On the last weekend of October, a little church on Wilkinson Road was extra crowded when its parishioners celebrated an event to which they had long looked forward, for on Oct. 27, 1913, the building in which they worshipped had first opened, and now they were celebrating its

DAILY COLONIST "ISLANDER"

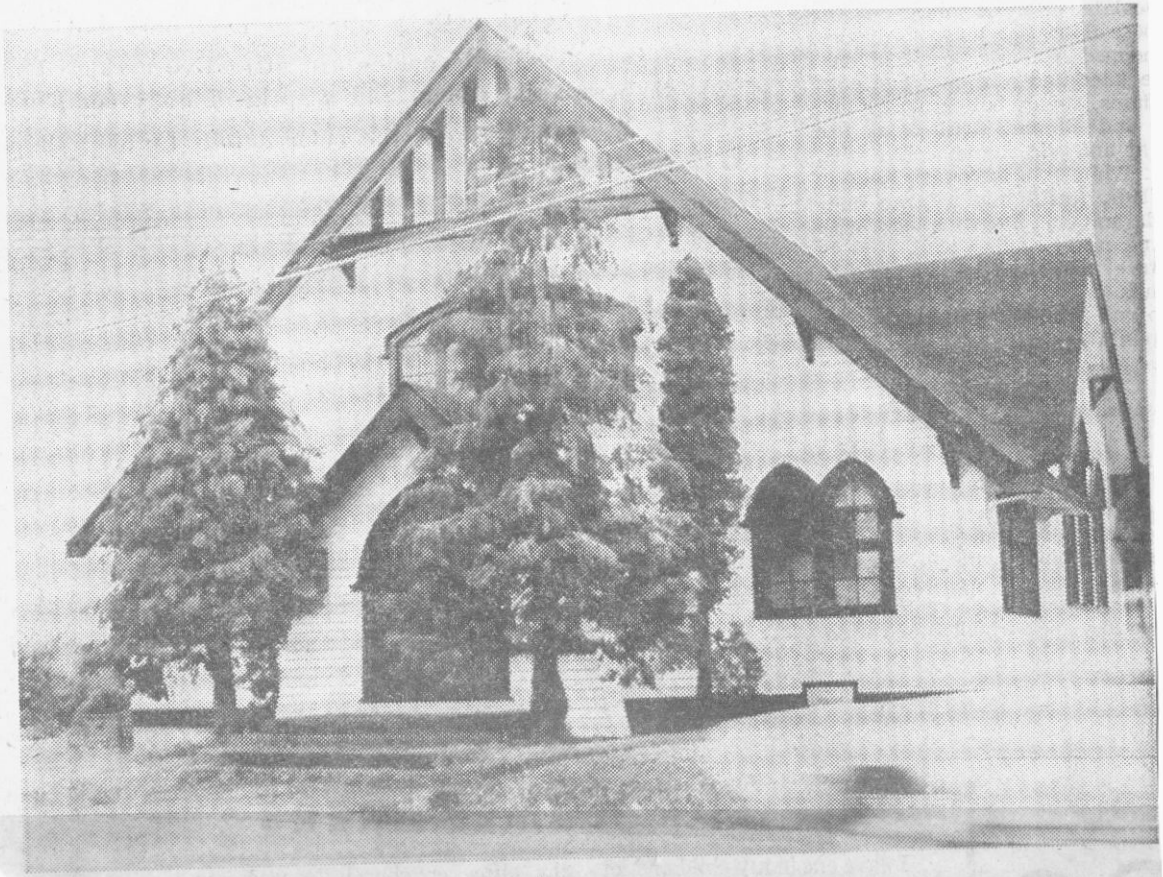
DIAMOND JUBILEE

4050 Cary Rd

The church in question is known as the Wilkinson Road United Church of Canada. In the old days, however, it was first known as the Strawberry Vale Church until in May of 1914, when it was agreed that it be known as Wilkinson Road Methodist Church. Following church union in 1925, it took its present name.

Though the congregation of the church has been celebrating the 60th anniversary, the parish goes considerably further back in time than that. Indeed, there is a tradition that the work of the Methodist Church in the district was first begun by Mrs. Ernest Etheridge, who started a Sunday School in her home at Royal Oak.

Subsequent to the Sunday School, prayer and preaching meetings were held in the Luscombe kitchen on Wilkinson Road. Here Wellington J. Dowler, long-time clerk to the City of Victoria; Robert Clark, an English engineer, and Leonard Tate all served as preachers to the growing congregation.



Wilkinson Road United Church, built in 1913.

