

The Odyssey of Ruth Smith

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This paper is dedicated to
Miss Ruth Smith, who was my
second grade teacher during
the 1957-58 school year at
Trinity Lutheran School in
Neenah, Wisconsin.

Burrowed deep into the Kentucky foothills of Appalachia is the small coal mining town of Pikeville. There on October 23, 1917, Ransom and Polly Ratliff were blessed with the birth of a daughter whom they named Ruth.¹ This child would one day become a Christian elementary teacher at Trinity Lutheran School in Neenah, Wisconsin, where, during a 34-year career, she would be instrumental in training nearly 1000 children² in the truths of God's Word and in the basic skills of literacy. How this came to be is a fascinating story for the journey from Pikeville to Neenah was long and arduous, beset by many obstacles and difficulties.

I

The Ratliff family was no stranger to poverty and privation. Ruth's first home was a log cabin on the outskirts of Pikeville, devoid of such modern amenities as indoor plumbing, electricity, and window glass.³ Papa Ratliff worked long hours in the mines, yet was barely able to earn enough money to keep food on the family table.⁴

¹Interview with Ruth Smith, Neenah, Wisconsin, February 6, 1981.

²Letter from Ruth Smith, Neenah, Wisconsin, February 9, 1981.

³Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

⁴"Ruth's Story Retold in Her Hometown Paper," The Twin City News-Record (Appleton, Wisconsin), October 1, 1980, p. 4.

The Ratliff religious life also demands consideration. Ransom was a nominal Roman Catholic, his wife an ardent Pentecostal.⁵ This resulted in Ruth's being exposed to the tenets of backwoods Pentecostalism. Her ears became accustomed to the curious blend of sounds emitted by the glossolalists. Her eyes grew wide at the fearsome spectacle of rattlers and copperheads being handled by the ecstatic. Her reason was challenged by the proclamations of the faith healers.⁶

Yet another element which played a lead role in Ruth's biography first surfaced when Ruth reached school age--her ancestry. Ruth's father was white, her mother was of mixed blood.⁷ Consequently, Ruth was not allowed to attend the local public school which was only fifty yards from the Ratliff cabin. Instead, she and her brother had to trudge five miles⁸ over the blue-clay hills to the school for the colored. Much of the path was so heavily forested that they used a lantern to find their way in the early morning hours.⁹

The school was a two-room frame building encompassing K-12.¹⁰ The older children received instruction in one room, the younger in the other. A husband and wife were the teachers.¹¹

⁵Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

⁶Interview with Ruth Smith, Neenah, Wisconsin, March 19, 1981.

⁷Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

⁸Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

⁹Kathy W. Nufer, "'Adoption' Launched a New Life," The Twin City News-Record (Appleton, Wisconsin), May 23, 1979, p. 4.

¹⁰Nufer, "'Adoption,'" p. 4.

¹¹Nufer, "'Adoption,'" p. 4.

Instructional aids were meager. The textbooks were outdated and worn. A library was non-existent.

What is more, regular attendance at this school was always difficult for Ruth because of the long trek on foot, and the frequent bad weather. It took Ruth three years to complete the third grade.¹² She celebrated her seventeenth birthday while in the sixth grade.¹³ With such an educational background Ruth might well have spent the rest of her years in the Appalachian foothills. However, Effie Waller Smith was to change all that.

II

Effie Waller was born in 1879 to parents who were former slaves.¹⁴ Though her parents were illiterate, they worked hard to have their children educated. As a result, all of their offspring eventually became teachers in colored schools.¹⁵

Effie spent fifteen years teaching in the rural schools of Kentucky.¹⁶ One of her students was Ruth's mother Polly,¹⁷ whom she got to know very well since she roomed for a time at Polly's home. When Effie moved on, she continued to cor-

¹²Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹³Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹⁴Alice J. Kinder, "Effie Waller Smith: Singing Poet of the Cumberlands," The Appalachian News-Express (Pikeville, Kentucky), June 18, 1980, Sec. 3, pp. 1,4.

¹⁵Kinder, "Effie," p. 1.

¹⁶Kinder, "Effie," p. 1.

¹⁷Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

respond with Polly and the two women remained very close friends.

In the years which followed Effie married Charles Smith.¹⁸ The couple had one child. Unfortunately, the youngster died at a tender age.¹⁹ Shortly thereafter Effie was widowed when her husband was shot while assisting the sheriff in the apprehension of a moonshiner.²⁰ In the midst of these tragedies Effie, who was a devout Methodist,²¹ drew comfort from her Christian faith and determined to go on with her life.

Effie returned to her teaching career²² in the segregated schools of rural Kentucky. Instructing the backwoods colored in the rudiments of literacy brought great joy to her heart. The setting in which she worked also moved her. Effie began to put into words and song the natural beauty of the Kentucky hills. She soon became known as the "singing poet of the Cumberlands."²³ She probably would have lived out her life busily engaged in these pursuits in her beloved Kentucky if it hadn't been for some religionists from the North.

