

**Susan Smyth Lindenberger's memories, complete document sent
by Susan Smyth Lindenberger, August 2007**

Remembering Blacksburg Presbyterian Church 1948-2008

My father, Ellison A. Smyth, accepted the call to Blacksburg Presbyterian Church, effective February 1948. He was uniquely suited to this position: son of a professor at Virginia A&M College (as it was then), home-grown in the congregation, a graduate of VPI in electrical engineering with experience in "the real world" before entering the ministry. He knew and was known, but had been long enough away to soften any rough spots from the past. He was coming Home.

His work was cut out for him: in addition to the church in town, largely revolving around the college community, there was a chapel in Roanoke Valley where he preached at 9:30, making it back to town for the 11:00 service. He was also building up a ministry in "Potlikker Flats" in Northside, where he preached and held gospel sings Sunday evenings about 7:00. Each location had its own distinctive congregation and style of worship. Dad would prepare one text, then tailor the sermon for each congregation, and the hymns were quite different each place.

But that's getting ahead of my story, which for me began when we stepped from the train onto the platform in Cambria, now swallowed up in Christiansburg. We were met by "Sally" Miles who called me "Towhead," which confused my brunette head as much as the fact that "Sally" was a gentleman, but I accepted the affection in his voice.

Having lived most of my life in balmy South Carolina, I had been looking forward to snow. The grimy slush in Richmond had been a disappointment, but there was nice white snow at the manse, where we were met by Paul Dyck and his two girls, Nancy and Polly, the latter my brother Allan's age. Their eldest, Robert, was away at college, but was an active member until recent years. Our families became good friends. The Dycks had a big brick house on South Main with a sloping yard, where I did my first sledding. Mr. Dyck taught us to swim in the sepulchral basement pool at VPI and sang in the church choir. Mrs. Dyck was a consummate cook; her pfeffernusse recipe is still a Christmas favorite.

I caught mumps right after we moved to Blacksburg, and Dr. Charlie Manges, a member of the congregation, ordered me into a darkened room, so I missed out on all the welcoming activities, including Dad's installation on February 29, Leap Year.

The red brick Presbyterian Church on Roanoke Street was the fourth built by the Blacksburg congregation. Although there had been an earlier wooden church, the brick church on Main Street, which has gone through many permutations - the Odd Fellows Lodge, a maternity shop, and now a restaurant -- was the one my grandparents had attended. The next church built was in use as the

educational building and fellowship hall when we moved to town. The church I grew up in had been built in 1904, the year after Dad's birth. The nave was divided into three sections with a balcony. We sat in the 4th or 5th pew on the left aisle - Dad's Aunt Meta's pew.

Aunt Meta was a formidable woman, an aristocrat from Charleston, S.C., widow of the former cadet corps commandant, later a professor. She wore a stole of two or three mink pelts; the heads fascinated me - each hard, pointy nose clamped near its fellows' dangling hind legs, beady glass eyes glittering at me. With four of us to control, Mother tried to seat herself between those most likely to cause trouble on a given Sunday, and the unluckiest got to sit next to Great-aunt Meta. One of my most embarrassing childhood moments was when the choir sang Handel's "Hallelujah Chorus" after the benediction one holiday. Considering the length of the chorus, Dad suggested the congregation be seated during the singing. However, if King George II had stood during the chorus, so would Aunt Meta, and I was made her unwilling partner in this public display.

Sometimes Mom would parcel us out to sit with other trusted members. Dr. Jack Hutcheson, former president of VPI, sat in front of us and had a marvellous bass voice. I liked to lean my ear against his chest, especially when he sang "Into the Woods My Master Went," the most dolorous hymn ever written. One Sunday my hair got tangled in his vest buttons, and when it came time to stand for the next hymn we were inextricably entwined. Mrs. Ida Dunlap sat directly behind us, a tiny woman with an extensive collection of flowered hats. She had been Dad's piano teacher and became ours, although the lessons didn't take on me.