DEC. 2, 1973

That little congregation was certainly a growing one for before too long it became obvious that the Luscombe kitchen was no longer the answer. There were just too many people anxious to attend the services, and with the best will in the world walls cannot be stretched. However, Will Luscombe was a generous man. Since his kitchen was too small, he offered to donate land on which to build a church, but he added the proviso that the people should come to his assistance for he wanted no part in a church building which was not free from debt.

The Methodist community on Wilkinson Road and Strawberry Vale may have been struggling, but they certainly attracted men who were in a position to ease that struggle somewhat.

One such man was Noah Shakespeare who was Victoria's postmaster toward the end of the last century. Noah Shakespeare has been called the father of the Wilkinson Road Church, and certainly he seems to have been on hand just when he was most needed. It was he who, together with Arthur Lee, had the bright idea of getting up an excursion for the Methodist Sunday Schools in Victoria to ride on the recently opened Victoria and Sidney Railway, and incidentally this was the first such excursion on the V. and S.

This railway trip which would have been so new and unusual to the passengers, was also more than successful from the financial standpoint. When it was over, its sponsors found they had $400. This money was forthwith turned over to the new church committee which at the time consisted of Messrs. Powell, Noah Shakespeare, Will Luscombe, and Arthur Lee.

With this nest egg in hand, the building of the church went ahead, and one may be sure that that building was mainly done by volunteer labor. The building which was on the other side of the Wilkinson Road and closer to Royal Oak than the present church, was finished and dedicated in September, 1894.

An early church membership list of 1891 contained the following names: Elizabeth Daniels, John Tway, Annie Tway and Jane Dodd. Other names of that era would have included Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Luscombe, and Ernest Etheridge and his wife Effie. Later on, other names were added such as the Sprinklings, the George McMorrans, and the two Jones families, to name a few. The area around the Wilkinson Road which is still largely rural was, of course, even more so in those early days. It was indeed the time of the horse and buggy and of poor roads full of ruts and mud puddles.

Yet, all the mud puddles and swirls of country dust must have been forgotten on that late September afternoon in 1894 when the little congregation gathered together for the consecration of its first church. A church to boot which opened free of debt. The Daily Colonist of Sept. 26, 1894, reported in part: "The new Methodist Church in Strawberry Vale district will be formally open on Sunday next. Services are to be held at 10:30 a.m. and 2:30 p.m. Rev. James Turner of Victoria West officiating in the morning, and Rev. Solomon Cleaver in the afternoon." The Colonist went on to say that "The Church is a neat little building facing the Winkinson Road . . . free of all debt."

Men's Bible Class, 1920. Back row, left to right: W. Hodgson, A. Allison, O. Sherk, R. Maguire, Dearborn, Jack Houghton. Second row, left to right: W. Jewell, H. S. Pringle, C. W. Williams, G. Jones, Rev. D. M. Perley, J. Maguire and S. Jones. Front row, left to right: J. W. Pimlott, E. Orr, D. Lehman and R. Lytle.

As stated earlier, the nucleous of the new Church had its beginnings in Effie Etheridge's Sunday School class, and later that class moved from the Etheridge kitchen to the Sutherland kitchen where 20 children attended, and Mr. Sutherland also acted as Sunday School superintendent.

By the time the first church was built, the Sunday School was in a very flourishing condition indeed. From old records we learn that the First Annual Meeting of the Strawberry Vale Sunday School took place Nov. 1, 1894. The president, Rev. Ashton, took the chair. At that meeting it was decided that a special meeting would be held

By MARGARET BELFORD

on the following Wednesday at Mrs. Etheridge's home for the purpose of arranging Christmas Entertainment for the children.

What a pity it is that, at this point, two pages of the old book have been stuck together, so we are left wondering what decisions were reached so long ago as to a suitable entertainment for the children. We do learn, however, that Mrs. Etheridge, Miss Etheridge, Mrs. Luscombe, and Miss I. Aubin formed a committee for "the reception of the provisions and the soliciting of cakes, etc."

Now here on Dec. 10 is good news indeed. the children, it seems, are going to be treated to "a Steropticon Exhibition." Does anybody know what a steropticon exhibition is? It sounds very grand indeed, and I have an idea that it may have been a sort of magic lantern show. Be that as it may, on Dec. 16 there is another note to the effect that a Mr. Clark triumphantly reports he has seen "Mr. Shakespeare who has promised to give a Steropticon exhibition on the occasion of our entertainment."

At the same time it was agreed that the date of the entertainment be fixed for Wednesday, Jan. 9, 1895. It was also agreed that Mrs. Etheridge should buy a ham (she always seems to have done the catering), and by Dec. 31 it was further decided that the secretary should prepare handbills, notices and tickets for the great occasion. Books were also to be bought as prizes and I believe the sum of two dollars and fifty cents was allowed for this.