Sometime during 1918 the Metropolitan Holiness Church Association of Waukesha, Wisconsin, sent some canvassers into the hills of Kentucky to missionize and sell religious articles

¹⁸Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹⁹Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

²⁰Kinder, "Effie," p. 1.

²¹Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

²²Kinder, "Effie," p. 1.

²³Eventually Effie Smith authored two books of poetry: Rhymes of the Cumberlands and Songs of the Months. Kinder, "Effie," p. 1.

and literature.²⁴ Effie came in contact with members from this group. She was impressed by their zeal and intrigued by their paradisiacal description of the commune maintained at their religious headquarters.²⁵ The conviction began to develop in her that she must make this "northern Eden" her home.

A short time later Effie Smith converted all her earthly possessions into cash and, accompanied by her mother, Mrs. Sibbie Waller, traveled to Waukesha, Wisconsin.²⁶ There she and her mother turned their resources over to the Metropolitan Holiness Church Association's treasury and took up lodging in its communal resident hall.²⁷ Within a couple years Effie and

²⁴Kinder, "Effie," p. 1.

²⁵Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

²⁶Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

²⁷The Metropolitan Holiness Church Association was an offshoot of the Methodist denomination. In 1906 the group acquired the former plush resort known as the Fountain Spring House, which was located at 200 South Grand Avenue in Waukesha, Wisconsin. At that location it conducted a Bible school, published books, printed a newspaper (The Burning Bush), ran an orphanage, and administered a commune which followed communistic principles. Because of the ecstatic acts of faith which some of the association's members exhibited, the local townspeople referred to the group as "the jumpers." Outbursts of such emotional displays became so frequent in Waukesha that the common council passed an ordinance in 1907 which forbade "jumping" on the city streets under penalty of \$100 fine or 90 days in jail. The Metropolitan Association also faced internal legal problems. Over the years a number of its members filed suits against the common treasury in order to free their personal funds. The association's membership gradually declined so that all operations in Waukesha were phased out by 1957. The remnant of the organization now has its headquarters in Dundee, Illinois. The buildings left behind in Waukesha were razed and today apartment complexes occupy the site. Old newspaper clippings, Metropolitan Holiness Church Association Folder, Vertical File, Waukesha County Historical Museum, Waukesha, Wisconsin.

Sibbie's initial exuberance for this utopian enterprise changed into mounting disillusionment. They opted to move out, but had to resort to the courts to retrieve their funds from the common treasury.²⁸ Finally, they were awarded their money and purchased a private dwelling in Waukesha. There the two women lived until Sibbie's death on May 17, 1927.²⁹

Meanwhile, back in Kentucky, Polly Ratliff's health was deteriorating because of a developing goiter.³⁰ Unbeknown to Ruth, Polly had informed Effie that if she were to die, Effie should adopt Ruth and have her properly educated in the North.³¹ Polly's condition became more and more severe. Her Pentecostal faith forbade her from seeking medical treatment.³² On June 17, 1927, Polly Ratliff succumbed to her affliction at the age of thirty-six.³³

Upon her mother's death, Ruth and her brother went to live with their maternal grandparents and four single uncles in a two-room log cabin.³⁴ There Ruth helped cook meals and wash heaps of dirty mining clothes. Ruth's father remarried in February of 1928, but Ruth, unlike her brother, never went back to live with

²⁸Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

²⁹Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

³⁰Polly Ratliff was sick during much of her life. The goiter became the final antagonist which afflicted her frail constitution. Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

³¹Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

³²Nufer, "Adoption," p. 4.

³³Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

³⁴Kinder, "Effie," p. 1.

her father, because she did not get along with her stepmother and her grandmother badly needed her assistance.³⁵

During the years which Ruth spent with her grandparents Effie was facing some difficult times of her own in Waukesha. She had to rebound from the loss of her mother and the news of her best friend's demise. The economic chaos of the Depression took its toll on her resources. Her brother came to live with her during his retirement years until he passed away in early 1934(?).³⁶ Left all alone, Effie thought about her beloved home state, its people, and the daughter of her deceased friend. In November of 1934 she returned to Kentucky for a visit.³⁷

Once there Effie informed Ruth about what Polly had said many years before and invited Ruth to return with her to Wisconsin. Ruth's grandparents were dead set against Ruth's going up North.³⁸ Ruth's father, however, thought it would be in the best interests of his daughter if she accompanied Effie.³⁹ Sunday, March 10, 1935, found Ruth and Effie leaving Pikeville. Two days later they stepped off the train at Waukesha.⁴⁰

³⁵Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

³⁶Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

³⁷Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

³⁸Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

³⁹Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

⁴⁰Ruth and Effie did not head directly to Wisconsin. They travelled to West Virginia for one day of visiting, then they boarded a northbound train. Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

III

Once back in Wisconsin⁴¹ Effie immediately commenced the long process of legally adopting Ruth Ratliff. It was not until May 8, 1937, that Ruth officially acquired the last name "Smith."⁴² Effie also did not waste any time in seeing to it that Ruth's education was advanced. For the balance of the 1934-35 school year Ruth was enrolled at the seventh grade level of the Waukesha public school system to get a "feel" for what would be expected of her in the fall.⁴³

