

Cross of Christ Chronicles
Sesquicentennial of the Stone Church—Part 4 (continued)
1866—The building is completed...

— *Continued from last month.*

To finish up on the spire: According to research done by Halvor Nordbø from Vrådalen in Telemark, Abraham Jacobson Øy, one of our early settlers, was a seaman before he came to America and therefore not afraid to work in heights. He led the building of the *tårnet på kyrkje* (the steeple of the church). Abraham's great-great-grandparents, Hans and Anne Øy, gave the "altar foot" (bottom section or table of the altar) to the old octagonal church back in Vrådalen, the ancestral church of almost all of the Norwegian pioneers who settled in Badger, Holty Ridge, parts of Sheldon and Houge Ridge, almost half of Crystal Valley, and a few other places around Houston. He in turn helped his many fellow *Vrådølar* (people from Vrådalen) and the rest of the congregation with providing a house of worship for themselves, and all those yet to come down through the ages. (Having climbed all the way up the outside of the spire back in 1997 to take a few pictures, I can tell you it's quite scary at the top, especially when there are gusty winds. Jerome Stanoch estimated the height at 75 feet.)

Moving on to the main roof, unlike houses or even the larger schoolhouses, with their interior walls to help support the floors and ceilings above them, the open floor plan of the sanctuary, or nave, of a church presented a very real challenge. What did they devise that would hold up the large expanse of ceiling (36 X 56 feet) as well as the massive roof above it? I know it doesn't look very big inside now days, but how would we do it using the tools and materials available to them at the time? (No giant laminated beams for the pioneers.)

Barns have big roofs, but between the "plates" on the top of the exterior walls at the eaves, and the peak where the upper ends of the rafters meet, they have "purlins"—horizontal beams under the rafters about midway up, which are in turn held up by vertical support posts going all the way down to the ground floor. A very effective method, but it didn't result in an open plan.

I must confess I hadn't thought too much about this before the 1990s during the major re-roofing project when all the layers of wood and asphalt shingles were removed, allowing natural light in through the spaces between the roof boards. I then got my first good look into the attic as I peered through a small hole at the top of the stonework up in the tower, which had been opened many years before. When my eyes adjusted to the diminished light I was somewhat surprised, but very gratified to learn the answers to my previous questions. What I saw was a series of "King's Post" trusses made from massive squared-up beams—the perfect solution to a significant problem—which showed "our boy Aad" to be a very competent and experienced engineer.

A King's Post truss is a very simple, yet effective, support structure that has been used to hold up short bridges, etc., for centuries. Squared beams were fastened together in a basic isosceles triangle configuration with the ends of the long bottom beam resting on each of the side walls of the church. A fourth beam connecting the peak of the triangle to the middle of the horizontal beam helped greatly to hold up that most vulnerable center portion. Remember it's an almost 40 foot span.

The vertical connection to the peak, or apex, put a lot more downward pressure on the slanted legs of the triangle, but they were kept from spreading by their firm connection to both ends of the long, horizontal beam. Each part of these mighty triangles of hand-hewn beams supported each of the other parts—that's the beauty of a well-designed truss. Once again, they made use of a large volume of local timber which was theirs for the felling, shaping and lifting into place.

Once in position (and again I wish I knew exactly how they did it) the trusses were ready to do double duty. Joists inserted into slots on the sides of the long beams allowed the ceiling boards to be nailed up in place. Horizontal timbers laid across the slanted segments of the trusses about half way up provided support for the middle of each of the many long rafters. These "purlins" did the same work as those in barn roofs, but without the need for vertical posts. I daresay very few of us were aware of all that went into the framework above the ceiling, while sitting placidly in the pews below. (I know I certainly wasn't.)

The records also list "hauling windows from La Crosse—\$2.00" which is not surprising. The original windows were made up of the relatively small panes of glass available at the time. Somewhat rippled clear glass, very likely with a light blue tint, they had a certain charm we now associate with early historic buildings. Doors and the hardware to hang them, frames, and a whole lot of nails (at 6¢ a pound) were also needed.

There are several excellent pictures of the church from around the turn of the last century, but of course none of them show anything up close. Fortunately, the 1905 Confirmation Class Photo was taken on the south side of the church, and the old windows can clearly be seen behind the group, in fact you can see all the way through to the windows on the north side. (Shutters for all eight tall side windows were provided by the Money Creek Ladies' Aid in 1889. These shutters, with their movable louvers, are in plain view on the 1894 Confirmation Photo.)

