

A CHURCH BEGINS IN A FRONTIER COMMUNITY:

The Founding of First Eve.

Lutheran Church

in the

La Crosse of the 1850's

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11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W
Mequon, Wisconsin

by Tom Schnick
Senior Church History

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Prof. Fredrich

The early years of the history of the Wisconsin Synod are a familiar story to most of us. It is the story of German settlement along the western shores of Lake Michigan and of close ties with the German mission societies across the sea. It is the story of careful and skilled leadership from such men as President Muehlhaeuser and President Bading, who helped to steer us through the troubles of those early days toward a stance of confessional Lutheranism. It is the story of the founding of a training school and seminary at Watertown and the story of how we cut the ties with the German mission societies and grew. But even before we established Northwestern, before we were working in more than a small handful of towns on the eastern part of the State of Wisconsin, God was sewing the seeds for expansion along the western border, along the Mississippi River, in the small village of Prairie La Crosse.

This expansion was officially declared in the spring of 1859, when a small group of German men dedicated to the Gospel message met in the brick schoolhouse in the newly incorporated town of La Crosse and signed the first constitution of what is now First

Evangelical Lutheran Church. From its inception, the oldest Lutheran congregation on the western border of the state was a member of the Wisconsin Synod, the farthest boundary of the Synod's outreach in the west. But already from the early 1850's, almost a decade before the Civil War, during the very first years of the Wisconsin Synod itself, Lutheran settlement in the La Crosse area was already beginning. The German Lutherans began to settle in the area of the Mississippi River Valley right along with the earliest pioneers in the area. In fact, these early years of the 1850's when the Lord was busy planting the seeds of First Lutheran congregation. are really a story of pioneer settlers in a frontier town. What kind of people were these early German settlers? Into what kind of a frontier society had the Lord placed them in the 1850's? What kind of religious climate prevailed in this early community, and what kind of spiritual pressures did this small group of confessional Lutherans face? How did these Germans in the end stand up for truth in this frontier setting? And finally, what kind of a reaction did their stance receive from within the community as a whole?

I. Background

Western Wisconsin was largely unsettled territory until the

1840's. All who have visited the Villa Louis in Prairie du Chien are acquainted with the fur trapper Hercules Dousman and the first settlement in the southwestern part of Wisconsin. This was the era of the trappers, traders with the Indians, and Army outposts. But within two decades, the settlement of Hercules Dousman would take second place to a thriving community thirty miles up the Mississippi at Prairie La Crosse. Already in the fall of 1841, a young trader from the East named Nathan Myrick headed upstream with Eben Weld and established a trading post on what is now Pettibone Island at the base of La Crosse's present Mississippi River bridge. They soon found this spot to be ideal, for the Indians had long used the river bottoms as a central meeting area. Within two years, Myrick and Weld had moved across the channel to what is today First Street, the street along the river. Several other traders joined them, and by 1843 a small enclave of buildings had sprung up. As Nathan Myrick's journals testify, this settlement of the 1840's could hardly be considered a civilized community in the strict sense of the word.¹ It was not until the next decade that families would begin settling permanently in the Coulee Region. Besides traders and trappers, the only other significant development in this part of the state was the rapidly growing lumber industry.²

The first German Lutheran settler in La Crosse was Mrs. Augusta Levy, who arrived with her husband, John M. Levy, in 1846. Mrs. Levy records in her memoirs that there were only five homes in the La Crosse trading community in 1846. Two years later, the trading post was to suffer a major setback when Nathan Myrick left the area for good on account of his poor health. As a result, the community never really grew for the rest of the decade. According to Mr. F.M. Rublee, who settled in La Crosse in 1851, there were still no more than five homes in the area in April of that year. However, when a young lawyer named Harvey Hubbard came to the area in July of the same year, he found eight homes were in use. But the summer of 1851 proved to be a major turning point. Mrs. Levy states how from this time onward through the decade ..." settlers came in with a rush." ³

