

Cross of Christ Chronicles

Sesquicentennial of the Stone Church—Part 2

A decision is made and the rock is quarried...

<i>Her fann dei fjøll og dalar</i>	Here found they hills and valleys
<i>Og skog og bekk og aa,</i>	And woods and brooks and streams,
<i>De likna heimebygdi,</i>	It resembled their home districts,
<i>Som best du her kan sjaa.</i>	As best you here can see.
– Ivar Vathing	

“When a group of sincere church-minded people join together for worship and religious services, the need for a meeting place comes quickly to the front and soon after the first service in the blacksmith shop the decision was made to build a church. Living in early pioneer circumstances and under difficult political and financial conditions the realization of this great hope was of necessity deferred for a few years, but definite plans were formulated in 1863.

“A site for the church and cemetery was selected on the section line between Houston and Sheldon Townships, on a table above the South Fork bottom lands, on the main road from Houston to the Badger, Sheldon and Yucatan valleys to the south. Further the site was adjacent to timber on the bottoms and limestone at the brow of a close-by hill.”

—I couldn’t have done a better job than the authors of the 1955 Centennial Book-p.11, and 1936 Stone Church 70th Anniversary folder in recapping our story and bringing it up to date. (The last sentence in the first paragraph is from the 1936 folder. Isn’t it a good one?)

When the decision was made to build a church the Congregation already owned one piece of land, two acres on the northeast corner of Anfin Anfinson’s farm, which they purchased in 1856 to meet their most immediate need—that of a *gravplass* (graveyard) now long known as St. Peter’s Cemetery. However, with its uneven terrain and a wide ravine down the middle it wasn’t suitable for a church. Anfin and Martha Anfinson were the original owners of the Beckman farm, where John and Jana live, and it’s reasonable to believe the parishioners were already partial to this nice stretch of bench land for their new church. It was close to town (if that made a difference), well above any flood waters, and provided a central location as well.

On April 29, 1863 two acres of land were officially purchased at the chosen site, but as anyone who has dealt with land deeds will know very often the date on the deed can be well after the deal was made and the land actually changed hands, which was most probably the case with both of the purchases mentioned here (1856 & 1863). We know for sure at least one interment was made at the new site in early 1863, and it is also very likely that several burials occurred in 1862, and possibly 1861—the early *Jordfeste* records are unclear.

The northern acre in Houston Township was bought from the Anfinsons for \$20.00 and the acre to the south in Sheldon Township was obtained from Thore and Aasne Lofto (now Ben and Linda Lind) for \$25.00. With the site now secured it was time to begin the project in earnest—*Gud villig*. The new comers from 1861 had two years to settle in, and would now have more time to help with the construction as well.

The beautiful hills in our area are sedimentary in nature, made up of varying layers of limestone and sandstone with a fortuitous deposit of dolomite at the very top of the higher hills. It was composed of limestone with magnesium, which gave it extra strength, and when it came to suitable construction material, our congregation was *thrice* blessed.

First, that there were naturally occurring deposits of dolomite in our area to begin with. *Second*, that the source of the dolomite was at the top of the hills. (If it had been formed between the lower layers not much could have been removed before the hillside above would've begun caving in on them.) *Third*, that a sufficient quantity of this desirable raw material was ready and waiting for them on the brow of the hill directly across from the church site. Attractive and very durable they couldn't have asked for a better building stone.

According to the 1955 Book: "A quarry was opened in the year 1863, but a *war* stopped the early work...." Were they referring to the Civil War, which had taken away many of our young men, who nobly volunteered to enlist in service to their new country? Or could it have been the Dakota Conflict, or Sioux Uprising as it was called then and its subsequent "panic," that was being fought closer to home; and how exactly did it effect our community in that particular year? Again, a part of the story left untold.

Be that as it may, quarrying resumed the next year. This hard, heavy and dangerous work was done by the members after their crops had been put in, so the early summer of 1864 saw the Norwegian farmers gathered on the top of the hill overlooking the church site, working together to wrest the stone from its ancient bed.

What must they have felt as they first reached the summit of the quarry hill and looked down on the small parcel of land that would soon become central to all of their lives. There had to have been a feeling of exhilaration, paired with at least a touch of trepidation. Yet as overwhelming as the prospect of building their own church must have been, they obviously had Faith and put their Trust in the Lord to help see them through.

And although he had several other congregations in his charge, their relatively new pastor, Rev. N.E.S. Jensen, would also have most assuredly given them all the guidance and encouragement he could muster. It's unknown just how much input Rev. Jensen had on the actual project itself, but at least they were secure in the knowledge that he would soon be holding regular services in their new church, if only once a month or so.

