

A HALF CENTURY OF WHEAT AND TARES
IN BOSTWICK VALLEY

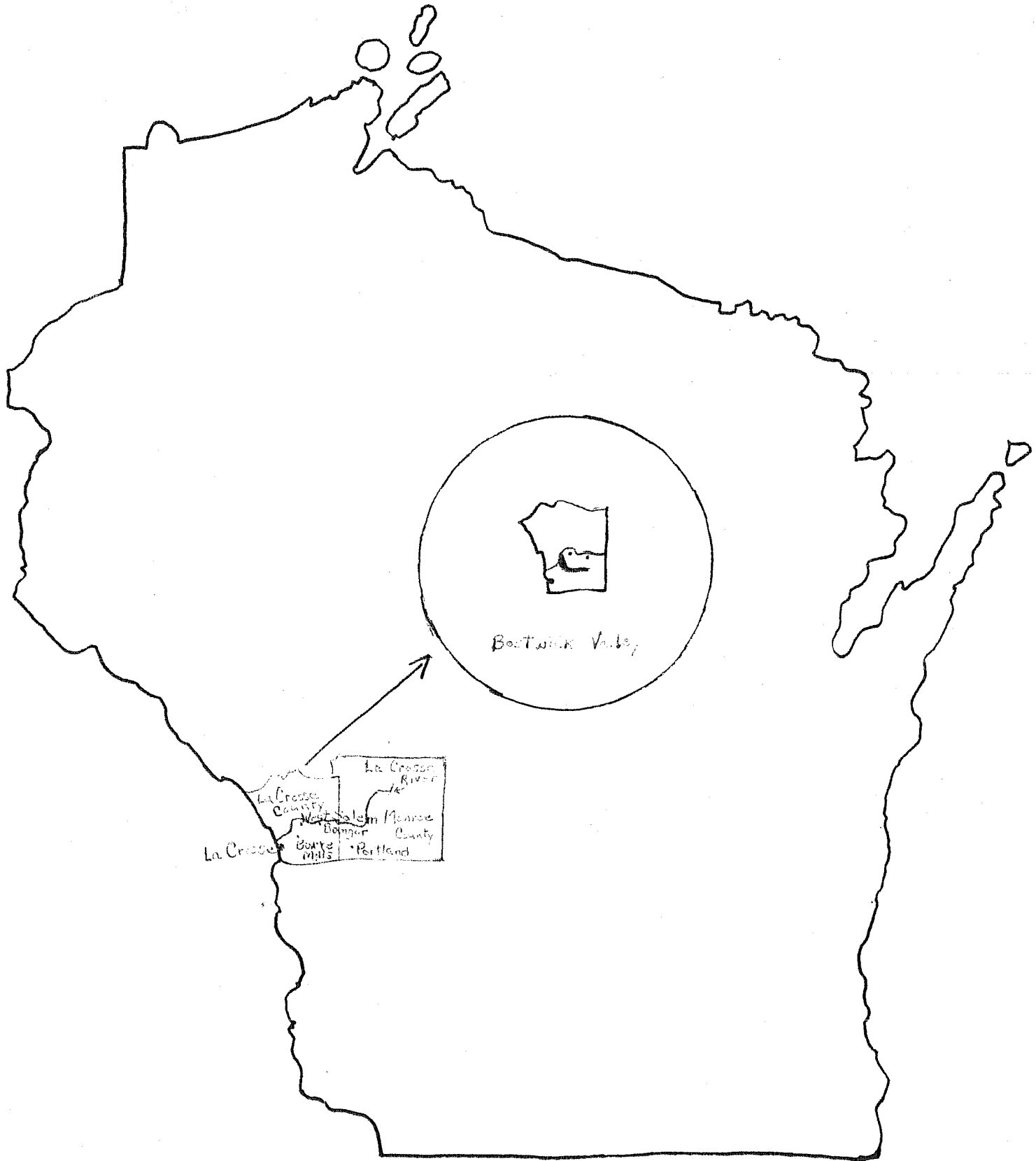
Senior Church History

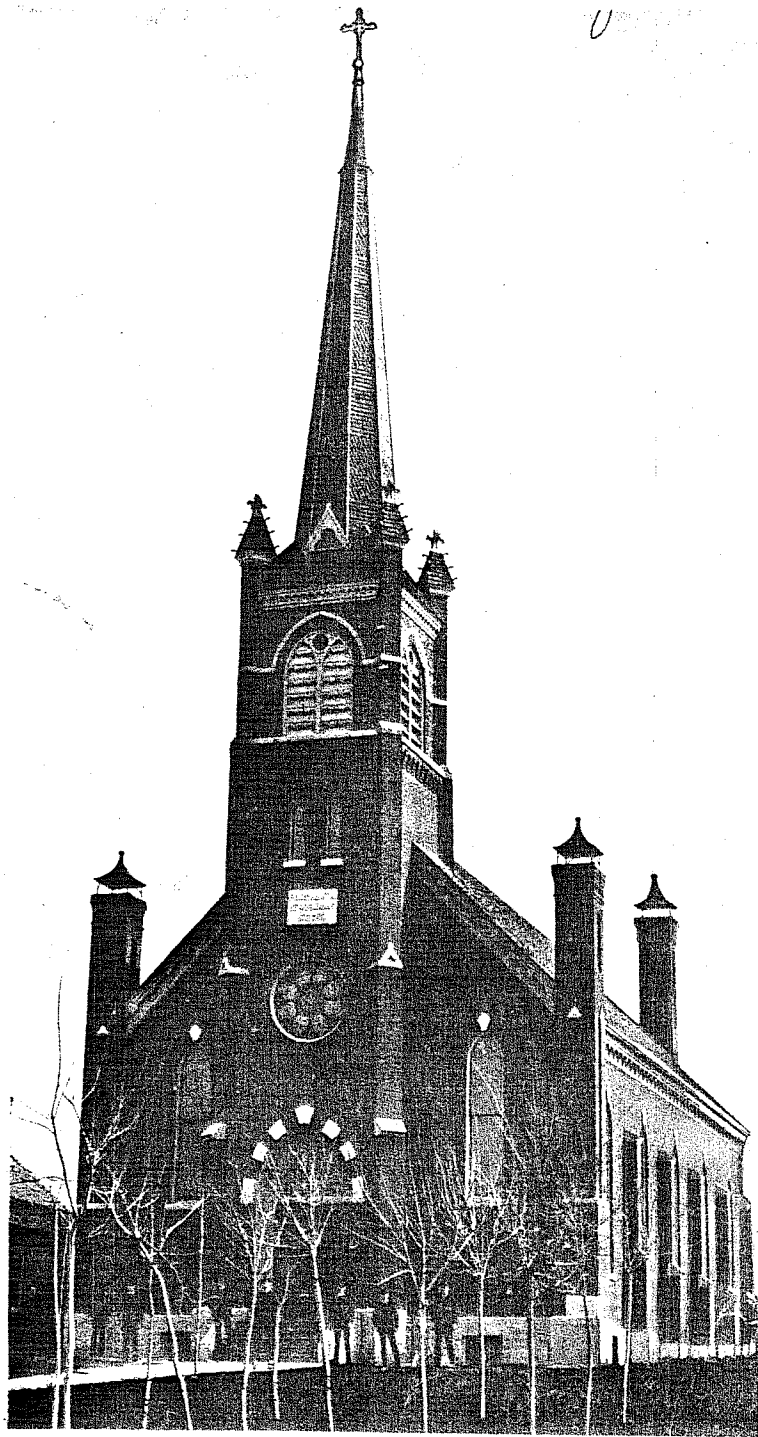
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Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library
11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W
Mequon, Wisconsin

Bostwick Valley
La Crosse County, Wisconsin





St. Johannes-Kirche.
Erbaut 1887.



WHERE FREE THINKERS ONCE MET—This brick building, now the Town of Barre Hall, was built by the Bostwick Valley movement of Free Thinkers which began in 1870 and ended in 1916.—Tribune Photo.

The year was 1850--the year after the California Gold Rush, the year ^{in which} Millard Fillmore became President of the United States. This was also the year that the Wisconsin Synod was founded in Milwaukee. Wisconsin as a state was only two years old at this time; many of her areas, especially in the North and West, were largely unsettled wilderness. Of these thousands of acres of prairie land and virgin forest our main area of concern is a small valley on the west side of the state, which lies approximately ten miles east of La Crosse. The first settlement in this area was made in May of 1850 by Martin Bostwick and his two sons, Jerome and John, natives of Vermont. When these men arrived, they plowed a furrow around several miles of land and laid claim to the whole valley; hence the name "Bostwick Valley."¹

The valley certainly appeared different then than it does now. There were no highways, no homes, no stores, and certainly there was no church steeple pointing majestically toward heaven. Already in the early 1850's this quiet and peaceful valley was referred to as "the garden spot of La Crosse County." Into Bostwick Valley there came in 1853 some rather primitive ox carts, bringing people who had only recently arrived from Hanover, Germany. "When these men reached this valley, and saw its fertility and beauty, its endless variety of hill and meadow and

