



Reflections of Yesteryear

Martin L. Ashley, Church Historian

At First Church, we have been privileged to be served by a number of ministers throughout our 123-year history. Two of our ministers served nearly a quarter of a century apiece. Many of you remember Dr. Allan J. Weenink and the impact he made on our church and congregation during his 24½ years of tenure.

The Rev. William S. Potter, our second minister, served 23 years, coming to First Church in November of 1888. He saw our young congregation through its formative years, laying the firm foundation that has sustained us for more than a century of service. It was during his pastorate that the membership grew to 703 and a church was erected on the

corner of W. Michigan and McCamly Streets downtown. In July of 1911, Rev. Potter decided to retire from First Church, but continued to reside in Battle Creek the rest of his life. He maintained an active role in the community and became known as the "Marrying Minister," performing over 3,000 marriages during his 50+ years of ministry.

The following is taken from a Battle Creek newspaper dated August 12, 1934, and gives a glimpse of Rev. Potter's views on marriage:

A bridegroom so absent-minded he forgot the date of his own wedding and a man who paid his marriage fee five years later, are among the recollections of the Rev. William S. Potter, who has been in the ministry for more than 56 years. Twenty-three years of that time he was pastor of the First Presbyterian Church of Battle Creek.

With a record of 3,619 marriages the Rev. Mr. Potter has earned the title "the marrying minister" which was given him during his local pastorate.

Mr. Potter is reluctant to talk about himself; he is afraid he will

be accused of "tooting his own horn." But a record of more than 56 years in the ministry is something to talk about, whether the talking is done by the record holder or someone else.

So often, Mr. Potter says, a tall man and a short woman come to him to be married, and if one is a brunet, the other is almost sure to be a blonde. It seems that opposites attract in human nature as much as elsewhere, he said with a twinkle in his eyes.

During the war, when Camp Custer was over-running with khaki-clad soldiers, Mr. Potter married 185 soldiers and their brides. When the camp first opened Mr. Potter supposed that most of the marriages probably would be performed by the army chaplains. But one day a soldier and his bride-to-be appeared at his home and said the landlord of a hotel recommended him because "He married us and it stuck." After that he had a succession of soldier marriages.

In later years Mr. Potter has been marrying the sons and daughters of those whom he married when first he came here. About two years ago he married a 16-year-old girl whose mother and grandmother he had also married.

As to statistics about marriages, in Mr. Potter's experience, more people are married at the minister's home than at the church; June is the most popular month of the year, and Wednesday the most popular day of the week.

The time of weddings is anywhere around the clock from the "high noon to high midnight" as Mr.

Potter expresses it. On of the latest weddings that Mr. Potter attended was in the country.

Apparently the bridegroom had mistaken the date, and when 8 p.m. arrived he did not appear. As it grew later, one of the guests went to get the bridegroom and the ceremony was performed at two o'clock the next morning.

An amusing situation occurred once when Mr. Potter performed the fifth wedding ceremony in a single family. At the conclusion the most recent

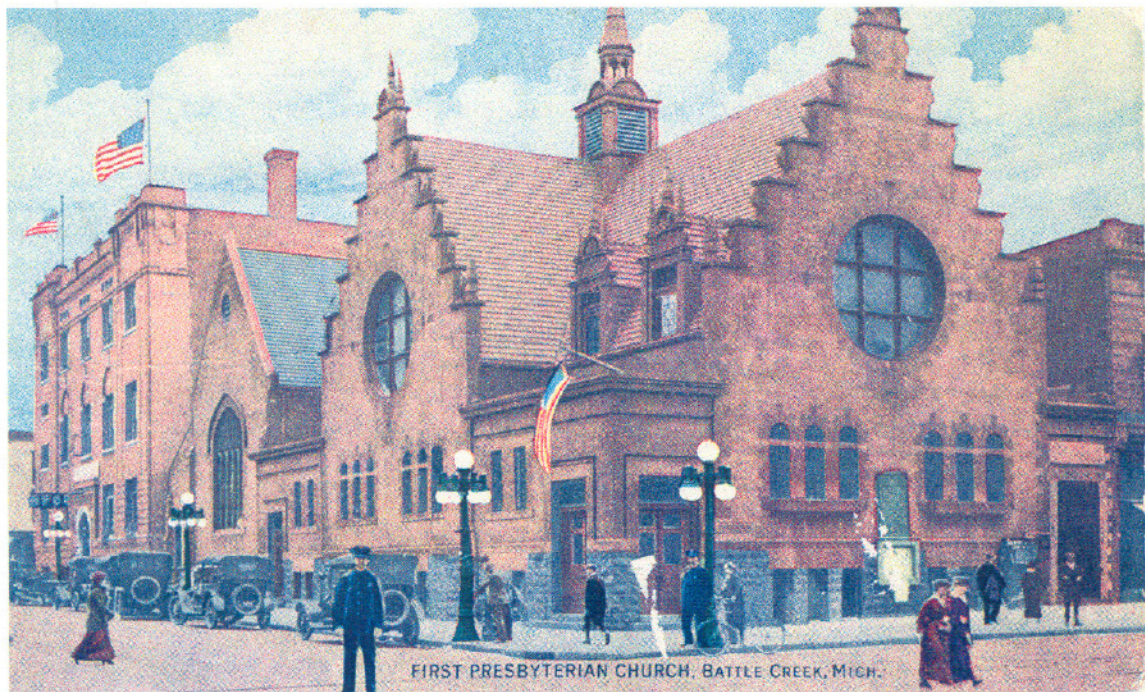
bride said, "There's no one left now but Mother." The mother was an elderly widow, but in six months Mr. Potter conducted her wedding.

Fees for a wedding ceremony are a ticklish subject.

Mr. Potter said after one ceremony the bridegroom told him he had left his pocketbook at home on the bureau, but to Mr. Potter's knowledge he never found it. One fee for a marriage was repeated on the first anniversary because the couple was so happy. Another young man after the ceremony said, "I'm short on funds right now but will see you later." Five years later he met Mr.

Potter on the street and gave him a very good fee.

I can claim a connection to Rev. Potter, as he married my paternal grandparents in 1927. Perhaps he married one of your relatives.



FIRST PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, BATTLE CREEK, MICH.

Old First Presbyterian Church built at the corner of W. Michigan & McCamly during Rev. Potter's pastorate.