

Cross of Christ Chronicles

Sesquicentennial of the Stone Church—Part 1

The congregation progresses...

Our little village of Houston reached its century and a half mark in 2002, and Cross of Christ faithfully and joyously celebrated the Sesquicentennial of our Congregation throughout the year of 2005. It naturally follows that we should mark the 150th Anniversary of the completion of our remarkable pioneer church, one which was crafted by the hands of our immigrant ancestors into a “building fitly framed together and which grew into a holy temple in the Lord.” (Ephesians 2:21)

Since we will be celebrating this momentous occasion at the end of the summer (August 28)—*Gud villig*— the next several articles will pertain to that topic. Our plan is to devote each of the summer months to one of the three years in the building process: **June–1864**, *the quarrying*, **July–1865**, *the stone work*, **August–1866**, *the carpentry work*. (The interior finishing will not be covered, since that work wasn’t completed until 1871 in preparation for the Dedication Service.)

<i>De var i femtiaari</i>	It was in the 1850s
<i>Dei til Houston’s dalar kom</i>	They to Houston’s valleys came
<i>Fraa gamle Telemarki</i>	From old Telemark
<i>Med mykje anna kraam.</i>	With many provisions. *
– Ivar Vathing	

Before delving into the actual construction of the Stone Church, it would be good to have a bit of background about what went on before, the circumstances of our newly formed congregation, and the significance of Rev. N.E.S. Jensen’s arrival and presence in their midst. As we know the first Norwegian immigrants, most of them from West Telemark, came to settle in our area in 1853, the first visit by a Norwegian-Lutheran pastor occurred in October of 1854, and in that same month the following year Houston and Norwegian Ridge (Spring Grove) became the first Minnesota congregations admitted to the “Norwegian Synod.” ** Not bad for their first three years on the frontier!

It’s easy to imagine that the dream of having a church edifice of their own was foremost in the minds of the pioneers, but during their first decade in Houston County they hadn’t the wherewithal or the time. When the first European settlers arrived here they found a blank slate of pristine natural gifts and beauty, but many modifications were necessary (good or bad) to accommodate the needs of their Old World way of life. Fields had to be established and sometimes cleared, fences erected and farmstead buildings put up. Add to that schools and a minimum amount of infrastructure and you get the picture—they also needed everything that couldn’t be brought along on a wagon pulled by oxen.

The first year was the hardest since they had to brace themselves against the approaching Minnesota winter. A snug shelter, often a dugout in the side of a hill, was crucial. Though not as long as the winters back in Norway, they were colder here and more severe, especially in the beginning. They would have considered the relatively mild winters we’ve had the past couple of decades to be heaven sent. Those were indeed

desperate times and their very survival depended on their resourcefulness, *dugnad* (cooperative spirit), fortitude and Faith.

1857 proved to be a particularly challenging year, one that was very likely never forgotten by those who lived through it. The Winter of '57 was so unusual and memorable that it was written up in the 1882 *History of Houston County*, p. 282. Even more remarkable is the fact that it was later described in the obituary of Ole O. Stutlien (the younger) of Yucatan, in the Norwegian newspaper *Skandinaven* in 1908! Ole and his family later moved, as did many others, to the Buffalo River Settlement northeast of Moorhead, Minnesota, Houston's largest Norwegian colony. His obituary also mentions that he helped build the old "Stone Church" outside of Houston—*another very memorable event*.

We all know of the Great Depression in the 1930's, but few are aware of the financial panics (as they were called then) that plagued our ancestors in the latter half of the 19th century. They had to weather three of them in less than 40 years, but I believe for them the Panic of '57 was probably the worst, especially in light of their already arduous existence. Still very new to America, the resulting hard times that continued into the early 1860s made it extremely difficult for the pioneers to find or raise any money. According to the Sept. 1913 issue of *Telesoga*, there were times in the early years when people had to pay up to 40% interest. Ole Jonson Lie (Lee) of Badger, great-grandfather of Sigurd Vathing, Jerry & Julian Lee, et al., once had to pay 60 %. —*Uff-da!*

On a more positive note our early church members participated in the Minnesota Territorial Census of 1857, the earliest listing of those who were living in the Houston area, and there were quite a few by that time. It must have been rewarding for them to look forward to the upcoming statehood.