woodland, its brook, and the endless springs of fine, fresh water, they seemed to sense at once that their search for a home for themselves and their children after them was over--THIS WAS HOME!"²

Even the newspaper of the day was promoting the beauty and suitability of Bostwick Valley. The May 31, 1853 edition of the La Crosse Democrat featured an interesting editorial. It told how certain "enemies" of the little village of La Crosse (with a population of 543 including four blacksmiths, six doctors, four ministers, and one barber) were trying to hinder its growth by spreading rumors that while the site chosen for the village on the river was excellent, there was a shortage of good farmland surrounding the village. In opposition to this opinion the editor wrote that the surrounding farmland was some of the best in the country, and to prove his point, he described Bostwick Valley:

"The valley is about eight miles long and varying in width from $1\frac{1}{2}$ to 5 miles, and is watered by one of the largest streams entering the La Crosse River from the south, and containing prairie and timberland, excellent springs and speckled trout. Already 22 families live here, and other men have gone to get their families... To those 'seeking homes in the West,' we would say, 'you may go much farther without finding a spot which combines so many advantages as may be found in this section.'"

Bostwick Valley, also known as Barre Mills (from the two mills erected in the 1850's on the stream forming the valley) is today a peaceful place where the pace of daily life is a bit slower than in the city. One might assume

that it has always been a quiet, peaceful area during the last 125 years. But that is not the case. A century ago there was a war going on in this valley. It was an unusual war and, at times, very bitter. A soldier entering this battle was more likely to place his soul on the line, than he was his life. The chief weapon used was words; the one side used human words of science and philosophy, while the other side used the Word of God.

