

First Missions – Miltown, Washington

First Missions – Pioneering Workers – Miltown, Washington

The Miltown, Washington Convention Story

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The Miltown, Washington Convention Story by Harold E. Silvernail

Mabel Sill's Story

The roots of a Christian Convention at **Miltown, Washington, U.S.A.**, go back to the British Isles and especially to the ministry of **John T. (Jack Carroll)**. Jack came to the U.S.A. through New York City's port in 1904 having left his native Ireland to preach the Gospel of Jesus Christ in America. He arrived in New York City in May, 1904 accompanied by his sister **Mae Carroll, Hugh and Charles Mathews, Sarah Rogers, and Charles Glen**. He soon found his way to the West Coast where he pioneered his gospel preaching in British Columbia and the coastal states of U.S.A.

Often Jack traveled in his homeless ministry between Vancouver, B.C. and the Washington cities of Tacoma, Seattle and Everett by train. Some trains stopped at nearly every small station. Jack was constantly on the alert for places to preach the gospel. The views from the train windows and conversations with passengers enhanced study of the communities the trains served.

As the train stopped at the Miltown Station, just eight miles south of Mount Vernon, he noticed a white school house on the hill since public schools were often available for community and public use including gospel meetings. The Miltown Community Center was located adjacent to the Pacific Coast Highway, the Great Northern Railroad and the South Fork of the Skagit River. It was obvious that two country stores served farming and lumbering enterprises, The farmland and the tree covered highlands were the backbones of the local economy. As the train moved north, the Conway-Fir Community came into view followed by the dairy and poultry Community of Cedardale.

Shortly after the 1909 Christian Convention in Vancouver, B.C., Canada, Jack Carroll made arrangements for two pairs of sister ministers to begin gospel meetings in the Cedardale and Miltown areas. Meetings had been previously held in Conway and Mount Vernon. **Esther Hanson**, who began in the ministry in California in 1906, and had also preached in some Oregon and Washington cities, teamed with **Maggie Marshall** to open gospel meetings in Cedardale in February 1910. Esther later preached many years in Scandinavia. It was in this mission that the Herman Benson family professed along with several others.

A little earlier, in December 1909, two young girls from the British Isles got off the train at Miltown with a few bags and cases—their total possessions. They were **Flo Davidson and Grace Douglas**. With baggage in hand they started walking east on the Miltown road toward the white, two-room school house on the hill a half mile away. They knocked on the school house door and were soon greeted by Mr. J. M. Weaver, the upper grades teacher and principal. His wife taught the lower four grades in the adjacent classroom.

After making their business known the ladies left for the nearby farm of William Starbird. Bill was the chairman of the three-member school board. They soon returned to the school with a note for the principal, and then were on their way to seek for lodging and also to visit homes in the area. When the ministers were gone from the school, Mr. Weaver put a message on the chalk boards of both classrooms as follows:

Notice to Parents

What:. Christian Gospel Meetings

When: Every night except Saturday

Where: Miltown School

Time: 7:30 P.M. Beginning January 10, 1910 Everyone Welcome.

The children made copies of the announcement to take home to their parents. Ellevine Lian, later Mrs. Lester Silvernail, was a student in Mr. Weaver's classroom and recalled the above knock on the school house door, along with the chalkboard notice, as if it were made yesterday.

The mission began as scheduled after New Years. The women ministers had visited many of the family homes in this predominately Scandinavian community. The meetings were well attended, in fact, most everyone in the area came to some meetings to join in the group singing and hear the sharp English and Irish brogue of the women ministers. The meetings were the talk of the area, as the gospel was preached clear and straight from the Bible.

This first of several missions in the Miltown area lasted six weeks, and before they closed many were moved to profess Christ. **The FIRST to take her stand for Christ was Mrs. Flora Silvernail**, a widow whose husband, Frederick, died suddenly in 1907 at age 48. She was burdened by her husband's loss and the assumption of the greater family responsibilities of seven children plus the

family shingle-lumber mill. Furthermore, the family was pressed to finish the construction of their new large home and barn. She was ready for the gospel when it came.

