

Cross of Christ Chronicles

Sesquicentennial of the Stone Church—Part 5 (continued)

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

—Continued from last month.

Let us now continue to see how others described those pioneer times:

The following excerpts from Dagne Wroolie's *An Immigrant's Memories* describe the early days here. Born in 1854, she came as a young girl with her family from Fyresdal in 1861. Dagne's father, Kjetil Vrålid (from Vrådal), died in an accident onboard a steamboat and all of his money was taken! The rest of his family arrived in La Crosse destitute and at a loss as to how to proceed.

"Finally, some people from South Fork, a valley near Houston, Minn., came to get some of our traveling companions and they took us with them. The twenty miles from La Crosse to Houston was a hard all-day journey for an ox team (and they weren't hauling a load of lumber). The fields were fenced with rail fences; the cattle went loose in the woods (so they wore bells like back in the old country). The houses were built of logs, mostly with one room and an attic.

"There was no market for butter and eggs, poultry or garden truck (produce). It took two long days to take a load of grain to La Crosse and three days to make the round trip to Winona, 30 miles distant. Need is a hard taskmaster, but the women met and beat it, although many of them had to grind their wheat and corn in a coffee mill before they cooked it into mush.

"With the coming of the railroad, prosperity came into the country. Timber was needed for ties and bridges. The railroad gangs needed hay and grain for the horses, dairy and garden products for the men; when the farmers had some extra time they could work on the road and get cash. Ox teams were sold to the butchers and horses were bought and raised."

Offering a different point of view, the following excerpts from the Preface to our 1930 75th Anniversary Book are a heartfelt tribute to the Norwegian immigrants, in light of their hardships and achievements, from a congregation only a couple of generations removed from their pioneer ancestors. At times they convey feelings similar to those expressed in the verses by Ivar Vathing, which appear at the beginning of each of these chapters, but that's not too surprising since the poem was written in 1913.

"We have a profound respect for these hardy Norsemen who left their homeland and ventured out in quest of homes in a new country where a strange language was spoken. In most cases they were in debt for their passage across the ocean, with perhaps a large flock of little children, and with nothing standing between them and starvation but two strong arms and a will to work. Because they were used to hardships from their childhood they were willing to take their share of the burden of developing this, the garden spot of the Northwest, and faced the future with the true Viking spirit.

"Little do we realize the struggles and hardships that our grandparents and parents had to go through—with sometimes several families living together in the small, roughly-built log cabins, facing the long and hard Minnesota winters poorly clad, and with barely enough food to eke out an existence.

"Here, no matter what religion one had or might accept, one had a right to worship God as he chose. It was only natural, then, that fortresses of the Lord sprung up with the coming of these Christian emigrants, churches where they could hear the word of God and of the Savior

they loved, where their children could be baptized and confirmed, and where other sacred rites belonging to their church could be performed. It was this thought that prompted these hardy pioneers here to erect the edifice or fortress of God around which we, at this time, have gathered to celebrate the seventy-fifth anniversary of its foundation and to pay tribute to the men and women who founded it, built it, and to the many others who helped to maintain it through these many years, and have handed it down to the present generation as the greatest and grandest heritage they, *who are now sleeping under the sod* (my italics), have left behind them.

“We thank these pioneers who laid the foundations for our congregation. May we, who reap the fruits of their labors and sacrifices, continue the good work. We cannot honor them and their work in a better way.” —1930 Preface (author unknown).

Parts of these excerpts from four different sources reiterate some of what has been said before in this and earlier chapters, but historians like primary sources (which is what the first and third are) and it's good to hear it from those who actually lived it. (I consider Thore's reminiscences to be as good as a primary source, even though they were recorded by a second person.) Some of the praise for the pioneers also gets to be a bit redundant, but I think we all agree they deserve it.

Noting what was said earlier about the demise of pioneer churches, and considering the odds, it is a minor miracle that our church survived. It could easily have succumbed to a large sinkhole, and still could—our region with its karst geology is full of them. It could have suffered the same fate as Spring Grove's stone church, which developed a dangerous crack in a side wall not long after its completion, and soon became too small for its burgeoning membership. The lightning that struck our steeple in 1892 could have easily caused its destruction as well.

A church article in the *Houston Signal* stated that, “Prior to the merger (in 1923, which necessitated the enlargement of St. Peter's in town, making it the primary church) many attempts were made to have the congregation vacate the building and build a new church in the village. But this thought was a sacrilege to the members.” Simple changes in circumstances such as demographics, rate and volume of migration, or simple attrition over a period of time could have resulted in an outcome similar to that of the St. John's German Lutheran Church southwest of Ridgeway, Iowa.

It has beautiful and impressive stone walls with gable ends of stone, just like our church, except that's all there is. It has stood for many decades with not a sliver of wood, green grass growing where once the members gathered reverently for services. Some still came together to mark the 150th Anniversary of the Congregation, organized in 1859, but in a very different manner than our upcoming Sesquicentennial Celebration, to be sure.

As we reach the end of these writings the question of why they decided to build with stone, instead of constructing a smaller wood frame church like almost all the other Norwegian-Lutheran congregations in the area, remains unanswered. For one thing it was there and for another it was free, but not without a tremendous, almost unbelievable—*and to us now days, unbearable even to think of*—amount of work. I sometimes wonder (among so many other things) what route they used to get up to the quarry. How many workers were there at any given time? Did they build a shelter for the clock so it wouldn't have to be carried up and down the hill every day? The questions are endless and the answers are few.

I have written much over this past summer about how the pioneer builders were Blessed in their worthy and ambitious endeavor in so many ways, but now I would like to speak of the exceptional Blessings that they have passed down to those of us who are heirs to the benefits and enjoyment of this remarkable church, 150 years after its completion.

Because of their incredible commitment to the use of stone and the wisdom to provide a substantial foundation, our pioneer ancestors left us a humble, yet picturesque church whose massive walls are imbued with their own rugged beauty. Stalwart and stable they will endure through the ages with very little upkeep, and they complement the rest of the building, with its classical simplicity, very well. To that we must say: ***“Mange takk!”***

They also left a legacy of Faith and Fortitude that should serve as an inspiration for every one of us. After all, their Faith allowed them to move the top of a “mountain” and turn it into a Holy Temple to the Glory of the Lord, and the edification and sanctification of their children, and their children’s children....

And to that we must say reverently: ***“Mange tusen takk!”***

“Ære være Gud i det Høieste” — “Glory be to God in the Highest”

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

Daa lyt me halda vakt. Then let us keep the watch.

–Ivar Vathing

*Shelley and Jim,
Cross of Christ Archives,
October 2016*

P.S.—Due to its subject matter this chapter is a bit disjointed and for that I apologize. Thanks for staying with it.