The next several years found Ruth making use of all the educational advantages available to her. Beginning with the seventh grade she steadily progressed through the educational system until she arrived at the goal of being graduated with the 1941 senior class of Waukesha High School.⁴⁴ The final ranking listed her as finishing 143 out of a class of 313.⁴⁵ During this same time period she also took some courses at a vocational school and was involved in summer school.⁴⁶

Ruth discovered success and received encouragement in other areas as well. Many students and faculty members at Waukesha

⁴¹The two women resided at 124 Garfield Avenue, Waukesha. Wright's Waukesha City Directory (1936), XX (Milwaukee: Wright Directory Company, 1936), p. 339.

⁴²Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

⁴³Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

⁴⁴Academic Records, Class of 1941, Waukesha Public High School, Waukesha, Wisconsin.

⁴⁵Records, Class of 1941.

⁴⁶Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

High School befriended her.⁴⁷ She sang with the school's a cappella choir.⁴⁸ Piano playing became one of her skills.⁴⁹ She worked as a salesclerk at the local Sears store.⁵⁰ Several of her instructors recognized that she had the characteristics which would make her a good teacher and strongly urged her to pursue a career in education.⁵¹

During these same first years in Wisconsin (1935-41) Ruth occupied her thoughts with still another matter--the quest for a suitable church. By this time Effie had severed all ties with the Metropolitan Holiness Church Association and had joined First Methodist Church in Waukesha.⁵² Naturally, Ruth attended services with Effie. However she was displeased with the liberal theology promulgated there and the aloofness of the large congregation. She desired a small church which taught the fundamental doctrines that were so prominent in her Pentecostal background.⁵³

Ruth began to visit various Waukesha churches. One Sunday she attended services at the Plymouth Brethren Gospel Chapel,

⁴⁷Nufer, "Adoption," p. 4.

⁴⁸1941 Megaphone (yearbook), Waukesha Public High School, Waukesha, Wisconsin, 1941, p. 24.

⁴⁹Megaphone, p. 24.

⁵⁰The wages which Ruth earned at her part-time job supplemented the income which Effie received from the college students she boarded and the dividends which Effie's church-related annuities bore. Ruth received no financial assistance from Kentucky. Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

⁵¹Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

⁵²Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

⁵³Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

located at 900 South Grand Avenue.⁵⁴ She liked what she heard and saw. Shortly thereafter, she applied for membership. On July 17, 1937 Ruth Smith was rebaptized in Peewaukee Lake in the name of the Triune God after it was pointed out to her that her Pentecostal baptism might not be valid because it had been performed only "in the name of Jesus."⁵⁵ Ruth would have remained with the Brethren except for the fact that six months later the lay preacher, Dan Dunnet,⁵⁶ left for California, and the worship services entered a period of abeyance since no immediate replacement for him could be secured.⁵⁷

Upon Effie's insistence, Ruth again attended the Methodist church. However, William P. Hulan,⁵⁸ a rank liberal,⁵⁹ was still serving as one of the pastors of First Methodist. His pastorate kept Ruth from worshipping there with any regularity.

Instead, Ruth spent some Sunday mornings tuning the radio for religious broadcasts. A program to which she began to frequently listen was the one sponsored by the Moody Bible Institute

⁵⁴Information sheet, Plymouth Brethren Gospel Chapel Folder, Vertical File, Waukesha County Historical Museum, Waukesha, Wisconsin.

⁵⁵Ruth had been previously baptized by immersion in a Pikeville river when she was about twelve. Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

⁵⁶Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

⁵⁷The Plymouth Brethren congregation was active in Waukesha from 1928 to 1955. In 1955 the church records were in the possession of a Philip J. Strong, whose whereabouts at that time were already unknown. Plymouth Brethren Folder, Waukesha County Historical Museum.

⁵⁸City Directory (1938), p. 90.

⁵⁹Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

of Chicago.⁶⁰ In its broadcasts the institute proclaimed fundamental Christian doctrine and told of its mission of training men and women for service in the Christian ministry. This caught Ruth's interest for she was at the time a junior in high school who, on the one hand, was being encouraged by her teachers to seek a career in the field of education, and, on the other hand, was being urged by her foster mother to get involved in some sort of Christian service.⁶¹

Ruth decided to wed both counsels by seeking admittance to Moody Bible Institute in an education track. Because she feared that she might not be accepted on account of her race, she made application in early 1940.⁶² Moody Institute wrote back that it was a Christian school and that race had no bearing on its admissions policy.⁶³ The school then confirmed Ruth's pre-enrollment and stated that it looked forward to having her on campus following the completion of her senior year at high school.⁶⁴ Ruth was satisfied that she had found a place where she could in good conscience attend and grow in Christian faith after her high school graduation, but she still did not have a local church for her immediate needs..

She continued her ritual of visiting various churches and monitoring the air waves for religious programs. In the fall of 1940 she tuned in the "Lutheran Hour" and heard Dr. Walter A.

