

John L. Lenhart, Chaplain of the Cumberland

by Charles Berkheimer, 1966

Editor's Note: Rev. Charles F. Berkheimer (1896-1968) served charges in the Central Pennsylvania Conference from 1918 until his retirement in 1962, at which time he volunteered to serve as Conference Historian and Librarian. A conscientious researcher and a superb writer, he has given future generations a treasure store of articles and information that save for his dedication might have been forever lost. The Methodist Collection in the archives has been named in his honor, and the 1993 volume of THE CHRONICLE was dedicated in his memory.

The June 19, 1924, *Washington Christian Advocate* presented a series of accounts of heroic chaplains. The following paragraphs tell the story of Rev. John L. Lenhart (1805-1862), the first chaplain to lose his life in the Civil War. What the paragraphs fail to tell is his relationship to the Central Pennsylvania Conference by being Williamsport's first Methodist ministerial son, or the prominent roles his parents played in the planting of Methodism within our Conference. This paper retells the incident which earned that clergyman his place in history and recognizes his godly parents as the probable source of his Christian valor and commitment.

"Chaplain John L. Lenhart was the first clergyman to lose his life in the Civil War. He was admitted to the Philadelphia Conference in 1830, but later transferred to the Newark Conference, where he served several important charges. He was appointed a Chaplain in the Navy and entered upon his duties in 1847. By the beginning of the Civil War he was known throughout the Naval Service and greatly loved. Big and burly and boisterous, a regular Ben Johnson of a man, he was immensely popular with all with whom he came in contact. While he may have lacked some of the graces of the "pink tea parson," he was forceful and friendly and frank, and loved the Navy and its men and officers with an undying love.

"Like many other men of large physique, he was impulsive and generous to a fault, and it was his impulsiveness and large-hearted generosity which finally brought him to his death. At the beginning of the War, Chaplain Lenhart was detailed to duty aboard the Frigate Cumberland, and was a part of her complement during the winter of 1862 in Hampton Roads. When the Confederate Ironclad Merrimac came down the river on the 8th of March, 1862, and engaged the squadron lying at anchor off Fortress Monroe, Chaplain Lenhart took his post in the dressing station on the Cumberland where he could assist the surgeons as the ship went into action.

"After only a short resistance it was seen that the Cumberland was in a sinking condition, and word was passed to abandon the ship. The rest of the story may be told in the words of a contemporary publication: *When it was seen that the Cumberland must go down, all the officers in charge of the wounded were ordered to come on deck and bring with them such of the wounded as there might be hope of*

saving; which order was obeyed by the surgeons and some others. The Chaplain (unwilling to leave the more severely wounded to die by themselves, and not wishing to save himself while his shipmates perished) instead of coming on deck, went into his room and shut the door, when in a few minutes he met his fate, the ship speedily going down.

"It has frequently been stated that Chaplain Lenhart returned to his room to rescue some documents or books, and that the inrush of water prevented him from returning to the deck. What actually did occur we shall never know, as the Chaplain was alone at the time. We prefer to believe, as we have every historical right to do, that Chaplain Lenhart, as an example of almost divine unselfishness, died a hero and a martyr to his convictions. It is more in keeping with his character, for he had never before selfishly saved himself when others were in danger. Write his name, then, on the list of Christian gentlemen, heroes of the Faith."

Big and burly and impulsive -- these adjectives used to describe Chaplain John Lenhart equally applied to his father, local preacher Rev. Henry Lenhart. He was born in York in 1783, the son of Godfrey Lenhart -- a silversmith and clock maker whose store was on Market Square, and who served as county commissioner 1787-1790 and county sheriff 1792-1795. His mother was the former Mary Elizabeth Harbaugh, oldest daughter of pioneer York settler Yost Harbaugh.*

Henry Lenhart was a local preacher as early as 1810, for he is listed that year among the preachers attending Low's Camp Meeting near Shrewsbury. In 1811 he moved his family to Williamsport, where he established a factory for the manufacture of hats in a two-story house built in 1810 by Joseph Alexander on the southeast corner of Third and Pine Streets. He bought the building in 1811 and put a one story addition to the east of it to house his hat store. Four years later, in 1815, he changed the addition into Williamsport's first drug store. In 1821 Major Charles Low became a partner of Henry Lenhart, but a year later he erected his own building and established his own business.

A local preacher when he arrived in Williamsport, he became very active in the affairs of the extensive Lycoming Circuit of the Susquehanna District of the Genesee Conference (which was transferred to the Baltimore Conference by the 1820 General Conference), serving as a circuit steward, etc. Area Methodists at that time worshiped at Lycoming Chapel, a primitive structure erected in 1804 on the site of today's Calvary Church.

*The original Swiss immigrant Yost Harbaugh [Herbach] who died in 1762 -- not to be confused with his son Yost Harbaugh (1741-1832), prominent Emigsville-York resident who at age 14 was a member of Braddock's expedition, or with his grandson (through Ludwig) Yost Harbaugh (1771-1839), prominent United Brethren pioneer in Harbaugh Valley MD.

