

## Cross of Christ Chronicles

*Sesquicentennial of the Stone Church—Part 4*

*1866—The building is completed...*

*Ei kyrkje dei seg bygde,* They built themselves a church,

*De er 'kje noko herk;* It wasn't poorly made;

*De er 'kje skryt aa seia,* It isn't boasting to say,

*De er eit kjempeverk.* It is a “giant” (impressive) work.

— *Ivar Vathing*

When last we left our intrepid pioneers they had finished the grueling task of laying up the massive walls built to immure the soon to be completed sanctuary.\* Another long, cold winter had passed and we can only hope they embraced the change of season reinvigorated in mind, body and soul, their dreams having been brightened by the knowledge that only the far less daunting carpentry work remained.

It's easy to imagine they were more anxious than usual to be *fædig med våronni* (done with spring's work) and free to once again come together in the cooperative and magnanimous spirit that would lead them to the ultimate fulfillment of their goal.

For this final phase of the project the congregation hired one of their own. Aad Evendson Aarbak, the *snikkar* (carpenter) who contracted the labor and material to complete the work on the church, was born in 1837 and grew up in the relatively small valley of Vrådal. His father died in 1858 and it's possible he accompanied his mother and younger brother, Jens (our longtime *klokker*), when they came to Houston in 1861. As part of the large group from West Telemark mentioned in Part 1, they did not arrive here as strangers. From the very beginning a pronounced majority of the Norwegians who settled in this area, and formed our congregation, were from West Telemark, especially the neighboring parishes of Vrådal, Fyresdal, Skafså and Mo.

Like many immigrants they sought out their family and friends, in essence transplanting a part of their community and many of their customs from the Old Country to the New World. This process was particularly successful in many of the Norwegian settlements in southeast Minnesota, as well as the rest of the Midwest. (More on this later.)

Mr. Aarbak seems to have found his niche early on, securing the contract to build the first North Prairie Lutheran Church, eight or nine miles northwest of Rushford. Constructed in 1863, the thirty by forty foot frame building was considerably smaller than our church, with an unusually tall tower supporting its spire, but it proved he was equal to the task of finishing up work on the Stone Church.

“Early in 1866 Aad Aarbak traveled (70 miles) to Black River Falls, Wisconsin and purchased the necessary lumber at the sawmills there. He then rafted the material down the Black River to the Mississippi River and thence into Target Lake below LaCrescent. It was hauled to Houston on wagons drawn by oxen.” Although it resembles a lake it is actually a large bay with a narrow inlet to the west channel of the Mississippi, and thereby protected from the swift and

powerful river currents. Our old ones would maybe have called it a *bukti*. —The information in quotes was taken from that invaluable 1936 Stone Church 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary folder.

Just past “Miller’s Corner” (at the junction of Hwys. 16 & 26) to the right (east) is a grassy marsh. Prior to the installation of the locks and dams in the 1930s, which keep the river levels up, this area was dry land for much of the summer and the neighboring farmers used to hay it. In the early years it provided access to Target Lake and in our case the precious lumber that was waiting there. (This interesting piece of the story was told to me by Robert Jore, a dedicated and enthusiastic fellow historian, and friend.)

The sawed lumber needed to complete the church would have consisted of rafters, roof boards and shingles; floor and ceiling boards and joists; material for the U-shaped balcony and its support posts and stairway; wall studs and clapboard siding for the entry tower and belfry. Also needed were eight rafters, roof boards, shingles, and a stout central “mast” for the spire. Remember that there was nothing built onto the back (east end) of the church until 1874 when an 18 X 20 foot sacristy was added.

That being said, we can’t state positively that every piece of sawed wood came from Black River Falls. Since the records include small payments for “hauling lumber from La Crosse—\$2.00” it is plausible that some of the milled or more finished pieces such as the floor and ceiling boards, and maybe the shingles, came from the mills in La Crosse and only the larger, rough-sawn pieces were rafted down to Target Lake.

As was previously mentioned the building site was adjacent to timber on the bottoms and according to the 1936 Anniversary folder “the timbers used under the floor joists and in the tower were hewn here. They were trimmed square with an ax.” Most of the pioneers were quite proficient with an ax having had to rely on them extensively in the Old Country as well as here on the frontier. Having always fashioned much of what they needed from wood using axes and knives they had plenty of experience, but even more than that, the Norwegians seemed to have an almost inherent affinity for wood. (Much more could be told about this fascinating topic.)

Turning a round log into a square beam without a large saw was a relatively straightforward proposition which began with resting the log on crosspieces to keep it up off the ground and scoring one side with an axe, across the grain, along its entire length. The log was held in place by iron dogs whose sharp perpendicular ends had been driven into the log and the crosspieces.

