

BUILT ON THE ROCK,
ST.PETER'S, LARSEN, WI STANDS

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On a county trunk two miles north of Lake Butte Des Morts in the middle of a marshy farmer's field stands St. Peter Ev. Lutheran Church. Although located in the Town of Winchester in Winnebago County, its mailing address is Larsen, approximately five miles east of the church. As with many other small, midwestern, WELS congregations, no large town or city surrounds the church property. In fact, only two homes are in the vicinity of the church--one on the church grounds which has served as the parsonage, and another across the road. To the casual passerby, this church warrants no special consideration, no second glance. Even to the most observant person, this edifice suggests no importance. And yet, the very fact that it exists, that it is maintained, that it is well-used, testifies to the fact that this building and the congregation responsible for it are significant. In spite of its mirky, lowland surroundings it still stands today. Built on the Rock, St. Peter Larsen, WI, stands.

As with so many WELS congregations, the beginning years are the years of intrigue, controversy, and interest; and it is with these years that we will concern ourselves. No matter how good the pastor, no congregation can exist without people. It takes people to constitute a visible Christian church. In the case of St. Peter's these people were German immigrants. In 1850, a trading post was opened on the east side of the Wolf River at Fremont. This was necessitated by the booming timber business in the area. The territory was covered by white pine timber and as yet was unsettled. There was also the prospect of quarrying limestone in the area. And the fact that the stagecoach from

Green Bay to Stevens Point passed nearby gave the people a sense of being connected, at least remotely, with the "civilized" world, and therefore the area became attractive.

Perhaps it was reports such as the above which attracted the first settlers between 1852-1858. There were no roads, no schools, no churches. The people had to clear their own land and were often isolated from each other by dense forest, though not by any great distance. In spite of this isolation, a party of settlers decided to homestead in the area. They had no exact destination in mind. But they were prepared to tame undeveloped territory.

One of these settlers was Heinrich A. Spiegelberg. No fascinating story attaches itself to his name. He lies buried in Lake View Cemetery in Boom Bay country in Wolf River Township. This cemetery is also known as St. Peter's Cemetery No. 3. It overlooks the tranquil waters of Lake Butte Des Morts. His tombstone reads: Heinrich A. Spiegelberg Geb. 16 Nov. 1816 in Schwerin Hinter Pommern Gest. 31 Okt. 1901 Eingewanderd 1854 "He wandered in here 1854."

Spiegelberg and the others--7 adults and some children--had left the Watertown area in a prairie schooner. When they arrived at Oshkosh they looked for a floating bridge to use to ford the Fox River. The schooner they were traveling in was being pulled by four oxen. Naturally such a load was dangerous on a floating bridge. The weight of the people, oxen, wagon, and earthly possessions proved to be too much. In mid stream the bridge went under. The men quickly jumped off and harnessed the oxen to the bridge and allowed the oxen to pull the load to shore.

Soaked and exhausted, the settlers regrouped and headed north across Ball prairie in the area of Winneconne until they arrived at the mouth of the Rat River which empties into Lake Butte Des Morts.

They cleared several acres and used the trees to build a log shanty in which they all spent the winter. In the spring they cleared more land and planted their first crop of grain to make bread. Thus began their homesteading efforts.

After homesteading for one year, these settlers took advantage of the U.S. government's homesteading offers and purchased forty acres of land at \$1.25 per acre.

But again, disaster struck these German Lutherans. The log cabin which they had built burned to the ground. They immediately began rebuilding, this time a little further east near what is now County Trunk MM, the same county road on which St. Peter's now stands. But a tornado ripped off the top story of this new structure some time later. Wearily they only rebuilt a half story to replace it. This home still stands on its original site.

Again it seemed as if this tiny group were destined for destruction. An epidemic of diphtheria spread from household to household and many children became its victims. They lie buried in small cemeteries which dot the countryside.

Facing death and destruction time and time again, these settlers felt a grave spiritual need for pastoral care. They longed to hear the Word and to receive the Lord's Supper. Their children remained unbaptized and unconfirmed. Since there were

many scattered pockets of German Lutherans who had no established congregations yet, the situation seemed ripe for a traveling missionary.