In Matthew 13 Jesus told the Parable of the Wheat and the Tares. The central point of this parable is that believers and unbelievers grow side-by-side in this world until God separates them in judgment. Using that same picture of the wheat and tares growing up together, we have a picture of the struggle which took place here for nearly a half-century, roughly covering the years 1866 to 1916. Just as a wheat plant and a weed growing on the same plot of ground vie with each other for soil nutrients, moisture, and sunshine, so in Bostwick Valley, St. John's Lutheran Church and Die Freidenkerverein contended with each other for a much more precious commodity, namely human souls.

Bostwick Valley was a fertile area. In 1869 the tares were sown when the Freethinkers Society was organized. Just one year earlier the wheat was sown when 25 men met to pledge their support for the establishment of a Christian congregation, later to^{be} known as St. John's Lutheran Church. The actual organization took place on

March 2, 1870. These two groups grew up side-by-side, although they were diametrically opposed to each other in their view of God and in their view of this life. Watching how these two groups grew is an interesting study. The Freethinkers had so many people at some of their early meetings, that even all the standing room was taken.³ But two and one half decades later, by 1895, the Freethinkers society was described as "einem verschwindend kleinen Häuflein."⁴ The Freethinkers officially disbanded in June, 1916. By way of contrast, the church experienced a difficult birth and childhood, but finally matured into a healthy Christian congregation. Today, in its 106th year, and still a rural congregation, it maintains a communicant membership of just under 400.

When studying history and trying to make intelligent historical judgments, it usually becomes an analysis from a purely human point of view. This is not necessarily wrong for we see the fabric only from the underside. We don't always know what pattern the Weaver of history has chosen. We could certainly list human factors why the Freethinkers of Bostwick Valley fell into oblivion and more human factors why the church grew into a thriving Christian congregation. But let us remember that the hand of the Lord directs earthly events according to His will. The Freethinkers, as a whole, espoused a godless, humanistic, "this-world" type of philosophy which was nothing less than Satan in a new disguise. For a time the advocates of Free Thought made life miserable for a Christian in

Bostwick Valley, but in so doing the individual Christian grew in his faith and in love for his Savior. This type of persecution made St. John's a healthy church--it made many more of its members Christians by conviction, not Christians by convenience.

By way of historical development the Freethinkers originated in both Protestant and Catholic churches in Germany between 1840 and 1846. The movement was a protest against the orthodoxy which demanded that members accept without question the theological dogmas laid down by church authorities. "Those members who withdrew to organize Free Congregations insisted that an individual has the right to hold those convictions about religious truths which his study of history and science leads him to accept as reasonable and as consistent with the growing knowledge of the nature of the universe of man."⁵ When the failure of the Revolution of 1848 prompted many Germans to emigrate to the United States, some members of those Free Congregations were among them. Especially among them we find those whose political activities had resulted in their persecution by the victorious conservative forces of the government and church. In the United States the separation of church and state promised freedom from authoritarian religion and it promised the liberty to teach the principles in which the Freethinkers believed.⁶ They had had little success of uprooting the Church in Germany and they felt they would have better success in

America where the church was still small and weak.

In America, the Freethinkers might be described as well-educated and prosperous people. They felt that the True Liberty of the New World could not tolerate religious allegiance in any form. They used attractive rhetoric, in addition to sarcasm and ridicule.⁷ They insisted that supernaturalism be abandoned and that people be free to do what they wished on Sundays. The Freethinkers substituted the word "speaker" for "pastor" or "priest." Their meeting places were called halls, not churches. Instead of sermons they listened to lectures on science, history, philosophy, and literature, or they held discussions on these subjects. In 1852 there were thirty active Freethinking societies in Wisconsin, ranging from Racine to Manitowoc and westward to Oshkosh and Madison.⁸

A man by the name of Friedrich Schunemann-Pott (1811-1888) was "the leading spirit...in Freethinking religious groups among the Germans in this country." In 1848 he had been briefly imprisoned and barely escaped prison a second time by emigrating to the New World in 1854. From 1854 to 1871 he was the speaker of the Freethinkers group in Philadelphia, and in 1871 he assumed a similar post in San Francisco. Between 1868 and 1873 Schunemann-Pott made five lecture tours into southern Minnesota.⁹ On at least three of these trips he visited the Freethinkers in Bostwick Valley: on October 10, 1869, April 11, 1870, and April 2, 1871.¹⁰ In addition to his duties as national

lecturer, Schunemann-Pott was also the editor of Blaetter fuer freies religioeses Leben, which was published for 21 years.

As to what the Freethinkers actually believed, we must turn to their respective constitutions. The Freethinkers guarded very carefully the independence of the local society. The local organization was the highest authority in their governing process and there were no specific creeds which every member must accept. The constitution of the Bostwick Valley society is no longer available, but the constitutions from contemporary Freethinking groups give a good idea of the Freethinker's dogma. The Sauk City group made this statement in its constitution adopted in 1853:

We shall not profess atheism (theoretically), the denial or disbelief in the existence of a Supreme Being, but rather a practical atheism, namely: living so that we can interpret our Supreme Being as we desire and hold our own conception of immortality.

