

HISTORY MINUTE

Presented by Edward Spannus

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The Tobler Ministry: Through the Great Depression and World War II



We continue today our discussion of the ministry of Aaron and Viola Tobler, from 1927 to 1945—the years of the Great Depression and the Second World War. By all accounts, he was one of the "greats," and one of our most beloved and favorably-remembered pastor-and-wife teams.

Pastor Kretsinger says that the Toblers made us "more Lutheran." For example, they transformed the sanctuary than a year, and in part if he stayed less than three years.

They needn't have worried. The Toblers were here for 18 years: through the economic hardships of the Depression, the shared sacrifices of the war period, and some very bad weather, according to Mrs. Tobler's diary.

Their grand-daughter told me that Pastor Tobler wanted to devote his life to serving the church in rural areas. He entered the ministry in 1913, at Gladesboro church in Carroll County, southwest Virginia, and then in 1918 was called to the Cripple Creek parish in adjacent Wythe County, where he served until 1925. In 1925, he then went to the Gravel Creek parish, near Winchester, where Christian Streit (the first chaplain in the Revolutionary War) and Abraham Reck (who was here right before Reverend Daniel Hauer, around 1831) had both served.

Pastor Tobler was installed at New Jerusalem on October 17, 1927. He opened his first Council meeting with the 46th Psalm—a very "Lutheran" thing to do, as that Psalm provided the scriptural inspiration for Martin Luther's signature hymn, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God."

Viola Tobler's diary not only chronicles their joint ministry at this parish, but also reflects events in the community, and in the world at large, during those tumultuous years. One of the first community events, was Pastor Tobler attending the dedication of the historic marker in Hillsboro honoring Susan Koerner, the mother of the Wright Brothers (whose parents were married here at New Jerusalem). She notes movies she has seen, and books she has read, as well as both their avid interest in baseball, and at least her interest in prize fights—with entries such as Max Schmeling knocking out Joe Louis in 1936.

She followed the Lindberg kidnapping case closely, was upset by the "show trial," and even more upset by the death sentence. A number of entries reflect her opposition to the death penalty.

Here's a sampling of her diary entries:

1932 – sanctuary reconfiguration – altar-centered, stain-glassed windows, new altar, the altar painting, new pulpit, lectern, and baptismal font (the same ones we still have today); new organ, painting and redecorating – all in middle of the Depression!

1933 – husband Aaron and son Paul took train to D.C. for FDR's inaugural; Decoration Day services with guest preacher; A.F.'s salary reduced to \$1,500.

1934 – Feb. 13, Nina Hickman brings her an unusual valentine—a big beef's heart. Feb. 14, "Cooked my valentine." July 13, spent day at Legards, enjoyed "Pete" and "Bobby." Big celebration in Brunswick for the end of the tolls on Lovettsville bridge.

1935 – Lindberg/Hauptmann "show" trial, distressed over death sentence; execution of another convict in Richmond, "I don't believe in killing anybody." Delegation goes to Leesburg to protest saloon license in Lovettsville.

1936 – Floods in Johnstown, Pittsburgh, Potomac River rising rapidly, electricity and telephone serviced out, bridges at Harpers Ferry and Point of Rocks washed out; FDR election landslide.

1937 – May 30, Union Cemetery beautiful for Decoration Day, garden of peonies ... 10th anniversary of A.F.'s ministry in Lovettsville, congregation raised the money to pay off salary arrears.

1938 – Open House as telephone dial system begins in Lovettsville.

1940 – Aug. 31 plane crash near Lovettsville.

1941 – New windows for Sunday School and tower; Dec. 8, declaration of war on Japan.

1942-43 – Wartime: meeting at High School for air raid defense; Toblers man Observation Post overnight many times; blackouts; help with registration for ration books.

1944 – June 6 "Invasion Day" special service, "no way to describe feelings."

1945 – Council approves, then rejects A.F. become acting Post Master while Berkeley Baker serves in armed forces; rejection very distressing and troubling; 4/6 Tower Cross; 5/8 VE services, "splendid attendance; after VJ Day, world-wide communion services on 10/7.

On Sept. 16, 1945, about a month after Japan surrendered, Pastor Tobler submitted his resignation, to take effect five weeks later. Now, I can't help but think that he had wanted to go back to his home in southwest Virginia, but felt he should stick it out with this congregation until the end of the war. His last service here was on October 21; he preached again his first sermon from 1927. The last hymn was "Now Thank We All Our God"—sometimes known as "the German Te Deum." Viola's diary entry for Oct. 24 was "Moving Day! ... Farewell, a long farewell, to folks we've loved more than they knew."

The Toblers returned to Cripple Creek, where Pastor Tobler was active in the ministry until 1956. Aaron passed away on March 6, 1965; Viola returned to Lovettsville in October of that year for our 200th Anniversary celebration. She passed away in 1986, and both are buried in the Gladesboro Lutheran Church cemetery in Carroll County, Virginia.

*Reverend Willard Saltzgeber went on to a successful fifteen-year ministry at St. Mary's Lutheran Church, Silver Run, Carroll County, Maryland. Perhaps he just wanted to be closer to his home town of Jefferson in York County, Pennsylvania, which was only about 20 miles from Silver Run.