

Chapter 1

Aggie Finks and the “Seminary Boys”

The history of St. Luke's Church begins in 1929, when an energetic school teacher named Mildred Lozano (Aggie) Finks and an energetic group of students from the Virginia Theological Seminary in Alexandria joined forces to open a Sunday School with worship service (it was known as the "Sunday School" at first; the designation "church" came much later) in Snowden School. Snowden was located on Fort Hunt Road, just a few blocks south of our present building, between Cedar Dale Lane and Chadwick Avenue.

A Rural Area

The area was mainly fields and forests; very few houses stood between Snowden and the city of Alexandria. Fort Hunt Road was unpaved. It had existed for a long time, first named Clifton Neck, then shortened to Neck Road, receiving its present name during the Spanish-American War, when the Fort was built to protect our capital city from Spain's tiny navy.

People walked, rode in cars, or caught a ride on the milk wagon to go into Alexandria to do their shopping. Or they rode the trolley which ran from Washington to Mount Vernon, approximating the route of the George Washington Parkway, which wasn't opened for traffic until 1932. The trolley line crossed Fort Hunt Road at Hunter's Station (presently Elkins Street, near Stratford Landing) where Dooley's Store was located and where some of the people who became St. Lukers were then living.

A few large estates adjoined the river, such as Wellington (now the home of the Horticultural Society), Andalusia, Collingwood, Bellapais, Herbert Springs, Arcturus, and Grassymede Farm (now the Waynewood subdivision), The Wilkinson Farm on Sherwood Hall Lane and Thompson's Dairy were working farms; the others, despite their acreage, were really only residences.

But it was the Depression, and most of the people in the area were poor. One parishioner said, "Of course we always had enough to eat." But there was no spare cash for fine clothes or for travel.

The First Church on Fort Hunt

The closest Episcopal churches were Pohick and Christ Church, Groveton (it was located on Route One, just south of Beacon Mall; its congregation later became St. Mark's Church, on South King's Highway) when Aggie opened her Sunday School. This Sunday School was the first church of any kind on Fort Hunt Road, now home to St. Luke's, two Baptist, two Lutheran, a Methodist, and a Presbyterian Church!

Aggie: Teaching for Free

Aggie lived on Southdown Road (her house is still there), where a number of houses, many of them summer cottages, had been built during the twenties. The Lozano family had come here from Louisiana, and Aggie had married Emmet Finks, who worked for the post office.

Aggie was a teacher at Snowden, named for the Quaker family who gave the land for its construction in 1870. It was a one-room school at first, with a pot-bellied stove, oiled wood floors, a well, and a "necessary" house outside. In 1917-18, a second room was added. At some point before Aggie went there to teach, the owner of the land, Miss Kate Snowden, turned the school over to Fairfax County. But the county administration was apparently unaware of its new treasure. Aggie taught there for two years without a salary, and rumor had it that the powers that be were ignorant of her presence. Aggie got her reward, however, becoming in later years a member of the Fairfax County School Board.

Mrs. Finks's day school students, including Ella Dodson Baggett, who believes that she has been a member of St. Luke's longer than anyone else now in the congregation, and Nell Stevens Gallagher remember her as a motherly woman with gray hair done up in a bun. She brought soup to school every day and served a hot lunch to her students. She was both generous and gracious. She would sometimes offer her daughter's outgrown clothing to girls who she thought might need it, always saying something like, "I have this extra coat that looks as if it would fit you. Would you accept it?"

Aggie's Sunday School

Aggie's first Sunday School was not the one that became St. Luke's, and it was non-denominational. She and several other teachers held it in Sherwood Hall, a building (located near present-day Kirkside) which belonged to the King's Daughters and was used by various civic groups. But when she realized what a long way some of her children were walking, she set up a Sunday School at Snowden. This one was Episcopal.

Ella recalls coming in early to make the fires at Snowden, both for the "regular" and the Sunday School. It was a long walk for Ella from Hunter's Station, but she considered her job an honor as well as a responsibility and refused to take any money for doing it. Nell, who lived on Mason Hill, had perhaps an even longer walk, but she rarely missed a day or a Sunday.

Aggie did things with style and taste. Mary Scheeler, a long time St. Luker, lived near Groveton and attended Christ Church, as well as Aggie's first Sunday School. When she moved to Fort Hunt Road in 1935, Mary transferred her membership to St. Luke's. She cherishes a hand-painted pin Mrs. Finks gave her and the other members of her Sunday School class one Christmas, prior to 1929.