The constitution of the Milwaukee Freie Gemeinde makes this statement regarding their view of this life:

Through knowledge of his common origin, his common end and a realization of his common needs and tasks, to which we subscribe, men will eventually be able to make of this earth, which is our home, a place where ideals may grow, justice prevail, and where the good and true and beautiful may survive.

On October 7-8, 1868 Schunemann-Pott visited La Crosse and addressed the local Society of Free Men. In this lecture he contrasted the philosophy of Free Thought with the "theology of orthodoxy":

A scientific view of creation contrasted to a personal God and creator of the world.

Christ is an idea inherited from the past, the Holy Spirit is the human spirit working to greater knowledge contrasted to a doctrine of Trinity...

Interest in making the world a better place for humans to live contrasted to original sin concept and need for redemptive divine grace to enjoy eternal life in heaven.

An "I will" ethical life made from intelligent decisions contrasted to ethical life through God's commands based on fear of eternal punishment.¹¹

Not only did Freethinkers espouse godless and humanistic philosophy; they also practiced it in many of their activities. They spoke glibly of their fellowship after Thomas Paine, the French thinker. "Some had their children baptized in the name of the United States of America. Often at their gatherings they would display the cap of freedom on the top of the liberty pole. 'Freiheit ist meine!' they shouted,"¹² When it came to weddings and funerals, the Freethinkers obviously did not have a minister. A justice of the peace or a leader in the Freie Gemeinde officiated at marriages. "Funerals were non-religious with one of the Free Thinkers speaking briefly. One man requested that his friends take a walk in the woods instead of giving him any funeral ceremony."¹³

The Freethinkers were by no means idle people. Almost every local society had its own "gesangverein." Most had their own library. According to the Jahresbericht des Bundes der Freien Gemeinden und Freidenkervereine von Nordamerika, the Freethinkers of Bostwick Valley had 15 volumes

in their library in 1876, 27 volumes in 1899, and 29 volumes when the group was disbanded in 1916. Most societies were very interested in the education of their children. They had both day schools and Sunday schools. Professor H.M. Kottinger of Milwaukee wrote a book of instruction in the principles of Freien Gemeinden which was adopted in 1871 as a text for use in the congregations' Sunday schools, almost as a catechism. Its title was Leitfaden fuer den Unterricht in den Sonntags-Schulen Freier Gemeinden.

It is difficult to get a real clear picture of all the details of the wheat and tares contending with each other as they sprung up a century ago in Bostwick Valley. However by piecing together many details from many sources, we do get an idea of what this struggle was like. The Freidenker Society of Bostwick Valley was organized on January 15, 1869 with sixteen charter members and the following officers: Dietrich Sandmann, President; Hermann Sander, Secretary; and Fræd Ihlo, Treasurer.¹⁴ On October 10, 1869 Schunemann-Pott, the national Freethinker lecturer visited Bostwick Valley since the society there had just been organized. He wrote:

A simple and plain but solid farmer, Hermann Sander, had raised himself from 'a poor day laborer to a well-to-do farmer' and had organized seventeen neighbors the previous summer in a society of Free Men. Naturally they were banned by the churches.¹⁵

Schunemann-Pott seemed to be a man who had an opinion on everything. He wrote that Bostwick Valley had been settled almost exclusively by Germans (und zwar von

Plattdeutschen) who had come from Hanover. He went on to describe these immigrants and their religious beliefs:

Die meisten unter ihnen gehören noch aus alter Gewöhnung dem strengen Lutherthume an, und die benachbarten Synoden haben dafuer gesorgt, sie durch Missionaire aus der Herrmannsburger Schule in geistigem Duselei zu erhalten. Einige wenige klare Köpfe und gesunde Naturen aber haben sich durch ernste und nachhaltige Gedankenarbeit freigemacht...¹⁶

The Freethinkers were in no way secretive regarding their purpose for existence. They "vowed openly that no Christian church should ever be built in this valley. They ridiculed the Gospel and refused to have their children baptized."¹⁷ They threatened to subjugate the entire area into unbelief. To their neighbors they were "Äusserlich ehrbare Bürger, so zeigten sie sich doch als ausgesprochene Feinde des Christentums und aller Religion."¹⁸ Their leaders exerted a great deal of influence--it's too bad this zeal couldn't have been put to better use. They were well-organized in their common opposition to the preaching of the Word. In those early days they made Bostwick Valley a place unfriendly to Christ.

When the Freethinkers said that they were opposed to all religion, these were not just some idle words. In the case of Thiensville, for example, which was known as the "Paris of Wisconsin," the town managed to keep out churches until 1919 when a Catholic church was finally established.¹⁹ This same belligerent spirit was prevalent in Bostwick Valley and neither was St. John's the only victim:

A group of Norwegian Lutherans who also settled

there became discouraged when the Free Thinkers burned their church. An attempt had also been made to start a Methodist and a Presbyterian church. These groups finally pulled stakes and started their churches at West Salem, six miles to the north, where they hoped to worship in peace.²⁰

At one time Bostwick Valley had Methodists, Presbyterians, Baptists, Norwegian Lutherans, and German Lutherans, and it was only the latter group, the stubborn Germans, who stayed to fight and not yield to those enemies of Satan as the other denominations had.