II. Growth in the 1850's

Both La Crosse County and the Town of La Crosse were organized in 1851. From the summer of 1851 to the latter part of 1853 the number of heads of household jumped from five to 30⁴. We have an interesting picture of conditions within the community in a twenty-eight page booklet written by a Baptist minister, Spencer Carr. Rev. Carr's pamphlet, entitled "A Brief Sketch of La Crosse Wisc'n", was completed by November 1853, but was not actually published until the

following June. Rev. Carr's booklet is noteworthy here for two reasons. Not only does he informally count the population of the area in late 1853, but he also breaks down the population into households by name, giving the religious affiliation of each family. According to Carr's statistics, there were a total of 745 people in the community at this time, including single men and women and all of the children. He lists the following religious affiliations:

Baptist	Unitarian	Friend Quaker
Roman Catholic	Methodist	Seceder
Swedenborgian	Adventist	United Brethren
Lutheran	Dutch Reformed	Disciples 4
Episcopalian	Free Will Baptist	
Presbyterian	Christian	

There are a total of twenty-nine Lutherans listed on Carr's chart. Eighteen of these people are from Scandanavian countries; eleven are from Germany originally. Those German settlers are as follows:

John B. & Rebekah Behlouer	Berbera Sharp
Theodore & Elizabeth Frederick	John & Charlotte Shoemaker
Frederica Levy (listed as John M. Levy's wife, though the first name is probably inaccurate)	Sebastian Shenk
	Christian & Dora Thili 5

These eleven people either joined other church bodies by 1859 or moved away from the La Crosse area, for none of their names grace the early records of First Lutheran congregation.

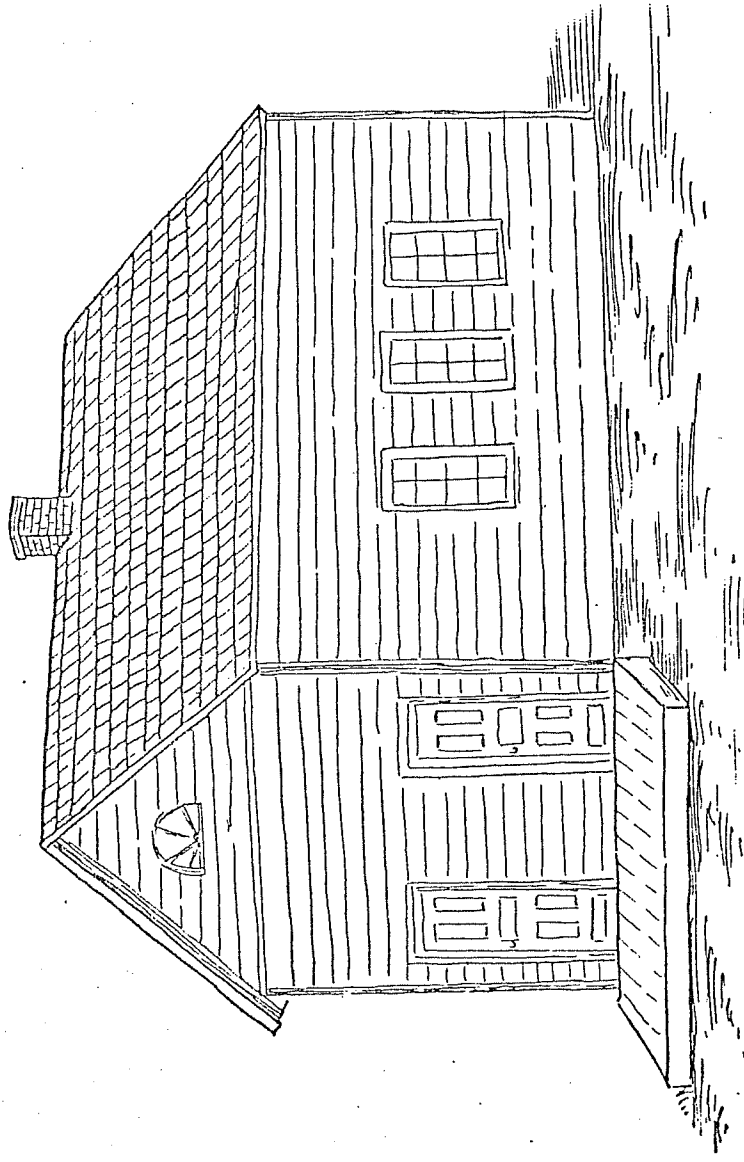
Rev. Carr does not tell us whether these people came directly to Wisconsin as a result of the tumultuous conditions in Germany after 1848, or whether they had already settled in the eastern United States

