

THE LIFE OF A "REISEPREDIGER"
A Look at the Life of Johannes Strieter

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One hundred and fifty years ago central Wisconsin was a vast wilderness whose main inhabitants were the Native Americans and the Whitetail Deer. It was about at this time, however, that many German settlers began to move in. They came to take advantage of the abundant farm land that was available, to simply begin a new life, or to get away from the religious domination that they felt in Germany. These people formed small communities, most of which were German not only in language but also in culture. Many of these settlers were Lutheran who were living without a pastor to lead them or direct them with God's word. These people needed pastors. They needed someone to lead them in organized worship, to share God's word with them, and they needed to receive the Lord's Supper. It was this need for pastors which prompted the Wisconsin and Missouri Lutheran Synods to begin the "Reiseprediger" program in the mid 1850's. This program was set up to supply a traveling pastor ("Reiseprediger") who would travel from village to village or even family to family and care for their spiritual needs. This paper is going to focus on one of these "Reisepredigers", and his work in central Wisconsin. This pastor's name was Johannes Strieter.

The Missouri Synod realized the need for a "Reiseprediger" in central Wisconsin when Pastor Martin Stephan, son of the well known Martin Stephan,¹ visited the area. On that trip Pastor Stephan found many Lutheran families who wanted a pastor to serve them. Pastor Stephan, who at this time was serving in Theresa, Wisconsin, urged the Missouri Synod to supply pastors to the area of Marquette County, Wisconsin. There were finally several reasons why both the Wisconsin and Missouri Synods felt that they needed to send pastors to the "Woodlands." The first reason was because there were many vacant Lutheran congregations that had no pastor. The second reason was that there were many German settlements, especially in middle

Wisconsin, ^{with} without pastors and organized congregations. Thirdly the Methodist and Baptist itinerant preachers or circuit riders were a threat to the Lutheran settlers. The final reason was that there were many children who had not been baptized and few had received Lutheran instruction.²

It was not long after this realization that Pastor Strieter, who graduated from the Fort Wayne Seminary, was called to serve four congregations in central Wisconsin. These churches were in Crystal Lake (Budsin today), Newton, Mecan and Germania. These four churches all laid the foundation for every other ^{Lutheran} church that was formed in Marquette County. Strieter made his home in Crystal Lake which today is called Budsin. Today Budsin is a very small village consisting of the Lutheran Church, about ten homes, and a beauty salon. It is located about ten miles north of Montello on Highway 22. But around the turn of this century it was a bustling town with its large general store, and dance hall and saloon, a school, and the church.

Pastor Strieter lived in Marquette County, Wisconsin for six years, from 1859-1865. His life as a "Reiseprediger" was often hard, always busy, and with the Lord's help rewarding. It was in November of 1859 that he moved to Wisconsin. He was accompanied by his wife and their three children. They could not take their mother along who had lived with them because she would not have been able to endure the rough life and harsh winters of Wisconsin. Mother was forced to move to Cleveland and live with her daughter.

They arrived in Milwaukee and from there wrote Wilhelm Stelter who was their contact man in Crystal Lake. He wrote to Stelter two times but never received an answer, so after a week of waiting they decided to leave and make the 120 mile

trip to Crystal Lake. They took the train to Ripon, and traveled from there by stagecoach to Princeton. The area west of Ripon at that time was referred to by the settlers as "Indianland."³

When they arrived at Crystal Lake they were taken in by some members so that they would have a place to sleep. The first night they were in Crystal Lake Strieter woke up to hear his wife sobbing. She was terrified of what lay in the future for them in "Indianland." The next morning Wilhelm Stelter took his new pastor to the parsonage and helped them move in. The house had three rooms and was a German style home with wooden framings and clay plaster.

Later that same day Strieter bought a six year old horse which he later named Charley. The horse cost him sixty dollars. He harnessed his new horse to a sled and drove north to Wautoma to pick up two stoves, a couple beds and anything else that they needed for their new home.