⁶⁰Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

⁶¹Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

⁶²Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

⁶³Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

⁶⁴Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

Maier preach on Jesus Christ being the church's foundation stone.⁶⁵ Ruth wrote to Maier for more information. Dr. Maier replied with a personal letter directing her to Trinity Lutheran Church of Waukesha, a Wisconsin Synod affiliate.⁶⁶

At the time Trinity was served by Pastor Harry Shiley.⁶⁷ Ruth began to attend services at Shiley's church and was pleased by what she heard. She talked Effie into going with her to the instruction class which started in November of 1940.⁶⁸ During the course Ruth became convinced that the Lutheran church had what she was looking for--God's Word in its truth and purity.

Consequently, Ruth Smith became a confirmed member of the Lutheran church on January 1, 1941.⁶⁹ The church files record the names of five people who were confirmed that day: Ruth Smith and four other adults.⁷⁰ Interestingly, behind Ruth's name Pastor Shiley added the parenthetical remark "colored."⁷¹

In the weeks which ensued Pastor Shiley casually asked Ruth what her plans were for the future. She informed him that she wished to be active in Christian education and had already

⁶⁵Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

⁶⁶Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

⁶⁷Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

⁶⁸Ruth and Effie never had an automobile. Because of that fact Ruth had confined her "church shopping" to those congregations which were within easy walking distance. Prior to Dr. Maier's letter she had never ventured as far as Trinity Church. Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

⁶⁹"Confirmation Register," Church Records, Vol. III (April 1938-December 1958), Trinity Lutheran Church, Waukesha, Wisconsin.

⁷⁰Effie did not at this time join the Lutheran church. She remained a Methodist, although she did attend services with Ruth.

⁷¹"Confirmation Register," Waukesha, Wisconsin.

been accepted at Moody Bible Institute. Pastor Shiley then pointed out that Moody Institute was not a Lutheran school⁷² and did not maintain all the Scriptural doctrines found in the Bible. Next, he stated that there was a Lutheran teacher training college in the Chicago area and suggested that Ruth apply there. She became convinced that the proper course of action was to withdraw from Moody Institute and transfer her enrollment to Concordia College, River Forest, Illinois.⁷³ Moody Institute honored Ruth's request to be transferred and sent her application over to Concordia. Concordia College accepted her as a student.⁷⁴

IV

The Tuesday after Labor Day, September 3, 1941, found Ruth Smith at Concordia of River Forest. The morning of that day was a hectic one. Ruth wrote an entrance exam with the other members of the freshman class. She received her schedule, paid certain fees, and was assigned her dorm room. She even had a chance to chat a little with her two roommates before dinner.⁷⁵

After the noon meal she returned to her room to spend some more time in getting settled. No sooner had she gotten in the door when she received a notice to go see the college president.⁷⁶ When Ruth arrived at Dr. Arthur W. Klinck's⁷⁷ office he had her

⁷²Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981..

⁷³Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981..

⁷⁴Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981..

⁷⁵Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981..

⁷⁶Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

⁷⁷Northwestern Lutheran Annual for the Year 1942 after Christ, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1942), p. 100.

student file in front of him, which included a picture which all new students had been requested to submit along with their application.⁷⁸

When Ruth sat down, President Klinck looked back and forth between her and her picture. After a few moments he asked Ruth, "Are you colored?"⁷⁹ She replied, "Partly."⁸⁰ Klinck then inquired, "Well, who sent you here anyway?"⁸¹ Ruth responded, "My pastor in Waukesha."⁸² President Klinck then declared, "You can't stay here. It just won't work out. In fact, you can not spend the night here."⁸³

After this five minute episode⁸⁴ Ruth returned dejectedly to her dormitory. Her roommates were aghast at what had happened and sympathized with her as she packed together her things. Ruth didn't know what to do for that night until she recalled that the Henry Jorgensens, some family friends from Waukesha, now lived in Chicago.⁸⁵ She called their home and they picked

⁷⁸Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

⁷⁹Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

⁸⁰Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

⁸¹Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

⁸²Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

⁸³Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981. Further elucidation on this decision is not available because "Dr. Klinck has been dead for several years" and the records of that time suffer from "inadequacies."--Letter from Paul A. Zimmerman, College President, Concordia College, River Forest, Illinois, February 26, 1981.

⁸⁴A few days after this incident Ruth Smith addressed a letter to Dr. Maier apprising him of Klinck's action. Maier responded by sending a note of apology to Ruth and a reprimand to Klinck. Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

⁸⁵Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

her up. After spending the night with the Jorgensens Ruth took the early train back to Waukesha.

When Effie heard the news she was heartbroken. She could not understand how such a thing could happen.⁸⁶ That very day Ruth went to Pastor Shiley. He was equally shocked when he learned what had transpired at Concordia.⁸⁷ However, he then told Ruth that the Wisconsin Synod had its own teachers' college out in New Ulm, Minnesota, and he would see if he could get her enrolled there.⁸⁸

V.

