

BUILDING AGAIN, III: LEIGH GITTINS: LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD

by Tom Cox

The seventy-fifth anniversary of the First Presbyterian Church was a landmark event that provided the congregation with a chance both to look to the past with pride and to the future with enthusiasm. To be sure, there were harbingers of trouble on the horizon that were detectable to the more perceptive. Nationally membership in the Presbyterian church (and other mainline Protestant denominations) had begun a slow, steady decline in the mid-sixties, and the First Presbyterian Church was not immune; by 1978, membership had fallen from a high of over 600 to 425 partly because the neighborhood surrounding the church was changing as families grew up and those with young children moved to the suburbs where they were frequently served by other churches. But such things were generally lost sight of in the euphoria of the anniversary; it was a time marked by confidence and a congregational sense of well-being.

Perhaps no one typifies the times so well as H. Leigh Gittins — and, appropriately, it was he who was called upon to prepare a history of the church for the seventy-fifth anniversary. Gittins had spent a lifetime in the First Presbyterian Church and had become a person of some note in the community through his long association with education and the writing of regional history. For sixteen years he was principal of the elementary and junior high schools in McCammon, a thoroughly Mormon community some twenty miles south of Pocatello. Indeed, his wife, Virginia, later expressed some surprise that the powers-that-be in McCammon accepted an active Presbyterian as head of their schools. Their action spoke loud and clear of the respect in which he was held, for Gittins made no secret of his Presbyterian faith. At one point Gittins even requested support from the session of First Presbyterian in establishing a Sunday school program in McCammon, where some twenty-five families had expressed to him their interest in having an alternative to the LDS church for their children. Nothing lasting came from the request; the days of Samuel Wishard, when Sunday School building was a major part of the Presbyterian effort to convert Mormons, were past. In spite of this abortive effort, Leigh Gittins was well accepted in McCammon. A number of things surely went into this, not the least of which was the fact that both he and his father before him had been active in community affairs (among other things, Leigh had been president both of the McCammon Lion's Club and the McCammon Chamber of Commerce, while his father was a long-time county commissioner). Moreover, their skillful management of the Gittins ranch west of Arimo gave them an acceptance in the largely rural area that might not have been accorded to city dwellers and Leigh's staunch conservatism served him well in the anything-but-liberal community.

The elder Gittins left the ranch in the hands of hired help and moved to Pocatello shortly after the turn of the century so that his children could obtain an education at the new Academy of Idaho. It was in Pocatello that Leigh was born and grew up. The family lived at 488 South Seventh (today the Gittins house, built in 1907, is included in the University Historic Neighborhood Walking Tour). Young Gittins attended the nearby First Presbyterian Church and Pocatello's public schools, graduating from Pocatello High School in 1925. An interest in music was already evident, for with his mother's encouragement he took clarinet lessons and, in time, became a soloist with the Idaho Technical Institute's orchestra. He attended the University of Idaho, Southern Branch (as the Academy cum Technical Institute was then called), receiving a

B.A. in 1929. Virginia Cornell, Leigh's future wife, graduated that same year and took a position with the local Y.M.C.A. By September 1930 they "had saved enough to be married." They lived and ranched on Marsh Creek for the next 36 years on a place Leigh's father had obtained as a squatter before the area, then part of the Fort Hall Indian Reservation, had been legally opened to white settlers (although no longer in the family, the ranch still stands beside Gittins Road, some five miles southwest of McCammon). There the young couple raised a son and two daughters.

During the school year of 1941-1942, with teachers in short supply due to World War II, Gittins was prevailed upon to teach in McCammon High School while continuing his ranching business to which he returned full-time the following year. Virginia began teaching at Lava Hot Springs in 1954. Well known and popular, in 1956 Leigh was tapped to be principal of McCammon's elementary and junior high schools, positions he would hold for many years. To strengthen himself for work in education, he returned to school during the summers, earning a master's in education (or, according to one source, an M.A. in history) from the University of Idaho in 1961 (or 1962, again the sources are not in agreement). Due to ill health that kept Leigh from doing heavy work, the Gittinses sold their ranch and moved to Pocatello in 1966; Leigh commuted daily to McCammon to carry out his duties as principal. After his retirement in 1972, the couple was primarily tied to Pocatello, where as Leedice Kissane put it, both Leigh and Virginia were "devoted workers in church and civic endeavors, noted equally for their generosity and geniality." Over the years both received professional and service awards. While resident in Pocatello, Leigh wrote two books on local history, *Idaho's Gold Road*, much of which centered around McCammon, and *Pocatello Portrait: The Early Years*. He also played major roles in the financing and building of the Bannock County Historical Society's replica of Fort Hall on the upper level of Ross Park and in the city of Pocatello's centennial celebrations.