years, or even generations before. But wherever they were from, there is evidence that many attempted to blend in with whatever church bodies that came along to service the developing society. This is no doubt what happened to Mrs. Levy, for example. Already in 1850 her husband hosted an afternoon church service when the traveling Episcopal missionary J. Lloyd Beck passed through the area on June 23rd on his way to St. Paul. The next day, Rev. Beck administered communion to four Germans.⁶ So seven years later when Christ's Episcopal Church was organized on January 21st, and when John Levy was present and became a charter member and first treasurer of the group, Mrs. Levy also blended in becoming an Episcopalian. The early Germans faced the lure of the heterodox.

This lure was compounded by the unionistic climate of the early religious community. In 1851 the first Sunday school was organized. It was called Union Sunday School, and it continued to exist even after several denominations had organized. The spirit of frontier cooperation was the prevailing wind also among the first organized church bodies, those of the Baptists and the Congregationalists. They were even formed together! On January 22nd in the home of S.T. Smith, both the Baptists and the Congregationalists met. After the two ministers, Elder Card and Rev. Sherwin, shook hands the Baptists then the Congregationalists were formed.⁷ The two ministers

reportedly "...went hand in hand through our streets. They used to be called Peter and John." Another report states, "Sectarian feelings and differences are not known among us; but all seem to unite their efforts for the advancement of true religion and the conversion of souls." ⁸

Though these were the first two organized churches in the community, Methodist influences were around even before. In fact, the earliest recorded sermon was preached by Rev. R. R. Wood, a circuit rider from the Black River Falls area, in June of 1848. He stood on the banks of the Mississippi and preached to eight or ten people who were waiting for a riverboat. He preached, "I thought on thy ways and turned my feet unto thy testimonies. I made haste and delayed not to keep thy commandments"(Ps. 119:59-60), but before he had finished his sermon a whistle blew and his "congregation" headed for the boat dock.⁹ Undaunted, the Methodists returned. In 1851 the Methodist Missionary for the La Crosse district, Rev. George Chester, preached several times. An English-speaking Methodist church was officially founded in September of 1853.¹⁰ Spencer Carr records that this group had nearly completed "a commodious house of worship" by 1853-1854.¹¹ It was this building that First Lutheran purchased for \$125 in April of 1860 and used as its first worship facility. (see the enclosed sketch on the following page)



Erste Luth. Kirche
diente als Kirche und Schule von 1859—1869 und als Schule bis 1880

For the most part all of the churches mentioned thus far relate almost exclusively to the English speaking community. But the spirit of frontier unity also prevailed in the developing German speaking settlers. This spirit was typified best in the tenacious German Methodistic thrust in the early and middle part of the 1850's. During this period, German Methodist missionaries had missions in many rural areas east of La Crosse. As early as 1856 one such man, Carl Leipprant, was sent to organize a mission in the city proper. The result of his labors was the founding of the German Methodist Episcopal Society of La Crosse the following year. It was not until 1858, however, that this organization actually picked up steam under the jurisdiction of the Rev. P. Schaefer, their first real resident minister. Leadership again switched hands when in the fall of 1859 William Schreiner was appointed in charge of the mission.¹² As the first German speaking group to worship in the community, this Methodist congregation presented a real thorn in the flesh to any true Lutheran who desired to worship with his family in La Crosse. Though this group was prevented from building a church of their own until after the Civil War, their regular spirited meetings in members' homes proved to be one of the greatest heterodox foils which the German Lutherans had to face before they themselves organized in 1859.

