

HISTORY ▶ LOOKING BACK AT PEOPLE AND EVENTS IN THE YAKIMA VALLEY

150 years of Methodism in Yakima Valley

Wesley United Methodist Church’s congregation is celebrating the faith’s sesquicentennial Sunday. Like the community surrounding it, the church has grown with the Valley, from its humble beginnings with a circuit preacher to a congregation that follows a mission to “serve Christ, community and creation.”



It Happened Here

Donald W. Meyers

A formal Methodist presence in the Yakima Valley started in 1860, when James Wilbur was appointed as the supervisor of the Indian Boarding School at Fort Simcoe. A Methodist missionary who previously served in Oregon, Wilbur would become the second Indian agent for the Yakama.

The school’s official mission was to teach Yakama children productive skills, such as farming and making clothes, to help them better fit into white society. In reality, the school’s purpose was to eradicate Yakama culture by shearing boys’ long hair, stripping them of tribal names and forcing them to be baptized.

Wilbur, known to many as “Father Wilbur,” pleaded with church leaders in Oregon to send a circuit rider for the Upper Valley. In 1872, the Rev. George W. Kennedy was dispatched to the area.

Kennedy took up residence at Yakima City — today’s Union Gap — and for several years tended to congregations at Ahtanum, Tampico, Cowiche, Wenas, Parker Bottoms and Moxee.

It is said that Wilbur even took a turn riding the circuit among the congregations.

By 1881, church leaders purchased a lot in Yakima City for a parsonage that would serve as a home base for several circuit preachers.

When the Northern Pacific Railway extended its line into the Yakima Valley and bypassed Yakima City for a city of its own creation — North Yakima — the Methodists were among those who took the railroad up on its offer of free land if they relocated to the new city.

The parsonage was one of the buildings winched across the Valley to the new city, where they received two lots.

The first church meetings in North Yakima were in Centennial Hall, another building that had been hauled up from what is now Union Gap. The Methodists would later use the Presbyterian Church, with a joint Sunday School for both denominations.

Buildings in Yakima

Four years later, church leaders decided to sell the lot in Yakima City and planned to build a church in their new home, setting a minimum budget of \$5,000 — \$155,986 when adjusted for inflation. It was an audacious move as the church’s bank balance at the time was \$16 — almost \$500 in today’s cash.

