

Winston Stephens's History at the First Presbyterian Church of Athens

In 1907 my grandfather, Ambrose Penn Winston, came to Athens as part of a group from Virginia Polytechnic hired to organize the new Agricultural College at the University of Georgia. He had been raised as a Quaker, but found no Quaker group in Athens. He liked Dr. E. L. Hill of First Presbyterian and soon joined that church.

In 1909 he married India Jewel Kinnebrew of Athens. Their children were all born at the University farm (which was where the UGA Visitor's Center on College Station Road is today). Penn, Jr, Mary, Richard, and Grace all joined the church in time.

When Grace was a junior at Athens High School, she joined Bob Gunn's Sunday school class for high school and college students. Robert G. Stephens, Jr, a college freshman (and Presbyterian) from Atlanta, joined the class that same year. Their courtship lasted through his year as an exchange student in Germany (1935-36) and her teaching Home Economics for a year in Augusta (1937-38). Then they asked Dr. Hill to marry them.

As the wedding day approached, it was clear that Grace's parents' house was going to be packed full of relatives. Dr. Hill and his wife kindly invited her to stay at their house the night before the wedding. On July 20, 1938, a big crowd heard them take their vows and be declared man and wife.

Bob and Grace slipped out to get in his car and go to the Hills' to collect Grace's suitcase and begin their honeymoon. The car was hidden behind the house so as not to be found by Bob's KA fraternity brothers (including Grace's twin brother Richard). Indeed, while they were still upstairs, the boisterous crew arrived at the door, asking where the couple were. My mother reported later, "I don't know exactly what Dr. Hill said, but I think he must've come as close as he ever did to tellin' a lie." In any case, she and Bob were able to get out of town without having tin cans tied to their bumper or "newlyweds" written on the windshield.

Grace and Bob continued to be active in the church while Bob worked got his law degree. I was born early in 1941 and soon world events led to his enlistment into the army. My brother RGS III (Rob) was born in the fall of 1943. Our family moved around to different installations until Bob finished his last assignment, working on the legal staff at the Nuremberg trials. When, as Grace used to say, "we" got out of the army in 1946, we all returned to Athens (and the church) for good.

By this time my Winston grandfather had his own dairy farm outside of town on Newton Bridge Road. He offered my parents one of his tenant houses just a mile down the (unpaved, red clay) road. He may already have started serving as an elder at First Presbyterian. And he was the Sunday School Treasurer for forty years.

I was pretty young when I first sat in the pew with my parents and grandparents—the second pew on the left side in the middle facing the altar. Sometimes I had a book to

look at or a coloring book and crayons to use. Of course I had on a dress and wore patent leather shoes, and my mother and grandmother wore their best dresses and gloves and hats with veils.

When we were somewhat older, Rob and I were baptized by Dr. Hill at our house. (I don't know why this didn't happen at church) My parents and I were mystified as to why Rob kept staring at Dr. Hill instead of bowing his head as we had been told. Later we found out that Rob had confused the word "baptize" with the word "hypnotize" and had found that scary.

I remember my Sunday school teachers as a child—Miss Julia Walden and her sister Mrs. Audley Morton. I loved drawing pictures and reading children's versions of Bible stories.

In 1949 Dr. Hill retired from the ministry. I'm sure it was a surprise to me (an eight-year-old) that such a thing was possible! We soon had a new minister, Dr. Harmon Ramsey, who right away worked hard to get to know his new parishioners.

One Sunday my brother, my parents and I were in the tiny living room in our house up on the hill. The card table was up and we were playing a game of "Go Fishing" as we often did, before Daddy read us a chapter from Hurlbut's Story of the Bible. The telephone rang and my mother went to answer. She returned a few minutes later and mumbled something to Daddy, who swept the cards away and folded up the card table.

"What's the matter? Why do we have to quit playing?" we cried.

"Well," we were told, "some people think it's a sin to play cards on Sunday." Soon there was a knock on the door. We greeted Dr. Ramsey and had congenial conversation with him for maybe half an hour.

I don't remember if the card table came out again after he left. ("WE don't think it's a sin, but some people...") It still makes me laugh to imagine that our earnest and congenial Dr. Ramsey would have thought less of us for playing "Go Fishing" on Sunday.

In 1951 my baby sister Mary (now Mary Hopper) was born, and in 1954, my baby brother Lawton completed our family. They later joined us in the family pew.