The task of removing the extraneous wood was most likely performed with a broadax, but it could also have been done with an adze. They then gave the log a quarter turn and repeated the process three more times to produce the desired beam. The average pioneer had no doubt done this job a great many times and with a sharp axe it was actually much quicker and easier than trying to use a handsaw, or even a two-man saw. (When building log structures only two sides of each log were squared up.)

I don’t know what was built first, but a roof would have been desirable in keeping out the elements when installing the floor. Of course many stone piers had to be arranged to hold up the large, recently shaped floor beams, on which would rest the joists that held up the floor boards. A ledge was left around the inside perimeter of the foundation to support the ends of the beams. This

created a crawl space under the floor—the basement was dug out in stages later. They also had sense enough to leave small openings in the side walls just at ground level for air circulation, which is very beneficial to the longevity of the vulnerable wood timbers, so close to the ground with its detrimental “rising damp.” They were covered over when the ground level along the church was raised.

The floors in the entry and in the sanctuary were replaced during the 1925 remodeling, but I’ve always been so very thankful that one can still see, and experience, the original wide flooring and narrow pews up in the balcony. I’ve sent dozens of visitors up there over the years for that very reason.

Keeping to the subject of hand-hewn beams, they were also used to frame up the entry tower and belfry. This not only saved them money, but made for a very sturdy structure as well. Just like old barns, the beams and corner braces were joined by mortise and tenons, which were held tightly in place with wooden pegs.

This age-old method of “post and beam” construction can be easily seen and appreciated in the upper level of the tower. Had it been built using more modern “balloon framing,” as were its interstitial walls (which are also on view) it may well have been blown down by now. Several newer sawed beams were added sometime later to further strengthen the upper structure. After all, the bell alone weighs three quarters of a ton!

As long as we’re up in the tower, we might as well talk about the steeple, or more specifically the spire. While often used interchangeably, the actual spire is the tapering cone- or pyramid-shaped structure which surmounts the steeple or tower. (I, too, grew up using “steeple,” so I don’t want or expect anyone to start calling it “the spire.”)

It was with great interest and perhaps a bit of apprehension, that I first entered the dark interior of the spire through the small trap door above the bell way back in 1987. Aside from the shower of bat dirt that greeted me when first lowering the trap door, it was an altogether fascinating experience. Having no idea what to expect I was immediately taken by the central “mast” extending up through the full length of the spire. A hefty eight inches square, the corners at the upper end have been trimmed to form an octagon, thereby providing a flat plane for each of the eight, 3 X 5½ inch, spire rafters to butt up against, tightly and securely, as they came together.

The bottom of the spire rests solidly on the top of the “post and beam” framework of the belfry, with its central “mast” supported by a seven inch beam across the middle. Wide boards had been nailed to the underside of the framework above the bell, but no floor had been put in over the beams. The roof boards are five to eleven inches wide and look as though they might well have been leftover pieces from the main roof. Most of these rather short boards run horizontally, as would be expected, but some longer boards are vertical, presumably so they could cover more area without needing to be cut.

There was a modicum of sunlight coming up through the open trap door in the ceiling of the belfry, but I was surprised to see a few more slender shafts of light piercing the darkness above me, shining through five or six small holes previously installed by woodpeckers. They had been used by other birds over the years to carry in dry grass for nests which fell to the floor creating a

three foot “stack.” Jerome Stanoch, who did the restoration work on the spire, found these holes to be quite handy for running ropes through, which were used to secure the long extension ladder he had set up against the east side of the spire back in 1997.

A light decorative vane and ball on a narrow rod finished off the top of the spire, as it was not common to use crosses at that time. The sizes and shapes and overall design of the present cedar shingles are a duplication of those which were in place from 1885 to 1925. They did service for 40 years, and the standard wood shingles that replaced them endured the wind and the rain, baking and freezing, for 72 years! (*They must have ordered them from Augsburg.*)

— *Continued next month.*

\* While looking for a possible synonym for *enclose* I came across *immure*, a word I’d not known before, and when I saw that its first definition was “enclose within walls” there was simply no going back. Of further interest, the root of the word is the Latin *murus*-wall, and it isn’t too surprising that the Norwegian word *mur* means a brick or stone wall. Remember our stone mason, Gullick Halvorson? He was the *murmester* or “master builder of masonry walls.”

*“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.**—I have a feeling that the decorative steeple shingles which were replaced during the 1925 remodeling would have lasted quite a bit longer, but at that time they were thinking modernization, not preservation, and they succeeded beautifully in what they did.