

Treasures from the Archives

Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda

Charlotte Innerd

(presented by Sue Markham)

with a contribution by Carol Hylton

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When Carol approached me about helping with the library and archives at Olinda, I was excited. This was not the first time and I had been involved with them, having previously helped with Louise Foulds, Sheron Campbell, and Gypsy Carroll. I love the history of this church and there is a lot of documentation about this community. While I find it endless fascinating, I realize that not everyone will have the same enthusiasm about the intricacies of managing this heritage or even the details of the history. Today, I want to leave you with an understanding of what the Library and Archives Committee is doing and some interesting insights into the history of our congregation and what it says about this church and our theology.

I am going to do this through the lens of three rites that we perform in churches. These are not unique to UUism or to Olinda but I will talk about them in the context of Olinda. I have in various contexts explored the meaning of these rites and hope you will find it interesting. The first rite, is the laying on of hands. In this ancient tradition, we ordain and install our ministers. There is a physical laying on of hands as they are charged with the sacred duty of ministry. For me, this important rite also occurs when we have a child dedication and welcome a child into our community. And when we greet each other at the door, in happiness and in grief. I also feel this when I work with our archives and I touch and read the documents created by those who started and kept this community going. It is an honour and a delight to be able to read the words and learn what our forebears were thinking and what they accomplished by touching the relics that record their lives and activities. We are very fortunate at Olinda that the records of this community have been preserved through the

years. We know who started this congregation, we have their minutes, their ledgers – we know how they spent their money, an indicator of where their values were.

As Carol, Sue and I started working on the archives, the first thing that became apparent was how much we had!! I thank the Board for agreeing to us having the closet at the end of the hall and for purchasing a filing cabinet for us. Thanks to John and Laurie for making sure it was level (a historic church means the floors have a certain charm, but are always uneven.) There's now a four-drawer vertical filing cabinet and two small two-drawer horizontal cabinets at the end of the closet. I think we were all surprised when we almost filled the cabinets to the brim! Having them in boxes in the second bedroom closet hid the full extent of the collection. In transferring the items, we put the documents into acid-free archival grade folders. I have also been scanning these in so that we have an electronic copy should anything be damaged or lost.

As we worked on transferring the material, we realized what a great debt of gratitude to those who came before us. Primarily Louise Foulds but also Sheron Campbell and Gypsy Carroll. Louise did a mountain of work identifying items and people and we can see her imprint throughout the records as well of course as her written history. Sheron put together fabulous scrapbooks where she identified events and people. I will come back to these scrapbooks shortly.

It is important that we continue to maintain and care for these documents, but also that we periodically bring them out and share with the congregation so you can see the continuity with our ancestors.

This leads to the second rite that we have in our church. The rite of storytelling. Storytelling is a long tradition, and when we tell stories over and over again to each other, it is to pass on the knowledge and traditions of this community. It tells us who we are and why and how our theology

has changed over time. We are especially fortunate to be in a tradition which values and honours that change.

I started attending Olinda when I was 6 years old and tomorrow, I will be 48. As I worked through the archives, I was reminded of people and events from throughout those 42 years. I was struck by how close we are to the people who founded this church and how many stories there are through the years.

I have selected a few items to share some of those stories briefly. And only a few because there are some many different items in the archives that I would love to share with you, each with a unique history and insight into life at Olinda. I hope this will add to or remind you of the history of Olinda and also give you an idea of what we have.

We have all the minutes of the congregation and the Universalist Convention. For many years, recorded in handwriting in Minute books.

We also have all the ledgers and financial documents. Again, the ledgers being in hand recorded in ledger books. One of my favourites is the Universalist Convention ledger book. The ledger book that we had covers the period 1901 to 1994. That's right, I said book. It is all contained in one book, with pages to spare I might add! And George Whaley was the Treasurer from 1938 to 1994 so most of the entries are his.

I also mentioned the scrapbooks that Sheron put together. She did a marvelous job of putting these together, weaving together the story of Olinda. Unfortunately, there were two drawbacks to this, one is that the scrapbooks contained the original and often only copy of the documents or photos. The second being that the pages she used were not archival quality and were starting to fall apart. I wanted to preserve her work so I scanned all the pages and photocopied them as well. This preserving all her work. We have put the photos into archival quality envelopes and in an archival box with labels. We are now working on typing the labels up

into a finding aid. What I produced was this binder that people can go through to view copies of the original documents and see the stories through time. It is still in progress.

I picked three items of the many in the scrapbooks to highlight. I dearly remember Florence Dresser and sitting and talking to her after service. It was a treasure therefore, to see postcards sent by her from New Jersey in 1920 (page 52). She was there as part of a YPCU event – Young People’s Christian Union of the Universalist Church. We also have her Daily Bible Readings card from September and October 1920.

Then there are the documents starting in 1920 calling into question whether Universalist ministers marriages are legal, though the real question was whether the marriage performed by Rev. Martha Jones – a woman! – was legal, even though it was performed with her husband Rev Leon Jones. It was eventually established that Universalist Male ministers could perform legal marriages.

We have a series of letters between Mrs. Rubi Stotts, one of the founding members and Mrs. Dresser from 1954 to 1958. She was answering specific questions about the founding of the church and its early organization. She was 93 in 1958.

Through these documents, we can trace the changes in our theology. There is another way that we can do that as well, and this leads to the third rite that I wanted to discuss, and that is music. Who can imagine a service without music.

It is clear through the archives that this is true throughout our history. One of the things I did was look through and identify what hymnbooks we have and we have a great historical, and well loved, collection of hymnbooks, many of them Universalist hymnbooks, hymnbooks in our own tradition. These are fascinating to look at to see what has and hasn’t

changed about our theology. Though I will say a lot has changed, it is also obvious how we are connected to our past.

We know this was an important part of life throughout our history and we even have a photo of the first organist, the very same Mrs. Rubie Stotts whose letters I talked about earlier. Carol is working on a list of all the musicians at Olinda so that we have a record.

I'm now going to invite Carol forward as she has a special donation that she is making to Olinda.

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[Carol Hylton]

I am at the time in my life that I have been looking to find a new home for possessions that have some sentimental value. One of those items is a gold-plated pocket watch which I have had for probably 50 years and I have worn it a few times. It was originally presented to my grandmother in 1902 for playing the organ here at the Church.

I finally came up with the idea of giving the watch back to the Church in recognition of all our musicians over the years. The watch has been placed in a picture frame to be displayed along with some other sentimental items on the wall between our two entrance doors. I will read the inscription that accompanies this watch.

**This gold-plated watch was gifted to
Esther (Peterson) Longland, who played
the organ for this Church. Inscribed on
the outer cover "Esther" and inside:**

Presented By

Church of our Savior

December 25, 1902

*This watch is a symbol of appreciation
of all the past and present musicians of the
Unitarian Universalist Church of Olinda
November, 2022*

I thank all our musicians. Carol Hylton