Already as a young boy, this writer vaguely remembers hearing stories of how the Freethinkers used to disrupt the worship services of St. John's. In Bostwick Valley the wheat and tares grew up side-by-side, and that is to be understood literally. In 1871 the members of St. John's built on the present site their first house of worship, a plain building which had neither altar niche nor steeple. In the same year the Freethinkers built their own hall on land donated by one of their members and which lay adjacent to the church property. That hall is said to have been modeled after the church building which had just been erected, and it stood hardly more than a stone's throw away.²¹ The Freethinkers used the proximity of the buildings to their own great advantage:

It was not unusual, even as late as in the days of Reverend Siegler [1886-1904], for noisy demonstrations to take place on Sunday morning, sometimes with band music in the front of church, with the hope of disrupting the worship.²²

Because these men also controlled the town board, they never had to worry about being arrested for their acts of violence

against the church. The Freethinkers contemptuously referred to Sunday as "der Tag des Herrn." It was also one of their favorite devices to schedule dances at their hall at the same time as the church would conduct evening services.²³

These allies of Satan did not always use violence and brute force to achieve their goal. Very often they were more subtle by trying to lure young Christians away from the church. It was a great temptation for the young people of that day, not only because of the ridicule they had to endure for being loyal to Christ, but also because of the temptation to join in the many celebrations held at the "Freidenker Halle" during the year. Celebrations were traditionally held on New Year's Eve, Thomas Paine's birthday, and as spring and harvest festivals. Needless to say, these celebrations did not have the character of Sunday school picnics, but rather:

Diese Feiern entwickelten sich dann regelmässig zu rechten Orgien der ausgelassensten Fleischeslust, wobei die ganze Nacht getanzt und der Schwelgerei mit unmässigem Trinken gehuldigt wurde. Es war ein wuestes Leben und Treiben, zu dem oft viel Volks auch aus Nachbarorten zusammenlief.²⁴

A former member of the congregation recalled that as a boy he would occasionally enter the then-abandoned Freethinker Hall and find piles and piles of empty liquor bottles hidden under the stage.

The Freethinkers were generally well-educated people. To maintain this academic level, they provided educational opportunities for themselves and their children. Generally they held a meeting every other Sunday for speakers and

discussion groups. Several times during the year they would invite well-known lecturers: "...es wurden auch die berüchtigsten Freidenkerredner des Landes eingeladen, um Reden zu halten gegen das Christentum und Propaganda zu machen fuer den krassesten Unglauben."²⁵ On October 10, 1869 Schunemann-Pott was the guest lecturer who spoke on the important distinction between reason and revelation.²⁶ In his "Geschichte" for the congregation's 50th anniversary, Pastor J.H. Paustian disparagingly remarks that these people and their children naturally grew up without any knowledge of the saving Gospel. Furthermore he says, they bought Freethinkers' books and newspapers and placed more trust in them than in the Bible.

The Freethinkers' children were also well-educated. The "Redner" conducted the bi-monthly assemblies and was also the teacher in the school. In 1876 Maxmillan Gross was the speaker who had a school of 12 students meeting three times a week. Pastor Paustian also laments the fact that these children were taught the long obsolete theory of Darwin "dass der Mensch nicht von Gott geschaffen sei, sondern vom Affen abstamme."²⁷ According to the Jahresbericht the Freethinkers in 1899 were conducting a German school for two to three months during the summer with an enrollment of 20 students. The enrollment gradually dropped, until in 1905 the school closed entirely because of the lack of children.

In April of 1871 Schunemann-Pott made his final ap-

pearance in Bostwick Valley "where I had the joy to be able to dedicate the Freethinker Hall which the wide-awake farmers of the valley had built amid their flourishing farms."²⁸ This hall was built of the same brick as the first church. Prior to this time both the congregation and the Verein used the same schoolhouse on section 26 as their meeting place.²⁹

When Schunemann-Pott talks about his reception by the people of Bostwick Valley, we certainly must give him credit for being an optimist. Regarding his visit on Sunday, October 10, 1869 he wrote: "The building was filled to the last standing place, and seldom have I found an audience which listened to my words with equal eagerness." On this occasion he spoke of the distinction between reason and revelation and commented concerning his listeners: "und eine Freude war es, zu sehen, wie das in solcher Art zum ersten Male Gehörte in die offenen Seelen der schlichten Landleute einschlug. Nicht wenige unter ihnen werden fortan fuer die Kirche verloren sein."³⁰

Regarding his visit the following spring (April 11, 1870) the lecturer writes:

Herr Sandmann, one of the valiant farmers from Bostwick Valley called for me...he said that the members do not mind the loud outcries of their believing neighbors...the Sunday meeting in a schoolhouse in pleasant weather brought a stream of persons on foot, by wagon, on horseback from all sides...out of five-mile distant Bangor alone came 22 men and an hour later when I began to speak, the schoolhouse could not hold the crowd of listeners."³¹

His reception appeared equally encouraging on this

occasion:

Wie ihr Ackerland den Sommerregen einsaugt in
dürerer Zeit, so schienen sich ihre empfänglichen
Seelen fuer die Anregungen der neuen Gedankenwelt,
die ich ihnen zu vermitteln suchte, zu öffnen...³²

Why did so many people come to hear Schunemann-Pott?