Fearless and outspoken, Lenhart was the subject of several charges which brought him to trial in those early days. Once he was convicted of not keeping his word in a contract with another Methodist. On another occasion he was convicted of using profanity in the heat of a passionate argument. Old Quarterly Conference minute book records give the following extended consideration of one such case:

April 12, 1818

Henry Lenhart shall not exercise office of deacon in our church nor any longer be considered a preacher among us and that he remain on trial of 6 months.

Must acknowledge in the following words:

- 1. I confess that I have frequently taken the name of God in vain.*
- 2. that I have indulged in sinful tempers.*
- 3. that I acted improperly in the case of Mr. Henderson*

April 1818

Henry Lenhart made application to be restored to his former standing in the church.

Conference having considered the case of Henry Lenhart and although there is no doubt but that the decision of the Conference which tried the case was just, and that he was guilty of crimes laid to his charge, yet they are of the opinion that these expressions, spoken in the heat of passion, have escaped the memory and that if he could distinctly recollect them he would with humility acknowledge the facts.

Therefore, conference sincerely desiring his salvation, and observing in him marks of contrition, agree to receive him in the society as a private member.

August 1818

Application made by Lycoming congregation for Henry Lenhart's restoration. The vote was put whether he should be restored to the office of a preacher and was carried. The second vote was taken to restore him to deacon's orders and was carried.

Rev. Lenhart was apparently welcomed back with no reservations, for he was soon a circuit steward again and one of the trustees of the first Methodist building erected on Pine Street in 1824. Indeed, it was probably because of him and Jeremiah Tallman, who had opened the first shoemaker's shop on Pine Street (where the L.L. Stearns Store now stands) that the Pine Street site was selected. He was quite human, but a devoted Christian leader through it all -- truly one of the pillars and pioneers of Methodism in frontier Williamsport. He was still alive in the early 1850's, but the exact date of his death appears to have been lost to history.

With such a father, Chaplain John Lenhart seemed destined for action. He became a local preacher, was recommended for admission on trial into the Baltimore Conference in 1828, but was not admitted when he applied. Conference declared, however, that the presiding elder was permitted to employ him, if necessary, during the year. There seems to have been nothing against him, but rather there seems to have been no opening in the Conference. He soon thereafter applied to the Philadelphia Conference and was received on trial. And so it was that the first ministerial son to be recommended out of Williamsport entered another Conference.

But what of the Chaplain's mother? What was her contribution towards his valor and commitment? While history frequently fails to remember its daughters as it

does its sons, that most fortunately was not the case for Rev. Henry Lenhart's wife Mary. Her obituary appeared in the Christian Advocate for June 8, 1854, as follows:

LENHART, MRS. MARY,

wife of Rev. Henry Lenhart of Williamsport.

Died April 17, in Williamsport, Mrs. Mary, wife of Rev. Henry Lenhart and mother of Rev. John Lenhart, of the N.J. Conference, aged 67. She obtained religion in her 14th year and immediately united with the M.E. Church. Member 53 years. She was among the first Methodists of this place and had, in those early days, to suffer much opposition and persecution from a wicked world, which she endured as a good soldier of Jesus Christ. Her house was the place for holding meetings for many years, and of entertaining many of the father of Methodism -- and among them may be named Bishops Roberts, McKendree, Whatcoat and Asbury.

Certainly Mary Lenhart was a woman of valor and conviction. But it is the last line of the obituary, together with certain facts known about Rev. Henry Lenhart, that opens the door for further speculation. The Lenhart home in Williamsport was not "the place for holding meetings for many years," nor could the entertaining of the bishops named in the obituary have occurred in Williamsport. It is clear that this final statement refers to her girlhood home.

Would it not be reasonable to conjecture that Mrs. Henry Lenhart was the daughter of John Low, south of Shrewsbury? What other Central Pennsylvania home could so be described as a place of meeting and entertainment? Furthermore, the presence of local pastor Henry Lenhart of York at the 1810 session of Low's Camp Meeting establishes a connection -- as does the partnership in Williamsport of Henry Lenhart with one Charles Low. While research reveals no lists of either the descendants of the Shrewsbury Lows or the ancestors of the Williamsport Lows, it was not uncommon for in-laws to follow their relations from York County to Williamsport and to enter into business with them.

For those who are genealogically inclined, more is known of the Lenhart family. Henry's father Godfrey was one of nine children of immigrants Johan Peter and Maria Margaretha Lenhart -- the other known children being Anna Margaret, Philip, Frederick, Johan Jacob and Johan George. Henry's brother William Yost Lenhart was a prominent mathematician and poet. Henry's son Godfrey, as a lad of 14, became the driver of the conveyance which took the surveyors from Williamsport to run the new boundary line of Tioga County, which was then being taken from Lycoming. He served in the Mexican War and when the Civil War was declared, even though he was about 45 years old, he enlisted and served in numerous engagements. In 1864 he contracted typhoid fever, was furloughed, and died while recuperating at his home in Bath, NY. His March 9, 1864, Williamsport obituary states that he was "the son of Rev. Henry Lenhart, recently deceased."

May we never cease to be inspired by stories like the one of Chaplain John L. Lenhart, and may the Methodist families of Central Pennsylvania continue to demonstrate and pass along to their children Christian valor and commitment.