The second person to respond to the gospel was Emelia Lian, the eldest daughter of Syvert and Ellen Marie Lian. After these, many more accepted Christ as their Savior and King. Among those who are remembered to have professed in the original mission are: Flora Silvernail, Roy Silvernail, Wren Silvernail, Lester Silvernail, Fred Silvernail, Arthur Silvernail, Lula Silvernail, Maud Silvernail, Syvert Lian, Ellen Marie Lian, Elmar Lian, Emilia (Millie) Lian, Jewell McKinney, Mr and Mrs. J.M. Weaver, Mrs. George Mann, Eddie Nelson.

Later on gospel meetings were held in the old Pleasant Mill school house Just south of the Skagit-Snohomish county line east of Miltown. Still later meetings were held in the Silvernail home.

During this time Jack Carroll visited the community, as did his sister Mae. Both became well known by those who had professed as they continued to preach the gospel freely. A Sunday morning fellowship meeting was begun in the Silvernail home, while mid-week Bible study meetings were rotated among the homes of the believers.

In November 1909, a Christian Convention was held in Vancouver, B. C. The gospel had been prospering there. November 1910, the Miltown and Cedardale churches were invited to attend the Vancouver convention. Many of the U.S.A. friends attended, including converts from Everett, Seattle, Tacoma and other Washington areas. The Miltown church was well represented as the zeal for truth flourished. Three Miltown young men offered their lives for the ministry at that convention. They were: Jewell McKinney, Eimar Lian and Wren Silvernail. Eddie Cornick of British Columbia also began his ministry at this time.

When Flora Silvernail was about to return home from the convention, she, as others was spiritually inspired. She confronted Jack Carroll to ask if it could be possible for the U.S.A. friends to have a convention in their country where more could attend. She was told that it might be possible if a suitable location and facility could be located. She immediately offered the use of the family farm and their recently completed home and barn.

Arrangements were made later for the FIRST COVENTION AT Miltown, on the Silvernail farmstead for November 1911.

These early conventions were small. Meetings were held in the barn in the center Isle between the cow and horse stalls. It was in the 1911 convention that Ellevine Silvernail professed. She is 88 years old at this writing.

After two years of using the barn for the convention meetings, it became necessary to move into canvas tents to accommodate more people. The convention tents have occupied many locations on the farmstead until the present configuration was arranged.

Conventions have been held continuously at Miltown since 1911 until the present time, outliving the old town, the railroad station, the shopping and service area, the shingle and lumber mills and the little white school house on the hill. The Silvernail farm is now in the third generation of ownership, having a Conway telephone and a Stanwood mailing address. Only during the great influenza epidemic of 1918 and the Japanese War in 1942 were conventions not held. In the past 73 years the gospel has continued to flourish in N.W. Washington as in other areas of the state, and it has reached into at least five as in other generations.

In 1924, double conventions were held at Miltown to accommodate the people and probably continued until the Olympia convention began. Conventions had also begun early in Chelan, WA, in Moscow, Idaho and Dalton Gardens in Idaho. Some of the locations have been changed.

In the 1950's, double conventions began again and continue on an annual basis to this present date. Some information from senior ministers from overseas and our states indicate that Miltown convention may have one of the longest tenures on one site under one family name, but surely a site of the most total conventions, perhaps one hundred or more.

Conventions or their sites are not to be idolized; however, to many of us they are a memorial to our roots in Christ and our place of decision and surrender to God.

Miltown has another important memorial. It is a little cemetery* one-half mile west of the convention grounds on the Miltown Road where many friends in the church and several workers are buried. The ministers grave markers remind us of the price of our salvation. They left their homes in Ireland. Scotland. Tasmania and Greece to preach the word and feed the flock. For these memorials we are indeed grateful.

