

HISTORY IS NOW

Nina Brice Gwin*

If you don't believe history is NOW, you should be the first to have to tell it! What we don't write now will not be read in the future.

The year was 1963 when the National Women's Missionary Union was seventy-five years old. All WMU organizations, church, associational, or otherwise were asked to review their own history. I was detailed to tell that history in my association in Florida. Without blinking an eyelash, I said "Yes." All I would have to do was go to the church office to look at the associational minutes. So I thought.

It was my moment of truth. They were not there. I'd have to find the history to tell it. My husband suggested that the clerk of the association would have a complete file of minutes, and if I promised neither to destroy, displace, nor deface, he might let me take them home to study.

Over the phone, my predicament was explained, assuming he had a full file of minutes, and asking if he would consider trusting me with them. The silence was unnerving. Then, "Wait just a minute. Let me have a look." More silence.

My wheels were spinning well over the speed limit. He doesn't want me to have them . . . he can't find them . . . he doesn't know what he's got

An uncertain voice followed sounds of shuffling and picking up the phone. "Well . . . all that was passed on to me is right here in a cardboard carton. You're welcome to use it. It won't be any trouble to carry . . . not much here - let's see, here's one or two very old looking minutes - no, they're from another association -wonder what they are doing here. Wait, here's something else - doesn't look like minutes . . . no, I don't know what it is."

My husband brought the carton home to me, and sure enough, it wasn't very big, not nearly big enough. I couldn't wait to dig in.

The old minutes the clerk thought didn't belong were actually from the next-door association, and I knew why they were there. Our association had descended, so to speak, or sub-divided from our neighbor in a friendly separation to diminish distances to be traveled. I also knew that we, as a part of the neighbor, had once been in a still larger association. Like cells, we grew, divided, and multiplied.

Combining the contents of the carton with some associational minutes from our church office, as well as some of my own, I still did not have a complete file. Some duplicates from the church and some of my personal copies were added to the carton. For posterity.

For my purpose I struck a little pay dirt in the depths of the cardboard mine. The WMU had once printed its own minutes and here were three consecutive issues. But, then, to economize, the association had decided to include the WMU minutes in the regular associational minutes. Fine. Now I was getting somewhere.

Hours vanished as I followed lead after lead. The leads became mirages. Here was mention of a program with a lofty theme. Sounds inspirational. What did it say? The definite, concrete examples of how the women of my association had carried out their missions imperative were largely lacking. "The chairman gave very interesting reports." The reports were not there. "Sister So-and-so gave 'Silver Memories' on the 25th anniversary." I got excited all over again. But the memories, whatever they were, were not recorded. Where were they? In another carton somewhere?

Having now exhausted the contents of the brown box, I was forced to look closely at the u.f.o. (unidentified floating object), which neither the clerk nor I had recognized. It was a contribution - a real bonanza! Here was a collection of brief histories of all the churches in the association, with a splendid profile of the general association, as well as the Woman's Missionary Union. Not in detail, mind you, but it gave me the backdrop of Baptist history I needed.

What farsighted individual had gone to the trouble to collect the data and carefully document it? None other than Uncle Sam himself -through the Works Project Administration - better known as WPA, of the depression years. You could try to locate a copy of *Inventory of Church Archives* done in your county. Surely Uncle Sam preserved his copy!

That valuable booklet was reproduced and added to the valuables in my church's safe. After returning the carton, I sometimes awaken in the night, worrying that someone would clean out the carton and throw away the whole contents in one toss.

But now for that talk I'm going to make. My backdrop will be fair. I need some living action to portray against it. A quick trip to the Baptist University 150 miles away gave the opportunity to fill in a few gaps. For five hours I read dusty, tattered, old minutes, hoping for something really alive and vital.

Do you begin to see what I mean by "History is NOW"? If we don't put down what is happening right now, who can tell it later?

I took another tack. More recently, my economy minded association had stopped printing WMU minutes in the back of the association report. They settled for only the report to the association. Turning to the annual proceedings, I prayed to find something specific the women had done. Another hour. Specific? I read, "It has been a good year of special privilege . . . (God's) rich and abundant blessings have attended our sincere efforts." Oh, my aching head! What efforts? More of the same. "This year we celebrate our 20th anniversary . . ." That leaves something to be desired in the way of specificity. (If it's not in the dictionary, it ought to be.)

You do get the point, don't you? HISTORY is NOW. Even if it's not much, what there is of it is with us NOW. If we do not preserve it in a form to make interesting research a hundred years from now - or ten - it will never be told. What someone can't read then certainly won't, can't be told then. Because by that time there may not be any "old timers" left around who saw or helped it happen.

Well, come to think of it, a cardboard carton may be better than nothing!

Anybody want my soapbox?

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Historians have an obligation to future writers, also. We should do for them what we wish others had done for us in the past. The Alabama Baptist Historical Commission has worked with church clerks to help them prepare records that will be most useful to future historians. The article by Irma R. Cruse is an example of the sort of encouragement and education provided by the Commission. Historians themselves are encouraged to save records and to leave written summaries for future writers.

Nina Gwin recounts one of her own experiences in gathering historical materials for a WMU report. Her article is a valuable first-hand account of a tenacious search for any scraps of information.

Lee N. Allen