The old double doors at the front opened inward, and two steps were necessary to gain entrance; the first one up to a large, wide *stein-helle*, or stepping stone, and the second to the entry threshold. Large, flat stones outside the main entrance to a building were very common back in Norway, and over here, to prevent mud puddles from forming in front of a door. A clear glass, leaded fan light occupied the semi-circular opening just above the doors. There were actually two, whose styles varied slightly, one of which was preserved up in the tower. The uppermost corners of the front door frame were decorated with a pair of trefoils—those three-lobed designs meant to represent the Trinity.

—From the translation of *The Autobiography of Rev. Kristian Magelssen*, (1918) p.24: "There were churches in all the congregations when I came in 1869, but none of them were finished. And there was a lack of pews and other furnishings. And none of them had been dedicated. They were terribly cold. They were heated by a large stove in the middle of the church. Those who sat near the stove were nearly scorched. Those who sat far away froze a great deal." (Rev. Magelssen was our second pastor, 1869-1873.)

Since our church was considerably larger than the others and originally had two low chimneys, I believe it must have had two wood stoves before the furnace was installed in 1892. The lower portions of the chimneys can still be seen up in the attic. Located just under the level of the original ceiling, at the middle of the walls on each side of the sanctuary, the top sections were removed long ago and the holes left in the roof were shingled over. The old, two-story frame schoolhouse, built in 1870 where the

Elementary School gym now stands, had a similar chimney arrangement. (See photo from 1876, in Ingrid Julsrud's *Remembering Old Times*, p. 68.)

The purchase of posts, and 2,600 feet of fence boards for \$19.00, suggests that the churchyard was promptly enclosed as a barrier to domestic animals, which at that time were still allowed to roam at large. This would have been in addition to the stone fence in front of the church mentioned in Part 3.

The church was completed in the late summer of 1866 and by May 1868 Mr. Aarbak was given the final payment of his \$2,500.00 contract. They also "agreed to pay \$42.40 over that amount for some extra work that had been done. Since Mr. Aarbak made the Altar and pulpit it is likely that the "extra work" must refer to these items." — 1936 70th Anniversary folder.

Aad proved his expertise as a finish carpenter by creating a truly masterful and original altar and pulpit, which were ready for use not long after the church was completed. Of course at that time they were together in one piece in a form called an "altar-pulpit." This combination placed the pulpit up on the altar piece, well above the altar table itself, which in our case was where the plaster statue of Thorvaldsen's *Consoling Christ* now stands. It was moved down to its present location in 1896.

There are several reasons for this unified configuration. It was often used in very small churches, especially those made of logs in the pioneer days where there simply wasn't room for side by side structures, or a dramatically raised pulpit in its usual position close to the congregation would have been overwhelming, but various churches in Norway had been using them for over a century regardless of size. Meant to restate in visual terms the traditional Lutheran emphases on word and sacrament, they succeeded in doing this very well. — The information in this paragraph is from: Kristen M. Anderson, "Altars in the Norwegian-American Church..." (See P.S. at end of article.)

In years gone by we were told by older members of the Congregation that the reason for the Pulpit's lofty location was that since we had a balcony, no one was to be "above the Word of God." This may have been the "perceived notion" of those who came later (after the fact) and weren't fully aware of the original intention, but it could be an equally valid reason, as well.

And what of Aad Aarbak, our talented carpenter and contractor? He lived for a few years in Sheldon village before moving to Nebraska where he worked on a few more churches, carving a beautiful altarpiece for one of them.

"According to the Treasurer, Christof Evanson (Tjostolv Eivendson Sandland from Vrådal), the total cost of building the church was \$4,385.58. This represented a real sacrifice on the part of these pioneer farmers and their families in order that they might have a place of worship." — 1936 70th Anniversary folder.

And thus was the building of the Stone Church completed—a simple classic design with few embellishments, modest, yet quite striking in its own right, rugged and stalwart—it truly was "Built for the Ages."

"Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy fathers have set."
—KJV Proverbs 22: 28

Shelley and Jim, Cross of Christ Archives, August 2016

P.S.-For more information see: Kristen M. Anderson, "Altars in the Norwegian-American Church: An Opportunity for Folk Expression," in Marion J. Nelson, ed., *Material Culture and People's Art Among the Norwegians in America* (Northfield, Minnesota, 1994), p. 204. For more about our own "altar-pulpit" see: *Pulpit Removed from Altar 100 Years Ago*, Cross of Christ Archives, 1996.

N.B.-The church was decorated in the year 1871 and made ready for consecration, which took place on Nov. 16, 1871. That most festal occasion, and the church interior, will be covered at its anniversary celebration five years hence. ❖