By unanimous vote at its 1851 Synod Convention, the Wisconsin Synod approved sending out a traveling missionary. The pastors who voted realized that the frontier area of Wisconsin was ripe for the harvest. But the harvest had to wait six more years until the Lord supplied the worker in the form of Ernst August Gottlieb Fachtmann. He was born in Baestel, Osnabrueck, Germany, on July 3, 1813. He left his pastorate in Brandenburg, Prussia to come to the United States. Upon his arrival in Milwaukee in 1857, President Muehlhaeuser assigned him to the Richfield and Town Polk parish in Washington County.

He was a bachelor with a passion for mission work and a heart for adventure. Realizing this, his congregation gave him permission already that fall of 1857 to conduct a mission tour north of Milwaukee. He had no money to buy a horse and was unable to borrow one, so he walked.

His first tour began in October 1857. He went through Port Washington to Sheboygan. From there he traveled west to Calumet Village and then on to Chilton and New Holstein. He next traveled to Fond du Lac and then up Lake Winnebago to Oshkosh, Neenah, and Menasha.

From there he traveled further west and came upon the Rat River. Fachtmann loved the forest-lined waterways. He was at home traveling from settlement to settlement along the Rat and Wolf rivers. On this first tour he went as far north as New

London and Hortonville.

On Sept. 1, 1958, Fachtmann reported to President Meuhlhaeuser on his travels. Near the end of his report he states:

Thru the grace of God a large field of work will be opened to our Synod, the importance of the traveling missionary institution next year will stand out still more because the trail will then be blazed, the traveling missionary of the Wisconsin Synod will then be known to the public and the connection with these congregations, which partly are of considerable strength, will be established. It will be our Synod's duty to cast about for able workers, and in case a change of congregations becomes desirable, our brethren will know where to go.1

No doubt, Fachtmann came into contact with our little group of settlers on his first tour. They were on his mind when he wrote of the dire spiritual need in which the German Lutherans of the area found themselves. His short stay among them must have been a refreshing oasis in this pastorally arid territory.

A more permanent solution to their problem came two years later in 1859 with the arrival in the U.S. of Pastor Carl Waldt. Pastor Streissguth of Milwaukee had journeyed to Germany in 1858. There he found a very able traveling missionary--the aforementioned Carl Waldt. He convinced Waldt to come back to the U.S. with him. They left Europe on Feb. 17, 1858 and docked in New York on Mar. 25, 1858. On April 9 they arrived in Milwaukee and Waldt immediately met with President Muehlhaeuser who sent him to Fachtmann in Fond du Lac. Fachtmann in turn directed him to the territory on the northern end of Lake Winnebago, more specifically, Neenah and Menasha. He also hinted that there ^{was} ~~were~~ a number of preaching stations west of there which needed attention. He established two preaching stations--one on

the Rat River and another along the Wolf River in the settlement known as Metzsig's Corners. Concerning his effort, Waldt reported:

In the vicinity of the Rat River is a peninsula where several farmers lived. There I was called for in a canoe made of a hollowed-out tree trunk. It was a shaky boat ride and each time I was glad to have firm ground under foot again. To some places I came only seldom and on week days, but these days were real festivals for the settlers. At some times it was necessary for the men to carry their wives on their back through the marsh in order that they might attend services.

As far as settlements were concerned, Winchester was the end of the line. Indians still inhabited the area up until the time of the Civil War and they were accustomed to begging for food from the settlers.

Between the visits of Pastor Waldt, the settlers met in a schoolhouse located in a field west of the present site of St. Peter's church. A layman read a sermon and hymns were sung.

On Oct. 29, 1860, 23 families of these settlers met in that schoolhouse and signed the articles of congregational incorporation. The name of the congregation was The Trustees of the German Evangelical Lutheran St. Peter's Society. On Mar. 24, 1861 the congregation issued a formal call to Pastor Waldt. They accepted the constitution of the Wisconsin Synod on April 2 of the same year and applied for membership. The Wisconsin Synod accepted St. Peter's congregation into membership at its convention held May 25-31, 1861.