Pastor Shiley wasted no time in contacting Dr. Martin Luther College. In Ruth's presence he telephoned President Carl Scheppe and informed him about her situation.⁸⁹ Classes at DMLC had started that day, Wednesday, September 3,⁹⁰ but Scheppe said he would see what he could do.

In one of the women's residences a girl had already become homesick and left the New Ulm campus.⁹¹ President Scheppe queried the girls where the vacancy existed to discover if they would mind having a roommate who was partly colored.⁹² The

⁸⁶Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

⁸⁷Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

⁸⁸Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

⁸⁹Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

⁹⁰Carl L. Scheppe, "Announcement," The Northwestern Lutheran, XXVIII, No. 17 (August 24, 1941), 269.

⁹¹Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

⁹²Letter from Ione Brick, classmate, New Ulm, Minnesota, March 7, 1981.

girls raised no objections and stated that they could see no reason why they wouldn't be happy with such a new roommate.⁹³

President Schweppe then returned the call to Pastor Shiley and informed him that Ruth Smith would be welcome on the DMIC campus. Friday, September 5, Ruth boarded a train for New Ulm, Minnesota. By Saturday afternoon she was registered and settled in her new home.⁹⁴

The next three years were wonderful years. Ruth was well received by the faculty and her fellow students.⁹⁵ Her classmates remember her as being friendly and easy going.⁹⁶ The pigment of her skin caused no problems whatever. One classmate remarked that he didn't realize at first that she was partly negroid; instead, he just thought that she had a good suntan.⁹⁷ Even when Ruth's racial background became common knowledge, no negative reactions resulted. No one recalled any racial slurs ever being made about Ruth.⁹⁸ In fact, when Ruth's unfortunate experience at River Forest became known, the collective response was one of disbelief.

⁹³Telephone interview with Lillian Quandt, classmate, Neenah, Wisconsin, February 7, 1981.

⁹⁴Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

⁹⁵Telephone interview with Lillian Quandt, February 7, 1981.

⁹⁶Telephone interview with Richard Grunze, classmate, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, March 12, 1981.

⁹⁷Telephone interview with Richard Grunze, March 12, 1981.

⁹⁸Telephone interview with Lillian Quandt, February 7, 1981, and with Richard Grunze, March 12, 1981. Also, letter from Ione Brick, March 7, 1981.

By time the 1943-44 school year rolled around, Ruth Smith's class had dwindled in size from thirty members to only nine.⁹⁹ The two prominent reasons for this attrition were the siphoning off of some of the young men for the war effort and the placing of many emergency instructors to try to alleviate the crying shortage of teachers in the Wisconsin Synod.¹⁰⁰

In the spring of 1944 these nine people realized that their student days at DMIC were fast coming to a close. During the week of May 8 to 12 President Schweppe absented himself from his classroom duties in order to attend the General Synodical Committee meetings of the Wisconsin Synod in Milwaukee.¹⁰¹ The final day, Friday, May 12, the assignment committee was to meet at Thiensville in order to place the graduates of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary and Dr. Martin Luther College.¹⁰²

When President Schweppe returned to New Ulm the following week he informed the class of '44 where each was assigned. A couple he told personally, some he phoned, and for the others he left messages.¹⁰³ Ruth was not notified of her assignment so she went to Schweppe's office to inquire. Schweppe told her that she had not been assigned.¹⁰⁴ She wanted to know the

⁹⁹Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹⁰⁰D.M.L.C. Messenger (Commencement Number), XXXIV, No. 4 (June, 1944) 8.

¹⁰¹John Brenner, "Announcement," The Northwestern Lutheran, XXXI, No. 9 (April 30, 1944), 103.

¹⁰²Brenner, "Announcement," 103.

¹⁰³Telephone interview with Richard Grunze, March 12, 1981.

¹⁰⁴Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

reason. He replied that things were "touchy" and that matters might not "work out."¹⁰⁵ Ruth felt shattered. Once again her ethnic origin stood in the way.

Where the responsibility specifically rests for the assignment committee's failure to assign Ruth Smith can no longer be ascertained. All of the men who comprised and advised the assignment committee of 1944 are now deceased. No minutes of the committee's meeting are extant.¹⁰⁶

The one available document which sheds light on the issue is the copy of the student profile sheet which President Schweppe took to the call meeting and on which he penciled some notes.¹⁰⁷ The document lists the nine members of the class of '44 together with an assessment of their various abilities.¹⁰⁸ Ruth Smith's name is at the end of the roster, her last name being the final alphabetical listing for the nine-member class.

This profile sheet is comprised of nine categories which are rated behind each of the candidates' names. The categories included are as follows: English, German, teaching ability, discipline, singing, organ, conducting, hymns, and grade level recommendation.¹⁰⁹ The term "fair" (standing either by itself

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹⁰⁶ Wisconsin Synod Archives, Synod Office Building, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

¹⁰⁷ Carl L. Schweppe, "Student Profile Sheet," Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, May, 1944.

¹⁰⁸ Schweppe, "Student Profile Sheet," May, 1944.