The only other church body to organize in the La Crosse area before

1860 was the Roman Catholic Church. In May of 1853 an announcement appeared in the English language newspaper, the La Crosse Democrat, that services would be held on May 29th in the home of Mr. James Gallagher. The first regularly scheduled services did not begin until August 24th, 1855, however. A church was built almost immediately. It was completed and first used in 1856. At this same time, St. Rose Convent was established.¹³

There were other influences which tugged at the spiritual roots of the German Lutherans who chose to settle in the La Crosse area during these years. Two of the most noteworthy are the Lodges and the active Turnverein. Spencer Carr records that the Masonic Lodge was established in October of 1852 with eight members. By 1854 there were already thirty-four members. The I.O.O.F. Lodge also began early, in August of 1853 with seven members. A year later its membership had grown to forty-eight. Anyone connected with First Lutheran congregation knows that the active area lodges have always menaced the German Lutherans of the community, being responsible, in fact, for the worst ripples of discord in the congregation's later history. It is with sadness that we have to report that two names of early congregational members also appear in the membership lists of La Crosse's first Lodges.¹⁴

The German Turnverein was another source of potential compromise for the confessional Lutheran immigrant. Organized in 1855, the

the Turnverein not only provided facilities for physical exercise; it also provided a social forum for the discussion of political and economic problems. It was the daily soapbox of the German liberal. Coupled with the Mannerchor which was founded the next year, this organization served as the major social center for the Germans of the community.¹⁵ In this frontier setting and without a church body of his own to call home, the German Lutheran was a stranger in a strange land. Along with the German Methodist mission and the Lodge, the Turnverein was the third great place for him to turn for a sense of community. But here he would find even the Freethinker with which to contend, a man opposed in principle to all orthodoxy. And these Freethinkers were around early and in good supply in the city.

III. Beginnings of the German Lutheran Church

From 1854 to 1860, the population of La Crosse increased by about 750 people every year. In 1854 there were about 700 people. The next year there were over 1,600. In the next year, 1856, La Crosse was incorporated as a city. In 1858 the railroad was completed from Milwaukee (although it was already eagerly awaited in the city since 1853). By 1860, the population of the city had increased to approximately 4,000.¹⁶

From Spencer Carr's statistics of 1854, we can safely assume that all of the first families of the German Lutheran church arrived in La Crosse and settled between 1854 and 1859. During this five year period,

the city was literally a boom town. Moving to La Crosse then would be somewhat analogous to a situation today such as a Lutheran family who had belonged to an established congregation in Milwaukee for generations moving to a remote boom town in Alaska. Only back then, it was worse. In July of 1857, for example, a large crowd of citizens gathered in the square and formed a vigilante group because they had had enough of the thugs and the thieves and the prostitutes in their frontier town. They set fire to two houses of ill repute and threatened more violence. There were frequent street fights in this river stopover town along the hotels next to the river. There were also a few murders. 17

Who were those first German Lutherans whom God planted in this setting to be the first families of the Lutheran church? Their names are easily found on congregational records, but what is known about them and about the circumstances of their arrival(s) to La Crosse is not easy to determine. The facts that we do know establish that there was no single group of settlers who came from a single area of Germany and settled directly in the city of La Crosse. (There do seem to be quite a few Wuerttembergers, which we can identify, though.) Many did not come from Germany, directly. They moved west with the frontier. Galena was a favorite point from which to catch a boat to La Crosse, as in Friedrich Refuss' case.