Also at its Oct. 29, 1860 meeting, St. Peter's decided to build a parsonage, but this motion was rescinded on April 11, 1861 when it was learned that Immanuel congregation in Zittau was determined to build a parsonage and that Pastor Waldt could live

there and serve both congregations. St. Peter's agreed to contribute toward its cost after Pastor Waldt had approved of the house and had moved in.

The number of parishes served by Waldt quickly grew to five, and therefore he installed his brother-in-law, Carl Wagner, as pastor of St. Peter's and Immanuel congregations. Wagner became the first real resident pastor of these two congregations when he moved into the parsonage. It was customary at this time for each member to contribute the following toward the pastor's support: 25 lbs of flour, 10 lbs of meat, 2 lbs of butter, 2 dz eggs, and 2 bushels of potatoes and fruit, besides a cash salary. Wagner served these two congregations until Oct. 26, 1864 when he accepted a call to Caledonia Center, Racine County.

In the fall of 1864, Pastor Theodore Jaekel arrived in Milwaukee from Hirschberg, Schlesian, Germany, where he had served as pastor. He was sent to fill the vacancy at Winchester created by Pastor Waldt's departure. Jaekel had been recruited for the Wisconsin Synod by President John Bading who was in Germany from 1863-1864. Jaekel found his assignment in the Winchester area difficult due to the lowlands which hindered his travel from preaching station to preaching station. After making his rounds on foot for a while, he acquired an Indian pony and made his rounds on horseback. He served six congregations and three preaching stations in three counties--Winnebago, Outagamie, and Waushara. Under his direction, Lutherans at Readfield formed Zion congregation in 1866. This parish became closely associated with St. Peter's and has often jointly supported a pastor.

At the St. Peter's congregational meeting held on Oct. 31,

1865, the members voted unanimously to buy an acre of land from Ludwig Zellmer on which to construct a new church. The plans called for a church 24 by 36 feet, and 16 feet high with an addition on the east end. The dedication of this church building took place on Jan. 6, 1867. Pastor Waldt returned to officiate at this service which began in the schoolhouse and proceeded into the new church. Pastor Jaekel's sermon text was 1 Peter 2:4-5, which he preached to a congregation numbering 24 families. In 1868 Jaekel accepted the call to Grace, Milwaukee, and therefore St. Peter's and neighboring congregations were once again left vacant.

To fill the vacancy, the congregation once again looked to Milwaukee for a candidate from a German mission society who had been accepted into membership by the Wisconsin Synod. Pastor August Weise was their man. He had been a missionary of the Hermannsburger Mission in Africa, working among the Zulus there for 10 years. In 1868 he arrived in Milwaukee and on Aug. 24 he received the call to the Winchester parish. He eventually served seven congregations and one preaching station: St. John's at Caledonia, St. Peter's, Immanuel at Zittau, Bloomfield, Weyauwega, Phillips Mill and New London, and Zion at Readfield.

Unfortunately, Weise met a very sad and untimely death while serving these parishes. On Ascension Day, 1870, while driving to one of his congregations, he stopped to visit a member who was very ill. He found a man covered with small pox. After the visit, Weise continued on to the congregation he planned to visit, but had to be brought home the next day deathly ill with

small pox. Two days later he died, leaving a widow and three small children. He was buried at the Zittau Cemetery on June 1, 1870. Two daughters also later died of small pox and are buried at his side: Emilie, born Mar. 2, 1869, died June 16, 1870, and Marie, born Mar. 2, 1865, died June 25, 1870. The inscription on

Weise's gravestone reads:

Hier ruht ein treuer Hirt der Christusheerde.
Die er in dreinen Theilen dieser Erde,
Am Gottesreiche trueliche mit zu bauen,
Gesammelt und gefeuht auf gruenen Auen.
In fremder Not der eigenen nicht gedenkend
Und Obel und Wein in anderer Wunden senkend
So durft im Liebesdienst der Tod ihm rauben
Zum Shauen ihm zu fuehren von dem Glauben.