Is it fair to assume that so many people were leaning in the direction of Free Thought and that Christianity was dying out? That is hardly a fair judgment. Certainly every lecturer wants to think that he is an inspiring speaker. We are never told in numbers how large those audiences were. Undoubtedly the little country schoolhouse was not such a large building. Also this man coming to Bostwick Valley was a national figure among Freethinkers-- he was the President Ford visiting Campbellsport. We know that Freethinkers came from La Crosse, West Salem, Bangor, and other surrounding communities to hear him. I am ~~not trying to belittle their evil influence but am~~ merely striving for historical accuracy. I think it is a fair assumption that many of those people present came merely out of curiosity. Some, perhaps, were pious Christians who wanted to know and recognize their satanic enemy. Furthermore to hear such a lecture espousing such liberal views was a novelty--a new freedom in the New Land. In the Old Country no one was allowed to say such radical things.

For more than two decades beginning in the late 1860's the Bostwick Valley Freethinkers presented a strong united front against Christianity. Consider these facts:

1) Prior to the organization of St. John's in 1870,

Pastor W. Hass (from the Town of Greenfield and later from the Town of Hamburg) served the Lutherans in the Valley:

"Auch Pastor Hass fuhr unbeirrt fort, Gottes Wort zu predigen, obwohl er manchen Spott darueber zu erdulden hatte."³³

2) On the same Sunday afternoon as Schunemann-Pott's lecture in April, 1870 we are told:

Als um drei Uhr der evangelisch-lutherische Pastor des Bezirkes an derselben Stelle, von der ich gesprochen hatte, erschien, um vor zum grössten Theile leer gewordenen Bänken sein Evangelium zu verkünden, da mag er sich denn doch wohl im Stillen gesagt haben, dass die Tage der ungestörten Alleinherrschaft des alten Glaubens auch in diesem Thale gezählt sind.³⁴

3) "Noch im Jahre 1886, als Pastor Siegler seine Wirksamkeit in der St. Johannes-Gemeinde begann, war dieser Verein in voller Blüte."³⁵ These were dark days for the small band of Lutheran Christians in Bostwick Valley. The Freidenkerverein seemed to completely overshadow the church in those early decades. The society's leaders were well educated, and they looked down on the church members who usually had less education. They openly ridiculed the church, its pastor, and its members--and they got away with it. It seemed like the tares were flourishing, while the wheat remained small and weak.

But God's goodness and guiding hand were no to be doubted. Just as God sends affliction into a Christian's life to strengthen his faith, so affliction made St. John's a strong congregation. The ridicule which these faithful

Christians had to endure for the sake of the Gospel helped them to love that Gospel and their Lord all the more.

These were not such dark days after all. Satan was by no means winning an easy victory in Bostwick Valley. A brief history of the congregation will show that God was indeed blessing His faithful followers. They were strengthened by His Word and Sacrament and were not afraid to take bold steps to proclaim openly the life-giving Gospel.

Already in 1859 the staunch Lutheran pioneers were requesting Pastor Fachtmann of La Crosse to conduct services in their homes, at first monthly, then bi-monthly. Five years later Pastor W. Hass came from his congregation, St. John's, Town of Greenfield, to conduct services in the schoolhouse. He was able to gather about 30 people. Concerning his part-time ministry in Bostwick Valley we are told: "Die wenigen, welche damals an ihrem Glauben festhielten, fanden Stärkung durch den sel. P. Hass, welcher oftmal über die Berge gepilgert kam, um durch Wort und Sakrament zu stärken, was da sterben wollte."³⁶ On March 2, 1870 St. John's Lutheran Church was duly organized in the home of Conrad Miller with 35 charter members. Most of the names on the first membership list are still found on the congregational roster today. In 1872 St. John's affiliated with the Wisconsin Synod. The Freethinkers predicted a quick end for the church, but ironically enough, it was the church that was finally to disarm these allies of Satan some 20 years later.

Even though St. John's was not large numerically, these people supported the work of the church with marked enthusiasm. In 1871 the first church was built for \$1250.00, and in 1873 the first parsonage was built. In that same year the congregation voted to become self-supporting and called Pastor A. Dagefoerde as the first resident pastor. He served until 1877 when Pastor Peter Lange was called as the second resident pastor.

By God's grace the fledgling congregation grew. By 1887 the congregation of 108 members had grown too large for the small church, and the members joyfully decided to build a new house of worship. We can visualize the zeal of these faithful Christians when we read that in one day \$4,000 was brought for the new church. One member, Fred Sprehn, gave \$500 for a beautiful 2,300 pound bell which is still heard today. Their enthusiasm for a new house of worship was apparent when:

The valley became a bee hive of activity that winter. Stones were hauled from the hills south of the church, other members hauled lumber from La Crosse and bricks from State Road Coulee and old-timers still recall the friendly competition which arose over the number of bricks that could be brought on a load... June 5th already saw the laying of the corner stone. November 13th was the dedication date of the fine new building...the actual cost of their church was about \$10,000.00 while the building was already then valued at about \$30,000.00.³⁷

In 1886 the young congregation was richly blessed by receiving a new pastor, Richard Siegler. He was a talented young man, motivated by the Gospel and full of ambition. Pastor Siegler was to serve St. John's for nearly a quarter

century, and it was he who bore the brunt of the opposition from the Freethinkers. He was an energetic man. In 1887 he was a member of the building committee for the new church, he established the Sunday School, and he organized the Mixed and Male Choirs. In April of that same year he began to conduct services on Sunday afternoons at West Salem, and in 1888 he started services at Bangor. With less regularity he also held services at Portland, which is near Cashton. The church which was to come to a quick end would eventually have three daughter congregations.

