

Cross of Christ Chronicles

Confirming Our Faith for 160 Years

It's difficult to imagine we almost let a very important milestone in the ministerial history of our churches slip by without note. The first recorded confirmation in the Stone Church Congregation took place in Beaver Creek Valley on the second of September, 1857, now giving us no less than 160 years of confirmation history. That one confirmand was 18-year-old Mathilda Tomine Abrahamsdatter, born May 30, 1839. She was from Lillesand (in Aust-Agder, Norway, which borders on the west side of Telemark) and at the time already the wife of Ole Olsen.

When researching any group, organization, settlement, etc., historians always hope they will be able to find something about its origins, its early actions and proceedings, since the birth of any entity is always of interest and importance; of course finding that information doesn't mean very much if it can't be identified and interpreted. That was the challenge (for Josie Brevig, Robert Jore, and me) when we first looked these things up for inclusion in the 1980 125th Anniversary History Book, but we really didn't have the time to pursue every lead at that particular juncture.

First—remembering that in 1857 we had no church, pastor, or parsonage—where did the confirmation occur? Just as the Badger Creek runs down through Badger Valley, Beaver Creek likewise flows through Beaver Valley, just over the hills to the west. Since before my time, and even before my Dad's time, we've called this area Sheldon, but in the 19th Century that only referred to the township and the small village of Sheldon, although with over 500 inhabitants not such a small village back then.

The rest of it was known as Beaver Valley, from the curve on County 10 just beyond Marilyn Jore's to the area above the village which splits into East Beaver (Schech's Mill and the State Park) and West Beaver Valleys.

That was the easy part—now on to the who: surprisingly good vital information was provided for the adult confirmand, not so much about her husband (who was pretty much lost in the “sea of Oles” that was our early congregation). The fact that the couple remained in the Houston area, and are buried at the Stone Church, made finding their identities considerably easier, although that being said, we have been able to figure out a great many of the early families who did leave Houston for points west and northwest as well.

It also helped that I was familiar with the manuscript *Man Behind the Plow* and its sequel *Men Behind the Plow*, which I discovered in the archives of the Minnesota Historical Society. While living in Minneapolis in the mid to late 1970s, I frequented their storage facility and research room on Mississippi Street and it was there that I also got my first glimpse of the 1857 Territorial and subsequent censuses covering the early years of the Houston area. So many families—so many questions, but since I was young and it was all new, I found it to be very exciting. (Now it makes me tired just to think about it, so I'm doubly thankful I started with all of this early on).

Man Behind the Plow is a biography of August Christensen, written by his son Oscar (1880-1976) in 1953, based on what his father had told him, his own knowledge of the Houston and Buffalo River Settlements, and his father's journal and letters from the old days. From that manuscript I learned that sometime around 1870 August Christensen came up from Iowa to stay with his sister, Mathilda, and her husband, Ole Olson *Bergland*, and family in Sheldon (Beaver Valley). Since he was still a very young man, he felt more like an older brother to their children than their uncle, and Ole and Mathilda served more as surrogate parents to him.

Being from Aust-Agder Mathilda was a bit of a “fish out of water” at Houston, but Ole on the other hand fit right in with the large West Telemark component of the congregation, having roots in Fyresdal; although since he grew up on the upper Bergland farm in neighboring Skafså he brought that “place name” with him to America where it became his family surname, Bergland. There is much to explain about the old Norwegian naming traditions, but that will be explored a bit later.

A large branch of the Bergland family took root in the aforementioned Buffalo River Settlement (about eight miles northeast of Moorhead), Houston's largest Norwegian colony, which was also largely made up of immigrants from West Telemark. It was like a microcosm of Houston—a home away from home (Houston) away from home (Telemark) and they still consider and speak of the Stone Church as the “mother church” of their own Concordia Congregation.

N.B.—More information will be forthcoming in the January 2018 Parish Visitor.

Shelley and Jim, Cross of Christ Archives, November 2017