Considering his lifetime of association with First Presbyterian and his background in local history, Leigh Gittins was the obvious choice to write a history of the congregation for its seventy-fifth anniversary. Yet he approached the task with trepidation. Having seen the friction the naming of rooms and the dedication of memorial windows had caused and knowing the sensitivities of various members of the congregation, he worried about overlooking someone and making them (or their families) unhappy. But those in charge of the anniversary would not take "no" for an answer, and — with misgivings — Gittins agreed to write the history and set other things aside to devote six uninterrupted months to the task.

Together with Marvin McCall, a teacher at Highland High School, Gittins interviewed a number of old-timers in the church, interviews which are preserved still on cassette tapes. He plowed through back files of Pocatello newspapers, examined old church and synod records, and drew upon his own extensive memories. What emerged was a frankly celebratory account — which is clearly what he and the anniversary committee had intended all along. Gittins set the tone early, writing of the church's founders: "They refused to permit apathy to enter their minds as many of us do today. They had a Christian church to establish and preserve, and they *did!*" After describing some fund-raising activities for church improvements in 1967, he summed them up with: "Gee, aren't good Christian Presbyterians great?" Further on, he wrote of the choir: "They have inspired us not only this particular season [the summer of 1974], but in all our services. We thank them and their great directors. This praise is also directed to our faithful

organist. May these fine services continue!” Such statements were a frank expression of Gittins’s enthusiasm for the First Presbyterian Church, an enthusiasm he had no intention of hiding and which led the anniversary committee to thank him for his work: “He has recounted our struggles and triumphs in a personal and vibrant way. His conclusion has inspired us with a challenge for the future.”

Gittins’s account is both a history and an invaluable source for researchers. Concerned that he would leave someone out, he included long lists of those who were active at various points in the church’s history. He even appended a list of members as of September 1979 and indicated the fourteen who had fifty or more years of continuous membership. The fourteen included the name Leigh Gittins. It was the sort of insider’s story that gives a “feel” for the church that no outsider could have supplied. Intended primarily for internal distribution and long out of print, the history is not readily available today, but fortunately copies remain in the church office and the Pocatello public library.

Although Leigh Gittins loved history — and the history of his church in particular — he did not live in the past. He celebrated progress and looked to the future with confidence. The past was but prelude to greater things that were to come. Perhaps nothing illustrates this quite so well as their contributions to the church’s music program.

For years there had been talk of some day acquiring a pipe organ. It is not clear just what role Leigh and Virginia Gittins played in the acquisition of the organ, but one can be sure they were active. Indeed, a few years later when it was decided that another rank of pipes was needed, they were the ones who stepped forward with funds to finance the addition. Nor did their dedication to the church’s music program end there; in 1982 the church added a handbell choir, and the Gittinses donated the money to purchase three octaves of bells for it — and another rank of pipes for the organ.

After Leigh died in 1999, Virginia remembered that the two of them had long wished that the church could acquire a grand piano for its sanctuary, and she launched a memorial fund in Leigh’s name to raise the money to purchase one. Funds accumulated, and in time a committee was formed to locate an appropriate piano. Early in 2002 the committee, which had not yet located a suitable instrument, learned that Virginia’s health was failing; finding a good piano took on fresh urgency. Their son, George, located a Yamaha piano in Boise that seemed to fit the bill. Organist Gerald Hughes tested it and pronounced it suitable. George and others in the Gittins family added additional funds to those already accumulated so that the church could buy the piano and have it delivered in time for Virginia to see and hear before she became too ill to attend church. What an appropriate memorial! The Gittinses had looked to the future as well as the past, and, as Bob Shaw has noted, “Even though Leigh and Virginia are gone, the piano will be around for many generations to enjoy. It will stand as a monument to the love of their church and its ministry of music by Leigh, Virginia” and their children.