This small pox epidemic became so severe that the entire countryside was quarantined for months and the churches remained closed.

Throuhgout the vacancy occasioned by Pastor Weise's death, the congregation continued to pay his salary to his widow until the end of 1870.

On Christmas Eve, 1870, John Meyer arrived in Milwaukee at the home of President Bading as a candidate for the ministry. He was assigned to the Winchester parish and was installed on Jan. 21, 1871. On May 30, he married Anna Behnken at Neenah. Pastor Weise's widow still lived in the parsonage with this newly wedded couple until she returned to Germany later in the year. Meyer served from three to five congregations during his tenure. He would leave the home church at Zittau by horse and buggy and travel to St. Peter's, then to St. John's Caledonia, on to Zion at Readfield, and finally to a preaching station at East Bloomfield.

The first burial recorded at St. Peter's congregation

occurred during this time at Cemetery No. 1 which was east of the church. Cemetery No. 2 began on Nov. 13, 1873 with the burial of William Bohlmann. This cemetery is located on the church property west of the church. Together with the Lake View Cemetery mentioned earlier, St. Peter's congregation maintains three cemeteries.

Pastor Meyer's services to the congregation ended in 1876. During the short vacancy, sermons were read to the congregation by a member, William Spiegelberg, from a book entitled Dr. Heinrich Mueller's Evangelischer Herzensspiegel.

Rev. Christian Reichenbecher accepted the call to serve St. Peter's and was installed on Feb. 26, 1877--the congregation's sixth pastor. Obviously he was unimpressed with the congregation's existing parsonage because he immediately revived the idea of building a new one. This matter was nothing simple. In fact, it had been a bone of contention for quite some time. Matters came to a head and necessitated a meeting of the four congregations involved: Zion, St. John's Caledonia, Immanuel, and St. Peter's.

The meeting was held on June 25, 1877 and resolved the following:

1. A parsonage would be built, the others repaired, and all of these would be the property of the four congregations. Zion and St. John's would pay half the cost, each one quarter, and Immanuel and St. Peter's would pay the other half according to the number of families.
2. The church boards of the four congregations would oversee these buildings.
3. If one congregation leaves to become self-supporting and continues to adhere to the Lutheran Symbols, the Unaltered Augsburg Confession, the Apology of the Smalcald Articles, the Large and Small Catechisms of Luther, and the Formula of Concord, such congregation would be reimbursed according to the amount paid in. If such congregation leaves and denies

the above symbols, it loses all rights to the buildings. In the fall of 1877 an addition was built on to the parsonage and a barn was built. Pastor Reichenbecher stayed here until 1878 when he accepted a call to St. Lucas, Milwaukee.

Again faced with a vacancy, the congregation called Rev. Carl Althof. He accepted and was installed on the first Sunday of the New Year, 1879. But it was during his pastorate that the election controversy raged in the Synodical Conference--a controversy which caused a division among the four congregations. The Synod proclaimed its stance in the matter and, for the most part, the members were happy and comforted with the position. But Althof felt otherwise. He held to some figments of his imagination and attempted to get his congregations to side with him. Immanuel congregation was persuaded and joined the Ohio Synod. The other three, however, decided to terminate Althof's call. St. Peter's, on Oct. 7, 1883, was the last of the three to do so. On Oct. 14, 1883, they decided to have Pastor H. Kunkel, an aged man from Winneconne, serve them for the following Sunday. On Nov. 25, they made his call more sure, asking him to serve them until July 1, 1884.

Meanwhile a candidate by the name of Ernst Haese was installed at Van Dyne and Winneconne. On June 25, he also began serving St. Peter's, using the steamboat to make the journey.

On Feb. 2, 1885 St. Peter's extended a call to Rev. Haese, which he accepted. He moved into a home rented for him by the parish from Ludwig Zellmer. He continued to serve the Winneconne parish from there.

The congregation came to the opinion that a permanent

parsonage was needed at its May, 25, 1885 meeting. A committee was appointed to buy three acres of land after the harvest. On Oct. 28, three acres were deeded to the congregation for \$75. In the following year a house and barn were built on the site.

