

Cross of Christ Chronicles

Sesquicentennial of the Stone Church—Part 3

1865—The walls are laid up...

<i>Dei totte de dei gamle,</i>	They thought about the old days.
<i>Og de du høird' i kor:</i>	And what they'd heard in church:
<i>Ei kyrkje lyt me hava,</i>	“A church let us have,
<i>Me kan 'kje dyrke Tor.</i>	We cannot worship Thor.”
– Ivar Vathing	

“Built on a Rock the Church doth Stand.”

We all recognize this familiar hymn, which was known and loved by our ancestors as “*Kjirken den er et gammelt Hus.*” Its first verse appears appropriately in Norwegian beneath photos of the Stone Church in our Church Anniversary Books. Of course the hymn refers to the body of the church and not the physical structure, which has been used as an effective metaphor throughout the centuries. Other hymns used similar expressions such as *A Mighty Fortress is Our God* and *The Church's One Foundation is Jesus Christ Our Lord*; and who could forget the Parable of the wise man who built his house upon the rock, and the foolish man who built his house upon the sand, which the floods then washed away. (*see-Matt. 7:24-27*)

Our pioneer church builders did not have to deal with sand or flooding, but the clay that was prevalent on most of the bench land in Badger Valley posed its own problem—that of frost heaving (expanding and contracting with the freeze and thaw cycles, more than other soils), which made for a somewhat unstable base or footing on which to build. Our ancestors had very likely been here long enough to have had experience with this phenomenon and therefore, after staking out the exact location of the walls, deep and wide trenches were excavated to accommodate the massive foundations needed to provide stability and support for the incredibly heavy walls above them. And so, they “built their Church on the rock” which they had *wisely* provided for themselves. *

Plans for our church called for a main structure 40 feet wide by 60 feet in length, which were exactly the same dimensions as the stone church that the Spring Grove Congregation had recently completed. This may not have been a coincidence since our people would have been aware of its existence and could well have used it as inspiration for their own design. Not only was it the same size, but just like our church each sidewall featured four tall windows with Romanesque, or rounded, arches (although admittedly, that was the style prevalent at the time). Their first school teacher was a Scottish stone mason, who “was an expert stone cutter and all the difficult work of cutting key stones and sills for doors and windows was done by him.”—Spring Grove Church Centennial Book (1955)

The Houston congregation hired a Norwegian *murmester* (master mason) by the name of Gullick Halvorson to oversee the raising of their walls and the next question is how they lifted those very solid, heavy stones off the ground and into place. I assume they had a block and tackle attached to a sturdy frame with strong ropes (perhaps pulled by oxen) to lift them at least part way. Could they also have built a type of crane resembling a catapult with a long heavy beam, counterweighted at the short end, which could lift the stones up as far as necessary?

A good deal of the mortar had to be lifted up as well. Smaller amounts could be carried up ladders with the use of a “hod carrier,” a V-shaped open trough on a pole with one end

enclosed, which was used to carry mortar, bricks etc., by leaning the pole against one shoulder. It would seem they also had to employ some type of scaffolding to provide a stable platform to stand on while applying the mortar and setting the stones (and it also seems there are more questions than answers).

Speaking of mortar, that is something they would have had to make themselves, the prime ingredient being lime, or quicklime (calcium oxide), which may have occurred naturally in places. The closest to the Stone Church would probably have been in *kalkedalen* (the lime valley) as it was called by the old ones. You can kind of see it today by going up the Yucatan road and looking to your right (before you get to the first farm on the left) where a narrow dirt lane leads into a very small side valley, but bigger than a ravine, now almost completely obscured by trees and brush. (More on this later.)

When it comes to stonework there are many different styles; some are quite natural, while others are highly decorative. The walls of our pioneer church have very few embellishments and it is therefore quite representative of the level of development in this area at that time. Still, there is much to be said for a simple, well-proportioned design.

The walls of our church are almost two feet thick and were laid up in basic courses of roughly squared-up blocks, most of which are rectangular shapes of varying sizes. Those who shaped the stones made sure the exterior sides were basically flat, yet aside from that they retained their natural look, sometimes referred to as “quarry face.” Considering the incredible amount of extra work they brought upon themselves by choosing to “build for the ages” with stone, it’s not at all surprising that they left the bulk of the stones in their more natural state.