During his pastorate Pastor Siegler obviously had many, many confrontations with the Freethinkers. Because the area was, and still is, rural, the members of the congregation and the members of the Verein knew each other quite well. Being neighboring farmers they would help each other erect buildings and plant and harvest crops. Pastor Siegler's weapon for dealing with the Freethinkers was personal, individual contact. He would be invited to a member's home for a meal and there he'd meet a Freethinking neighbor. Being a pleasant person and a gentleman aided him in making converts.³⁸

The number of pastoral acts conducted during these years indicates that the church was indeed growing and thriving. From 1887-1900 thirty-seven Baptisms, on the average, were performed every year. (Although the exact membership of the Freethinkers cannot be ascertained during those years, it is doubtful that they had more than 40 members.

Therefore every year there were as many children baptized as there were Freethinkers.) In 1888 Pastor Siegler performed a record-number of Baptisms--46 children. In 1898 he confirmed the largest class ever--40 pupils. By way of contrast today's confirmation classes range from three to twelve pupils.

From the earliest years the members of St. John's were deeply concerned about the education of their children. The Freethinkers helped the young congregation to see the urgent need for Christian education. If their children were not firmly rooted in God's Word, they could, in their teen and early adult years, be an easy prey for the worldly and godless lifestyle offered by the Freethinkers. Already in 1871, when the congregation was only a year old, classes were held for the children on Sunday afternoons. In the first pastor's call was a specific provision that he was to teach the children a number of months each year in a confirmation school.

By 1886 when Pastor Siegler came, there was much talk about establishing a Christian day school. There were enough children for a school by that time, but some members opposed the idea because the homes were too widely scattered to make such a school practical or even possible. Therefore 23 members organized a "Schulverein" and established a Christian Day School in which all the learning was to be done in the light of God's Word. Within less than a year the blessings of such a school became apparent,

and the congregation voted to take over the operation of the school. At this same time another bold step was taken. English was introduced and was to be used along with the German on a trial basis in the school. They were still German Lutherans, but at the same time they were realistic enough to realize that English was the mother tongue of America.

In 1890, just three years after the new church was built, the members of St. John's decided that they needed a new school. Once again the congregation actively supported the cause of Christian education: "Die Kosten fuer den ganzen Bau betruagen gegen 1200 Dollars, die zum grossen Theil durch freiwillige Beitrage der Gemeinde-Glieder gedeckt sind."³⁹ The interior of this new school was furnished with "die neuen Patentsitze," which could comfortably seat nearly 100 children, and with "die trefflichen neuen Schulkarten." The description of this new educational facility ends with the statement: "Fuer unsere Kinder ist nur das Beste gut genug."⁴⁰ During the last years of the 19th Century the enrollment of the school hovered between 90 and 100 students. For a few years the congregation called an assistant teacher. The parents of the congregation made every effort to bring up their children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord.

If one were to visit Bostwick Valley today, he would readily see what has happened to the wheat and the tares. The old Freidenker Halle still stands--but for more than a

half century it has served as the town hall for the Town of Barre. St. John's, built in 1887, with its high steeple rising majestically over the surrounding countryside, still stands also. The residents of Bostwick Valley today know little or nothing about the "Freidenkerverein," but most of them are well acquainted with St. John's.

What happened to the Freethinkers can be summarized by this statement from the 1916 edition of the Jahresbericht: "Der Freidenkerverein in Bostwick Valley bei La Crosse löste sich am 25. Juni 1916 auf, nachdem er in den letzten Jahren nur noch künstlich vegetiert hatte." The statistics of the Jahresbericht show a gradual decline in membership for the verein, and finally in 1914 there were only 20 members, half of whom were women. The appearances of guest lecturers gradually diminished. The last lecturer recorded was a Dr. Wm. Rahn of Milwaukee in 1908. Financial difficulties have often been cited as the reason for the dissolution of the Freethinkers of Bostwick Valley in 1916.

Why did the Freidenkerverein disband in the second decade of the new century? Perhaps a more pertinent question would be: Why did the Freethinkers of Bostwick Valley last as long as they did? Of the 30 Free Thought groups in Wisconsin in 1852, only four were still in existence by 1900. Humanly speaking many reasons can be given for the society's eventual demise. There was inter-marriage between Freethinking families and Christian families. The Freethinkers put a great deal of emphasis on maintaining the German language and culture. (The

Sauk City Freie Gemeinde did not adopt English for its meetings and records until 1937.) They wanted to maintain their German-heritage in the New Land. But second generation German-Americans did not share this same love and zeal for the German which their parents had. Also this generation had lived all its life under American democracy, and they did not know what it was like not to have freedom of speech and freedom of religion. Since they had never lived without these American ideals, they did not appreciate them as their parents did. Generally, the Freethinking movement was a flash-in-the-pan reaction to the political and religious suppression which these immigrants had experienced in Germany. After a few decades the zeal, the leadership, and the money were no longer there to keep the movement alive. Up until the early 1890's the Freidenkerverein of Bostwick Valley was a force to be reckoned with, but by 1895 it was described as a vanishing small group. During the last two decades it was little more than a social organization. Its last few years were only a stubborn hold on a token existence.

