

# A Bell Rang in Uniontown

*A Book Review by Matina Kilkenny*

**A Bell Rang in Uniontown:  
The First Hundred Years of Arcata  
and Its Methodist Church, 1850-1950**

**by Gayle Karshner**

**128 pages; \$29.95**



**W**ithout a doubt, congregations of the First United Methodist Church of Arcata, present and future, will be grateful to have in hand Gayle Karshner's book, *A Bell Rang in Uniontown*. But when Karshner accepted the invitation to write the history of the church, she drew a large circle around her topic. Her book chronicles not only the careers of preachers, the evolution of church property, the contributions of music and youth directors and of church women's groups within that single congregation, but also the social history of an isolated California town in the century 1850-1950. Those of us who value regional history will also dig into this treasure with thanks to the author.

The local ministry of Asa P. White, the first Methodist exhorter to settle in this area, began within months of the Gregg-Wood party's overland journey of discovery and the subsequent white settlement that radiated out from the town that was called, for the first 10 years of its existence, Union or Uniontown. On Christmas Eve, 1849, the Gregg-Wood party arrived near the plot of land that would come to be called the Plaza; Rev. White, after a sojourn in Trinidad, preached the first Methodist service in Uniontown on the Plaza July 3, 1850.

The fact that the beginnings of local Methodism and of the town were so close in time inspired Karshner to enfold church history into local history. She subtitled her book: "The First Hundred Years of Arcata and Its Methodist Church, 1850-1950."

The author is a master weaver of stories, pulling in not only local atmosphere and events and local responses to national events but also national church movements and their effect on Humboldt County.

As she chronicles the response of Methodist ministers and congregations to Humboldt's hard times—indeed, the hard times of a nation—including war and the home front, economic depression, issues of slavery and minority

relations, temperance battles, natural disasters and epidemics, even the rights of free speech, the author succeeds in giving us a picture of Arcata then and now. She also details the local reflection of a century's worth of changing American attitudes toward the life-turning events of baptism, marriage and burial.

In a recent slide presentation and reading for Humboldt County Historical Society members, Karshner commented on another of her goals for *A Bell Rang in Uniontown*: "I also wanted to describe how people lived, how they lit and heated their houses, where they got their water."

In all this, she succeeds.

This is an intelligent history that uses a wide variety of sources to tell its tale. The author blends her source citations into the text as she simultaneously guides the reader's evaluation of those sources. This is not at all a "vanity" book.

At the same time, the text of this solid history unfolds smoothly and many of the stories are a delight to read. As the author says, "Churches are human institutions, led by individuals who, like the biblical characters they quote, have their share of human frailties as well as strengths." Frailties, idiosyncrasies, and loving acts are all recorded with insight, compassion and humor. Deft in her use of the telling detail, Karshner gives full honors to those individuals who have inspired and enlivened the congregation and the town.

Eighty black and white photographs document church and local history; of value too are indexes by name and subject and the appendices listing pastors and their terms, recorded baptisms, and recorded marriages in Arcata's Methodist congregation.

In the preface, Karshner asserts that the interwoven stories of church and community reflect her "gratitude for this adopted place and its people who have supported me and my family in countless, caring ways for 53 years." As members of this community, we are fortunate that the author chose this as her home and that she manifested her gratitude by narrating our history in well-written, carefully organized chapters that blend into an informative, interesting whole.

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