These data were collected and written by Harold E. Silvernail, 1984.

* The name of the cemetery is Fir-Conway Lutheran Cemetery, Mount Vernon, Washington USA. It is located on the same road and down about a 1/2 mile from the Miltown Convention. Graves of various workers, ex-workers and friends are scattered throughout the cemetery. Their names are Linda Heyes (possibly the first worker to be buried there in 1943), John Vint, Jack Carroll, Anton Koutsourells (a visiting worker from Greece who died during the Washington convention times in 1981) Sydney Holt, 3 sisters, Jennell, Lilly, and Mary Wetzel. Shirley (Almondson) Huddle, Mary Hasper, Elena (Urquidi) Loss, Harry Brownlee, Wren Silvernail, Irene Bement, Charlotte Brown, Dorothy Wright, Jewell Mc Kenney, James Vaughan, his wife, Nellie (Marihugh) Vaughan, Norman Dalrymple, his wife Emily (Rozema) Dalrymple, Irene Bement and perhaps others. This cemetery may possibly have the most workers, ex-workers and friends buried there than any other cemetery.

Mabel Sill's Story

May 6, 1976

Sometime ago you wrote asking me to send you an account of how and when I heard the gospel. I am sorry to have been so tardy in doing this. The lady of the house and my companion are taking a nap so I decided now the opportunity is at hand to comply with your request.

It was in September, 1912 that I went to Clinton, Washington, a small community, to begin teaching. My home was in Coupeville, a small town on Whidby Island. All travel at that time was by boat (steam boat) as no bridges joining with the mainland had been built yet, still in the planning stages. Of course it was necessary to have a boarding and rooming place arranged for the school term. Hence I went down to Clinton a week before school was to start so to be settled.

When I left the boat at the dock at Clinton, I had over two miles to walk to the site of the school. There was a grocery store at the end of the dock. I decided that might be a good place to inquire about a place to live and board for the school term. The grocery man was very friendly. When I inquired where the teachers usually boarded he told me of a Mrs. Kingsley, a widow who had two teen age daughters and had always boarded the teachers, and he was sure I would find it a very satisfactory place also. But he wanted to tell me something further.

After the school term ended in May, 1912, 2 ladies came to inquire about getting the use of the school for some Bible Talks. They were not affiliated with any denomination and had no literature, etc., apart from the Bible, no creed but Christ, and were seeking to bring the gospel in the very manner as Jesus and those whom He called and sent forth to preach the gospel in the first century. They held services there through the months of June, July and August. The meetings were well attended and quite a number began to follow what they lived and taught.

Now those preachers are not here any longer, but they continue to have meetings in Mrs. Kingsley's home each Sunday a. m. and Wednesday evening whether the preachers would be present or not, and then he added, "They all pray and preach, and you better look out, they'll get you." I thanked him for taking the time to give me that information, and I thought to myself, "They'll not get me."

I went on up the road wondering what might open up for me. I didn't go to Mrs. Kingsley's home, but inquired at every home but hers regarding a place to stay. Not one home was available for one so-called reason or another. I returned home on the evening boat and told my mother about my day. She said I couldn't give up too soon, something would open up for me as I had to have a place to stay. I then packed up my possessions and returned to Clinton the following week.

When I told my mother of what the man at the grocery store had told me about the meetings in the home now, etc., my mother said, "What is that thing on your shoulders? You are going out into the world now to make your living, you need to do your own thinking and not allow others to persuade you." That made me realize I would need to be cautious and not let them persuade me against my own conviction.

When I went back to Kingsley's I would be very cautious not to be there for weekends. They never talked to me about what they believed. They were waiting for me to ask them. One Saturday was very stormy, and I didn't feel like venturing out, so decided to stay where I was. In the afternoon I was moved to ask them what they believed and how they heard the gospel. They went back to the time the workers came and how different they were from any other preachers they had ever met before. They had gone out to preach in the very same way as Jesus and as the first 12 and then the 70, leaving their homes, means of livelihood, etc. to give the gospel freely. No collections, salaries, etc. No denominational name, only in Jesus' name and manner of bringing the gospel. They didn't go to any school nor seminary to be taught of man, but to be taught of God as would fulfill His conditions, etc.