Friedrich Refuss was a butcher who moved to La Crosse in 1856. Born in 1826 in Wuerttemberg, he first came to the United States sometime between

1848 and 1852. He lived in both Cincinnati and Indianapolis before coming to La Crosse. He met his wife Barbara in Indianapolis in 1853. After they were married, he took his young wife along with all of his goods and set out westward in a covered wagon. They stopped at Galena, Illinois long enough to sell the wagon and book passage on a steamboat to La Crosse. Friedrich found work there in 1856 in the butcher shop of Shimmins and French. Eventually he purchased his own place, and began working for himself. On April 6, 1859 Friedrich Refuss attended a meeting of Germans who were protesting against the methodistic services in town and thus became a part of the group of men who formed the first constitution of First Lutheran congregation.¹⁸

Franz Metz settled in La Crosse in much the same way. Born in Germany in 1823, he emigrated in 1847 to Schenectady, N.Y. and lived there for two years. In 1849 he came to Wisconsin. After having lived in Milwaukee for three years, Metz moved to Racine. After living in Racine, he moved to Janesville, where he lived for eighteen months. In 1854 Metz settled in La Crosse with his wife Christina (Betz) whom he had met back in Milwaukee. Franz Metz worked as a tailor in La Crosse for a total of eighteen years, after which time he was entrusted to the administration of the City Poor House. Metz was also among those men involved with the establishment of the German Lutheran church in 1859.¹⁹

But many years have passed, and the details are sketchy about the

other founders of the congregation. We know, for example, that another founder, Friedrich Voigt, started his wagon and carriage business in La Crosse already in 1855, but how he and his family came to the area is simply not known.²⁰ Similarly, what became of many of these men is also not easy to determine. We know, for example that at least one founder, H. Schroeder, served in the La Crosse militia during the Civil War because his name is recorded on the area Roster of Volunteers.²¹ Whether or not he ever returned, we just do not know.

Another interesting observation is that there were German settlers living in La Crosse by 1859 who were not present at the first meetings, who did not belong to the congregation from the start, but who later joined and became active in the congregation. We find three such examples on the building committee for the first church building project in 1866, A. Dittman, F. Kroner, and G. Heilemann.²² Dittman, a native of Mechlenburg-Schwerin, came to New Orleans in 1851, went upstream to Dubuque where he settled until 1856, and then came to La Crosse in 1856. Though he did not go to the organizational meetings, August Dittman when he did join was an active member. He even sent his eldest son, Edwin, to Northwestern College.²³ F. Kroner, a native of Wuerttemberg, came to La Crosse in 1856 after living a year in Indiana and a year in Janesville. He also did not join the congregation until later.²⁴ Gottlieb Heilemann, another Wuerttemberg native, came to America in 1853. He resided in

Milwaukee until he came to La Crosse to work in Michael's Brewery in 1857. In June of 1858 he returned to Milwaukee to marry Miss Johanne Bandle (also a Wuertemberger). He returned to La Crosse in the summer of 1858 and immediately went into partnership with John Gund forming the City Brewery. Though he was a member of the 1866 building committee also, and though his wife is still listed as a member in the Fifty Year Jubilee Booklet (he himself died 29 years before), Heilemann was not present when the congregation was organized either.²⁵

These early German settlers had no regular church services until that spring of 1859, although several Lutheran preachers had helped occasionally. The first Lutheran service held in La Crosse was a missionary service conducted by a Norwegian Lutheran minister, Rev. H.A. Stub, of Coon Prairie in Vernon County according to La Crosse records.²⁶ This was in 1857. Rev. Stub later organized the Norwegian Lutheran Church in the La Crosse area in 1861. He also was actively preaching to the Lutherans in Bostwick Valley in the early 1860's (before St. John's congregation was founded).²⁷ But Rev. Stub may not have been the very first Lutheran minister in La Crosse if J.P.Koehler's history is accurate.

J.P.Koehler reports that in 1856 President Muehlhaeuser sent a minister named Buehren to La Crosse to preach. At this early date an effort was already started to acquire some property also, although this

effort was not very successful. Then in 1857 according to Koehler, "...the old Pastor Spengler of Sauk County had come and the next year had received a position, contrary to the advice of Muehlhaeuser." 28

There are reasons to question the historical accuracy of this data, however. First of all, neither of these two men, Buehren or Spengler, are ever mentioned in any of the La Crosse historical records of this time or in the earliest records of the congregation either. In addition, Pastor Buehren, a former Methodist preacher from Indiana, is listed as the pastor at Granville earlier than 1857 and is listed as their pastor in their centennial booklet until 1860! But even if these two men were in town and preached for occasional services, the real work in organizing the congregation fell to the laymen themselves.