Not only did Mrs. Finks minister to the spiritual needs of her pupils, she also provided fun. Ella and Nell remember going to her house just before Christmas to fix boxes of candy and oranges for all the Snowden children.

Aggie's Sunday School flourished. The old-timers remember that the classes met before worship services and, in a reversal of the usual practice, some adults came for classes and then went home, leaving their children to stay for church. Since Snowden was the only church in the area, people of several denominations came. Scratch an old-time St. Luker, and you may find a Baptist, Methodist, or a Presbyterian underneath!

The Seminary Boys: Who They Were

Whether Mrs. Finks got in touch with the Seminary and asked for their services, or whether the students somehow found her, we do not know. But the "Seminary Boys", as the congregation called them, began to come to Snowden to hold Sunday services. They continued to serve the Snowden Mission from

1929 to 1942, when the Diocese of Virginia assigned the Reverend Foxhall Parker Thornton to take care of both Snowden and the Groveton chapel.

The names of the Seminarians who held services at St. Luke's between 1929 and 1942 appear in our Parish Register; there appear to be 41. However, since the register numbers skip from 21 to 27, we can suppose that there were actually 36. Among them were former Presiding Bishop John E. Hines; C. Gresham Marmion, retired Bishop of Kentucky; Canon Edward B. Guerry, who sent us wonderful pictures and memorabilia recently, as he had done in 1979 for our fiftieth anniversary; the Reverend J. Thomas Bagby, now retired and living in Houston, Texas; the Reverend Haskin Little, also of Houston; the Reverend William Sydnor, known to St. Lukers when he was the rector of Christ Church, Alexandria. Others whom St. Lukers of long standing remember with pleasure are the Reverend Messrs. Frank Moss, Steve Skardon, and Colin Campbell, now deceased.

The Seminary Boys: What They Did

St. Luke's was indeed blessed to have the faithful services of these young men. They must have worked very hard to take care of the Mission, in addition to handling their academic schedules. They are full of praise for each other. Tom Bagby speaks of Frank Moss as a "spiritual giant" and a great personal influence; both Bagby and Ed Guerry say that Moss was largely responsible for raising the money to build the first chapel. But Bishop Marmion recalls Ed Guerry as the chief fund raiser. This is what happens when the Saints of St. Luke's begin to talk about the other Saints!

But they had fun, too. A sense of affection and camaraderie comes through. They were somewhat free with ecclesiastical titles. Among

themselves, they called the senior of the three students assigned to St. Luke's at a given time "Bishop." Canon Guerry was "Bishop" from 1930-1933 and the Reverend Mr. Bagby served in that capacity from 1933 to 1935. The Reverend Haskin Little was "Bishop" in 1939; he went into Washington, bought a Model A Ford for \$50, and learned to drive so that he could perform his duties at St. Luke's.

Bishop Marmion recalls a creative solution to a problem which arose because the services were held in an elementary school. "Since it was difficult for some of the women to slide out of the desks in which they sat (some of them being a bit on the plump side), we stood only once during the service, and that was to recite the Apostle's Creed."

And Tom Bagby writes: "One day a kid or kids put boards over the top of the chimney. We had a profusion of unasked for incense. Instead of becoming incensed, we laughed and opened the windows."

The Seminarians called on their parishioners frequently. They played with the children, talked to the adults, and they ate. It was a joke among the congregation that the Seminary Boys knew just when to arrive, frequently as a pan of hot rolls was coming out of the oven.

Rites at Snowden

Six people were baptized at Snowden on March 23, 1930, with the Reverend Alexander C. Zabriskie of the Seminary officiating. One of them was Harry Harmon Clark; his widow, Louise, is still a member of St. Luke's. There was another baptism in October of 1930, one in 1931, two in 1932, and one in 1933. Aggie Finks is listed as godmother to all of the first group and almost all of the subsequent ones. The Seminarians, especially Edward Guerry, were other sponsors.

The first confirmation took place on May 3, 1931. Aggie Finks and Ella Dodson were confirmands; 75 people attended.

Building the Chapel

In 1933 St. Luke's moved into a brick chapel on our present site. Malcolm Mathieson, the owner of Wellington, donated the land. Our records note that on January 4, 1933, 1.033 acres of land were deeded to the Diocesan Missionary Society of Virginia. The church continued to be known as St. Luke's, Snowden, however, until a Parish council was formed in 1941; at that time the church was officially designated St. Luke's, Wellington.

