

Cross of Christ Chronicles

Sesquicentennial of the Stone Church—Part 5

Built for the ages—a gift for us all...

Me vyrdnad gjev dei gamle, We give respect to the old ones,
Og helt dei høgt i akt, And hold them in high esteem,
Dei søv snart under torva, They sleep soon under the sod,
Daa lyt me halda vakt. Then let us keep the watch.

– Ivar Vathing

*“Remember the days of old, consider the years of many
generations;*

Ask thy father, and he will show thee; thine elders and they will tell thee.”

–KJV Deuteronomy 32: 7

During Rev. Jenson’s decade of service all five of his primary congregations built churches. They include his original call: Houston, Highland Prairie, Elstad, and Rushford, and North Prairie as well. He also served the large Big Canoe Congregation in Iowa as interim pastor from 1862 to 1864, during which time they too decided to build a church of stone. More precisely, these churches were all constructed between 1863 and 1867, and we can only wonder about the flurry of activity they created. Rev. Jenson also served the Whalan, Newberg, Winona, and Cedar Valley congregations, plus several others, and much of his transportation was provided by “shank’s mare”—*walking.—Uff-da!*

“Such a large call was an ambitious task for any man, but it wore him down. Rev. Jenson resigned from the combined pastorate in 1869 for reasons of health and for a short time he was without a regular parish. He moved to Houston (remember he had been living in the parsonage built by his first four congregations on Highland Prairie) and accepted a call in 1870 from the St. Peter’s Church and was serving them at the time of his death in 1875.”—1980 Church History Book, p. 22. Rev. Jenson should long be remembered for his exceptional and tireless service to all of his churches.

Of the first six congregations mentioned above, and considering Spring Grove, Wilmington, and Black Hammer as well, only one of their nine pioneer churches exists and is still in use—*the Stone Church*. This is also the case with almost every Norwegian-Lutheran Congregation in Fillmore County and all of northeast Iowa. Seldom do you open a church anniversary book from this area without seeing a picture of their *first* church, but that’s all they have, a picture. (The empty shell of Black Hammer’s early frame structure stands on a nearby farm.)

The church was completed in the late summer of 1866 and by May 1868 Aad Aarbak was given the final payment of his \$2,500.00 contract. “Treasurer Christof Evanson (Tjostolv Eivendson Sandland, from Vrådal) then reported the total cost of the church building to be \$4,385.58. The building represented a major effort, much of self-denial and heavy contributions

in personal labor and money, that the congregation (could) secure a place of worship to serve the needs of the day and the future.

“This was not all of the giving of the hardy, thrifty, church-minded membership of the day. In addition to paying for a church, they contributed nearly \$1,000.00 to the building of Luther College in Decorah Iowa.”—1955 History Book, p.12. They had already joined with Rushford, Elstad, and Highland Prairie in building a parsonage at the latter place in 1860, at a cost of \$700.00.

Let us compare this with our “stone” church in town which cost a total of \$209,805.29 including piling. “Sunday, April 28, 1974, Pastor Everson and Pastor Rossing and guest Pastor Braaten, along with a proud congregation, celebrated a big day in the life of the church. Starting out in 1960, with a debt of \$100,000.00 and now approximately fourteen years and six months later, they had the burning of the mortgage.” —1980 History Book, p.65. This would be quite a remarkable feat for any organization and the membership at the time had good reason to be proud of their achievement and the fact that over half of the costs were paid at the time of construction. (How are we doing today?)

As we’ve seen in Part 3 and above, our ancestors paid for the construction as they went, and less than two years after its completion the Stone Church was paid for! Taking nothing away from those who paid off the debt for Cross of Christ well ahead of time, this was an almost unbelievable accomplishment. Just think of it—considering the time period and economic conditions it was very close to a miracle, and yet I’ve read of other congregations doing the same. They did not believe in going into debt.

When our ancestors built their church they were still in their pioneering phase with subsistence farming being the rule. All work was done during the Civil War and its immediate aftermath, and before the arrival of the railroad to Houston in 1867, which made possible the advancement to a market economy. There were great changes on the horizon, but I doubt they had made a significant impact by May of 1868.

Let us now see how others described those times:

In Part 4 we read Rev. Magelssen’s assessment of the state of the churches in his new charge. Our second pastor (1869-1873) had this to say about the circumstances of the settlers after his arrival in 1869.

“Nearly all the people were poor. They usually received but little for what they could raise on the farms. At that time nearly all raised wheat. There was little corn and hay. People (on Highland Prairie where Magelssen lived in the parsonage) would buy their hay from the people in the valleys. The hay that they had on the prairie was wild hay growing on wild land. There were not many horses. Many had oxen. And of cows there were not more than so the families had enough milk (that’s subsistence). Hogs also were few. The price of a cow was 20-25 dollars. The hogs were worth about 3-4 dollars pr. hundred pounds dressed. A real large hog was needed in order to bring the owner \$12.00. The eggs were worth 6 cents a dozen and butter 6 cents a pound. Potatoes cost 15 cents a bushel. And wheat was commonly sold for 65-75 cents a bushel.” —From the translation of *The Autobiography of Rev. Kristian Magelssen*, (1918) p.24.

Remember Thore and Aasne Lofto, who lived on Lind’s and sold the south acre of land for the church site? While gathering information on the Telemark people during his trip to

Houston in February 1913, Torkel Oftelie had quite a visit with *gamle* Thore. This is what he had to say about the early years at Houston.

“A half-mile north of here (Ivar Vathing’s farm) lives Thore Lofto, who came to America from Fyresdal in 1853. Thore is eighty-six years old. When I arrived he stood at the chopping block, splitting wood so that the chips flew. He is an extremely tough old man, this Fyresdaler, a worker of the best kind. He came here to Houston in 1859. He told much about his first years here:

“There were hard winters with much snow, so sometimes it was impossible to get to La Crosse. All were in poor circumstances, lived in log cabins, and some in dugouts. They threshed with oxen, which they drove in a circle on the sheaves to tread out the grain. They muzzled the oxen, contrary to the old word that you shall not bind the mouth of the ox that treads the grain (Deuteronomy 25:4). They cleaned the wheat by letting the wind blow away the chaff. The worst was getting the grain ground. They had to drive with oxen all the way down to Iowa.

“Many of them lived on *mais* (maize-corn), which they ground in a coffee grinder. But people thought they lived well and were strong and healthy. They were sometimes prone to a malaria-like disease which they called *egern*. They believed it rose with the vapors from the newly plowed land.” —Torkel’s story about Houston was published in *Telesoga*, No. 17, September 1913. Translation from *Telemark to America, Vol. II, Settlements*, (2009) p. 63.

—Continued next month.

“Tell your children of it, and let your children tell their children, and their children another generation.” Joel 1:3

*Jim and Shelley,
Cross of Christ Archives,*

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