Many of the areas around Crystal Lake did not have established congregations, so he often preached in people's homes to their families and the neighbors. He never preached less than four and never more than nine times a week. He traveled about six thousand miles a year by horse and covered an area that went as far north as Eau Claire and as far south as Fair Water which is about eight miles north of Waupun. Pastor Strieter never took along anything to eat while he was riding because in the winter it would freeze and in the summer it would dry out. He found it best to "eat like a horse"⁴, at seven in the morning and at seven at night.

Pastor Strieter was finally installed on January 15, 1860 by Pastor Dicke of Mayville, Wisconsin. After the service when Strieter took Pastor Dicke back to Ripon to catch the train home, Dicke bought him a buggy for thirty dollars.

He loaned the money to Strieter without interest until he was able to pay the money back.

Pastor Strieter continued to travel to the regular houses to lead worship and to teach confirmation. The custom was that the people would stand outside of the house or school until he arrived, and then when he came they would go inside and immediately sing. He didn't like the hymnals they used because he felt that they were too rationalistic so he convinced his people to order new St. Louis hymnals.

The worship services in each area were held on the average once a month, if that was always possible. Communion was held twice a year at each location. They distributed communion outside if the weather cooperated. While he was the pastor of these churches in Marquette County several church buildings were erected. The first one that was built was called the "Straw Church" which was completed in 1863 at Bucholz's farm. It was located at what is now Emmanuel Lutheran Church, Wisconsin Synod, at Mecan which is about four miles south east of Montello. About the same that the "Straw Church" was erected another was built at Donnig's farm at what is now the town of Newton, which is about seven miles west of Budsin. That church is now St. Paul's Lutheran, Missouri Synod. Another church building was completed at Crystal Lake which today is St. John's Lutheran, Missouri Synod, in the village of Budsin.

When Pastor Strieter held his first communion at Bucholz's (the Straw Church) he had one hundred and thirty men and women come to the Lord's Supper. After each distribution of communion he always asked his people several confessional questions concerning the Sacrament. In his autobiography Strieter proudly pointed out that his members always answered "Ja" in unison to each question.

But one day he had to deal with what he considered to be a public sin of a certain man who wanted to receive communion. A few days before that church service when Pastor Strieter was in Princeton he saw ^{this} a member who had so much to drink that he was unable to get in or out of his wagon. It was the very next Sunday that this particular individual wanted to attend Lord's Supper. Since he felt it was a public sin Pastor Strieter publicly confronted him before the service. The man confessed his sin to everyone in the church and repented, so Strieter gave him absolution and allowed him to come to communion.

Pastor Strieter did most of his studying while he was traveling from church to church. He always brought along his Bible, several volumes of Luther, and a book of Luther's family devotions. He wrote his sermons and practiced them on the journey so that when he arrived he was always ready to preach. Strieter said though that he always regretted having to travel so much because he did not have enough time to teach his people adequately. To make up for this he obtained a young teacher from Fort Wayne named Lossner. His job was to instruct the children from Strieter's four churches.

One day while Strieter was at home a neighbor visited him accompanied by his mother. The neighbor's mother was from Big Bull and she wanted to tell Pastor Strieter about a need for a pastor in the Big Bull area. Big Bull was actually the city of Wausau, but the settlers always referred to the area as Big Bull. She told Pastor Strieter that about ten miles north of Big Bull there was a large settlement of Pommeranians who had no pastor. She asked Pastor Strieter to visit them. A few days later Strieter left for Big Bull,

which was a two day trip because it was about 120 miles from his home in Crystal Lake. Eventually he made the trip several times and preached in many of the School houses and homes in the Wausau area, while offering communion and baptizing many children. Whenever he traveled to Wausau he would spend a day in Stevens Point and preach around there also, because that was his half-way point to Wausau.

