes, I would say so. I will say we have a wonderful choir. I will say the choir in the last twenty years has improved. But as far as the service is concerned, I think things are just about as they were.

Q: Do you feel that the role of women in the church has changed since the early days of your membership until now?

A: Definitely. Mainly because of women in business. Years ago one didn't hear of women working. It was very rare. Now there are so many that I think that is the greatest thing for our church to have to overcome. It makes it harder. Those of us who are not employed are all so much older and not able to cope with the things that should be done by the younger women. The younger women are not available because they are working.

Q: How do you perceive the future of our church?

A: You mean as far as growth is concerned?

Q: Overall, what do you perceive as the future of our church?

A: I hope that it will continue to grow, that we will have a feeling of unity among the members. I feel that it is very important to have us work together. I think that is of the utmost importance.

Q: What areas do you feel need strengthening?

A: That's hard for me to answer. I'm sure there are a number of areas. Of course, one thing might be in the Sunday School. It seems like it is very difficult for women or men to accept a Sunday morning teaching job knowing that this means preparation in order to face a class of young people. It is most important because that is where the strength of the church is going to be as these children grow up.

Q: Was the move of our church from downtown to Bates and Cherry the right step?

A: Definitely. As we look at our downtown area now we can see what a mistake it would have been if we would have tried to build in the downtown area. Out here at Bates and Cherry it is such a fine location that people, I think on the whole, are very pleased that that decision was made.

Q: I want to thank you Mrs. Rynearson for letting me do this interview.

A: I was happy to do it. If I can help, if I have been of help I'm glad I could.

End of Side One, Tape One