Heritage Sunday: May 20, 2018
Fred Rogers Before the Neighborhood

While a senior at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, Fred McFeely Rogers (1928-2003) became "appalled by what were labeled 'children's programs'—pies in faces and slapstick." As Rogers later told Eva Stimson, editor of *Presbyterians Today*, "That's when I decided to go into television....Children deserved better."

In 1953, the music composition major and Latrobe, Pennsylvania, native was hired by Pittsburgh's WQED to co-produce *The Children's Corner*, a half-hour television program hosted by Josie Carey. Rogers worked behind the scenes as organist and puppeteer, recording episodes that emphasized creativity and self-esteem. Around the same time he began taking classes at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary and graduate courses in child development, "to deepen what I could bring to television."

Carey's lyrics and dance, running weekly alongside Rogers' music and puppets from 1953 to 1961, gained national attention after *The Children's Corner* was syndicated by NBC. Rogers continued attending classes at Pittsburgh Seminary—sometimes during his lunch hour—and in 1963 was ordained with a charge to work with children and families through the media. *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, with the Reverend Fred Rogers appearing on camera sporting his iconic sweater and sneakers, began broadcasting on public television in February 1968, fifty years ago this year.

As Stimson wrote, Fred Rogers "never served in a traditional role of pastor, but through television [brought] his simple message of affirmation and acceptance to a 'congregation' of millions."

Heritage Sunday is an annual day of celebration set aside by the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). See rare digitized film of *The Children's Corner*, download past bulletin inserts, and learn more about Presbyterian history at www.history.pcusa.org/hs

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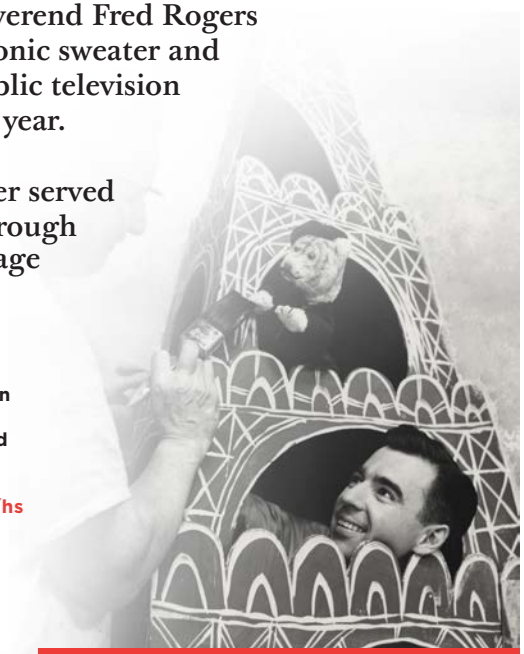

Fred Rogers on set with Daniel Striped Tiger, 1962. Photo: Ron Vickers.

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