Many of Strieter's members moved away to Fall Creek which was near Eau Claire. They had no pastor so they wrote to Pastor Strieter and asked for his help. He made the trip to Eau Claire several times. To do that he had to travel thirty miles to Pardeeville and then take the railroad from there to Tomah where he went the final ninety miles by stagecoach.

One of the winters of the early 1860's was an especially harsh winter. For eight days it was so cold that Pastor Strieter's family had to sleep in the main room of the house huddled together around the wood stove. During that cold spell one of his members died, so he had to go to the "Straw Church" which was about fourteen miles away for the funeral service. On the day of the funeral he left for the service very early in the morning because it was so bitterly cold. During the ride he had to stop several times to rub ice from the horses nose so that it could breathe. At one point on the trip when he came to a clearing in the woods the wind blew into his face so hard that it caused him to feel a terrible pain in his head. The doctor told him later that if that would have happened to him again he probably would have died. Pastor Strieter felt the effects of that ride for the rest of his life because it caused permanent damage to his lungs.

That same winter Strieter made another trip to Big Bull (Wausau) and Stevens Point. After holding several services in that area he set out again to return home. It was a very cold night. Between Stevens Point and Wautoma he came to a fork in the road where he usually turned left. The snow was about six feet deep but he thought that it was packed down enough for him to travel on. He turned left and immediately his horse sank through the snow so that only its head and tail were visible. He unloosed his sled and trampled the snow down so that the horse was able to breathe. After he got the horse out, he turned around and took the long way home.

After he arrived in Wautoma he immediately headed to Berlin and from there set out on the final twelve mile stretch home. By this time it was dark and he was having a difficult time getting through the very deep snow. Pastor Strieter thought that this might finally be the night that he would freeze to death. He was beginning to get very tired and wasn't even sure where he was, when he finally came across a familiar farm and arrived home safely soon after that.

By the beginning of 1862 Pastor Strieter began to feel that the work which he had to do was too great for him to get done on his own. He wrote to his superior and asked for an assistant. They responded by sending him a young pastor named F.T. Hoffmann. They felt that Hoffmann was still too young to be on his own so he would be perfect as an assistant for Strieter. Hoffmann was to work at least one year under Strieter, with Strieter keeping close supervision over him.

At first Strieter liked Hoffmann very much. He made a fine first impression, but Strieter later felt that he had a rather "weak character." Strieter remarked that, "He preferred to hang around the kitchen with the wife and girls."

Hoffmann's job description was for him to go north and carry on his work in the Big Bull (Wausau) area, and Strieter would go to Big Bull to see how he was doing. Hoffmann was to first go to Big Bull for two weeks and then come back south to report to Strieter.

When Hoffmann came back south after the first two weeks Strieter asked him to preach at the Newton church. Strieter felt that Hoffmann's sermon was terrible because he had turned into a babbler rather than a Lutheran preacher. Strieter advised Pastor Hoffmann to read more Luther rather than French, but Hoffmann refused to listen.

Hoffmann left again for Big Bull and after a couple weeks announced that he had accepted their call to be their sole pastor. Strieter was infuriated that he had done this behind his back, and their differences were never settled. Strieter said that Hoffmann came to a bad end, but he never said specifically what that was. Pastor Eduard Moldehnke⁵ helps to shed some light on this whole ordeal because he talked about it in his report to President Johann Bading.⁶ This is what Moldehnke says:

On September 28th I took the stage to Wausau, a distance of 36 miles. It is a village surrounded by blackened tree stumps, lying in a beautiful area along the Wisconsin River and is actually the last village in that direction. I stayed with Mr. Pfaff and preached to about 30 people that evening. Earlier in the day I had a meeting with a Missourian named Hoffmann, who would like to settle there, but is being rejected by the people. He has a congregation in the woods about ten miles out of Wausau, but hurries on horseback to about 30 stations. Because of a lack of physical strength he accomplishes little of importance. He was very rude to me even though he is only about 21 years old. Naturally I repudiated his attacks, but I am afraid too mildly. His superior, Strieter, who lives in Princeton, became entangled in a terrible dispute on the street with the local Methodist preacher, so much so that each protected himself with his cane. Finally both dignified men spat each other in

the face. Because of his domineering manner Hoffmann has caused offense in all the places where he has preached. Even many in his own congregation want to get rid of him.⁷