On the national level, a contributing factor for the disbanding of many Freethinking groups was the growing liberalism of some orthodox churches which gave less ground for objection to their principles. In Bostwick Valley just the opposite happened. There was no growing liberalism in the orthodox church--no watering-down of the Word. This is one reason why I feel the Verein remained in

existence for so long after other Wisconsin societies had folded. If a person wanted to retain such liberal views, that was the only place for him.

The Bostwick Valley Freidenkerverein closed down because of the Word of God. As the society's members gradually came into contact with the church and its doctrine, some of them were won over for the church. They were instructed, baptized, and became faithful members of the congregation.⁴¹ That big, beautiful church of 1887 must have been an ugly reminder to every Freethinker. Even though the struggle was far from over, it was clear which side God was blessing. Every time that big bell tolled, it was, in effect, the death knell of the Freidenkerverein. When the new school was built three years later, the Freethinkers lost another major struggle. Their power had definitely weakened. Perhaps it is symbolic that the old Freidenker Halle was a low building with no steeple, setting on the floor of the valley. The things taught there dealt only with this life and led people down the broad road to destruction. By way of contrast the church stands on a hill, and its high steeple points toward heaven. There faithful pastors taught the way of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. There faithful shepherds instructed the flock with these words: "Let both grow together until the harvest: and in the time of harvest I will say to the reapers, 'Gather ye together first the tares, and bind them in bundles to burn them: but gather the wheat into my barn.'"

There the flock was comforted with Jesus' promise: "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world."

NOTES

¹History of La Crosse County, Western Historical Co., 1881, p.709.

²H.E. Paustian, 85th Anniversary booklet of St. John's Lutheran Church, Barre Mills, Wisconsin, 1955, p.2.

³Friedrick Schunemann-Pott, "Reisebericht," Blaetter fuer freies religioeses Leben, Vol. 14 (1870), p.107.

⁴"Jubiläum der St. Johannis-Gemeinde in Barre Mills, Wisconsin," Evangelisch-Lutherisches Gemeinde-Blatt, Vol. 30 (June 15, 1895), p.95.

⁵Wm. Schaefer (ed.), Die Freireligiöse Bewegung Wesen und Auftrag, Mainz, 1959, p.40.

⁶Max Hempel, Was Sind die Freien Gemeinden?, Milwaukee, 1902, p.9.

⁷"Memoirs of Wm. George Bruce," Wisconsin Magazine of History, Vol. 17, (September, 1933), p.5.

⁸Berenice Cooper, "Die Freien Gemeinden In Wisconsin," Wisconsin Academy of Science, Arts, and Letters, Vol. 53, (1964), p.53.

⁹Berenice Cooper, Minnesota History, Vol 41, (Summer, 1968), p.54.

¹⁰James O. Hulmlund, "Free Thinkers' Day In La Crosse," The La Crosse Tribune, September 20, 1964, p.7.

¹¹Ibid., p.7.

¹²Fred Holmes, Old World Wisconsin, Eau Claire: E.M. Hale & Co., 1944, p.60.

¹³Cooper, "Die Freien Gemeinden...", op. cit., p.63.

¹⁴History of La Crosse County, op. cit., p.711.

- 15 Quoted by Hulmlund, op. cit., p.7.
- 16 Schunemann-Pott, op. cit., p.106.
- 17 H.E. Paustian, op. cit., p.5.
- 18 J.H. Paustian, Kurzgefatzte Geschichte der Evangelisch-Lutherisches St. Johannes-Gemeinde 1870-1920, p.9.
- 19 Cooper, "Die Freien Gemeinden...", op. cit., p.63.
- 20 "The Turbulent Background of St. John's Lutheran Church," The Lutheran Journal, (Fall, 1968), p.9.
- 21 H.E. Paustian, op. cit., p.5.
- 22 H.E. Paustian, op. cit., p.5.
- 23 Personal letter from Rev. Louis Meyer, Sr., a son of the congregation.
- 24 J.H. Paustian, op. cit., p.10.
- 25 J.H. Paustian, "Kirchweihe," Evangelisch-Lutherisches Gemeinde-Blatt, Vol. 55 (October 24, 1920), p.345.
- 26 Schunemann-Pott, op. cit., p.107.
- 27 J.H. Paustian, Geschichte..., op. cit., p.10.
- 28 Quoted by Hulmlund, op. cit., p.7.
- 29 History of La Crosse County, op. cit., p.711.
- 30 Schunemann-Pott, op. cit., p.179.
- 31 Quoted by Hulmlund, op. cit., p.7.
- 32 Schunemann-Pott, op. cit., p.179.
- 33 J.H. Paustian, Geschichte..., op. cit., p.10.
- 34 Schunemann-Pott, op. cit., p.179.
- 35 J.H. Paustian, Geschichte..., op. cit., p.10.
- 36 Gemeinde-Blatt, Vol. 30, op. cit., p.95.
- 37 H.E. Paustian, op. cit., p.7.
- 38 Personal recollection of Mrs. C.W. Siegler, whose husband was a nephew of Pastor R. Siegler.

³⁹"Schulweihe," Evangelisch-Lutherisches Gemeinde-Blatt, Vol. 26 (December 1, 1890), p. 55.

⁴⁰Ibid., p.55.

⁴¹J.H. Paustian, Geschichte..., op. cit., p.22.

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