

## Cross of Christ Chronicles

### *Lift High the Cross?*

*I should begin by saying that although I lifted the title for this article from our wealth of hymns, unlike them I will not be dealing with the metaphorical aspects and usage of the cross, but rather its figural presence in and on our churches and in our cemeteries.*

It was back in 1990 that a member of the committee to plan the 30th anniversary of the building of our new church suggested what we all thought would be the perfect theme: *Lift High the Cross!* Not only did it reflect the name of the church, it also made reference to the cross motifs visible in many places throughout the building, and last but definitely not least there was a beautiful and expressive hymn to go along with it.

In fact, our attention was drawn to those cross designs to the point that photographs of each of them were included in the 30th Anniversary Booklet. We know that Leigh Iverson designed the overall look and layout of the church (although he did not do the architectural construction plans), but who was responsible for the design of the interior and fixtures? Almost assuredly it was Rev. M.A. Braaten, one of the prime proponents of the new church, together with the building committee who chose the cross-adorned features we now appreciate so much, *but was this always the case?*

Quite a few years ago (probably at the dedication for the newly restored Stone Church steeple in the summer of 1998) I had an interesting and enlightening conversation with former member Lloyd Swenson, son of Arvid Swenson (from Sweden) and Badger's own Dorothy Findreng. Not surprisingly our attention turned toward the new steeple and Lloyd shared with me a story told to him by his late uncle, Ted Findreng, about the last major change that had been made to the steeple during the extensive remodeling back in 1925, and the minor controversy involving the placement of the large metal cross that we had just recently taken down from the tip of the steeple after its 72 years of unwavering service.

It seems there were a number of people who expressed their dismay at the prospect of this significant change to the appearance of their beloved church. After having heard this argument several times Rev. Ostrem became somewhat irritated and finally declared, **"We have every bit as much right to that cross as *they* do!"** (Are you as confused now, as I was at the time?) As the story went on I had found it difficult to comprehend why anyone would have an objection to placing a cross anywhere on the church, especially on the steeple, but then I came to understand that it wasn't the cross itself they were opposed to, but rather its "Catholic connotation."

By way of explanation I should say that I had long been familiar with the animosity and distrust between the Lutherans and Catholics, especially among those born before World War I, but I was completely unaware of the association of the cross with the Catholic religion. Growing up when I did I was used to seeing crosses on the steeples of every Christian denomination church, but I also assumed, as did most, that the *cross* was the symbol most used by the Protestants

inside their churches, as pendants for necklaces, etc., while the Catholics used the *crucifix* for those purposes.

Lloyd's story opened up a whole new area of awareness for me to ponder, and pursue as the opportunities presented themselves. I would eventually learn that the line of demarcation between the two symbols was not as sharply defined as most people of our generation would think. My search would lead to many interesting and often surprising examples but let us begin with something rather straightforward, the cemeteries. As you walk through the older parts of the Stone Church and St. Peter's Cemeteries you will find relatively few crosses adorning the gravestones.

On my cursory inspection of our grave markers while preparing this article I must admit that I found more crosses on the old flat "tablet stones" than I had expected. There was an interesting variety, some of which I didn't remember seeing before, but they were definitely in the minority and rarely the central motif.

Turning to the square gray "pillar stones" that were very popular during the last quarter of the 19th century you will see many elaborate turned-urn finials, as well as pyramid shapes, bisecting arches and even a couple of spheres gracing their pinnacles, *but not a single cross!*

I haven't really visited any Catholic cemeteries (no one fits into my research parameters), but a perfect example of the differences can be seen along the east side of Losey Boulevard in La Crosse. There, on the high bank next to the sidewalk, in the huge Catholic Cemetery of LaCrosse, you can't miss seeing a large portion of the pillar stones surmounted by an attached stone cross. I'm still quite amazed at how strange and almost jarring they appear to me, being so unlike the pillar stones I grew up with and have seen in a great many old Lutheran cemeteries.

Another thing you won't see in our cemeteries are the many crosses sprouting up from the tops of the more modern granite markers. A Lutheran cemetery's lack of crosses on the tops and faces of the pillar stones, and granite markers from the first half of the 20th century, would seem to indicate something caused a shift in attitude against the inclusion of this most basic and beloved symbol of our religion, but eventually their use resumed and are found most often at the upper corners of the granite gravestones, at least in our cemeteries. My quick survey (which didn't include military markers) yielded only three of them before 1950: one from 1938, one from 1946, and one at St. Peter's from 1941.

— *Continued next month when we'll look at the crosses on our churches, etc.*

**Correction:** In last month's article (September 2018) it was stated that Thorvaldsen's statue of Christ has been in place above the Stone Church altar since 1897. The correct year is 1896. *Du maa unnskyld meg!*

— *Shelley and Jim, Cross of Christ Archives, October 2018*