Pastor Haese began holding yearly mission festivals. Church records indicate that the first of these was held on Oct. 18, 1885. Pastor Jaekel preached in the morning and another pastor in the afternoon. The collection amounted to \$38.13.

The following year the mission festival was held at Winneconne. Pastor Eppling, one of the preachers that day, reported in a Gemeinde-Blatt issue of 1887 how hard it rained, and yet everyone was in good spirits and was inspired by the preaching.

In June, 1890, Pastor Haese accepted a call to Peshtigo, WI and St. Peter's was vacant again, but not for long. On Aug. 10, 1890 Pastor Oswald Lugenheim was installed as pastor of the Winneconne and Winchester congregations. He came here from the Hartland-Pewaukee parish. His tenure, likewise, was short. In the latter half of 1892 he accepted a call to Nicollet, MN.

To fill its vacancy, St. Peter's once more looked to candidates who had arrived in Milwaukee from Germany. Richard Ladegast received the call to serve them and was installed on Dec. 20, 1892.

1893 saw many changes for St. Peter's. Up to this time it had been singing hymns without an organ. Early in the year an Estay Chapel Organ was purchased for \$75. The congregation also lost its pastor. St. Paul's Winneconne voted to become self-

supporting and called Ladegast to serve them alone. He accepted and moved to Winneconne.

On Oct. 1, 1893 Zion Readfield voted to call a pastor jointly with St. Peter's. They extended their call to Rev. Herman Gerhard, who accepted and was installed on Nov. 26. At this time, St. John's Caledonia again joined the other two congregations and all three were served by Gerhard.

Another doctrinal controversy reared up among the members. This time it concerned the lodge. Things became so turbulent that Gerhard accepted a call in 1896 to Arcadia-Pleasant Valley.

This time the parish sought a candidate from the Wauwatosa Seminary in 1896, in order to fill the void left by Gerhard. Oswald Theobald received the call and was ordained and installed by Prof. E. Notz of Northwestern College on the Seventh Sunday after Trinity--St. Peter's thirteenth pastor. Theobald was a native of Poland who had come to America at the age of 14 to study for the ministry. In 1897 he returned to Poland and married a girl with whom he had been confirmed by Rev. W. P. Angerstein. Angerstein was a defender of confessional Lutheranism in Poland. He was also the man who married them. The couple returned to Winchester in November, accompanied by the Pastor's aunt and his wife's aunt. Apparently there were horrible stories about wild beasts in the U.S. which reached Poland, because these two other relatives were sent along to fend off the wolves and other wild beasts which infested the area.

In 1898 the Lake View Cemetery had been in existence for over forty years. But its formal organization came on Aug. 30, 1898 under the direction of William Spiegelberg. The cemetery

was registered on Sept. 7 and became known as St. Peter's Cemetery No. 3.

Being from Poland, it was quite natural for Pastor Theobald and his wife to wish to return there for a visit. In April, 1900 the congregation granted him a leave of absence for this purpose. Upon their return, Mrs. Theobald quickly settled back down into parish life, writing, "I often traveled with my husband over the three parishes and often we were gone for several days, staying overnight with different parishoners and in this way we became an intimate part of many families and could enter into their family life as one of them,"

In the fall of 1903 St. Peter's resolved to build a new church. On Exaudi Sunday, 1904 the cornerstone was laid with Pastor Julius Zuberbier of East Bloomfield preaching the sermon. The church dedication was held on Sept. 25, 1904. The new church was 50 by 30 feet, with a 72 foot tower. Total cost of the building was \$3,800 which was entirely funded by the time of dedication. A 1,000 pound bell was hung in the tower bearing this inscription: Gloria Deo In Excelsis--Ev. Luth. St. Peter's Congregation, Winchester, Wis. 1904. The E.W. Vanduzen Co., Cincinnati--The Buckeye Bell Foundry 1904.

By the time the new church was dedicated, Pastor Theobald had already accepted a call to Manchester, WI. Although he loved this parish dearly, the days of traveling to three congregations had begun to take its toll on his health.

