

A Century of Religious Use

Our Unitarian Universalist Building

1892-1992 Ninth Street and Second Avenue South Fargo

By Millie Treumann

It is a wonderful story this building could tell if we could give it voice. Its history reflects some of what is best in our Unitarian tradition, housing as it has religious groups from three quite different backgrounds, the Unitarian Universalist, the Hebrew Congregation, and now the Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints. This early UU home represents in part the inclusivity of Unitarian attitudes toward the best thought from the religions and philosophies in world history. We are proud of this place and for me, especially, being asked to speak here is a kind of homecoming because I have long cherished a secret fantasy that our congregation could someday return to its roots born here one hundred years ago.

It was an intrepid group of religious liberals, many of them transplanted New Englanders, who first organized this congregation. I rely on an account first published in the Forum in 1895 for much of this brief history and a story in the Saint Paul Pioneer Press in October 1972. William Ballou, probably no relation to the famous Josea Ballou of Unitarian ministerial fame, came to Fargo in 1889 and began giving a series of public lectures on art, literature, philosophy and religion to a receptive audience hungry for intellectual stimulation. He was a tall (6' 4") spare man with a carefully clipped Van Dyke beard, meticulously groomed. He had a Boston Latin School and Tufts College education, eastern roots and a manner of speaking which was both convincing and well informed. He had come to the Dakotas in 1884 at the age of twenty to try farming up north. In 1887 and 1888, he spent a year in classes at the State Universities of Michigan and Minnesota to prepare himself for the ministry.

He gathered around him a number of leaders in the young Fargo community, starting in June of 1889. In late November 1889, F.H. Irons, W. A. Scott, and A.E. Nugent met at the latter's office and agreed to bear the current expenses for Sunday meetings, and to canvass the prospects for forming a stable organization which would be called the Unitarian Society. In December 1889, a temporary organization was created with the three men named above as officers, and directors Winship, Montgomery, Mrs. F. J. Thompson and Miss S. S. Pike. Other early members were the Bakers, S. L. Beane, Dr. and Mrs. Kent Darrow, the Douglasses, Farrands, Folsoms, J. E. Gage, the Sheffields, the Max Sterns and Alex Sterns, and Mrs. O. J. deLendrecie.

The society was visited by the Rev. S. M. Crothers of St. Paul and the Rev. H. M. Simmons of Minneapolis, both of whom helped the young organization become a part of the Unitarian Association. By February 1890, the Church was incorporated. In June of 1890, the American Unitarian Association of Boston committed itself to help the new congregation and it was

decided to call Mr. Ballou as minister. The formal ordination took place on December 20, 1891 in rented quarters at the Grand Army of the Republic Hall on First Avenue North.

During early 1892, Mrs. O. J. deLendrecie and Mrs. A. E. Nugent began raising funds for the purchase of two corner lots at Ninth Street and Second Avenue South, the site of Fargo's first public school built in 1872. Mr. Thomas Baker Jr., President of the Board of Education and a member of the new Church signed the deed conveying the school property to the Unitarian Society for the sum of \$2000.00 on June 1, 1892. Hancock Brothers were the architects and J. J. Bowers & Sons, the contractors. The building cost \$5000.00 to erect, and the first sermon was preached in it on December 11, 1892, one hundred years ago today.

In 1895, the church was described as being of cream brick with red stone lintels and windowsills...attractive and homelike. "The interior walls are finished in warm tints and are adorned with engravings, water colors and etchings; the shelves contain a well selected collection of books and the whole environment comports well with the cheerful mental and spiritual outlook of people who, finding that living is a very interesting matter, like to enable others to share in the joy of life. On the first floor of the building are a finely proportioned room for religious services and a sunny parlor, and in the basement are a spacious lecture room and a well appointed kitchen."

The church was in constant use for lectures, concerts, study club work etc., as well as for the religious services of the society, for the members take good heed not to "forsake the assembling of themselves together." The Sunday school provided to its students instruction in domestic ethics, the duties of citizenship, religious history and biography. In 1895, the pupils were employed upon a course of nature study.

The women's organization of the church, called the Literary Teacup, was begun in February 1892 and met weekly, speedily becoming a leading social and literary organization where members exchanged opinions on books, politics, and art, and often heard much good music.

I cannot refrain from quoting further from that 1895 article. "The Unitarian Society...numbers among its ardent supporters people of the most various antecedents of nationality and religious training. Its experience is instructive, and tends very directly to the conclusion that has in past ages served to keep people, who cared deeply for religion at sword points, was that religion was presented as dogma for acceptance instead of as a life to be lived. With it, the teaching has not been so much dogmatic as ethical, and this is in large part the reason why monist and dualist, spiritualist and materialist, monotheist and tritheist, Jew and Christian, theosophist and agnostic find that here there is cleared for them a common ground of sympathy which theological brambles erstwhile totally obscured.