The Seminarians were the ones who made the building possible. They spent many hours visiting the owners of the river estates, some of whom were Episcopalians but not members of the Snowden congregation. Canon Guerry describes humorously a visit he made to one of these wealthy neighbors. In a few moments, the Canon relates, this man faced him with a series of "stunning" questions: Have you raised any money from the congregation? Have you a site for the church? Have you an architect and plans? Have you a reliable treasurer? Upon hearing a negative reply to all these questions, the man asked the young Seminarian to come back and see him when he had some answers. So the Seminarians proceeded methodically to find the answers. Unfortunately, the rich man died before the young men had gone through all the steps. But in a short time Mr. Mathieson telephoned the Seminary with his offer of both land and a sum of money to complete the building.

Consecrating the Chapel

Parishioners of Olivet, Sharon, and Christ Church, Groveton, joined the St. Luke's congregation for the consecration of the chapel

on June 4, 1933, Whitsunday. Mary Scheeler brought a group from Groveton to sing in the choir, but they left before the service was over. Mary says, "We had other (social) plans for the rest of the day."

Bishop Frederick D. Goodwin was there for the confirmation service held at the same time. The building was not complete, and wooden ramps were used to get people into the church; there was a lot of mud still around. Five young ladies, all of them still alive, received the laying-on of hands. Nell Gallagher was among them, and she wore her high school graduation dress; two very important ceremonies in Nell's life happened close together.

How the Chapel Looked

The chapel consisted basically of one room, with a round window above the altar. Aggie Finks often said that she would like to see a stained glass window replace the clear panes that were there. "You could dedicate it to my memory," she said. There were choir stalls on the left side and a pulpit on the right, with an organ behind it. Choir robes were stored in a tiny room behind the stalls. Another small room behind the pulpit was used for Sunday School classes and for storage of the altar linens. The hot air/coal-fueled furnace was in a small addition behind the chapel; there was no entry into the furnace room from the church.

Most of the Sunday School classes met in the big room, drawing their chairs into circles to separate themselves from other classes. Mary Scheeler, who had moved to Fort Hunt Road in 1935, was a teacher; she and her pupil, Ann Miller, remember with pleasure the beautiful oak chairs that furnished the room. A cross was carved into the back of each, and there was a holder for a hymnal and prayer book. Hooks on the bottom held kneeling cushions.

Rites at the Chapel

Professor (later Dean) Zabriskie was celebrant at the first Baptism in the new chapel, on January 21, 1934. A familiar name appears in the register as a sponsor: Mildred Lozano Finks. Aggie's name can be read again and again in this capacity until she moved from the area in 1941. Mrs. Finks moved to Criglersville, in the mountains, where her husband's family had come from. She lived there until her death in 1963. She became very active in Piedmont Episcopal Church in Madison. Judy Lovegren, a former Senior Warden of St. Luke's now living near Madison and attending Piedmont, asked parishioners about Aggie. "A lovely person," one said. She recalled that Aggie arrived as World War II was going on and there were few men in the congregation. She took a leadership role once more and joined enthusiastically in many church activities and was instrumental in having kneelers made. Aggie is buried in Cedar Hill Cemetery, Madison.

The first marriage to be celebrated at St. Luke's took place on May 23, 1934. Mildred Virginia Harrell, a member of the first confirmation class in 1931, married William Mack Forrest, who had been confirmed in June, 1933. Sadly, William Mack Forrest's funeral was among the first to be held in the new chapel on May 8, 1936. He was buried in the church yard, but his grave was subsequently moved when it was decided that the church facility would grow and that there would not be room for a cemetery.

Summer Services at Holiday House

During the summer the Seminary was closed and students were not available to hold services at the Snowden Mission. But there were services, held in a small chapel belonging to Holiday House, a collection of barracks-type

buildings in the area of Ridgecrest Drive. Its land extended from the overpass on East Boulevard Drive to Morningside Lane; it belonged to the Girls' Friendly Society of Washington (How many of you ladies remember the GFS?) and was used as a camp. Girls of high school age and younger would come out on the trolley to spend the summer; some local girls, including our own Ann Miller, went, too.

The St. Luke's young men acted as lay readers for these summer services, and St. Luke's used the Holiday House facilities for retreats and for church suppers.

The Young People

Throughout the 1930's, the Seminarians had a wonderful ministry among the young people of the area. This was a social, as well as a religious tribe, enjoying such activities as square dancing, eating at Howard Johnson's, hay rides and Halloween parties. According to Gladys (Gibby) Baumbach, currently a resident of the Mount Vernon Nursing Home, groups of Episcopal young people from Franconia, Groveton, and Alexandria would sometimes join the Snowdenites for picnics or parties. Although some teenagers came from as far away as Mount Vernon and rode the trolley, the Seminarians were responsible for much of the group's transportation. They had an old station wagon, known as the "Gospel Wagon", which made the rounds after school, picking up people to go to choir practice and to their various other church-connected activities.