There were windows on either side of the pulpit platform. One warm Sunday Adger, who was about four years old, escaped from the nursery and climbed up on a box to look in through the window on Dad's right. The long pastoral prayer was underway, and Adger joined in, "Blah, blah, blah, blah." Dad glanced up at one of the ushers, who, comprehending the message, slipped out back, and shortly there was an indignant squawk as Adger disappeared.

We loved to explore the empty church, crawling under the pews, racing up to the balcony, using the choir with its velvet curtain as a stage. We discovered how to get into the basement and found the Christmas decorations, and purloined a blue glass ball, which appeared for years on our own tree, producing feelings of guilt. Bulletins, for some reason, we called "church members," and our job was to collect them after the service. On summer evenings it was fun to watch the chimney swifts swarm into the church chimney at dusk.

The brick manse stood on the corner of Roanoke and Church Streets. It was a large two-story affair with a bit of a front yard where I once tried my hand at a lemonade

stand. There were full-length back porches up and downstairs. There was a mouse hole where an electric cable entered the house, and I loved to see the tiny mice peek out, their pink ears aquiver. I remember the sound of Dad stoking the coal furnace in the basement, and the pile of coal with the big flap doors for deliveries. We weren't supposed to climb up the water pipes connecting the radiators, but we did anyway, like chimps up a tree. The basement, which had a dirt floor, was also where the Boy Scouts stored piles of newspapers accumulated during their paper drives. I think Mother had a jelly closet down there for food she canned. This was also the place where a stray cat had kittens. I avoided the basement as dark and scary.

The manse had a big back yard. Dad always had a garden where we were each encouraged to grow something; I had a row of radishes. When I discovered one row was spinach, I "over-weeded" it down to nothing. Another time I emptied a pot of spinach from the stove into the garbage. Not my favourite vegetable! I had to pay for the losses out of my "Saturday dime" allowance.

There was a high wooden fence on the Church Street side of the back yard which was fun to sit on, especially the day the bear came to town, although we missed seeing it. Hollyhocks lined this fence, and along the back fence was a grapevine, from which we made jelly. Between the manse and the back of the church was a low picket fence entirely covered with wild clematis. You could clamber onto the fence and fall backwards into the mass of vines, raising sneezes from the pollen.

The back yard corner abutting the fenced Sunday School yard had a brick barbecue and was where church socials and picnics for VPI students were held. I loved to shuck the ears of corn that were boiled to accompany fried chicken or hog dogs and burgers, mounds of potato salad, and fruit pies. In inclement weather the Westminster Fellowship met in the adjoining educational building, row upon row of students, served piping hot meals by the church women. I remember the sound of two hundred male students singing evening hymns.

The educational building, behind the sanctuary, was where Dad had his study. On Sundays our classes were there, and I remember baskets of broken crayons, the Faith and Life curriculum workbooks, and the take-home leaflets based on the International Sunday School Lessons. I hated dressing up, especially wearing a hat, and I used to tuck my offering dime into my white gloves. Mrs. Hill's day school, Kindergarten to Grade 6, met in the educational building, and my younger siblings, Ruth and Adger, were enrolled there. Allan and I walked down Roanoke Street to public school. I enjoyed the sandbox under the huge blackheart cherry tree. You could climb into the tree by standing on top of the sandbox, but we weren't supposed to do that.

Mrs. Hill produced an annual play, with reworded tunes: "Mirror, mirror magic, hanging on the wall" (Au Clair

de la Lune) and "I am a little pilgrim maid, my name is Patience Charity Wade, I sew and cook and clean and mend, and help my mother days on end." I envied the costumes and strutting about the stage. One year Roger Long, son of the minister to students and ethics professor, was Aladdin. The robbers led him blindfolded off stage, but forgot to tell him when he'd reached the edge. The audience heard a loud "Thump," but when Aladdin was led back for the next scene in the robbers' cave, he manfully spoke his line, "Thank you for bringing me," which brought down the house!

Because of over-crowding, a nice problem for a church to have, Sunday School classes began meeting downstairs in the manse, so Sunday mornings were harried. One Easter Mother came downstairs to discover that Adger had found a tube of Dad's heavy-duty glue. His hair was just hardening into spikes, and she spent the Sunday School hour trimming off the clumps. With the manse more and more in demand, Dad made the wise decision to invest in a home of our own, and in 1950 we moved to Oak Drive, in Blackwood.