When I entered Athens High School in 1955, I joined a new Sunday School class led by deacon Walter Danner. I appreciated the fact that he tried to make the lessons appropriate to our time of life and the new challenges we were facing. After graduating from Athens High School in 1959, and starting college at UGA, of course I began to attend the Westminster Fellowship on Sunday nights. The ministers there, Bill Rogers, Corky King, and, later, Roland Perdue had a profound effect on me, especially because of the huge social upheaval that we suddenly found ourselves involved in.

Two students from Atlanta, Charlayne Hunter and Hamilton Holmes, had graduated from high school at the same time I had, but they had not been accepted at UGA because they were African American. Our Westminster ministers asked us good questions about this—for example, their parents had been paying taxes for years, part of which had gone to support the state University. Was that fair? Their high school grades had been just as high as mine were. Was this just? Weren't we staunch Presbyterians supposedly good and fair people? Hmmmm..... We watched their case crawl through the courts.

They had been kept out for a year and one quarter when the case came to Athens where the UGA officials would be questioned. I didn't have a class that morning, so I went to sit in the gallery of the courtroom.

The first surprise I experienced was that the lawyer for the plaintiffs was Constance Baker Motley. I hadn't realized that a woman could be a lawyer, much less this very well-spoken, imposing black woman lawyer! The person being questioned was my former Sunday school teacher, Walter Danner. He took the oath to tell the truth, the whole truth, "so help me God," Mrs Motley said, "Mr Danner, have you ever, in your capacity as registrar of the University of Georgia, refused entry to the University solely on the basis of their race?"

And Walter Danner said, "No. That was never the reason."

I felt as though I had been struck by lightning. Was there some way he could THINK he was telling the truth? Surely he wouldn't have the nerve to lie under oath? But he had.

When the recess came and I got up and turned to the left to go out, I felt as though I were turning a literal corner. My Sunday school teacher, my church, my family were in the wrong. And I had to decide who I was going to be.....

Meanwhile my father had been elected to Congress from our 10th district. At some point he told us that as long as he voted against the Civil Rights Amendment, he could get re-elected, no matter how he voted on any other issue. This was embarrassing to me, but, given the men who had run against him, I sincerely believed that he was the most liberal candidate who could get elected to that office at that time. I knew that I should be conscientious in not calling attention to myself, signing any petitions, getting my name in the paper.

The two African American students were admitted to the University in the winter quarter of 1961. Corky King invited them to come to the PSC, and I was sitting next to them at an evening meal. I was afraid of Charlayne, who looked as though she had no use for me whatsoever (and why should she?). She decided to go to the Catholic Center instead. Hamilton looked miserable—I believe he never returned. Now I know that he spent as little time in Athens as possible and when he wasn't in classes, he kept to areas inhabited by African Americans. I think he rightfully feared for his life during those years.

In 1961 Harmon Ramsey retired.(I've been told that he thought we should welcome the black students and that he was over-ruled.) Bill Adams became our minister in 1962. Also that year more black students came to UGA and were welcomed at the Presbyterian student center. One of them was Harold Black. He lived in a dorm and was tortured most nights by guys banging on his door and otherwise harassing him.

It was easier for me now that my parents and younger siblings were in Washington DC. Instead of sitting in the family pew, I would sit with a group of other PSC students. One Sunday I actually walked into First Pres. with Beau May (whose father had made clear that he thought First Presbyterian was in the wrong on this issue) and other students with Harold Black in our midst.

Most of the church members pretended not to notice. But a few days later Harold reported that Dr. Adams had begged him not to come back. "This issue is tearing our church apart." I felt disgusted. Harold continued at the PSC, but did not go back to First Church. A story that circulated around that time was that one of the "prominent" church members had spoken to Beau's little sister, saying, "Why does your daddy like (n-word)s so much?" (To her credit, even today she will not reveal the name of that member.)

(I must say that, now that I'm in my 70's, I have much more sympathy with Walter Danner and Bill Adams. No matter what they did in that situation, a bunch of people were going to be mad. And Danner had two sons in college—He couldn't afford to lose to lose his job!

After college I went west. Of course my parents kept me up with First Presbyterian news. My mother was always involved in "women's work." And then --women could be elders! Naturally my mother was asked to be one. She was reluctant at first, thinking of her father. But then she accepted and, I'm sure, did a fine job. My father taught a Sunday School class, and later led a weekly Bible study at their home.

In 1983 Jack Dohany and I were married by Dr. Hasty. In 2001 we left California and retired to Athens. I once again sat in that same pew with my parents. I also went with my mother to Josephine Paine's Bible study, (more recently led by John Kipp.) And I have also loved being a member of Wanda Wilcox's Women's Sunday School class.

Now every Sunday I am glad to sit in the beautiful sanctuary along with other long-time members and members of color and people who know it's not crucial to "dress up" for church!