

NOTES FROM THE ARCHIVES

PRESERVING SISTER AIMEE'S STORY: THE FOURSQUARE HERITAGE ARCHIVES

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WITH STEVE ZELENY

ABSTRACT: After the 2016 SPS meeting in San Dimas, California, the Canadian Journal of Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity editors agreed that a feature in "Notes from the Archives" focusing on The Foursquare Heritage Archives would be of great interest to the journal's readers. Linda Ambrose corresponded with Foursquare Archivist, Steve Zeleny, and what follows is a result of that exchange.

When Canadians think of Aimee Semple McPherson's "home," we tend to think of her childhood roots in Salford, Ontario, a small rural community near Ingersoll, Ontario – west of Toronto. But those humble rural roots pale in comparison to Sister Aimee's more famous home in California. "The Parsonage of Aimee Semple McPherson," in Los Angeles has been restored and is now an important historic site known as "The Foursquare Heritage Center." According to the official Foursquare website,

"The home is restored with original furniture, photographs, props, personal artifacts and displays. The wonders of modern media tools have transformed memories and memorabilia into a trip back in time, with each room unveiling a portion of the life of Sister McPherson. The parsonage recaptures an extraordinary period of American history and culture – and it reminds us of our Foursquare heritage and call that still continues today."

On the occasion of the 2016 SPS meeting in San Dimas, California, many conference delegates took the opportunity to visit this extraordinary site and learn the amazing story of one of the most famous and influential people of the early 20th century.

The two-story building is fascinating, even for the casual visitor or curious tourist. In 2012, 2,000 such guests visited Sister's Parsonage, and that number has held steady since then, with just over

2,600 visitors in 2015. Touring the home, one learns about Sister McPherson's ministry, her personal life, and interacts with audio/visual displays such as a "Pepper's Ghost" (an illusion technique used in theatre, amusement parks, museums, etc.) of Sister McPherson giving one of her famous "illustrated sermons," as well as touch-screen exhibits that provide virtual "question and answer" conversations with her famous children, Rolf and Roberta. Two esteemed Canadian colleagues who toured the site during the SPS conference recounted the unforgettable décor, particularly the blue tiles and incredible acoustics in one of the home's washrooms. Other items on display include a unique piece of Canadiana: a piece of the apple tree Aimee used to climb in when she was a young girl living on the farm near Ingersoll. (Co-editor Ambrose, because her first paid employment as a teenager was picking apples, muses, "That apple tree artifact might be worth the visit right there!")

The Parsonage is located at 1801 Park Avenue, Los Angeles, and is next door to Aimee's famous Angelus Temple. For those who might wish to arrange a visit, the Parsonage is open to the public Mondays through Thursdays from 1-3 and Fridays from 10-1. You can also schedule tours at other hours for groups of six or more by contacting the staff at # 213-989-4444. All tours are free of charge. Additional information is available on their website: www.foursquare.org/about/heritage_center.

The Foursquare Archives has three main functions. The first, as mentioned, is to oversee the Parsonage of Aimee Semple McPherson, her home for twelve years, which is now a museum. The second responsibility is to handle the current document management needs of the Foursquare Church by digitizing the files and documents used in the daily operations of the eight-million-member denomination. The third function is to manage the historical materials of Aimee Semple McPherson and the denomination.

This means that while the public displays in the Parsonage offer an intimate glimpse into the famous evangelist's ministry and life, they are only part of the depths of riches that The Foursquare Heritage Center offers. Perhaps of even greater interest to scholars, is what is *not* on display there, but what resides on the more than 1,500 meters of shelving of The Foursquare Archives itself. This facility,

next door to the Parsonage, is housed in the basement of the five-story L.I.F.E. Bible College building which she built in 1925.

In this facility, the researcher will find a wide variety of historical items such as McPherson's sermons, her publications dating back to 1917, her music, thousands of photographs, voice recordings, and culture artifacts including personal effects such as clothing and household items. For scholars interested in "breaking new ground," these collections have much to offer. It was only in 2015 that the first collections of sermons given by Aimee Semple McPherson were published, and these only covered the years from 1906 through 1923. Her remaining sermons, from 1924 through 1944, still remain in boxes, untouched in some cases for more than ninety years.

Publishing these sermons in a series entitled "The Collected Sermons and Writings of Aimee Semple McPherson" (available at Amazon.com) is a goal, albeit a long-term one, for the archives. "For the past two generations, the only books available on Aimee Semple McPherson have been biographies giving similar information: Born in 1890, died in 1944, and recounting what happened in-between," Zeleny said. "What has not been available to researchers are books exploring what she said and what she taught. Yet her Pentecostal message was the reason people travelled sometimes thousands of miles to see her, and it was that message that so impacted Christianity in the 20th century."