Janet Cameron and Hallie Hughes were pillars of the north Blacksburg mission, and I would often accompany Dad to the Sunday evening services. When the cinderblock Northside Chapel was built in 1950, Dad procured a train bell from Norfolk and Western, the same bell that was tolled for his funeral decades later. I occasionally accompanied him to early services at the Roanoke Valley Chapel, picking up people en route, sometimes on the running board of our old Ford. As a teen I helped with Vacation Bible School there, which was usually organized by a summer seminary student, on whom I invariably developed a crush.

Church Picnics were at Plank's farm. There were peacocks up at the main house, which sounded like they were screaming for "HELP!" There was a river to explore and splash in, a pony to ride, horseshoes for the men, and relay races for all ages. Long tables were laid out with every imaginable thing to eat, all grouped in categories: fried chicken, sliced country ham, devilled eggs, many types of potato salad, corn on the cob, beans cooked different ways, pickles made from cucumbers or watermelon rind or green tomatoes or zucchini, rolls and biscuits and corn pone, and wonderful deserts: coconut cake, chocolate cake, berry and apple and rhubarb pies, brownies and cookies, and sometimes hand-churned ice cream -- we took turns turning the crank -- and always watermelon.

Dad loved being back in Blacksburg and on Sunday afternoons introduced us to all his boyhood haunts: Smithfield, Brush Mountain, Trillium Vail . . . Dad claimed he could skate before he could walk, and became the official tester of the ice on the pond. He was in his mid-seventies when he finally hung up his skates. On Sunday morning folks at church would ask, "Is it ready yet?," and soon the ponds became the center of town. Dad taught many town kids - and some adults - how to skate. He would skate backwards, holding your hands and pulling you forwards, and then skate

side by side, with hands crossed over in front. Often he was towing a whole line of kids, and sometimes would do a gentle crack-the-whip. Then he would do some figure 8s, or rapid backwards skating, crossing his feet over on the turns.

Sunday dinner often found stray students at our table: Dad would sweep them up after church and Mom never knew how many she'd have to feed. I especially remember a student named Joe Martin, after whom I named my next Christmas doll. He, the doll, later became Baby Jesus for the Christmas pageants.

Christmas was a busy time in the manse, with extra services, a pageant, and all the excitement of the season. I don't remember Christmas Day services, unless it fell on a Sunday, but Dad would go down to open the sanctuary in case anyone wanted to spend some quiet time in meditation. One Christmas the church did a dramatization of "The Gift of the Other Wise Man." Mother made a magnificent cape for Dick Dietrich out of the remains of a silk parachute she had bought from army surplus. I had a bit part as a slave girl screaming down the aisle that the Roman soldiers were coming, and wrecked things by making my noisy entrance too soon.

Bob Bluford directed student work until April 1951. One evening he found a possum on their back porch and asked his son if he'd ever seen a possum. "I've seen Possum Smyth," Bobby said, having heard Dad referred to as "Parson." Bob was followed in September by Edward Leroy Long, who was half time at the church and half at VPI's new department of Philosophy and Religion. Ed is brilliant, active in social and political issues, and still a prolific writer.

The Blacksburg Church has a good record for producing ministers and missionaries. Earl King was a VPI student who had served summers in the Roanoke Valley chapel and went to the Congo; Ron Dietrick became a missionary to Korea; Dick Andrews and Bill Brown entered the ministry, as did my brother Allan. I like to think that our neighbor Rick Dietrich was influenced by his childhood in the Blacksburg church. Charlie Bill Moore directed student work and then became a candidate for ministry. I stayed on the farm with his folks, Harry and Frances Moore, when the church sent Dad and Mom to Florida when Dad lost his voice after Christmas. Harry let me try milking the cow, but neither of us enjoyed the experience. I preferred feeding clover to Lyn's rabbits and was allowed to take one home as a pet, not realizing that the others were headed for the table.