By 1859 the Lutherans in La Crosse were tired of having to face their only alternative, the German Methodist Society. For them, this heterodoxy was no alternative at all. It was time to stand up for the truth, to stand up for what they believed in. As a letter of the day states, "The La Crosse people do not fall for the Methodists because they are originally Lutheran."²⁹ And so they placed a notice in the German newspaper, the Nord Stern. Translated, the notice read as follows:

We are calling the German Protestants attention in La Crosse to the fact that on Wednesday, April 6, at 7:00 P.M. a meeting of the Protestant congregation was announced to be held in the brick schoolhouse. We hope that everyone possible will participate. 30

This announcement on the last page of the newspaper brought success. The small group that had met that evening then published their results along with another announcement in the next weekly issue of Nord Stern. Translated, it read

On the 6th of this month, a meeting was held of the local German Lutheran Reformed Protestants. The formation of a legal organization, the "German Evangelical Church," was resolved, a church council was elected, and a committee was named. This committee will draw up the necessary by-laws by or before the next meeting, which will be held on Thursday, April 21st at 8:00 P.M. in the brick schoolhouse. To this meeting all townspeople of Lutheran-Reformed confession are cordially invited.³¹

This meeting was actually postponed until the next evening, April 22nd. So the laymen took the initiative from the start. Not only did they draw up a constitution and by-laws, they also instituted reading services and a Sunday school right from the start. On May 11th the congregation decided to join the Wisconsin Synod. At this time they requested President Muehlhaeuser to send a pastor to serve them. The congregation also decided right from the beginning that it would seek to maintain a German school for its children.³²

President Muehlhaeuser was present in La Crosse at this May 11th meeting. President Muehlhaeuser also preached in La Crosse that Sunday. And what was the reaction of this boom town community to all of these events? How did the local Germans feel about the fact that some

had made a stand for confessional Lutheranism? The reaction of the German speaking community to this new Lutheran church body was exactly the reaction that we might expect from the world at the spread of the Gospel message. The reaction of the liberal German community is best summed up by their editorial comments about President Muehlhaeuser and his preaching. An editor of Nord Stern was present that week when Muehlhaeuser preached his sermon. In translation, here is his editorial which appeared that week in the German newspaper:

Religious: Last Sunday Herr Pastor Muehlhaeuser from Milwaukee was here in La Crosse in order to consecrate a newly established Lutheran Church. Now we like to hear a good sermon, so we also went into the church expecting to hear an exceptional presentation by the renowned and famous (!) Milwaukee Pastor. But alas, instead of a composed, instructive, and stimulating presentation in the spirit of Christianity, we had to hear a straight, dry (orthodoxist) sermon like we always hear from a preacher, of course, and what's more in a language that may be popular, but surely couldn't contribute to its growth. This thing has us so shocked! We can hardly believe that Herr Muehlhaeuser can find so many disciples in the enlightened city of Milwaukee with his strong, Old Testamentish "high and mighty" doctrine as he is really supposed to have. Or did Herr Muehlhaeuser imagine, perhaps, that a man has to speak some Old German with the peasants in the country? 33

This was the sarcastic reaction of the community around these German Lutherans to the preaching of the Gospel in their midst. But despite this opposition, the Word worked its effect and the small Lutheran congregation grew. On August 1st, 1859, Gottlieb Fachtmann became the first pastor of the congregation. He immediately began to teach in the Christian Day School. But from here on out, the activities

of the young congregation are ignored by the local newspapers. No mention of the pastor, or the school, or the purchase of a building less than a year later is to be found. The congregation grew steadily even during the Civil War by the Grace of God, and by the Grace of God will now soon be 125 years old. Though in the world, its foundation was never of the world, but in Christ and Him crucified. From its beginning, it was rejected by the society along with which it grew.

