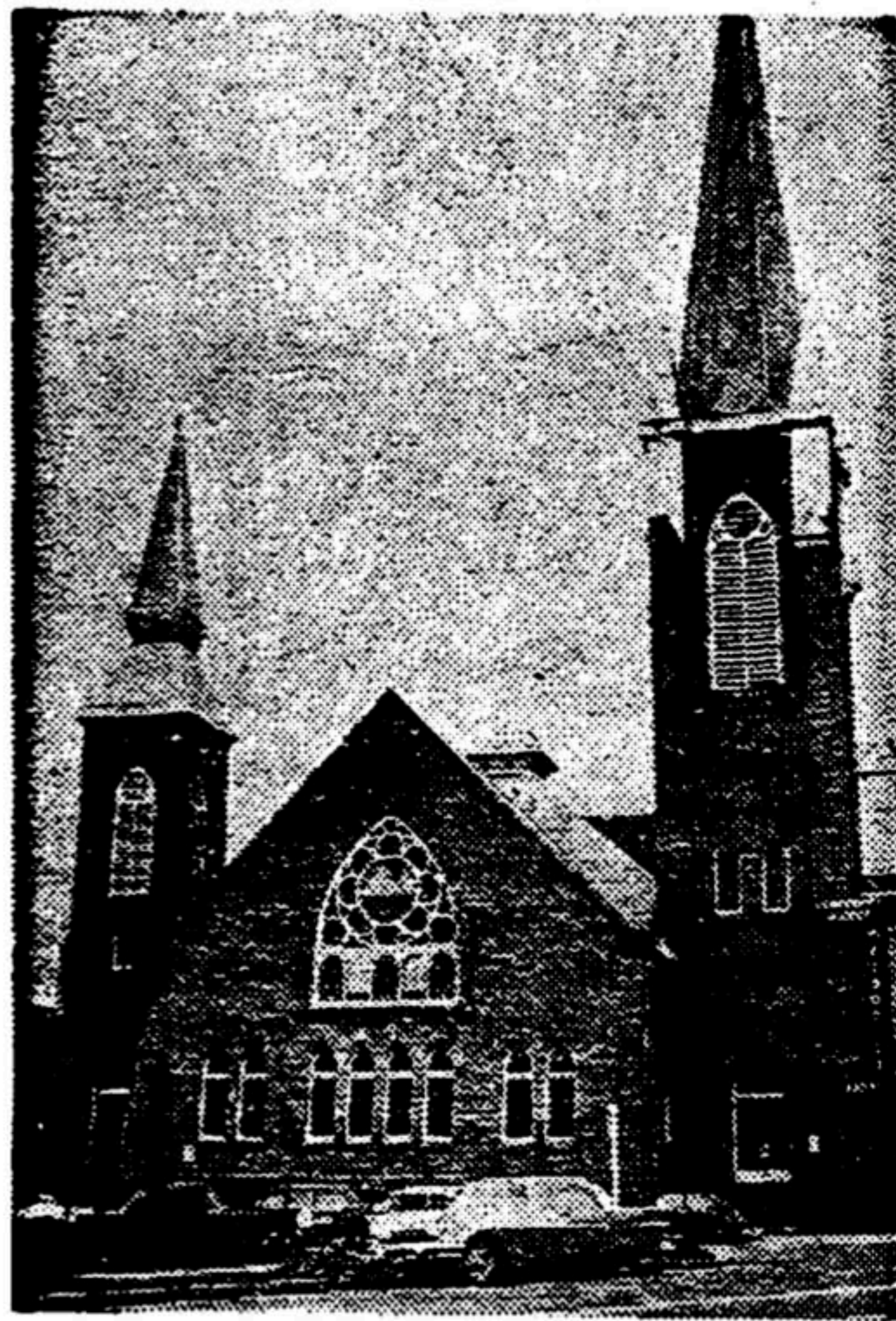


A Church Filled With Living

By Charles McBride



Now a parking lot

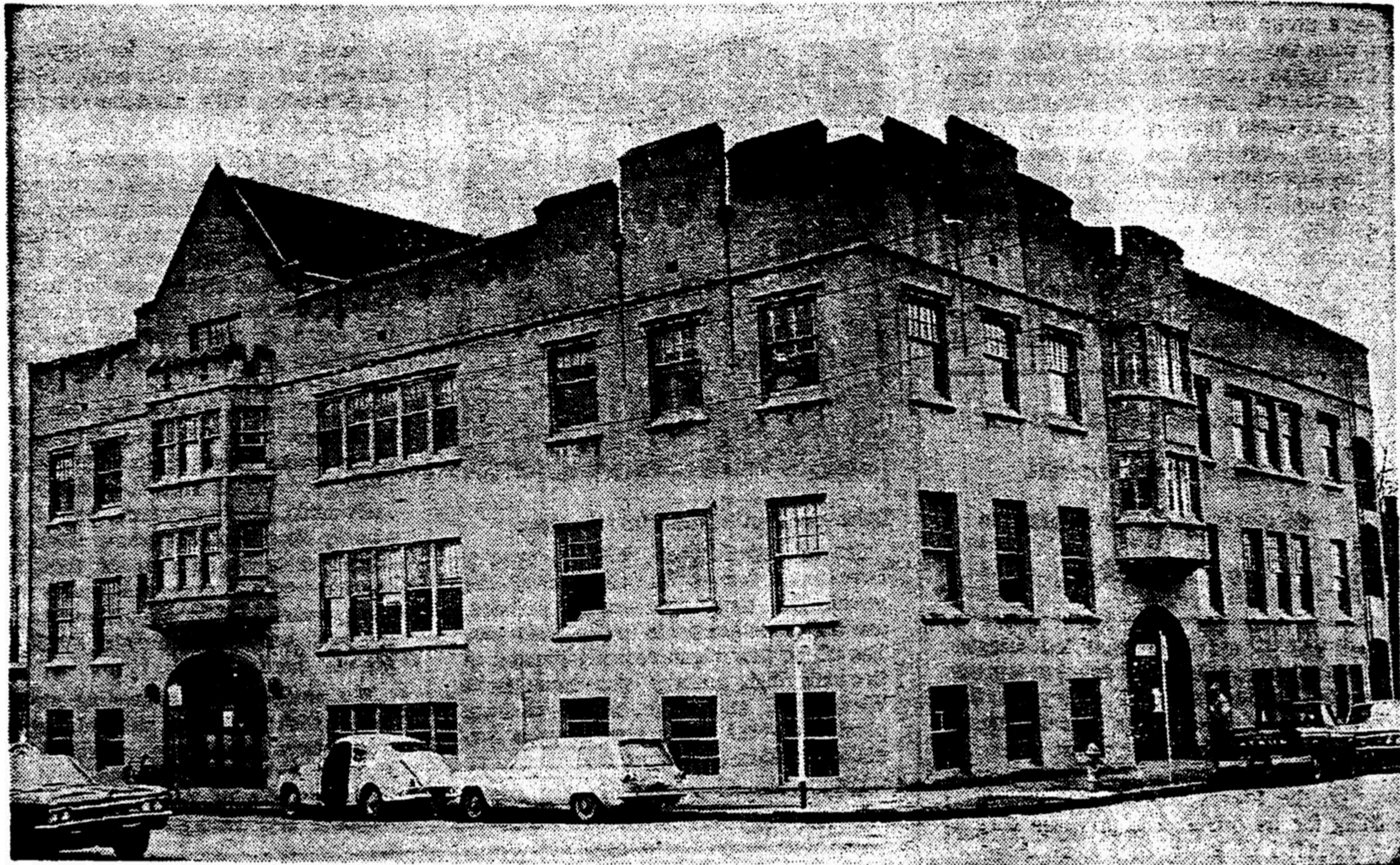
LIKE the catacombs which harbored Christians in an earlier era, Centenary-Wilbur United Methodist Church at SE 9th Ave. and Ash St. in Portland is a rather dark, dank and decrepit place, full of corridors leading back to little rooms where unlikely enterprises are headquartered.

Pursuing the analogy, just as the catacombs were a refuge for persons at odds with the popular culture — and even government — of first-century Rome, so Centenary-Wilbur Church has become a haven for the alienated, dropped-out and disenfranchised in this place and time.

A few may have revolutionary notions; certainly there are some radicals among them.

An Episcopal priest, whose own more affluent parish adjoins the turf for which Centenary-Wilbur accepts responsibility, characterizes his neighbor as "the only real apostolic church in Portland."

And like the early Christians, the members of Centenary-Wilbur Methodist Church — the few who are left — are continually subject to the pullings and pushings, stresses and strains, of their consciences versus the influences urging them to conform more nearly to the popular and accepted model of what a church should be.



Continuing in the rectory

That decision was another turn in the twisted course which has taken Centenary-Wilbur a long way from its former status as one of the grand old churches of Portland to its present search for a new style of ministry appropriate to its neighborhood.

For the neighborhood around Centenary-Wilbur has changed. It is near Buckman School and Buckman is one of Portland's southeast "poverty pockets."

In fact, it may almost be said that Centenary-Wilbur is in a non-neighborhood. Buckman School has a 100 per cent turnover in its enrollment each year, indicating the area is typical of "The Secular City" Harvard Theologian Harvey Cox describes in his book of that title.