On the Second Sunday in Advent, Pastor John Dowidat from Bailey's Harbor was installed as St. Peter's fourteenth pastor.

The family had gotten caught in an early snowstorm which delayed their arrival in Winchester. In addition, the train box car which contained their belongings developed brake problems and was temporarily lost in a Green Bay train yard. A week later it was located, but the potatoes and canned goods had already frozen. Pastor Dowidat's family soon outgrew the parsonage at St. Peter's and a 16 by 20 foot addition was built on to the parsonage.

The members of St. Peter's may have lived in the sticks, but they were backwoods by no means. They revealed their progressive nature by taking a special collection and buying their pastor a new Patterson auto. It was one of the first autos in the area.

But the life of the St. Peter's pastor was not all roses. Shortly before Christmas, 1914, Mrs. Dowidat died in childbirth and was buried Dec. 28, 1914. On Nov. 13, 1917 Pastor Dowidat remarried, this time to Emma Bader at Oshkosh.

During September, 1921, Pastor Dowidat left the parish after accepting a call to Eldorado. Ferdinand Weyland accepted the call to the parish and was installed on Nov. 13, 1921.

During the beginning years of the Depression, the parish was concerned about the surplus of candidates for the ministry. On Aug. 6, 1933 Lewis Bleichwehl, a seminary graduate, was installed to assist Weyland in his duties. This venture must have come from Weyland's impetus, because he supported his assistant solely from his own generosity. When his money ran out, the arrangement was discontinued. Bleichwehl left on Jan. 1, 1934.

On April 2, 1934 Weyland again tried to persuade the voters of all three congregations to supply him with an assistant, but

the voters decided otherwise.

On June 25, 1934 the tower of St. Peter's church was struck by lightning and suffered \$300 in damages. The congregation decided to remove the steeple and repair the remainder with a stub-tower.

The 75th anniversary of the founding of St. Peter's congregation was celebrated on Oct. 6, 1935. Pastor John Dowidat preached in German and Pastor William Wadzinski in English.

Pastor Weyland preached his last sermon at St. Peter's on Sept. 3, 1944 before leaving for the Enterprise-Monico parish. Weyland had been instrumental in increasing the number of services at each church from every other Sunday to every Sunday. He also made sure the transition from German to English was smooth.

On Oct. 24, 1944 Pastor Armin L. Engel was installed in all the churches of the Wichester-Readfield-Caledonia parish, and it is with the beginning of Pastor Engel's tenure that this historical presentation will close. Pastor Weyland had safely guided St. Peter's into the "modern" era. His pastorate, the longest of any so far at St. Peter's, had served to solidify the congregation. By now, roads and communication were well established and the descendants of those first German settlers in no way felt the isolation and dangers of life along the waterways leading into Lake Butte Des Morts.

Certainly God had been by their side. He had preserved them. Most importantly, he had preserved their faith. Had their faith been built on anything less than Christ, the Rock, it would

have failed. But their faith remains, and St. Peter's still stands, built on the Rock.

ENDNOTES

1John P. Koehler The History of the Wisconsin Synod (Sauk Rapids, MN: Sentinel Printing Company, 1981), p. 56.

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Pastors of St. Peter's

Missionary G. Fachtmann

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|-----|-------------------------|-----------|
| 1. | Carl Waldt | 1859-1861 |
| 2. | Carl Wagner | 1861-1864 |
| 3. | Theodore Jaekel | 1864-1868 |
| 4. | August Weise | 1868-1870 |
| 5. | John Meyer | 1871-1876 |
| 6. | Christian Reichenbecker | 1877-1878 |
| 7. | Carl Althof | 1879-1883 |
| 8. | H. Kunkel | 1883-1884 |
| 9. | Ernst Haese | 1884-1890 |
| 10. | Oswald Lugenheim | 1890-1892 |
| 11. | Richard Ladegast | 1892-1893 |
| 12. | Herman Gerhard | 1893-1896 |
| 13. | Oswald Theobald | 1896-1904 |
| 14. | John Dowidat | 1904-1921 |
| 15. | Ferdinand Weyland | 1921-1944 |