Alas, with everything going so well, a note of calamity was sounded at another special meeting on Jan. 6—just three days short of the great event. The meeting was called to consider "the advisability of postponing the entertainment owing to the snow, Mr. Shakespeare being unable to come out."

Oh dear, just when we are all excited about the steropticon show! Is there anyone still around the area who can remember as a little girl or boy the keen disappointment they must have felt on that occasion? True, the powers-that-be did hold a "tea-meeting for children, parents anl teachers," but the Steropticon Exhibition was postponed indifinitely. Later, I discovered that it was at one time proposed to be held on March 5, 1895, and surely the weather must have been better by then. However, we shall never know, for search as we may there is not another whisper about that famous Steropticon Exhibition.

Beside the ongoing work of the church, there were many other pleasant events in those long ago days. Socials, concerts and picnics. Those were certainly good days when neighbors and friends gathered together in friendship and mutual aid. A good deal better than huddling around the "boob tube" as so many of us do nowadays.

The Sunday School picnic seems to have been one of the outstanding events of each year. In the early years the date varied, somtimes being held in July and sometimes in August. Also, the picnic's venue varied from year to year. In 1902, for instance, the picnic was held on "Mr. Turner's rocks." I was interested as to the whereabouts of Mr. Turner's rocks, and much more than interested when I found somebody who could tell me just where those rocks still stand.

In later years, I have it on good authority from Mrs. Dorothy Hackett, herself a granddaughter of Mrs. Ernest Etheridge, that when she was a child the Sunday School picnics were always held on July 1. The pupils, of which she was one, used to ride in Sam Jones' hay wagon—Uncle Sam, they all called him—and he used to drive them down to the beach at Cordova Bay where the annual picnic was held.

Dorothy Hackett has other memories of her grandparents, Ernest and Effie Etheridge. Her grandfather, she recalls, was a well-known cabinet maker who worked for Rattenbury's firm. Thus it was Ernest Etheridge who carved the throne chair in the legislature. His granddaughter remembers with pride that it also fell to his lot to order the glass for the legislature windows which was being procured from England. It was a matter of family pride that when that glass arrived it was not one inch out of true.

But this takes us somewhat away from the place which at the opening of the present church in 1913 was spoken of as "only a little church in the woods. "It may have been only a little church but it was a place of godliness and endeavor.

There must be something very satisfactory when a group, not by any means over-blessed with wealth, can yet grow from strength to strength, and somehow always manage to get by.

Sometime early in this present century, the church members decided that perhaps the time had come for them to be self-supporting. This meant paying for their own minister, but the Wilkinson Road board felt that they would probably be able to pay a single man, a probationer studying for the ministry. Imagine their dismay when the Conference appointed to them a married man with a family!

This was presented to them as a fait accompli and they simply had no home to offer a family. However, they had no intention of collapsing under this problem. With the feeling that they would provide, no matter how, they scraped around and bought a parsonage and even managed to find furniture to put in it by the time the new pastor and his family arrived.

When the present church was built in 1913, Mrs. Charlie Jones of Glyn Farm, donated the land for the church. She made one stipulation, however, and that was that a particularly fine oak tree which stood on the property was not to be cut down. Her wishes were obeyed, and for many years that old tree spread its sheltering branches beside the building. It was not until 1957 that old age got the better of, and for safety's sake it had to be removed.

Nothing ever seems to have been an impossibility to this congregation. By 1914, with increased building in the Garden City area, it quickly became apparent that the new Wilkinson Road Church was not going to offer sufficient space. So, in just one day, on Sept. 14, 1914, the Garden City Church was built by volunteer labor. They didn't waste any time that day! True, the church remained a shell until the inside was completed in 1922, however it was in constant use all those years.

The work of the women of this parish began long before the present church was built. As witness Mrs. Etheridge and her Sunday School, and all the other well-loved and remembered women who gave so willingly of their time and energies. Indeed, it is now thought that the influence of that group of devoted women was what really shaped the early life of the church.

So the Wilkinson Road United Church remains as united as when the first small band of workers raised the first little church. They can look back with pride to their years of service, as they look forward with hope to the future. Perhaps the following quotation found in a treasurer's book from the early days best typifies their devotion and determination—"Got any rivers you say are impassable—got any mountains you wish to cut through? We specialize in doing the wholly impossible—in doing the things others can't do."

Written under this verse is the statement—"And we did it." Then, in brackets, "Paying for the furnace."