

## Cross of Christ Chronicles

### *Lift High the Cross? — Part 2*

Before we continue on our quest for crosses it would be good to go back to the beginning for a short course on “Christianity in Norway-101” or should I say “1026” the number of years its presence has been felt in the homeland of our forefathers. In 1995 the people of Norway celebrated the millennial anniversary of a supremely important event. “Olav Tryggvason came to Norway from England with several priests and a Bishop and began his Christian missionary work in the year 995. He also worked to set himself up as King. Christian services have been held continuously in Norway since that time.” This development was quite remarkable considering the fact that it was still very much the Viking Age, and as we know they already had a religion (now referred to as mythology) which was very robust and promised a desirable afterlife to those who were deserving of it.

This thousand-year Christian epoch is divided almost equally between the early years of Catholicism and the following Lutheran era. “The Reformation came to Norway mainly as a result of the conversion of King Christian III of Denmark and Norway. In 1537 he established the Evangelical Lutheran faith as the official religion of the two countries.” (Can you imagine that this was just 20 years after the Reformation?) Understandably the images and regalia of the Catholic Church were not all destroyed as the populace reluctantly embraced the new religion.

Crucifixes and statues of saints survived and some even continued to be used in arcane rituals involving processions and miraculous healings. A number of these relics remain in the ancient churches while others have been sent to the *Olsaksamlingen* (Antiquities Collection) in Oslo, in which case some of the congregations chose to make exact replicas to fill the newly vacant spaces on the walls and in their collective memories. An oak statue of “Lavrans” (St. Laurentius) survived in the Moland Church, the head parish in Fyresdal, Telemark – the former home of many of our church’s founders.

Quite surprising is the fact that crucifixes continued to be made many years after the Reformation. One such figure was presented to the then half-century old, eight-sided church in Vrådal, Telemark in 1719. It was moved to the new church in 1887, along with the pulpit, altarpiece, baptismal font, as well as many other precious

items, and hangs there still. I believe that the three objects just mentioned were the models for their counterparts at the Stone Church, since their makers Aad Aarbak and John Homme had attended that church, as had a great many of the founders of our Stone Church congregation, but that is an edifying story for another time.

It is understandable that there were many who wanted to hang on to various aspects of their previous religious affiliation, especially since the new one was so summarily thrust upon them. Centuries after the Reformation there were even a few who still paid homage to the old Norse gods, in effect hedging their bets for salvation in the afterlife. If you've ever known any old Norwegians, you will know that they don't accept change easily — a trait that followed them from the old country to the new.

Moving on to our churches, early photographs of the Stone Church (finished in 1866) and St. Peter's (1884) show that both are topped with the adornment popular at that time: a slim rod usually decorated with small spheres of different sizes, a weathervane or pennant sometimes with the date of the church cut out, openwork crown shapes, etc., although St. Peter's finial does appear to have a short cross arm making it look like a very slender cross.

These days its rather difficult to find an old church with its original steeple topper. The Oak Ridge Church (1896) retained its original finial, which was in quite good condition as I recall, and can now be seen at the Norwegian Emigrant Museum in Ottestad, Norway. The old brick Lutheran Church (1876) at the eastern edge of Coon Valley, Wisconsin, has a very well-preserved exterior which includes its old finial.

A bit closer to home in Houston County, the Wilmington Lutheran Church (1908) still has its original, as does Black Hammer (1898) and Riceford (1876); and in Fillmore County the Elstad Lutheran Church (1910) near Highland Prairie, and South Fork Lutheran (1877) near Choice. — Well, I guess it isn't so difficult after all.

— *Continued next month when we'll look at the crosses inside our churches over the years.*

**N.B.** – Segments in quotes are from *The Norseman*, January 1995 and *News of Norway*, June 1995. Please contact us if you would like more information about this interesting and enlightening subject.

*Jim and Shelley, Cross of Christ Archives, November 2018*

Riceford Church

South Fork Church



South Fork Church



The Christian symbol of the cross can be seen on this reproduction of a Viking Age pottery container. (*I know—I'd never heard about Vikings having pottery either, but of course they did.*)