

# Pointing heavenward

*"For nearly two centuries, Mt. Zion Church has been a beacon in Marion County. Her founders were good, strong, simple people; frontiersmen, pioneers and farmers. It is a beautiful place, hallowed, rich in heritage, steeped in tradition. And, once more, a hand points triumphantly and eternally heavenward."*

— HEATHER NEILL

## *Tradition reborn at Mt. Zion Methodist Church*

BY DEBRA MINOR WILSON  
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FAIRMONT — Ever since she was a little girl, Heather Neill could remember her dad talking about Mt. Zion Church, and the old, wooden hand up on top of its steeple.

These memories were especially vivid in his autobiography, "I'm Gonna Bury You!"

"Dad wrote about the 'big old oak weather vane' my great-granddad Eldora Moran hand-carved in the shape of a fist with the index finger pointing triumphantly and eternally heavenward! A 'one-way' sign even way back in those mountains a hundred years ago."

Among the oldest churches in the area, Mt. Zion's history begins more than 180 years ago, before West Virginia was even a state.

In about 1829, Frederick VanGilder and his sister Sarah, children of Revolutionary War soldier Jacob VanGilder, began holding prayer meetings in homes up in the area that would come to be known as Mt. Zion.

In 1833 they bought a bit of ground and moved the services into a little house on the property. Several years went by and the church grew until, one Saturday night, the little house burned to the ground. Services were held in a cabin on the back of property owned by the Morans until a new church could be built.

By 1846, a new cabin stood on ground donated by Frederick VanGilder and served as Mt. Zion's house of worship for 30 years.



George Swearingen holds up the new carved hand that will be placed at the top of the church's steeple, while Bob Wilcox looks on.

In 1875, the church as you see it today was built to replace the now-outgrown cabin.

"Together, Granddad Eldora and Clark Kincaid built and erected the steeple, and that is when Eldora put up the hand pointing heavenward," Neill said.

"A number of the oldest headstones in the area have that same hand carved on them, not only at Mt. Zion but in other area cemeteries, such as Catawba, as well. The writing is long worn away, but the hand still points triumphantly toward heaven. I have often wondered whether great-granddad carved the hand to match the headstones, or

whether it was the other way around."

Eldora's original carving finally succumbed to the elements, but Mt. Zion couldn't do without her unique steeple, Neill said.

"Hazel Morgan, a longtime benefactress of Mt. Zion, now passed away, saw to it that another hand — the one I remember from my childhood — was erected around the late 1960s. My cousin, Walter Moran, was the first person to show it to me when I was a little girl. His son Charlie says he remembers his dad telling the kids he had to climb up there to clip its fingernails! But, after nearly 50 years, that hand, too, had seen better days and was taken down last

year. The steeple sure did look bare without it.

"But not anymore!"

Bud Burik, owner of B&B Tree Service, was the man of the hour in "topping off" the effort to revive the ancient Mt. Zion tradition, when he used his bucket truck to put up a new hand last week.

"You only had to see the upturned faces of the church members, as he placed the ruggedly-carved hand atop the steeple, to know he has never done a job which meant as much to anyone.

"For nearly two centuries, Mt. Zion Church has been a beacon in Marion County. Her founders were good, strong, simple people; frontiersmen, pioneers and farmers ... your grandfathers and mine. Many of you share in her story and will come to their final resting place in her peaceful cemetery.

"Daddy is buried there now, right by Mamaw and Great-Granddad Eldora, and Great-Grandma Lydia Moran. It is a beautiful place, hallowed, rich in heritage, steeped in tradition.

"And, once more, a hand points triumphantly and eternally heavenward.

"Join us, won't you, some Sunday morning? Come on home to Zion."

Sunday services are held at 9 a.m. The church is located on Mt. Zion Road, two miles off Route 73/Speedway, just past Mt. Zion Nursery and Tree Farm.

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Bud Burik places a hand that is carved of western red cedar atop the steeple, 60 feet in the air.

SUBMITTED PHOTOS

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Bud Burik prepares to place the new hand, pointing to heaven, atop the steeple.