I told them such couldn't be done now. That was for the time when Jesus was upon the earth, etc. They had an answer from the Bible for everything I asked. I kept my Bible hidden in my trunk so they wouldn't see that I was interested.

I went there the following weekend so to unpack and get settled. On Sunday morning Mrs. Kingsley told me there would be a meeting in the home, and I would be very welcome to attend. There would be a number of parents present of the children I would be teaching, and she felt I would like to meet them and they would also like to meet me. She was so gracious in inviting me in that manner, and I felt I couldn't be rude in refusing the invitation.

Already I perceived that they were different from any so-called Christians I had ever met before. There was such harmony among them and I could see they had something that made them give evidence that they had something I didn't have and gave me a desire to find out what they had. I was in the a. m. Sunday meeting. As they prayed one by one and spoke one by one I realized they knew the Lord. Then I attended each Sunday a.m. meeting after that, also study meetings, but as yet no questions being asked.

My bedroom was above the sitting room, and there was a transom in the floor above the heater in the living room. I could hear their conversations, singing, reading letters from the workers, etc. This was creating more and more confidence in them and wanting to know more how they obtained it. The following Saturday the girls cleaned up the house in preparation for the meeting, and did their baking for Sunday, etc., then disappeared. This surprised me. I was curious to know where they had gone. Finally I mustered up the courage to peek through the keyhole, as their door was closed. I saw them on their knees beside the bed and they had their Bibles opened before them. Then I knew where they received what they possessed.

So that afternoon I had courage to inquire more of what they possessed, etc., and was more concerned about how I could possess the same. I continued going to their Sunday a.m. and Wednesday night meetings, and was becoming more concerned.

By that time there were no gospel meetings available, as workers had gone to Milltown to prepare for convention. So they encouraged me to plan on attending the convention and meeting God's servants and people and hearing how I could get to know God for myself. I decided to do so. Of course I could only get there in time for Saturday night gospel meeting and would need to return Sunday afternoon. I would need to travel by boat part way, across to the mainland to get the train for Milltown from Everett.

When I boarded the boat who should be on the boat but my sister, who was going to Everett to get her eyes tested, as she was having headaches. I told her what my plans were but as she was alone I could cancel my plans and go with her. She replied, "You will not go one step with me as Mother has always taught us that when we give our word to others never to go back on such."

I was wanting to go to the convention, but yet fearing I might not be welcome, as I knew only Mrs. Kingsley and the girls, so would have to make other plans regarding going. Finally I decided to go to the railway depot half an hour late for the train to depart. This I did. I went to the depot and found a notice on the bulletin board, "Northbound train 1 hour late." So I decided the Lord wanted me to go, as the boat from Everett was gone by that time. I met a number of the friends in the depot who were waiting for the train. They were so friendly, and told me how glad everyone would be and myself included to be there.

When the train reached Milltown the girls were there to meet me. We walked up to the grounds, half a mile away. Had supper, then gospel meeting. A sister worker spoke first and I enjoyed that as she didn't say anything to ruffle me, but a brother worker spoke next, and he surely revealed how I stood before God, and I concluded the Kingsley's had informed him all about me, and it surely provoked me.

After the meeting the younger girl (Cora) asked me how I enjoyed the meeting. I asked her why she asked me that question. I told her she had a lot to do to go ahead and tell him all about me. How could he speak as he did if he had not received some inside information. Then she replied, "You have been listening to preachers in the past who had not been sent of God and did not have God's message. But these preachers are different. They have been sent by God, and God who sees and knows the hearts of each person gives them a message to meet the needs of each present."

