

Centennial Stories
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An Interview with Miss Isabella N. Skinker

Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

— Hebrews 12:1–2a

I shared last week the Skinker family’s significant role in the founding of our church. Today I want to share an interview I had with Miss Isabella N. Skinker, the second of seven children born to Mr. Thomas Keith Skinker and his wife, Adela Bertha (Rives) Skinker. Miss Skinker was born 23 June 1873 in St. Louis.

You may be wondering how I had an interview with a 138-year-old woman! Okay, I confess that I didn’t actually talk *personally* to Miss Skinker. Fortunately, she wrote ca. 1924 her recollections of the early years of the Church of St. Michael and All Angels. I have taken portions of Miss Skinker’s recollections and arranged them in an interview format. It’s the only way we can “talk” to someone from her era.



Miss Bertha Skinker holding her pet cat named Peter, and her sister Miss Isabella N. Skinker, ca. 1913.

I had to “travel” to La Jolla, California to interview Miss Skinker in 1924. She has been in poor health for much of her adult life, and I suspect that she moved to La Jolla hoping that the weather there might be of help. I read a little about the history of La Jolla to occupy my mind during the long train ride and discovered that at the end of the Great War six years ago La Jolla had a population of 4,000, so the town isn’t a lot larger now. When I arrived, it was obvious that the town’s well-known beach cottage look was giving way to the elegant California Spanish style.

Miss Skinker was happy to see a parishioner of the church her family was instrumental in founding, and she was eager to tell her stories about the church’s early years.

Well, Miss Skinker, it is a pleasure to visit with you. I have heard so much about you and your family since I joined the parish two years ago in 1922, and the first thing I want to convey is my thanks for all you did to make our church what it is today. I know you’ve got stories to tell, and that’s what I want to hear so I can relate them to my fellow parishioners back in St. Louis, many of whom have never met you. Let’s begin by your telling me how Bishop Tuttle approached your father about planting a mission church just west of Forest Park.

There was a great mutual confidence and friendship between Father and the bishop. Father at first told the bishop he could not assume any new responsibilities. Father said, “The bishop looked so sad when I refused that I thought the better of it and consented to be on the Mission Committee.” And here we are, 13 years later, with a thriving parish!

The church had not been built when the mission began meeting for worship. Where did you meet, and how did you choose the location?

Someone on the Mission Committee suggested that we meet at Graham Chapel on the Washington University campus since it was not being used on Sundays. The Chancellor, Dr. David F. Houston who served on the Mission Committee, shook his head when this was suggested and said that owing to the university's non-sectarian charter, he would not think of suggesting such a thing to the Board. Fortunately, the bishop was bolder, and after getting the ear of several folk, permission was soon given for the use of Graham Chapel.

I understand that you had a Sunday school from the very beginning.

We did. Mr. Francis Walker, an instructor at the university, had agreed to take the boys' class, and I asked him one Saturday to be the Sunday school superintendent as well, but he said that he couldn't do it. I said, "All right, I'll have to do it myself, and it is supposed to be a man's job!" By the next morning, Mr. Walker had changed his mind and agreed to take the job. We began with 16 children in the Sunday school. One of the pupils was John Toms, son of the head of the English Department at the university. John was later withdrawn from the Sunday school because his mother said he was taught too little about the Bible and too much about the Church.

How was the music provided when you worshiped in Graham Chapel?

The chapel had a fine organ played only by Mr. Galloway, the university's organ instructor. Helen Huston suggested that I call Mr. Galloway and ask if Hunter Jones, one of his pupils, could play for us. Mr. Galloway said Hunter could certainly handle the chapel organ and that it would be splendid practice for him. Hunter came right over to see me and was delighted to have this opportunity. But the next day I got a sad note of regret from him. The Chancellor would not give his permission—afraid again that the Board wouldn't like it. I went straight to see Helen Houston—the Chancellor was there too—and when I started the case, she said, "O nonsense, Frank, let the boy do it!" And the boy did it very acceptably. I don't remember much about the choir, but I know that we had an all-volunteer choir right from the start.

Do you recall the first Sunday the Rev. George E. Norton, the first clergyman assigned to the Mission, officiated at a worship service?

I do. He was young and engaged to be married soon. After his first worship service with us, I went to the tiny visiting room where I found the young girls of the choir in a flutter of excitement over the handsome and charming young clergyman. They were very much depressed when I said, "No use, girls; he's engaged to be married in November!" When Mr. Norton first arrived on 1 June 1912, he spent his first six weeks at our house. We were all charmed immediately by his handsome, youthful face and pleasant, well-bred manner. We were astonished to find that his accent had no Maine "twang"—it seemed rather more Southern than anything else.

Did the Mission's membership grow slowly or quickly in those early days?

From the very first Mr. Norton's charming personality made friends and adherents for St. Michael's, so that the growth was astonishing to me. People of different church affiliations sent their children to the Sunday school because it was nearby, and through the children the parents often became interested.

A funny incident just came to mind and I don't know why, but let me relate it now before I forget it. Mrs. Roberts of Partridge Avenue was one of our early members. One day she said in her abrupt manner to Father, "Why have such a long name for the church? I don't like it at all." "Well," said Father, "I think Roberts, Johnson and Rand is a rather long name for a firm." (Laughter ensued.)

I'm sure the mission was thrilled to have an "unknown donor" provide the money for the construction of the church.

Oh, we were. We conducted our first worship service in the church debt-free! The congregation had to raise the funds for the organ. Father and Mr. Clint Whittemore were a two-man committee to select the organ, which highly amused Mrs. Whittemore, Sr. who declared that neither her old friend Tom (my father) nor her son Clint knew one note from another!

Where did Mr. Norton live before the rectory was built?

He brought his charming bride, Lillian, in the fall of 1912. They selected an apartment on Waterman Avenue, and the ladies of the parish stacked the pantry with preserves and jellies. Mrs. Norton became very popular from the start and threw herself into the life and work of the parish. About a year later the bishop notified us that the "unknown donor" who had graciously provided the funds for the construction of our mission church was prepared to add to her benefactions by presenting the parish with a rectory. There was great rejoicing over this, especially since by this time little John Hancock Norton had arrived and did not seem to thrive in the Waterman Avenue apartment. It remained for my mother to have the gracious thought of writing a letter of thanks to the "unknown donor" which the bishop gladly forwarded to the proper person. Not until her death in 1917 during the Great War did we learn her name.

Thank you, Miss Skinker, for sharing some of your memories with me. The folk back home will be thrilled to hear your stories. Do you have a thought you'd like me to pass on for you?

Being a part of getting the mission church up and running was one of the happiest and most fulfilling parts of my life. All the members of the Skinker family would say the same thing. I hope the parishioners that have come in the last few years will carry on the work by giving generously of their time, talent, and treasure. If they do, the church will continue to thrive.



The stories of the past are our stories too. They are woven into our fabric, into our very being, for they have shaped everything that surrounds us at this church that in turn is shaping us.

We will share more stories in these Centennial e-letters, and from living parishioners with whom we *can* sit down and talk. Our Centennial Celebration is first and foremost the telling of our stories and the sifting of those stories for spiritual truths. Only when we go back to know our past we will be able to go forward with the future mission God has given us.

*Direct us, O Lord, in all our doings with thy most gracious favor, and further us with thy continual help; that in all works begun by our spiritual forebears at this parish; continued by us, with thy help; and ended in thee by those who will follow us, we may glorify thy holy name, and finally, by thy mercy, obtain everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

— John R. Tyler
Historical information from *Trilogy* by Harriet Davidson