Mother belonged to a number of groups that met occasionally at our house. The Women of the Church, of course, but also the Garden Club, the Community Concert Association, a Book Club, bandage-rolling for the Red Cross or mission hospitals, and the Christmas Bird Count. Sometimes we were allowed to serve refreshments, starting with passing napkins when we were small, to the honor of passing the tray with sugar and cream and the polished

teaspoons. She was involved in some of the orientation programs for international students at VPI and was an active member of the Council on Human Rights. And there were many years of Sunday School and Scouting: probably every department of the former up to Jr Hi, and also Den Mother, Brownie and Girl Scout leader, and all the committees thereunto appertaining! One year for Vacation Bible School she led her class several times around the church, but the walls of Jericho didn't fall!

In 1953 I joined the communicant's class meeting with Dad. We learned the Ten Commandments, the Shorter Catechism and were examined by the Session. I was disappointed when we "joined the church," because, since there had been so much talk about taking on adult responsibilities, I had expected to become a member of Women of Church. I remember voting for elders and deacons and just marking the names I knew. At least I was now allowed to take communion, a rite from which I had felt excluded and avoided whenever I could.

Dad was a commissioner to General Assembly in Richmond in 1954, and was also being awarded a D.D. by Hampden Sydney. He missed his ride but found a friend willing to rush him to the ceremony. We were wondering where on earth he was when he crept onto stage, still struggling into his academic gown.

Irene Gay was church secretary for many years and had to get used to Dad's sense of humor, which often crept into letters he dictated. "Now Ellison," she'd say, "do you really want that part about the kitchen-sink to be in here?"

I was in the Sr Hi Sunday School class led by Dot Wisman and Charlie Dommermuth. We kicked off the fall with a bike hike, of which there is a memorable photo. In 1956 Wybe Kroontje came to VPI in agronomy and joined the Presbyterian church. He called Dad "Dominie," and he and Marietje followed the scripture readings in their Bible. I was called on occasionally to babysit their daughter Roeli Ann, and grew to admire them both, sometimes stopping off to visit on my way home from school. I remember Wybe as tremendously enthusiastic, eager to learn everything, and, a former member of the Dutch Resistance, dedicated to freedom - freedom of thought, speech and action. Wybe was probably the most influential mentor in my life. When the church moved to the new location on Eakin Street the following year, the Kroontjes became advisors to the Sr Hi group. From them we learned to ask questions, to probe for truth, to challenge unjust systems. We also had a lot of fun. I remember ice skating, Wybe going hard and fast -- Allan claims in his shirt sleeves! Mother would have cocoa piping hot for the group when we got back to the house to warm up and play board games or Spill & Spell. The Sr Hi group spent a weekend at our family vacation house in Blowing Rock, North Carolina, hiking, planning for the fall, worshipping and singing together. We had a youth newsletter that I co-edited

one year. A number of the youth group also sang in the church choir under Dick Dietrich's direction. The church encouraged youth to engage the wider church at presbytery rallies, retreats, and camps such as Massanetta and Fincastle. We had Easter sunrise services on the golf course and waffle breakfasts afterwards. One year Mother taught a group of the girls the highland fling for the high school spring festival.

In May 1954 the Supreme Court had brought down *Brown vs Board of Education*, requiring public schools to begin to desegregate. Massive Resistance was the response in much of Virginia, with some counties closing their public schools rather than integrate. Minister to Students Jerry Boney (who married Nancy Dyck), the Rev Bob Thomas from the Episcopal Church, our parents and a number of congregants, e. g. Norm and Anne Grover, were members of the Council on Human Relations locally and attended meetings in Richmond. At the time I didn't understand what this was all about, for, although our parents were very involved, I don't remember their talking much about it at home. When I asked Dad years later why, he said he thought we would have a more difficult time at school if we knew, but I didn't agree. I had considerable difficulty with my McCarthyite homeroom teacher that year, and if I had understood my parents' activities were a factor, I think I might have managed better.

In 1958 the Rev. Woody Leach came as Director of Student work. Woody and Nance were activists in race relations, and supportive and wise friends to me in my "lettuce years." I went off to Southwestern for college, but had letters from a number of church friends who kept me informed. Civil Rights was heating up in Westminster Fellowship in Blacksburg as well as Memphis.

