



Reeds Mill Church - a Little Church in the Wildwood

By Ginni Robie

“Come to the Church in the Wildwood” Hymn #367, is the call to worship. The reference is appropriate – a small 32 foot wide, 45 foot long, one-room church surrounded by trees on all sides. A narrow, unpaved driveway leads to the church situated on less than a half acre of land in the once thriving community of Reeds, located within the township of Madrid, Maine. With eight long pews lining a center aisle, and three shorter pews on either side of the pulpit, the church can accommodate over 100 people. Special events like Old Home Sunday, evening Hymn Sings, and weddings fill the church to capacity. Madrid (accent on first syllable), is an unorganized territory in the western mountains of Maine; population 170. Now a nondenominational church, Reeds Mill Church was previously known as the Reeds Mill Free Baptist Church. In 2002, the members voted to rename the church to Reeds Mill Church to emphasize the current nondenominational status.

Reeds Mill Church is rich in history. The church was officially organized on Sept. 17, 1831 with 33 members as the Church of Christ, a branch of the Phillips, Maine church. Records are scarce; however, the original deed dated June 1892 shows Lewis Reed donating the track of land near his home and the mill he owned. One condition – the property had to be used for the purpose of providing worship in a church; otherwise the land would go back to the family.

In 1833, an auxiliary missionary and temperance society, the Ladies Union Circle of Reeds Mill, was formed and “they held suppers to sell oyster stew for 15 cents a bowl” to support the congregation according to Wilma Plog, who is a long time member of the church.. Later, people donated from \$1 or less to \$70 as well as labor and materials for the construction of a house of worship. It was not until 1892 the church building became ready for occupancy. The first service, held in December of that year, saw 113 people in attendance for worship. Today the Reeds Mill Ladies Sewing Circle continues the work of the Ladies Union Circle with the sales of their hand made quilts.

One can feel the history upon entering the church, conjuring a deeply felt sense of nostalgia, perhaps generated through the simplicity of the church. There is no electricity, no running water; no fans, no air conditioning, nor furnace. Windows are opened for ventilation during the summer services. Kerosene lanterns, original to the building, provide the setting for ‘after dark’ activities. A clean, one hole outhouse is situated 40 feet from the building. A wood stove provides the only heat and is always

going for the Thanksgiving and Christmas services. Ginni and David Robie, whose property abuts that of the church, get the fire going about 2 hours before those two services so that it's plenty warm by the time people arrive. "The first time I laid eyes on this church I felt connected," says Ginni. "The sense of history was almost palpable to me. I wanted to find ways to let others know of this wonderful, old church; to worship in it and support it, not just with their presents, but more importantly with their presence." Before long, there were bulletins for each service; devotional materials available to take home; a little contemporary music mixed in with the well loved traditional hymns; occasional "special" presentations like a Christian drama, Christian-themed puppet shows, and visiting choirs; and the addition of a July Hymn Sing. Finally, a candlelight Christmas service the Sunday before the holiday was begun in 2004. The church is decorated with greens and plenty of candles in each window. Ginni enjoys being the speaker for this particular service, making sure to include beloved carols in the service. Ginni and David always host an Open House following the service in their home, just up the hill from the church. "This is MY Christmas," says Ginni.

The September Hymn Sing, a now highly held tradition, was established in 1978 when young twins, Ward and Wade Bredeau, wondered out loud to the late Rev. Robert Holcomb what the church would look like after dark with the kerosene lamps lit. So was born the September Hymn Sing; an evening gathering that would require the lighting of the lamps. People came from miles away to that first annual September Hymn Sing, creating a standing room only crowd. The tradition has continued to this day, the church filling with people who want to sing the 'old hymns' - "The Old Rugged Cross", "Rock of Ages", "How Great Thou Art", and, of course, "Come to the Church in the Wildwood." The hymns are played on the old but well working pump organ. The lamps are lit and all can feel just how special a place this is. At one point during the evening the singing stops just long enough for the Bredeau twins, now adults, to take the offering, and to identify where people have traveled from. A woman visiting from Washington State looks forward to returning each year. "When I went home after my first visit here, I sang 'Come to the Church in Wildwood' at my home church because it touched my heart so much. I wouldn't miss this." Each hymn sing concludes with the group standing in a circle holding hands and singing the Lord's Prayer, while Evelyn Norton, whose parents were married in this church, signs these great words with loving hands.

The church has had its ups and downs, sometimes with long periods between services as it was not always possible to get a pastor. In 1992, as the church was about to celebrate its 100th birthday, a meeting was held to decide if the doors should be shut forever – only one person was officially a member of the congregation. As the population in this rural area decreased, so did church attendance, declining to an average 12 people in 2002. Today the large bell with the long rope in the belfry is rung at 2:00 PM to call worshipers to a service that is led by guest speakers, many of which are pastors from nearby towns, leading their own congregation in worship that morning. With an apparent resurgence of interest, services regularly see 25 worshipers present with 40 or more at the Thanksgiving and Christmas services. As the world steps into the 21st century, so does Reeds Mill Church. Unwilling to change what makes it special, but very willing to let people know about its uniqueness through the world wide web, there is now a web site that holds scanned historical records, worship dates, and other interesting information. – www.reedsmillchurch.org.

Nostalgia, history, simplicity – drawing people back to the church in the wildwood.