“They at first hesitated to build the end gables of stone because some thought the added weight might settle the ends and crack the walls, but it was decided in spite of that probable danger to build the entire wall of stone. The congregation had gathered a fund sufficient to pay the cost of building the walls of their church. The cost of labor and material amounted to \$1843.18.” —1936 Stone Church 70th Anniversary folder.

“The leftover stone from the building of the Stone Church was used to erect a stone fence in front of the newly-built church. This fence was a favorite place to sit and watch your fellow parishioners come to church, especially the young folks, while waiting for their friends.” —1980 Church History Book-p. 95.

A master stone mason would have had a variety of tools at his disposal. Several different types of chisels were needed for shaping the blocks and dressing the accent stones. In our case they included the three-part arches over all eight windows. The arch is the strongest method of supporting that part of a stone wall above an opening, by transferring the weight out to the solid walls on each side.

Perhaps even more noticeable are the large quoin stones whose ends intersect to form the sharp exterior corner lines. As well as adding to the esthetic value of the overall design, the quoin stones play an important role in sustaining the structural integrity of the walls by helping to reinforce the corners with their “interlocking effect,” coupled with their larger size. The lower quoins are up to 2 ½ feet in length, but can be considerably smaller nearer the top.

The accent pieces are the only stones with a tooled finish, which gives most of their faces a slightly lighter complexion than those used for the rest of the walls. The visible surfaces were chiseled, or dressed, to a smoother finish, while the edges of each were deftly squared off with shorter parallel strokes, close together, sometimes giving the appearance of a faint narrow border.

If you have never stopped to look at them closely, the front corners provide a good example of the stone mason's artistic and capable workmanship. Perhaps the best testament to this is the fact that there are no sags or cracks in any of the walls, as can often be seen in old stone structures. (Spring Grove's stone church soon developed a large crack in one wall.) The congregation chose well when they engaged Gullick Halvorson to take charge of the stonework. I only wish we knew more about his background and experience.

Almost a century later, Cross of Christ was faced with a veneer of similar stone, taken from the bluff tops overlooking the Mississippi River Valley at Winona. Known as "Winona Stone" from the Biesanz quarry, it had to have been deposited at the same time as that which was used for the walls of the Stone Church.

Following a type of ashlar style masonry, the much thinner slabs of stone were sawed into rectangles of various prescribed shapes and sizes which fit nicely together in a pattern of asymmetrical, yet basically regular courses. The face of each stone was left rough with a slightly protruding profile, all of which gives the exterior of our clearly modern church a more traditionally ordered and naturally beautiful appearance.

Thanks to the foresight of separate generations of building planners, we are now blessed with two impressive church structures in very different architectural styles, yet forever linked by their higher purpose and the judicious use of an exceptional native resource, which was truly a gift from above.

* When Gerald Schwarz was re-pointing some of the joints on the exterior of the church in 1988, he dug down a ways along the wall to check on how the mortar was faring below ground and was surprised at the size of the stones he found there in the foundation.

"So built we the wall...for the people had a mind to work." – KJV Nehemiah 4:6

Jim and Shelley, Cross of Christ Archives, July 2016

P.S.—A building project of that magnitude would have aroused the curiosity of passersby, as it did with a young girl from the Sample family of Sheldon. With thoughts of the so-called "Indian panic" a few years earlier she asked her father if they were building an Indian fort! *Stakkars liten!* (Poor little one.) There is no greater fear than that of the unknown. (I was told this story by Leonard Johnson, Melba's father, who farmed just southwest of Sheldon village. He heard it from his mother.)

N.B.—All of my pioneer Norwegian ancestors were involved in the construction of the church, as was everyone else in the congregation, at least to some extent. I only mentioned Anfin Anfinson by name in the previous article because he donated the stone, and half of the church site was bought from him. For that same reason I mentioned the Loftos by name and would have made note of their descendants if any had remained in the area.

Ole Skree was mentioned because of his position at the quarry and his connection to our very historic clock—a precious heirloom belonging to every member of the congregation. I wish I knew something specific to share about all of the other workers. Do any of you have stories about your ancestors' involvement with the building project? If so, we'd very much like to hear them. *Takk*