¹⁰⁹ Schweppe, "Student Profile Sheet," May, 1944.

or coupled with a plus or minus) appeared behind Ruth's name in six of the above categories.¹¹⁰ The two areas where she did not receive a "fair" rating were "German" where a "no" appeared and "conducting" where the word "poor" was typed.¹¹¹ In the final column for "grade level recommendation" were the words "lower grades."¹¹² This assessment of Ruth's abilities did not differ greatly from many other candidates of that time.¹¹³ In fact, the final column showed that the faculty of Dr. Martin Luther College had no reservations about her teaching ability or having her serve in one of the Christian day schools of the Wisconsin Synod.¹¹⁴

Yet, Ruth was not assigned. This President Schweppe's penciled notes on that student profile sheet make crystal clear. Schweppe noted that there were twenty-four calls which needed filling--seven for men and seventeen for women.¹¹⁵ As the members of the class of '44 were assigned by the committee, Schweppe wrote behind each name the candidate's assignment.

¹¹⁰Schweppe, "Student Profile Sheet," May, 1944.

¹¹¹Schweppe, "Student Profile Sheet," May, 1944.

¹¹²Schweppe, "Student Profile Sheet," May, 1944.

¹¹³"Folder of Assignments," John Brenner File, Wisconsin Synod Archives, Synod Office Building, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

¹¹⁴Research of faculty action at Dr. Martin Luther College prior to the mid '50's is difficult because there are no extant faculty meeting minutes. Prof. Palmbach was faculty secretary at the time under discussion and he never duplicated his notes. Telephone interview with Arthur Schulz, Academic Dean, Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, Minnesota, March 10, 1981.

¹¹⁵Schweppe, "Student Profile Sheet," May, 1944.

Behind Ruth Smith's name there is no such notation.¹¹⁶

The reason for Ruth's not being placed was certainly not because of a lack of vacancies which matched her "grade level recommendation" and other abilities. This is borne out by the fact that the call committee "drafted" eight women from the Second Normal students to fill vacancies in various schools¹¹⁷ (some of which were for the lower grades) and even then there remained some congregations which did not get a teacher for the primary grades.¹¹⁸

Plainly, either President Schweppe suggested that Ruth Smith not be assigned or the committee itself proposed that idea. The person or persons responsible remain a mystery. The reason is not. Ruth Smith's skin color resulted in her not being assigned.

The call committee's action was in essence "covered up" in the public announcements of that day. The commencement issue of the DMLC Messenger¹¹⁹ and the Northwestern Lutheran article relating the closing exercises at DMLC¹²⁰ both list Ruth Smith's call as being to the "Colored Mission(s)." Perhaps

¹¹⁶Schweppe, "Student Profile Sheet," May, 1944.

¹¹⁷Carl L. Schweppe, "Commencement," The Northwestern Lutheran, XXXI, No. 14 (July 9, 1944), 142.

¹¹⁸Schweppe, "Student Profile Sheet," May, 1944. Cf. Immanuel P. Frey, "The Teacher Shortage," The Northwestern Lutheran, XXXI, No. 23 (November 12, 1944) 226.

¹¹⁹D.M.L.C. Messenger (Commencement Number), 43.

¹²⁰Schweppe, "Commencement," 142.

this is where the assignment committee thought Ruth should serve, and, in fact, she eventually did serve for a brief period of time; yet, Ruth was never given this assignment.¹²¹

On Friday, June 9, the graduation service for the class of '44 was held.¹²² Twenty-eight seniors from the high school department and nine third-year normals from the college department received their diplomas that day.¹²³ Effie Smith made the long journey to New Ulm to view Ruth's graduation. She felt happy that Ruth had accomplished this milestone in her academic career but saddened by the fact that her Ruth had not received a call into a congregation. After the day's festivities the two women boarded the train and headed for Waukesha.¹²⁴

VI

Back in Waukesha well-meaning neighbors unwittingly added salt to Ruth and Effie's wounds. A "block party" was organized¹²⁵ to celebrate Ruth's graduation from college and her entrance into her teaching career. When Ruth and Effie got home, they had to painfully explain that Ruth had not been assigned to a teaching position. The neighbors were dumbfounded.¹²⁶

¹²¹The only recollection Ruth has of anything vaguely connected to the above hypothesis is that one of her professors, E. R. Bliefernicht, told her sometime during her final year about the work which the Synodical Conference was doing among the colored people and about some fine Christian colored people like Rosa Young. Telephone interview with Ruth Smith, Neenah, Wisconsin, March 19, 1981.

¹²²Carl L. Schweppe, "Announcement," The Northwestern Lutheran, XXXI, No. 11 (May 28, 1944) 119.

¹²³Schweppe, "Commencement," 142.