As to spiritual needs, if a couple wished to marry they could avail themselves of the local Justice of the Peace, but for everything else the services of a Norwegian-Lutheran Minister was essential. During the early years they had to rely on the benevolence of those Pastors willing to embark on a missionary trip to Minnesota, and thanks to our first Church Anniversary Books we've always known that Rev. U.V. Koren from Washington Prairie (southeast of Decorah, Iowa) was the first to make it to Houston (in 1854), and that he also helped to organize our Congregation in 1855.

Subsequent visits were limited to one or two times a year and our invaluable ministerial records faithfully list the dates and services performed: a goodly number of baptisms, communion, and one confirmation. Worship services were held, but not recorded. Conspicuously absent from the records are the names of any of the officiating clergy, and it took a long time to identify just who blessed our early members between gaining official status as a congregation in 1855 and the arrival of our first permanent pastor in 1859. (We will share that curious journey of discovery at a later time.)

I know of very few congregations in our area and northeast Iowa that were able to construct their own church before 1860. Although it was an objective devoutly to be desired, I can't envision any congregation seriously considering such a venture prior to securing their own pastor. By 1858 (the year of Minnesota's Statehood) Houston was ready to join Highland Prairie, Rushford, and Elstad in calling Rev. Nils Edvard Schanke Jensen from Bergen, Norway.

Rev. Jensen and his wife Johanna's circumstances and experiences in Norway, their ca. two-month long voyage to America (which effectively served as their

honeymoon trip), and long journey across the Midwest, closely mirrored those of their dear friends, Vilhelm and Elisabeth Koren, as they followed their own call six years earlier. Both pastors arrived on the frontier in Iowa and Minnesota recently ordained, newly married, and completely overwhelmed!

Since Rev. Jensen was one of only 12 pastors when he was received into the Norwegian Synod in Wisconsin, his presence in Houston and Fillmore Counties was truly a gift from above. Arriving in the summer or fall of 1859, Rev. Jensen delivered his first sermon here in the Peter Erickson blacksmith shop in Lower Houston. It should come as no surprise that according to the 1955 Centennial Book the decision was made shortly thereafter to build a church.

Quite naturally such an immense undertaking did not happen right away—plans had to be made and a suitable location chosen and purchased. The Spring Grove Congregation, under the charge of Rev. F.C. Clausen, set the example in the summer of 1860 by starting work on a large stone church the same size as ours would soon come to be. Work progressed rapidly and by September of 1862 the building was basically finished, except for the interior.

In the meantime, 1861 saw an influx of new settlers from West Telemark, just before the Civil War stemmed the tide of immigration for its duration. Since they arrived later to join their compatriots here, most had no choice but to make their claims farther back in the narrower parts of the valleys or up on the ridges, including Houge Ridge and *Prærien* (the Prairie, now Holty Ridge), where the lack of water was much more of a challenge.

The congregation now had quite a few new members to help share the load of building a new church of their own. I can't say for sure, but it very likely helped to get the ball—or should I say *stones*—rolling, and roll they would in great numbers down the steep slope of Anfin Anfinson's hill across from the site of our future Stone Church.

* This Norwegian verse is from a poem written over a century ago by Ivar Vathing. He lived on the Vathing home farm in lower Badger, now owned by Arlin & Sue Peterson.

** The official name of the “Norwegian Synod” was *The Synod of the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church in America*. Our ancestors referred to it simply as “*Synoden*” (The Synod). Does that surprise anyone?

Jim & Shelley, Cross of Christ Archives, May 2016

Ben Flatten Artwork Wanted for Anniversary Display

Anyone who has attended services at the Stone Church has no doubt noticed the large and impressive painting of the church, ornately framed in gold; that hangs to the right of the altar. Executed by a young Ben Flatten it portrays the church as it appeared in 1903. An invaluable visual record, it is the only one done at the time that depicts the early church in color.

In later years, I think the 1940s, Ben painted a series of much smaller versions which were purchased by those who wanted a picture of their beloved church for their homes. As far as I know each one of them have slightly different backgrounds and it is

our wish to gather as many as possible for a retrospective display at the church this summer.

He also made drawings using colored pencils, often of the old house in which a person was born and/or lived. If you are fortunate enough to own a copy of a Stone Church painting (or any other Ben Flatten artwork) or *any* artistic representation of the Stone Church and are willing to share—or know of anyone else who has one—please contact: Jim Skree 896-3709 or Shelley Jerviss 896-3385. *–Mange takk!*