Then I said, "Then you mean to say that what he had spoken was given him from God?" She replied, "Definitely," and quoted Heb. 4:12&13 to me. That closed my mouth, and I marveled that she was so well acquainted with what the Scriptures teach. So I said to her, "Well, if what I heard him speak was given to him from God I want to listen."

I left convention, realizing God had revealed to me what is right, and with confidence that which I was hearing being from God, and that was what I wanted to observe and follow. Shortly after **May Carroll and Florence Davidson** came to have some meetings in a school house near where I was teaching, and there was where I made my choice to be a disciple of Jesus Christ no matter what it would mean or cost. That was the beginning of life indeed.

When I told my mother of the choice I had made she immediately said, "You've gone and done what I told you not to do, let others persuade you to make that decision." I told her, "No, it was God who had spoken to my heart and moved me to choose as I had and I had opened my mouth unto the Lord and could and would not go back upon it." I soon found out that my foes were those of my own household. My mother burned my hymn book, and told me my Bible would go the same way if I was found reading it.

The school term ended, and I knew I would have no fellowship, as there were no friends near home. I heard that **Jack Carroll** and his companion were planning to have meetings in Bellingham, where I had gone to college, so I would just change my plans for the summer and take a course in summer school, and take a light course, so as to be able to attend all the meetings. My mother didn't know what was behind my change of plans. Anyway it was all right as long as I was going to school.

I got to every meeting, and oh how wonderful it was. Then 2 sisters came to finish the mission, and I spent a lot of time with them. What a blessing that was to me. The result was that there was a vacancy among the workers, as one of the girls (May's companion) was ill, and that opened up the way for me to become her companion on November 4, 1913.

I went home to bid my mother goodbye and tell her of my plans. She was furious, as she felt that was the worst thing that could take place. She wouldn't bid me goodbye. She said she would rather be going to my funeral and seeing my body put into the grave than to see me going out to preach in such a manner. I didn't hear from her for over 2 years, but I wrote about the meetings and how happy I was to have a life to give unto the Lord in seeking to introduce others to Christ that they might get to know the joy of having Him as their Lord and Master.

To make a long story short it was 7 years after I went forth before I had a real visit at home. I wasn't free to take my companion with me as yet. No sooner had I taken off my coat and hat than she'd asked me if I would have some meetings in the home if she would invite the neighbors in to hear. That was quite a request, knowing how she had spoken against the choice I had made, etc. But I felt she must be wanting to hear for herself, too, and although I couldn't have my companion, I had the promise that I would have God, His Son and Holy Spirit to be with me and help me to give utterance to the gospel. She listened so well and was so very kind to me and eager to learn. One evening while I was speaking she stood to her feet and said, "It is Christ for me tonight no matter what it may mean or cost." That was like music to my ears, as she knew so well how much opposition I had, etc., when I made my choice.

The next morning I wrote to **Jack Carroll** to tell him of her decision and that I could hardly believe it. But she surely did and she had a lot of opposition from her own son, but it didn't alter her decision, as she was finding such joy in serving the Lord. She had the privilege of having the Sunday morning meetings in her home and Bible study on Wednesday evenings for 17 years before she died, and oh how she loved that. I was with her when she had her last stroke, and before she went into a coma, she took my hand and said, "Oh, Mabel, I am so glad you didn't let me nor the rest of the family keep you from being true to the choice you had made. Where would I be now if you had? Now I have the assurance of going to be with Christ. You keep faithful and don't ever give up preaching the gospel. I know there are others in the world who are like I was, who can be brought to know Christ also." That has stayed with me and has encouraged me to value my privilege of giving the gospel message still that they may hear and receive Christ, and I surely look to be one whom the Lord can trust.

I could write on and on, but don't want to weary you. But I certainly thank God for the privilege that has been mine for nearly 63 years to seek to be as a voice crying in the wilderness, "Prepare ye the way of the Lord." I feel so unworthy of such, and do pray to be more diligent in doing my part that God will entrust me with a message to those who are seeking to know Him.