Rev. Archie Richmond, minister of African Methodist Episcopal church, had been arrested in 1955 for picnicking on the "white" side of a state park. Dad and other white ministers supported him and invited him to join the Ministerial Association. The Session had then turned down a request for the Association and the Council on Human Relations to meet at our church. In 1959 the AAUW invited India Richmond, Archie's wife, to join, and was thrown off campus. Mom and others raised the question of their meeting at our church. The ushers were struggling with the question of whether to seat Negro visitors. Dad asked Orrin Magill, who was from Mississippi and had been a missionary to China, to head a committee to look into all questions relating to race relations in the light of Christian faith. Their report came to Session in January 1961 and opened seating, membership, use of the facilities, the Scout troop and day school to all.

I have heard stories of the voting at that Session meeting. VPI President Newman, adamantly opposed to integration, was on a Session made up of mostly faculty members. Dad started the discussion next to Newman and asked

everyone to speak their mind. Newman was last and stalked out of the room as the only negative vote. Great strategy on Dad's part, and tremendous courage on the part of faculty members.

When I graduated from Southwestern in 1963, I was accepted by the World Council of Churches for a month long summer project in Berlin, Germany, and then for a four month stint as a volunteer in Austria. Two couples instrumental in this experience were the Kroontjes and the Jake Tingas from the church, who provided encouragement and financial support.

On August 21, 1965 Dad conducted my marriage to Jim Lindenberger, then a student at Union Theological Seminary. Many women in the church -- Cornella Dyck, Helen Judkins, Margaret Grayson, Frances Dietrich, Mary Thompson and Maude Wallace - helped with preparations and hosted showers, teas and lunches. It felt right to be married surrounded by people who had helped me grow from childhood.

In Spring 1974 Jim, who had taught Hebrew Bible one semester at the Vancouver School of Theology in Canada, was completing his Ph D from Johns Hopkins. Mom and Dad were in Hartsville, S.C., where Dad was interim minister, so we moved into their home and back into my home church. Our daughter Ru was three years old and enjoyed the pre-school group, especially the church playground. Dad had been cautious about creating problems for new minister's after his retirement in 1968, as he had served such a long time. He had backed away from many activities, but when the Rev. Jesse Hutchinson died unexpectedly, he agreed to fill in as interim late in 1974. These were years when my parents enjoyed travelling in their little Airstream trailer. Mother continued working in the VT herbarium until she was 88 years old.

The 1980's and '90's were years of declining health, and I was thankful that I could piggy-back a trip to Blacksburg onto United Church of Canada meetings which took me to Toronto twice a year. During these visits I was embraced by my parents' "Young Friends" - Joni & Bob Pienkowski, Guy & Jean Hammond, Don & Barb Michelson, Catherine Snyder and Chris, JoAnn Underwood, Barbara Sinha. Having been welcomed to Blacksburg by my folks, these folks reciprocated tenfold. My parents' friends soon became mine, added to my longtime friends in the congregation. They kept in touch with my folks, who now lived at Warm Hearth, and kept me informed about their condition. They extended support, advice, meals, a place to debrief and stay when I was in town. The Leaches and Pienkowskies virtually kept a toothbrush for me in their guest rooms! And when Dad and Mom died within three weeks of one another in 1998, the congregation reached out to the family, hosting children, grandchildren, nieces and nephews. I will never forget the evening of remembering held before Dad's funeral, nor the sympathy extended when we were stunned by Mother's death which followed so quickly.

Wybe Kroontje said, "I don't suppose we'll see you in Blacksburg anymore," and I replied, "Don't bet on it!" Most summers we try to schedule our cross country route through Blacksburg on a Sunday, so that we can worship and fellowship with our friends at Blacksburg Presbyterian, and twice I have been able to attend the Smyth Lectures, a wonderfully appropriate memorial to two people who gave so much of themselves to Blacksburg.

My life, and that of my extended family, has been blessed by the saints of BPC, which will always be my "home church."

Susan Smyth Lindenberger
Vancouver, BC, Canada
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