Scholars of Pentecostalism will be pleased to learn that major efforts have been taken by the Archives in the past few years to collect, preserve, and digitize many archival materials connected to Sister Aimee's life and ministry. The Heritage Archives Annual Reports paint a fascinating picture of how this invaluable resource came together. In 2000, when many archives were putting their items on microfilm, the archives started digitizing their entire collection and making their documents full-text searchable. The goal is to protect the collection by making it unnecessary to access the original documents in most cases. Photographs, for example, are digitized at a resolution high enough to create a 20" x 30" print of every image at 300 dpi.

The Foursquare Heritage Archives recognizes that given Aimee Semple McPherson's legacy, its records have appeal for

inquirers coming from a wide array of backgrounds. While many archival collections hold little interest for those outside the ivory towers or denominational headquarters, the Foursquare experience is different. Demand for access to their holdings has been relentless, yet there has historically been reticence to make the records accessible to the public. “For decades,” Zeleny explained, “the archives was basically closed to most researchers because the denomination got tired of, for example, helping a television network with their research for a show about Aimee, only to see that all of their best efforts in research assistance had been used to create a product trashing her.” Fortunately, those years have passed and the archives’ staff got out of their way to help anyone who asks for assistance.

Zeleny described some of the more notable research projects that have made use of the Foursquare collections saying, “Kathy Lee Gifford is a friend of the archives and spent many hours here as she wrote her Broadway musical ‘Scandalous!’ and BBC Radio was recently assisted in the creation of a broadcast on the life of Aimee.” But such collaborations are tricky because the Heritage Archives are dedicated to communicating the history of Aimee Semple McPherson in a particular way. Because people think they *know* about Aimee Semple McPherson, the archives seeks to correct their visitors’ beliefs in common urban legends concerning her. Zeleny offers several examples of “facts” about Sister Aimee that need to be set straight:

She was not the first woman to drive across the United States.

She was not the first woman to own a radio station.

She did not plant lotuses in Echo Park Lake.

She was not buried with a red telephone.

She did not have an affair in Carmel with her radio operator.

She did not have an affair with Milton Berle.

She did not die of a drug overdose.

She really was kidnapped (three times!)

And the miraculous healings were real and were verified as such by the American Medical Association.

Clearly, managing these priceless collections and shaping their interpretation in particular ways is a monumental task. With a staff of three, the priority is taking care of the informational needs of the denomination, but the archives also assist people working on

dissertations, theses, books, articles, screenplays, television and radio shows as it can. Zeleny explains that “the main focus of Foursquare heritage work ties into the Great Commission first and foremost though, and the archives has turned down requests to be featured in television shows such as *Mysteries in the Museum* because the time spent working on such projects would mean time not spent assisting pastors, missionaries and Foursquare personnel who rely upon the archives to meet their informational needs to spread the gospel. When it comes down to helping a television producer or helping a pastor reach people for Jesus, the pastor wins. This is similar to Aimee’s outlook on ministry herself. When asked why she didn’t defend herself against accusations made against her, she replied, “All I have time to do is to keep on preaching Jesus. Often friends suggest, ‘Why don’t you ever get up and defend yourself?’ Well, maybe I’ll get a chance to do that sometime. But right now I’m too busy preaching the gospel.”

Zeleny has a favorite story that, for him, illustrates the impact of preserving this Foursquare heritage: “One day a woman came here from Nigeria. She flew directly from Nigeria to Los Angeles and took a cab here, telling the driver to wait outside. We gave her a two-hour tour, telling her about the life of Aimee Semple McPherson. She said that she had become a Christian at a Foursquare Church in Nigeria and was going to dedicate her life to ministry--IF what she had heard about Aimee was true. After her visit she said that she was now convinced that everything she had heard about Aimee and her ministry was true and she was ready to spend the rest of her life in ministry. With that she gave us a hug, walked back to the cab, hopped in, went directly to the airport, and flew back home to Nigeria.”

But wait, dear readers! Do not book your flight to LA just yet! As always, before a researcher is overcome with enthusiasm for time spent on-site, it is best to contact the archives for direction. With a digitized collection, researchers do not need to travel to the archives to find answers to their questions because the staff is happy to perform searches and send the results. Also, scholars who wish to perform their own research in the early magazines that recount McPherson’s ministry years can do so online at www.pentecostalarchives.org. Access to all other materials are arranged on an individual basis, but in most cases, with a phone call or an email, the staff will quickly find

the materials related to the request and send the researcher pdfs of the pertinent documents.

To contact the archives for research needs, email heritage@foursquare.org or telephone (213) 989-4444.