Here is where I have to toot the "family horn" just a bit. The aforementioned Anfin Anfinson was my *tipp-oldefar* (great-great-grandfather) who generously donated the stone to the congregation since the *brott* (stone quarry) was on his land. Then, as now, stone had value, but Anfin was quite well-to-do (as they used to say) and I'm sure he was pleased to have part of the church and cemetery on his farm. Anfin and Martha are buried in the back of the cemetery and since almost all of the Anfinsons moved away, the only descendants left in the Houston area are my aunt JoAnn Carlson, most of my siblings and their children, and me. The Charles and Sarah (Skree) Kragness family—Gilmer and his sister Gladys Houge, etc., were also descendants. Thore and Aasne Lofto had several children, but their descendants have long been gone from this area.

Ole Halvorson Skree, another *tipp-oldefar*, was appointed as overseer and timekeeper. He walked to La Crosse to purchase a time piece and came back with a large-sized Seth-Thomas wall clock which was set up in the quarry to keep a record of the

working hours. Since the members' pledges could be paid off in cash and/or in kind, by working on the project, it was necessary to keep track of their hours. (That record was unfortunately not preserved.) Sadly, Ole Skree would not live even to see the walls put up, death having cut short his labors in November of 1864.

The impressive clock that Ole procured, and which was vital to the proper disposition of the subscription lists gathered for the project, still exists. It can now be seen above the display case in the entry of the church. When I was growing up the clock hung back in the church parlors, between the kitchen counter and the sacristy door, and I never passed up a chance to marvel at its aged countenance and the fascinating story behind it. Imagine the saga it could tell!

Though not an expert in early quarrying techniques I believe the two most important tools would have been the stone drill, powered by maul, and the crowbar. Looking nothing like a spiral power drill bit, a stone drill—*minebor* (literally: mining borer/drill)—closely resembles a long chisel with a flattened and rounded end, slightly wider than the shaft. That important feature created a borehole just a bit larger than the shaft so it wouldn't get lodged tightly in the hole it was drilling.

One man swung the maul while another held fast to the drill, giving it a partial turn after each strike and taking great care not to *flinch*.—*Uff-da!* The more powerful the man, the heavier the maul, the faster the drill was driven into the stone. A narrow elongated scoop attached to a long rod was used intermittently to remove the built up debris from the bottom of the holes. Slender wedges could then be pounded into them to create fissures that would separate slabs of stone.

A stout crowbar—*jønnstaur* (or iron pole) as my Dad and the old ones would have said, *jernstaur* in modern Norwegian—was used as a lever to pry apart, lift up, or move the stones along. Luckily it wasn't far to the almost vertical eastern slope of Anfin's hill—*another blessing*—where they were pushed over the edge and went rolling and sliding down the hill, pretty much by themselves. Once the stones had come to a stop at the base of the hill, they still had to be dragged across the field and main road to the construction site.

This task was accomplished by the use of the aptly named and sturdily built "stone boat," the object of which was to be as low to the ground as possible for ease in loading heavy materials—they'd have enough high lifting to do the following summer. Made from heavy planks laid across two very stout runners, or a "Y-shaped" section of tree, an attached chain was hooked up to a yoke of oxen and off they would go at the slow and steady pace they were known for.

Oxen were the main source of power for the pioneers, and they were stronger than the horses available at that time. The giant Percherons and Belgians we see at horse pulls today were not an option for them. They were thankful however, when they could acquire a team of horses for doing lighter work and especially for going to town, since they were much faster than the plodding oxen. It was also a sign that they were "coming up in the world."

The road didn't present an obstacle then since it wasn't raised up and flanked by deep grade ditches as it is now. A simple flat road ran right in front of the church yard, continuing straight across the field and through the old Thore Lofto farmstead (now Linds) between the house and the barn. This was no place for a wide modern road so it

was moved west in the late 1940s. That worked out well for us since we now have a nice-sized parking lot and are no longer forced to park right along each side of the main road.

“Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were digged.” – Isaiah 51: 1

Shelley and Jim, Cross of Christ Archives, June 2016

P.S.—Over the years much has been made of the curious fact that the church is situated so the boundary line between Houston and Sheldon Townships runs down the center aisle. Several theories have been put forth concerning this, and the reasons for the disparity in the price paid for each of the two acres of land for the site. Some are plausible and some are not, but since nothing is mentioned in the records it will most assuredly remain a point of conjecture. ❖