After a few fits and starts, the

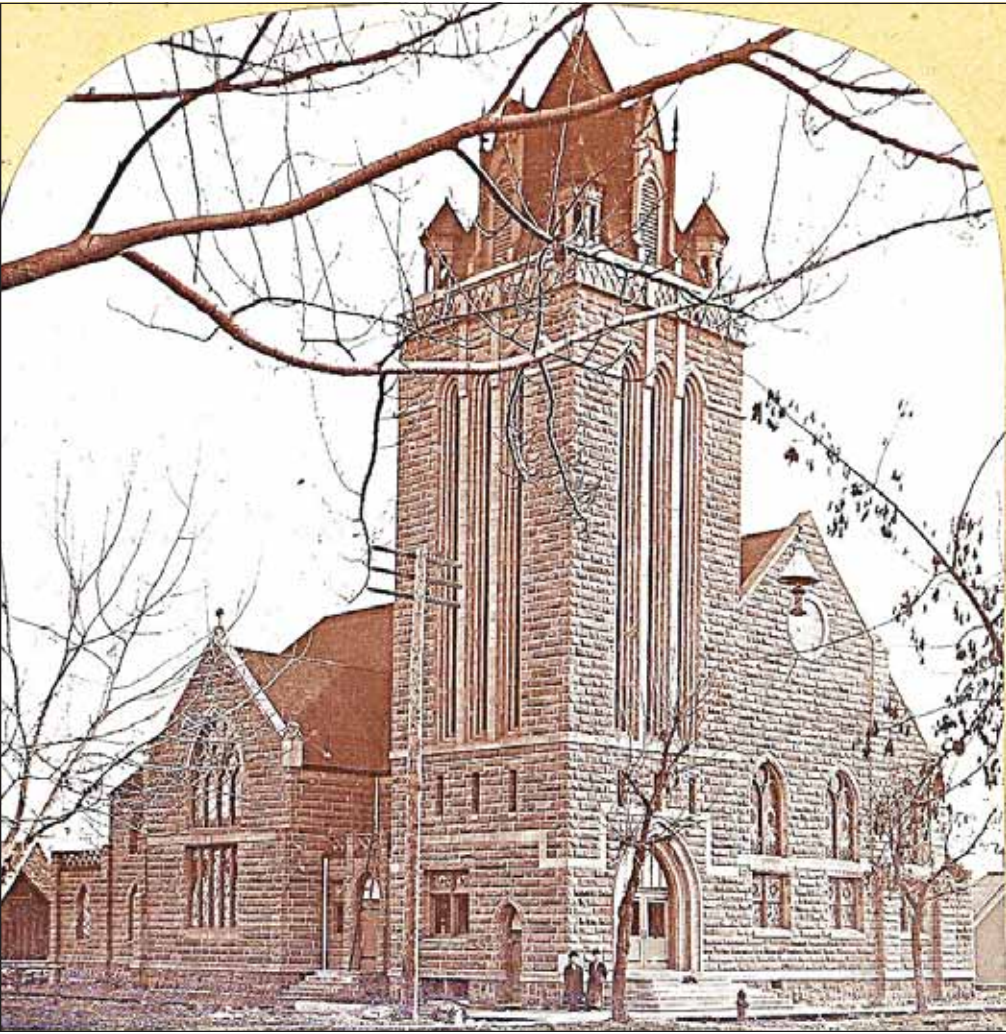


Photo courtesy of yakimamemory.org

First Methodist Church, which opened in 1905, was the second Methodist church to be built in Yakima. It stood at the corner of North Fourth Street and what is today Staff Sgt. Pendleton Way.

congregation finally built its church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, at 101 S. Third St. — where today’s Sunfair Professional Building now stands — in 1895. A.H. Switzer, who built his eponymous opera house on North Front Street, won the bid to build the church for \$4,049 — about \$126,317 adjusted.

That wooden church, with seating for 250 people, served as the congregation’s home for the next 10 years. It was at this church where the funeral for Pvt. Mathias Cherry, a member of Yakima-based Company E, First Washington Infantry who was killed in the Philippine-American war, was conducted. Cherry was the first of the company’s war dead to be buried at Tahoma Cemetery.

The church was replaced in 1905 by what was referred to as the “Stone Church” for the quarried stone that made its walls. It was at this church that the congregation became First Methodist Episcopal.

This edifice, which could seat a congregation of 1,200, was built at the southeast corner of what is now North Fourth Street and Staff Sgt. Pendleton Way at a cost of \$40,000 — \$1.2 million when adjusted for inflation.

But as the 1920s approached, the church was again experiencing growing pains, and there was discussion about whether to remodel the Stone Church or build a more spacious building. The decision was made to build a new church, right next to the existing building at the southwest corner of Staff Sgt. Pendleton Way and North Naches Avenue.

That church was dedicated in 1924. Among its features were an organ that was originally built for the Coliseum in Seattle and a stained-glass window depicting William Holman Hunt’s painting “The Light of The World.”

At this church, the congregation weathered the Great Depression, with the church’s Ladies Aid reaching out to the sick and the needy and the church selling bonds to refinance its debt.

Moving west

By the 1950s, the downtown church was thriving, but church leaders also realized that the city’s growth was westward. In 1955, 28 members of the congregation were authorized to organize a new congregation in the west side of the city, with \$30,000 in

seed money to get started.

The first service of the new congregation was at the Nob Hill Grange, at South 48th and West Nob Hill Boulevard. The new congregation was named Yakima Wesley Memorial Methodist, and church members began looking for a permanent home, which they built in 1958 at North 48th and West Yakima avenues.

But by 1966, things were changing downtown, both for the city and the church. Business leaders were looking to revitalize the downtown by building a mall, and the church was sitting on the anchor site for the project.

