

## “Homecoming” Festival at Stone Church

When I first got started with this World War I and Spanish Flu business, I didn't realize how involved it would become and how much research I would have to do, since I didn't know a whole lot about either topic. I chose the subject because of the hundredth anniversary of the war's cessation, although I got started a year late and have had a lot of catching up to do, but with this article I will have accomplished that goal.

I have wanted to share the story of the “Homecoming” Festival for the returned soldiers and sailors at the Stone Church ever since Sigurd Vathing showed us a large mounted picture of it (taken by Houston's part-time photographer M.O. Bue) back in the early 1990s. It's a wonderful and heartwarming story which most fortunately has been recorded in words and pictures for our enjoyment and edification, as well as for those who will follow us in the future.

I think it best in this case to read about it like I did, right from the *Houston Signal*, which through the wonders of modern technology I have inserted into this narrative. There are two columns titled *Armistice Day*, the first of which (Oct. 30) announces the Celebration, and the second (Nov. 27) follows up with an interesting report on the events of the day written by church organist C.P. Weld.

The congregation was quite magnanimous inviting every soldier to be with them, and not only the members of the three Lutheran churches served by our Rev. Ostrem. How they managed to serve a “sumptuous dinner” to about 75 of the boys and a large number of others is a wonderment to me, especially since there was no kitchen or parlor on the back of the church at that time. The invitation mentions that “there will also be a general picnic dinner for others in attendance” so that must have helped quite a bit.

Can you imagine the area around the church covered with blankets and happy picnickers? It was November 11th after all and the people in the photograph are wearing coats and hats (although it was sunny). And if that wasn't enough of a *sight to be seen*, picture the boys being marched and drilled on the church lawn by Lieut. Paul Abrahamson. It's very easy to believe such a performance was a “great treat” for the many who were gathered on that day.

Something else, that I wish they'd taken a picture of, were the elaborate decorations inside the church as described by Mr. Weld, both botanical and patriotic (next page). I believe if we had such a picture, we would be quite amazed at the extent of their embellishments, and how about that five-foot high “Welcome Home” shield in front of the altar rail?

I've seen wedding pictures from around the turn of the last century, taken in the homes, in which the walls were completely covered in fern fronds, in addition to the bouquets of flowers, honeycomb paper garlands and bells, etc. All that on top of an already extravagant Victorian interior. Of course, the walls in the church were also painted and stenciled, but adding more trimmings makes for a more festive occasion.

**ARMISTICE DAY.**

STONE CHURCH WILL CELEBRATE THE EVENT.

A "Home Coming" Festival for all soldiers and sailors will be celebrated on Tuesday, Nov. 11, at the Stone church. The congregation invites every soldier to be with them on this day, not only the members of the Stone Church, Looney Valley and Houston congregations, but all other boys who were in the service.

A dinner will be served at 11:30 a. m. to all returned service men, and there will also be a general picnic dinner for others in attendance.

As Armistice Day is a legal holiday, a large crowd is expected.

At two o'clock p. m., Captain Gustav Stearns of Milwaukee will deliver an address. Capt. Stearns was chaplain of the 127th U. S. Inf., called by the French, "Les Terribles". For fifty days and nights Captain Stearns had his clothes off only three hours; he was covered from head to foot with cooties, buried as high as 51 men a day, preached up to ten times on Sundays, often under shell fire. He received his citation recently from John J. Pershing, "for distinguished and exceptional gallantry at Juvigny, France, Sept. 1, 1918". It will be a rare treat to hear the Captain, as he is a fluent and interesting speaker.

The Stone church had 45 men in military service and one gold star is upon the service flag.



Remember I said back in September that I would tell an interesting story about John Nelson's eventual return to Houston. In the last paragraph of the Armistice Day article (shown to the right) it refers to "the last boy having returned the night before." Well, that was John Nelson of Badger Valley. He returned from France arriving at Hoboken N.J. October 31, 1919 and was honorably discharged from service at Camp Dodge, Iowa on Sunday November 9th. His sister, Kathryn Weida, told me this story sometime around 1990:

John arrived at Caledonia (presumably by train) late Monday night (Nov. 10<sup>th</sup>). Since no one knew he was coming he had to walk home to the farm he knew and loved so well. He likely walked out to the west end of Holty Ridge, and then down their own bluff road to the farmstead (and then again, he may have taken some other well-trodden path).

When he got to the house he crept in quietly so as not to awaken anyone and went upstairs. There several of his siblings woke up, but he made them keep quiet so they wouldn't disturb the others. The next morning (Tuesday, November 11<sup>th</sup>) he came downstairs with the rest of them and sat down at the kitchen table as if nothing was out of the ordinary. As soon as his parents, John and Aase, realized he was there they were so surprised they almost fell over backwards! A joyous reunion with their last son to return home from the war, and as it turned out the last one from our Stone Church congregation.

Imagine his getting home just in the nick of time to attend the big Homecoming Celebration at church—and *think how he must have been welcomed!* It seems almost miraculous, but that's the way it happened. Because of John's arrival at the Stone Church that day, they were able to remove the Service Flag from its place above the altar and consign it to posterity as a reminder of those who served so dutifully, and of a bright and shining moment in a very dark chapter in the history of our church.

*Jim and Shelley, Cross of Christ Archives, November 2019*

**P.S.**-Don't you love the way C.P. Weld put it at the end of his *Armistice Day* article: "the service flag...will be preserved in the church archives as a treasured emblem." He was definitely ahead of his time there, but preserved it was and we have to thank all those who were responsible for its survival to this day. Unfortunately, the Service Flag for St. Peter's was not preserved which is

really too bad. It should be noted that Mr. Weld was a Yankee from back east and although he was not Lutheran, had been the organist for the Stone Church since 1906 and would continue to preside at the instrument until a hip injury in December of 1941 forced him to resign. During those 35 years he never missed a single scheduled service, funeral, or other occasion—such was his dedication.

I find it interesting that the number of stars on the Service Flag grew from 43 to 45 on the announcement for the “Homecoming” and then jumped to 49 blue stars and one gold in C.P. Weld’s report. I have only counted 43 stars in all on the flag, and I can’t see where there would have been room for more. I have to conclude that they were counting errors or typos.