The characteristics of the secular city, Cox says, are mobility and anonymity. Its people are on wheels, moving, barely

touching, seldom attempting or wanting to know one another deeply.

The secular city is a far cry from the farm towns of a generation or two ago or a century or two ago — the rural culture which shaped America's churches, made them extensions of the friendly, supportive (and controlled) atmosphere of the small towns in which they were located.

When Centenary-Wilbur's congregation voted in late 1962 to tear down the damaged steeple and sanctuary, patch up the south wall and make a new entrance to the remodeled gymnasium, most members saw it as another giant step towards oblivion.

Back in 1935, the church had a membership of 1,500, but immediately after World War II the exodus of Portland to the suburbs began. For awhile, membership of Centenary-Wilbur remained fairly stable, but in the early 1950's the decline

began. By 1960 there were only 544 on the church rolls and the question of the church's future loomed large among those who were left. Many who kept their membership at Centenary-Wilbur were already residents of the suburbs or more attractive sections of the city, who each Sunday morning made the sentimental journey back to SE 9th Avenue.

Temporary use of the gym for worship was seen as a sort of holding action until members were able to bridge the gap to reality and accept the inevitable demise of their beloved church.

What happened next may not have been a resurrection, because the patient was not quite dead — but it perhaps will turn out to be a miraculous cure, although that is by no means certain. The congregation now numbers about 160 — not much more than 10 per cent of the membership in its heyday.

In June, 1965, a new minister, the Rev.