Also, the downtown church’s congregation was aging, and the church’s edifice was now 40 years old. There was a solution that would address both the business community’s concerns and the church’s needs: Sell the church building and join the west side congregation.

Church members in oral histories recorded in 1985 recalled that arguments for and against the move were “hot and heavy,” even spilling into worship services.

But finally, a vote was taken, and both congregations agreed to merge in the westside church. There were a few congregants who were upset enough by the decision that they joined other churches or started a new community church.

The merger required work on the Wesley building, adding an educational/administrative complex and a second educational wing to the building.

The new congregation, Wesley United Methodist Church, also received a new pastor, the Rev. William A. Ritchey, who sought to reconcile the blended congregation with a message printed in a weekly newsletter:

“This experience should affirm certain things for us. The greatest of these is to teach us once again that the church consists of persons and not a building,” Ritchey wrote. “Loyal, loving and dedicated hearts continue to serve Christ, strengthened and sustained by the blessed memories of the past. It will also help us center down on the essentials needed for the future.”

The church brought items from its former home, including “The Light of the World” window and some of the masonry from the Stone Church and the previous church, which were assembled into a memorial in the church garden.

The last step in the renovation occurred in 1987, when a new sanctuary was dedicated. The old sanctuary became a fellowship hall.

The congregation continues to be involved in the community, leading a recycling program that has diverted 60,000 pounds of trash monthly from the landfill, providing grants to community groups from a financial gift bequeathed by a former church member, and operating the “Free Little Pantry,” a mini food bank where people can take what they need or leave something for others.

● It Happened here is a weekly history column by Yakima Herald-Republic reporter Donald W. Meyers. Reach him at dmeyers@yakimaherald.com. Sources for this column include The Inflation Calculator by Morgan Friedman, Wesley United Methodist Church Pastor Shane Moore, Paul Schafer, and the archives of the Yakima Valley Libraries and the Yakima Herald-Republic.

Events planned for photo exhibit that features Valley farmworkers

TAMMY AYER
YAKIMA HERALD-REPUBLIC

An exhibition featuring historic photos of Yakima Valley farmworkers and their lives and struggles will formally open with a reception and other events Oct. 7.

“Our Stories, Our Lives: Irwin Nash Photographs of Yakima Valley Migrant Labor” debuted with a soft opening in late May at Washington State University in Pullman.

The formal opening is from 3 to 4:30 p.m. Oct. 7 at the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art, 1535 NE Wilson Road across from Martin Stadium and the CUB. A reception will follow from 4:30 to 6 p.m. Events will include a conversation with guest curator Lipi Turner-Rahman, which will be livestreamed via YouTube.

The exhibition of 45 photographs from the Irwin Nash Yakima Valley Migrant

Help ID people in the photos

All the photos in the Irwin Nash Images of Migrant Labor Digital Collection are online. To browse the photos, visit <https://content.libraries.wsu.edu/digital/collection/nash/search>. When Washington State University bought the collection of photos from Nash, most had general descriptions without names. Dozens of people since have been identified with the public’s help.

Many still need identification. If you have information about any of the photos, ask to join the Nash Photo Collection Facebook group or email Lipi Turner-Rahman at ilipi@wsu.edu or call her office at 509-335-4849.

Labor Collection will remain on display through March 11. It’s in collaboration with WSU Libraries’ Manuscripts, Archives, and Special Collections and the Jordan Schnitzer Museum of Art WSU.

There are more than 9,400 images in the collection. Most came to the university on more than 300 individual sets of film strip negatives and corresponding contact print proof sheets, according to a collection description.

The entire collection has

been digitized. Members of the public have helped identify relatives — and themselves — in multiple photos, but many more need to be identified.

Nash was living and working in Seattle when he came to the Yakima Valley in the fall of 1967 to photograph Latino and Indigenous farmworkers after learning about a drought in the Yakima Valley and the shortage of food for migrant

SEE **PHOTOS** PAGE 10A

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