In the deliberate exercise of its intention not to hold itself aloof from any contact with any phase of religious belief or unbelief, no matter how radically opposed to the sentiments of its

members, it has consistently maintained a free pulpit where orthodoxy and heterodoxy and no doxy at all, each have their innings as occasion arises. If to some critics—the friends as well as the hostile—the stated services of the society have seemed to lack much of the form and somewhat of the spirit of devotion that is commonly encountered in religious gatherings, it is well to consider whether it is not in fact accomplishing a work in the unifying of the community, the spread of enlightenment, the abolition of groundless prejudices, that has, when taken as a whole, spiritual implications of a vital sort...”

I would say these sentiments still express views of Unitarian-Universalists today.

While William Ballou remained as minister till 1919, other Unitarian ministers served in the Fargo pulpit from time to time. One was the Reverend Doctor Richmond Fisk sent to Fargo by the Unitarian Society of Boston as a supply minister for the years 1897 to 1899. Another was the Reverend Eleanor Elizabeth Gordon, one of three women from Hamilton, Iowa to be ordained in the Unitarian Church. Miss Gordon was ordained at Sioux City, Iowa in 1889. Her certificate was signed by two women ministers and two men ministers, one of whom was Jenkin Lloyd Jones, minister of All Souls Church in Chicago.

Of the many fascinating people in Fargo’s early history, Reverend William Ballou and his wife, “Madame Olivia Ballou” must have been among the most colorful. Madame Ballou was born Olivia Dahl in Norway in 1877, and was a well-known concert singer in Norway and this country before she met and married William Ballou. When she came to this country she brought with her a magnificent piano, a hand crafted instrument created by Julius Bluethner and weighing more than two tons. That piano accompanied her around the country, starting in Spokane Washington where she first settled, and moving up and down the west coast. Miss Dahl was a “statuesque” woman 5’ 11” tall. Her accompanist was Gina Smith, also nearly six feet tall. They and that piano were in San Francisco giving a concert on the day before the great earthquake and fire in 1906.

Miss Dahl had the piano taken directly to a ship in the harbor when the concert was over. It always took three men and a horse to move it. The two women stayed in the Palace Hotel for the night. When the ground began shaking, and the fires erupted, they fled in their nightwear to the safety of the ship in the harbor.

In 1915, Olivia met and married William Ballou. Calling herself “Madame Ballou,” she gave concerts and voice lessons in Fargo and at Concordia College. Her niece recalled that after the Church closed and was sold to William Ballou, it was turned into a music studio, which he called “The Prado” for his wife, and rooms were rented to artistic-minded people. Madame Ballou became part of the cultural heritage of Concordia College, while Uncle William, gentle, soft –spoken, but full of conviction stumped on behalf of the Socialist movement.

It was those Socialist and pacifist convictions of his that contributed to the demise of the Unitarian Society and his purchase of the building from them in 1919. His views became most

controversial and unpopular during World War I. He invited two prominent socialists of the day, Norman Thomas and Max Eastman to speak at the Society. In 1916 when Max Eastman spoke against the draft and the war, rioters broke the church windows. It was necessary to sneak Mr. Eastman out the back door to safety because of threats to his life. He crouched on the floor of a prominent citizen's carriage and was driven to Dilworth to board a train, which would take him east. It is said that that prominent citizen was Mrs. Mary Weible.

In 1930, Madame Ballou died after gall bladder surgery. William Ballou maintained the building as a cultural center featuring musical and artistic events, plus noted speakers of the day. After a fire in the building and his death in 1941, the building was sold to the Jewish community leaders lead by Herman Wilk, Robert K. Herbst, Max Goldberg, Harry Lashkowitz and others, the Ballous having always been concerned that this church continue a religious presence in the community. They named it the Beth El Center.

The Reverend Ballou died on May 14, 1941 at age 75. His memorial service was given by Professor E. L. Mayo, Professor C. B. Waldron of North Dakota Agricultural College, and Dr. Gottfried Hultz. Music was provided by Eleanor Nesheim Parsons and Sigvald Thompson of Concordia College, playing music by Brahms on the piano and cello. Fern Blanco, who helped reestablish our church in 1952, attended his memorial and kept the order of service containing his picture as a memento for many years, thus providing a thread of continuity between the old and the new Unitarian-Universalist Church.