Germans from Russia Lutheran Church (1910)

by Clyde Eisenbeis

Peace Lutheran Church, originally known as Friedens Gemeinde, was a small rural Lutheran church which clung to many German traditions. Built north of Beulah, North Dakota in 1910 by my Grandfather John Eisenbeis and three other charter members, it was closed in December of 1967 during my first year at college and taken down in the spring of 1968.

While the church building is gone, my memories of this church and the congregation are as strong as ever. We were family. We, and our ancestors, worshipped there for decades. We baptized, confirmed, married, and buried fellow members. We had Church Picnics, and Sunday Schools, and Bible Schools. But what really bonded us as a family was a unique spirit and some old traditions.

First of all, the spirit. While the congregation only numbered around 40 members, we could sing, and did sing! As a kid, I remember many times hearing visitors comment on the hearty singing. And we noticed the difference, too, when we visited other churches. While we had an old pump organ, everyone loved to sing!

Then the traditions. During the worship services, the men sat on the right side of the church, and the women sat on the left side of the church, with the boys in the front on the right side and the girls in the front on the left side. In the later years, a new pastor tried to convince the congregation to change, but this one tradition never did disappear.

We did replace the old picture of the Lord's Supper (which hung over the small altar) with a wooden cross on a red cloth background, we did replace the velvet sacks on the end of a pole with standard offering plates, we did switch from German services to English services, we did paint the inside of the church a color besides white (a very light green), and some people did stop wearing black for communion which was served three or four times per year. But changing the seating never happened.

The church was about 20 feet by 28 feet and had no basement. The front entry attached on the east side was about 8 feet by 10 feet and faced the gravel parking lot on the south side. The cemetery was south of the parking lot.

The church seated about 80 people. There were two sets of bench seat rows (in front and in back), and there were six or seven rows of wooden chairs. Each row consisted of five chairs bolted together with a board running underneath them (one set on each side of the church). There were two bench seats in the entry. The men always sat in the entry, while the women sat in the church until the service was ready to start.

There was a raised platform in the front of the church. On the platform, in the right-hand corner, was a small area (about 4 foot by 4 foot) surrounded by a curtain where the pastor changed his clothes. In the center of the platform was the altar, and on the left side was the pump organ. In front of the curtain was the pulpit. A gas lamp with a reflector hung on the wall

near the pulpit and another was near the pump organ. There were gas lamps down the center of the aisle. Gas lamps were used only on Christmas Eve.

Sunday School was held for an hour every Sunday, even in the summertime. Bible School spanned two weeks in the summer. We knew a lot of Bible stories and all of Luther's Small Catechism when we were confirmed. In a period of four years, I had to memorize and recite all six sections of Luther's Small Catechism eight times (per my mother's recollection).

The church had no electricity until the 1960's. There was a potbelly coal stove in the center of the church on the women's side (replaced by an oil furnace when electricity was installed). We continued to sing with the pump organ.

There was no indoor plumbing. But there were two outhouses, one for men and one for women.

In the earlier years, the pastor was shared with another rural Lutheran church, St. Johannes Gemeinde, located north of Zap, North Dakota (eight miles away). When St. Johannes Gemeinde closed in 1959, the Peace Lutheran pastor was shared with the Lutheran church in Zap. Church services were sometimes held in the afternoon during the winter (there was no electricity for lights).

Communion was served three to four times per year (always on Christmas Day and Easter Sunday). The people planning to take communion turned to face their chairs and knelt on the wooden floor by their chairs (while the rest stood) during the confession. Communion took place by kneeling on the raised platform at the front of the church, first by the men and then by the women.

The church services and singing were always in German until 1966 when our German speaking pastor left. We had used a black German song book for the worship service (only words, no music notes).

The German speaking pastors always wore a black cassock during the church service (so we could listen to the message without distraction by the messenger). The pastor, in 1966, wore a white surplice over the black cassock.

The organ players did not use music notes. They played "by ear". The words were printed in Lateinisch (old German printed letters of the alphabet). We switched to the "red hymnal" when we went to English in 1966 with the arrival of a non-German speaking pastor.

We had Church Picnics every summer, sometimes at Great-Uncle Sam Krause's farm (he had a grove of trees by a stream that ran through the farm), and sometimes "down by the river" (actually the Garrison Reservoir now known as Lake Sakakawea). After a brief church service, the tables were filled until they groaned from the weight of all the food (potluck). The tables were still full after people were done eating. At Uncle Sam's, we would play horse shoes, have gunny sack races, and three-legged races. At the Garrison Reservoir, we would water ski, swim, fish, and go on boat rides.

Every fall, after the harvesting was done, we had Mission Festival. We would gather on a Sunday afternoon to listen to a missionary and look at the items he brought with him from the far-away lands he had visited. A special offering was given to help support missionaries.

Occasionally skunks crawled under the church. It was always a challenge trying to remove them. The smell hung in the air in the church for days.

I remember daydreaming and staring out the windows to the north watching the wheat fields wave in the breeze. Through the south window we watched the prairie grass ripple alongside the cemetery.

Christmas Eve, however, brings back the most memories for me. This was always a special event which required extra planning and rehearsing the "Sprichle" (pieces or small speaking parts) and the program (always the traditional Mary and Joseph manger scene). On Sunday afternoons, before Christmas, we would gather with other families to make angel wings, halos, and shepherd staffs.

And then the big event! You could always tell it was a special time with the hissing of the gas lamps (white gas, no electricity) hanging from the ceiling in the center of the aisle. And the Christmas tree with lights powered by a car battery. The gas lamps were used only once per year, on Christmas Eve, as all other church services were during the day. To this day I can still hear that sound of Christmas Eve!

We kids always sang a combination of English and German Christmas songs and said pieces in both English and German!

At the end of the program, the pastor made a few closing remarks, and then brown paper sacks (Seckle), containing an apple or orange, peanuts, and hard candy (shaped like a folded ribbon), were distributed to all kids.

The evening always closed with a hearty round of singing of "O Du Froeliche, O Du Selige". Whenever I hear that song, it brings back a flood of memories of Christmas Eve in a small, crowded church in North Dakota with friends and relatives singing with joy and gratitude!

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