Such was the lot of a confessional Lutheran on the Wisconsin frontier of the 1850's. When we think of how difficult it seems to be to be a confessional Lutheran in the 1980's, when we think that we are unique because we are a still small voice proclaiming the inerrant and inspired Gospel message in a world that is busy rejecting God, perhaps we should remember our heritage. Perhaps we should take time to remember that we are not the only ones who have had to stand up for the truth against what seems to be insurmountable odds. Perhaps we should take the time to reflect upon our forefathers and the lessons from the past, taking heart in the fact that we need not be dismayed, for our Lord Christ has overcome the world!

FOOTNOTES

¹ Albert H. Sanford & H.J. Hirshheimer, A History of La Crosse, Wisconsin: 1841-1900, (La Crosse: La Crosse County Historical Society, 1951), p. 34.

² Ibid, p. 27. An interesting sidelight during this period would have to be the Mormon influx into the area. From 1840 to 1845, groups of Mormons came up the river from Nauvoo, Ill. where Joseph Smith was building his temple. Many worked at the Black River pinery cutting timber and sending logs downstream until the temple was finished in 1845. In October 1844 as many as 300 Mormons settled about five miles south of Myrick's trading post in what is today known as Mormon Coulee. They remained here for years, but were always isolated from the La Crosse community. The early La Crosse newspapers carry apologetic accounts of Mormonism as a religion.

³ Ibid, p. 32.

⁴ Spencer Carr, A Brief Sketch of La Crosse, Wisc'n, (La Crosse: W.C. Rodgers, 1854), p. 20.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Geneve Caldwell, "Early Customs and Activities of La Crosse Churches," in La Crosse County Historical Sketches, A.H. Sanford, ed., (La Crosse: Liesenfeld Press, rpt. from The La Crosse Tribune), p. 7.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid, p. 8.

⁹ Ibid, p. 7.

¹⁰ Spencer Carr, p. 18.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² History of La Crosse County, Wisconsin, ill., (Chicago: Western Historical Co., 1881), p. 569.

¹³ Ibid, p. 573.

¹⁴ Spencer Carr, p. 16.

¹⁵ Sanford & Hirshheimer, p. 70.

¹⁶ Ibid, p. 206.

¹⁷ Ibid, p. 72.

¹⁸ Benjamin Bryant, Memoirs of La Crosse County, (La Crosse: County Historical Society, 1901), p. 321,

¹⁹ History of La Crosse County, p. 755.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 646.

²¹ Ibid, p. 437.

F O O T N O T E S, p. 2

²²Fünzigjähriges Jubiläum der Ersten Deutschen Ev.=
Luth. Gemeinde zu La Crosse, Wisconsin, (Milwaukee: Northwestern
Publishing House, 1909), p. 4.

²³History of La Crosse County, p.280.

²⁴Ibid, p. 769.

²⁵Ibid, p. 760. There is a plausible explanation for Heilemann's absence from those organizational meetings in April and May of 1859. During these months in the local German newspaper, Nord Stern, the City Brewery had repeated advertisements for bock beer. Since this was his first spring making bock beer, Heilemann no doubt needed to work extra long and hard hours to make sure that his new kegs were cleaned out properly.

²⁶Bryant, p. 146.

²⁷Sanford & Hirshheimer, p. 231.

²⁸John Philipp Koehler, The History of the Wisconsin Synod, Leigh D. Jordahl, ed., (St. Cloud, Minn.:Sentinel Pub. Co., 1970), p. 60.

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Nord Stern, April 2, 1859 ed.

³¹Nord Stern, April 15, 1859 ed.

³²One Hundred Years of Grace: Centennial Booklet of the First Evangelical Lutheran Congregation, p. 4.

³³Nord Stern, May 13, 1859 ed.

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