

— 4 children died in June 29, 1969 Gilmanton Iron Works house fire —

Pastor who suffered devastating loss of 4 daughters never lost his faith

By ROGER AMSDEN
FOR THE LACONIA DAILY SUN

GILMANTON — A memorial service will be held Sunday at 10:30 a.m. at the Living Word Assembly of God Church on Old Stage Road for Millie Stevens, the mother of 17 children who died on June 4 of this year in Jacksonville, Florida and was lovingly known as "Shoebox Millie" by her friends and family.

Her husband, Pastor Sherman Stevens, who founded and helped build the church building where the memorial service will be held, says that she got the Shoebox tag because when she was born she only weighed two pounds and would be placed in a shoebox by her parents and kept warm on the end of the open door of a wood stove oven.

Stevens says that the service will feature remembrances of his wife by those who knew her from the time when he and she first arrived in town in the early 1960s and they established the Evangelical Baptist Fellowship, a popular church which drew members from many nearby communities, including Laconia and at one time had 300 showing up for Sunday School.

"I remember digging the cellar hole and working when the foundation was poured," Stevens, who would later go on to start churches in Pittsfield, Mass., and in Athens, Georgia.

He said that he first met Millie in South Paris, Maine, where they both grew up, when he had gone through the school lunch line in high school and was walking with his tray, looking for a place to sit, when she said "You can sit with me."

It was the start of a relationship which went over for over 66 years, including more than 63 years of married life and saw them involved in ministries in such remote places Gayuna and Ecuador in South America as well as eight missionary visits to Russia in the 1990s to churches founded by one their sons, who was involved in the underground church movement there prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union.

He said that his wife, also known as "Mother Millie", for the loving care that she provided to all who knew her and that the couple had 46 grandchildren and 17 great-grandchildren.

Much of what they accomplished together came after the devastating loss of four of their daughters, three of whom were teenagers and one who was a little over a year old, in an explosion and fire at their farmhouse home



Pastor Sherman Stevens kneels next to the graves of four of his daughters who died in a fire 45 years ago in Gilmanton Iron Works. A memorial service is planned Sunday at the Living Word Assembly of God Church on Old Stage Road for Steven's wife, Millie, mother of 17, who died last month and whose ashes will be interred next to her daughters at the family grave site. (Roger Amsden/for The Laconia Daily Sun)

in Gilmanton on Sunday, June 29, 1969. Stevens describes what happened that night in a widely circulated Christian testimony, entitled "When There's No Hope" which has been translated into at least a dozen languages.

"About four a.m. we were jolted from sleep by an explosion that rocked the foundation of our farm house. As we opened our bedroom door we were faced with a roaring inferno. It was impossible to reach little Hope, who was just outside our bedroom door. Millie snatched Grace from the crib in our room and we went up the old stairs that led to the attic. We passed through a small opening over the fire and found our way to the back stairs. The door at the foot of the stairs opened toward us and was locked from the other side. We were hopelessly trapped.

"Kevin, our 16-year-old son, had already led Peter, Carl, Andy, Tim, Faith, and Jesse outside the burning building. Above the roar of the fire, he somehow heard our cry. Leaving Peter in charge of those on the lawn, he made his fourth trip into the raging

inferno, unlocked the door and led us to safety.

"Immediately, we began to count the children. Mike, the oldest, was away for the night. That left twelve at home. Only eight were accounted for: Vicki, Bonny, Debbie and Hope were still inside the house.

"A ladder from the barn was used to try and enter the girl's window on

the second floor. The heat and smoke drove us back again and again. Soon the fire department arrived and began rescue operations. The great intensity of the fire made it impossible to save the lives of our girls.

"It is my honest prayer that you will never stand beside a burning building with the realization that members of your family have left this life for the life hereafter. It is my hope that you never have to watch as everything you own goes up in flames. Believe me, it is the most hopeless feeling that you can ever experience."

The entire family, wearing clothes donated by their neighbors, were at church several hours after the fire and Pastor Stevens told the assembled congregation that despite the loss, his faith was unshaken. "I am as sure that God is still God as I have ever been. If I didn't believe that I would nail the door of this church shut and never enter it again."

He says that "four of our girls went home to heaven that Sunday morning" and that it was the love of Christ and the grace of God that held his family together and flooded their hearts with peace, enabling them to withstand the trial brought on by the deaths of the four girls.

Stevens says he is intensely proud of his children and the careers in law enforcement, nursing and the ministry which they have created for themselves and that one of his great joys is family reunions, at which he gets to see them and their children and grandchildren and is looking forward to being reunited with former members of his congregation at Sunday's memorial service, where those who knew his wife will get to express in their own words what she meant to them.

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