Things were not very formal. The group had no fancy name; it was called simply "The Young People." But they took church seriously. Many of them read the lessons on Sunday, establishing early on St. Luke's strong tradition of lay reading.

The Young People, in fact, named the church. Ella Baggett remembers being at a meeting with five or six others, including their

president, Jack Nightingale, when they took out their Bibles and chose the name St. Luke's.

The Junior Vestry

During its early years, St. Luke's was not officially a church and hence had no formal governing body. Mrs. Finks and a few others kept things going from day to day. On October 24, 1937, a Junior Vestry (unofficial) was formed, consisting of about six men around the age of twenty, with the purpose of keeping the chapel clean and in good repair. The group met every week, usually on Thursdays, in the rooms of Steve Skardon or Colin Campbell at the Seminary. Steve Taylour of Marlan Forest served as Secretary-Treasurer until the group was disbanded in 1941; John Briar, Jr., was President.

They bought weather stripping and installed it. They directed the janitor to get the fire going in the furnace Saturday evening and stay three or four hours until it could be banked, so that it would surely be warm for Sunday services; they assigned their own members "furnace duty", which meant going in early Sunday to be sure it was warm. (It's surprising how many St. Lukers were involved with the furnace. Some of the Seminarians also recall getting up long before light to get to the church and check the heating!)

The Junior Vestry was responsible for the landscaping of the chapel grounds. When it came time to improve the driveway, they enlisted the services of young men stationed at a CCC Camp at Fort Hunt. They came in on a Saturday and put down cinders (purchased from the Potomac Railroad Yards for \$8.50). Since the roller the Vestry had hoped to borrow was broken, the group improvised. The CCC truck drove over the area many times. Even so, Colin Campbell was worried. He cautioned the young men not to stop their cars too suddenly or to start them too violently, as he did not think the

cinders were thoroughly settled and might damage the vehicles.

To repay the CCC boys for their assistance, the St. Luke's Young People gave them a party with bingo, refreshments, and dancing to radio music. Cigarettes, chewing gum, and shaving lotion were bought for prizes. Mrs. Finks and some of the older St. Lukers helped to plan the party.

In 1938 the Junior Vestry was concerned with the chairs in the chapel and how to keep them from damaging the wooden floors. A letter appears in the minutes from Haskin Little's father, telling in detail how to find and put on rubber bumpers.

The outhouse was also a problem, being described as in "deplorable condition." The Junior Vestry paid someone to clean it and then agreed to find the lost keys to the toilets so they could keep them locked except on Sundays.

The minutes of May 22, 1939, report plaintively: "One major problem of the Vestry is the parking of cars at the chapel lot. Illicit love affairs are evident, and in one instance the chapel has been entered." But there is no word as to how the resourceful young men dealt with that one!

The Junior Vestry had its share of fun, too. Often at the end of the official meeting, they would head into Washington to see a movie or to enjoy other things the city had to offer.

The Round Table

There was another young people's group from 1938 to 1940, known as the Round Table. It met in members' homes or in the Snowden School, which they called affectionately "The Ark." They had serious discussions and impressive speakers on topics such as the history of the Anglican Church, the meaning of the Apostle's Creed and the Lord's Prayer. They

completely dissected the Prayer Book; when they studied the service of Holy Matrimony, they played appropriate wedding music. They heard missionaries from Alaska, China, and the Blue Ridge Mountains speak.

They also had wonderful times, rowing on the Potomac, riding bikes along the Tidal Basin, cruising on the Wilson Line to the amusement park at Marshall Hall, playing bingo, and dancing often and late. One highlight for all was the party at which Janet Kessenger, an active member of the group and frequent hostess for their activities, announced her engagement to Haskin Little. (The couple were married, had three children, and are now enjoying their retirement). As 1939 drew to a close, the group was discussing the war which had just begun in Europe.

A Church Led by the Young

The leadership of the young people of St. Luke's was remarked on by many. Frequently only five or ten older adults would be present at a Sunday morning service, but there was always a larger group of the young people. With the assistance of the Seminary Boys, who were not much older than they were, and the inspiration of such people as Mrs. Finks, these young people enjoyed a social life outside the church, came faithfully to Sunday School, and assisted at worship. Adults who came to St. Luke's for the first time during these years were usually surprised to see a congregation made up mostly of people around twenty years of age. As they thought about it, however, some remarked: "The Holy Spirit is holding this church together."