¹²⁴Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹²⁵Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹²⁶Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

Ruth returned to Sears to her clerking position. She had worked there for about six weeks when Pastor Immanuel F. Albrecht, one of the two Wisconsin Synod men on The Missionary Board of the Lutheran Synodical Conference,¹²⁷ got in contact with her. He informed Ruth that The Missionary Board thought that it had a place where she could serve. St. Philip congregation in Cleveland, Ohio, was trying to start a school and needed a teacher to spearhead the project. Although Ruth never received a written diploma of vocation, she accepted this "call" and left for Cleveland at the end of August, 1944.¹²⁸

St. Philip Church was a Missouri Synod congregation located in the colored district of Cleveland.¹²⁹ Ernst G. Mueller, a white, was the pastor; all the members were black or of mixed race.¹³⁰ Ruth's duties included instructing Saturday morning pre-confirmation class, teaching Sunday School, making some sick calls, and visiting all the members of the congregation to encourage support for the founding of a parochial school.¹³¹

The members of St. Philip were from all social strata, including a number of highly educated individuals--doctors, lawyers, etc. In general, these people were in favor of starting a school, but they did not want it to be a segregated insti-

¹²⁷The Lutheran Annual--1945 (St. Louis: Concordia Publishing House, 1945), p. 54.

¹²⁸Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

¹²⁹The Lutheran Annual--1945, pp. 95, 219.

¹³⁰Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹³¹Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

tution.¹³²

For her work in the congregation's midst Ruth received \$75 per month.¹³³ She had a difficult time making ends meet. As a result, Effie rented out her house in Waukesha and came to Cleveland. Once there, she and Ruth found an apartment in the Jewish section of town. Ruth chuckles that that is where she learned to eat lamb.¹³⁴

After seven months of service to St. Philip congregation, Ruth asked The Missionary Board to release her from her duties.¹³⁵ She was convinced that the members of St. Philip did not want the kind of school which The Missionary Board envisioned.¹³⁶ The Board granted her request and sent her a written notice of release. In April of 1945 Ruth and Effie returned to Waukesha.¹³⁷

¹³² Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹³³ Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹³⁴ Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹³⁵ Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981. Correspondence directed to the present pastor, Floyd T. McAdoo, asking for any available information about Ruth Smith's service to St. Philip, was never answered.

¹³⁶ Ruth recalled that she visited a number of Missouri Synod schools in Cleveland. She also attended one teachers' conference. All of the students and instructors were white. She concluded that the people who were members of St. Philip did have a point when they refused to support a day school which would be for "their" children.

¹³⁷ Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

VII

Once again Ruth reclaimed her old job at Sears. The manager, Mr. Goldhamer, encouraged Ruth to stay on as a permanent employee and work her way up. She stated that she still wished to be a teacher in a Christian school.¹³⁸ Sometime during late spring of 1945 Ruth addressed a letter to Mr. F. W. Meyer, the Executive Secretary of the Board of Education of the Wisconsin Synod.¹³⁹ In this letter she asked if her name might be placed on a call list with the notation "partly colored" appearing behind it.¹⁴⁰

At about the same time Miss Florence Witte informed Trinity Lutheran congregation of Neenah, Wisconsin, that she was going to resign from her call at the end of the school year in order to pursue marriage plans during the coming summer.¹⁴¹

In view of Miss Witte's announced resignation, Gerhard Schaefer, Trinity's pastor, asked the district president, E. Behm,¹⁴² for a call list. The list which Behm supplied had Ruth Smith's name on it. Pastor Schaefer became interested in Ruth and sought to find out more about her. He discovered that Lillian Quandt, a daughter of Trinity congregation, had been a classmate of Ruth's at DMIC. He also learned that Gertrude Stoekli, a sister to one of Trinity's teachers, knew Ruth.

¹³⁸ Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹³⁹ Northwestern Lutheran Annual for the Year 1946 after Christ (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1946), p. 67.

¹⁴⁰ Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

¹⁴¹ School Board Minutes, Trinity Lutheran Church, Neenah, Wisconsin, June 25, 1945.

¹⁴² Northwestern Lutheran Annual, p. 67.

From these two women and other sources Pastor Schaefer received fine recommendations about R. Smith.¹⁴³

Pastor Schaefer then got in contact with President Behm and told him that he was planning to recommend to the congregation to call Ruth Smith. Behm strenuously advised Schaefer against doing such a thing. He told him that she'd be trouble and that the kids would run out on her.¹⁴⁴ Pastor Schaefer then retorted, "I don't care if she's as black as the ace of spades. We need a teacher."¹⁴⁵ Behm replied, "Well, if you get yourself into hot water, don't come crying to me."¹⁴⁶

On the night of June 25 Schaefer went to the meeting of Trinity's School Board with the call list provided by Behm.¹⁴⁷ He still planned to suggest to the Board, which was vested with the right to call teachers for the congregation,¹⁴⁸ that they extend a call to Ruth Smith. Upon making his proposal, some discussion naturally developed. It can be inferred that this discussion was quite lengthy from the fact that although the School Board was small and was meeting for a single purpose

¹⁴³A couple years later Pastor Schaefer told Ruth all the events which had surrounded her being called to Trinity. Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹⁴⁴Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹⁴⁵Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹⁴⁶Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981..

¹⁴⁷School Board Minutes, June 25, 1945.

¹⁴⁸Congregation Minutes, Trinity Lutheran Church, Neenah, Wisconsin, July 16, 1945..

(to call a teacher), the Board was not adjourned until 10:05.¹⁴⁹ The minutes, however, make no direct reference to this long discussion.¹⁵⁰

Regardless of what was said that night, the outcome is known. The School Board unanimously resolved to extend a divine call to Miss Ruth Smith.¹⁵¹ Her remuneration was to be \$100 per month and she was to be credited with one year of teaching experience.¹⁵² On June 29, 1945, Ruth received a special delivery letter from Neenah--her call to Trinity Lutheran School.¹⁵³

VIII

Ruth relates that she did not hold the call to Trinity very long before deciding to accept it.¹⁵⁴ The July quarterly meeting of Trinity's voters reiterates this fact. Amidst the various matters of congregational business, the assembly not only was asked to ratify the action of the School Board in calling Ruth Smith, but also was informed of the fact that Ruth had accepted the call extended to her.¹⁵⁵

Miss Smith arrived in Neenah in August of 1945. Her duties for the upcoming school year included teaching fourth and fifth

¹⁴⁹The School Board usually convened at 7:00 or 7:30 PM. School Board Minutes, June 25, 1945.

¹⁵⁰School Board Minutes, June 25, 1945.

¹⁵¹School Board Minutes, June 25, 1945.

¹⁵²School Board Minutes, June 25, 1945.

¹⁵³Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹⁵⁴Interview with Ruth Smith, March 19, 1981.

¹⁵⁵Congregation Minutes, July 16, 1945.

grade (48 children), conducting Sunday School three Sundays per month, and belonging to the choir.¹⁵⁶

Ruth was well received by all the members of Trinity. The staff enjoyed working with her and had great respect for her teaching aptitude and outlook. The children loved and trusted her. The parents expressed admiration for her way with their offspring. Indeed, Ruth maintained an enviable record at Trinity.¹⁵⁷

One day about six years into her teaching career at Neenah there was a knock at Ruth's classroom door. She answered it and found that it was the former district president, Pastor Behm.¹⁵⁸ He inquired if he might visit her classroom. Ruth said he was welcome. Pastor Behm sat down in the room and observed for about two hours. He then asked Ruth if he could see her out in the hall for a moment.¹⁵⁹

Behm proceeded to tell Miss Smith that he could see that she was a very capable teacher and that the children loved her.¹⁶⁰ He confessed that he had been wrong about her and that he had been thoroughly mistaken in his advice to Pastor Schaefer at the time Ruth was under consideration for the call to Trinity.¹⁶¹

¹⁵⁶Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹⁵⁷Any member of Trinity congregation will verify this statement.

¹⁵⁸Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹⁵⁹Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹⁶⁰Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹⁶¹Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981. Pastor Behm was a kind individual who, when he was shown that he was wrong, was ready to admit his error.--Interview with Irwin Habeck, former acquaintance of E. Behm, Mequon, Wisconsin, March 13, 1981.

In the early 1950's Ruth's foster mother Effie came to Neenah to live with her daughter. After receiving more instruction, she became convinced that the Lutheran church did teach God's Word correctly. She was confirmed in 1954 and six years later died in the Lutheran faith.¹⁶²

Through the mid 50's Trinity congregation grew by leaps and bounds. The number of school-aged children skyrocketed. It became necessary to provide a separate classroom and individual teacher for each of the grades. Miss Smith became the second grade teacher where she was instrumental in teaching hundreds of children God's Word and the basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic. To this day the author has vivid memories of Bible stories, phonics class, penmanship practice, and arithmetic flash cards.

As time marched on Miss Smith found her classroom peopled with children of her former students. She recalled hearing the comment more than once from a pupil, "My mom or dad said that they had you in second grade. You must be 100 years old."¹⁶³

Throughout her years at Trinity Ruth received a number of calls to teach at other schools, but she was led to decline them and remain in Neenah.¹⁶⁴ In the late 70's Ruth was experiencing medical problems with her legs and her physician advised that she should no longer stand for extended periods of time.¹⁶⁵ As a result, Ruth Smith retired from 34 years of teaching

¹⁶² Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹⁶³ Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹⁶⁴ Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹⁶⁵ Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

at Trinity at the conclusion of the 1978-79 school year.¹⁶⁶

Today Ruth is engaged in a very active retirement. She does remedial work at Trinity School, corresponds with 225 shut-ins throughout the United States, assists an elderly couple with their housework so they can remain in their own home, baby-sits for young parents, and gardens during the growing season.¹⁶⁷ She makes her home at 770 Congress Street, Neenah.

Quite naturally a dinner party was thrown to honor Ruth at the time of her retirement. One of the remarks made by Pastor Schaefer at that event well sums up Ruth Smith's career as a Christian teacher at Trinity School: "The only trouble Ruth gave us was when she retired, and we had to go looking for another teacher."¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹⁶⁷Interview with Ruth Smith, February 6, 1981.

¹⁶⁸Letter from Ruth Smith, February 9, 1981.

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