On another occasion Pastor Strieter went north to Fall Creek to visit some of his members that had moved there. To get there he first went south to Montello to get the stagecoach. He took his wife along to Montello so that she could drop him off and take the horse back home. He took the stage to Pardeeville and from there went by rail to Tomah, and then the ninety miles from Tomah to Fall Creek he went again by stage. The people in Fall Creek were excited to see him because it had been a long time since they heard him preach. The next day he left for home and that night the stage driver fell asleep and drove into the woods. After a while they managed to get back on the road.

While he was in Fall Creek he wrote his wife to meet him in Montello with the horse, but she never got the letter. When he arrived in Montello after he had made that long trip he found that his wife wasn't there to meet him. He decided to make the ten mile trip home by foot. After walking a while his feet began to ache so much that he had to take off his shoes and socks and try to walk barefoot. The sand was too hot to walk on so he had to put his socks back on and walk the rest of the way home stocking footed.

A few weeks later Pastor Strieter received a note from another pastor that he was supposed to carry out mission work in several different areas. On the day that he left to do this his horse began to bounce so wildly that he got very sick with colic⁸ and had to go see the pharmacist immediately. After Strieter took his prescribed medicine he got back on his horse and left for Chippewa Falls.

After he crossed the Chippewa River he came to a house and brewery with the name "Gerhard" written on it. Since it was a German name he decided to stop in and check to see if they had any interest in a pastor. The man he talked to suggested various places in town that he could go to to preach a sermon.

In Chippewa Falls he went to the saloon to see if he would be able to use the building to preach a sermon, but the bartender told him to get out because he wasn't interested. Next he went to the shoemaker who told Strieter that he knew of only one preacher who had previously been in the town. Due to this lack of interest and lack of time he never preached in Chippewa Falls.

From there he went on to Menomonie. He soon found out that Menomonie was Pastor Moldehnke's territory so he decided to leave immediately. The people wanted him to preach though, since he was a Lutheran preacher and was already in town. Strieter did not want to, but he finally gave in on the condition that they explain everything to their Pastor Moldehnke and tell him to regard Pastor Strieter as only a guest preacher. The people took a hat offering and gave him the money for the long ride home.

Pastor Strieter once said concerning the pay of a "Reiseprediger":

Nearly always I received money. I have often *wondered* why today's traveling preachers almost always have to be supported by the treasury. I never needed to ask for money. If I went to Big Bull, I would bring home a pocket full of money, three-cent pieces, two-cent pieces, sixpence, shillings, but seldom quarters. I would empty my pocket on the table and my wife would sort it out in separate little bags and laugh over her treasure... My people in Indianland gave me \$200.00 a year besides rye for bread and for my horse, and also some wheat.

After he preached in Menomonie he rode to Eau Claire to see if there was an opportunity in that city to preach. From Eau Claire he got into a steamer and went down river to Reeds Landing. Since it was late he went to the saloon and had a glass of beer, some sausage and a piece of bread. While he was eating his meal a group of men came in and began to ridicule the Bible. Here is the conversation that followed when Strieter confronted these men:

I got up and approached that group. "Listen," I said, "You claim the Bible is a book of lies. I ask you, if you go home drunk and treat your wife and children like a tyrant, would that be right?" The blacksmith said, "No." I said, "Good. The same is in the Bible: 'You men live with your wives with common sense.' How can you argue that words from your mouths are truth and the same words in the Bible is a lie?" He was silent and one, two, three, the saloon was empty! ^o

The saloon keeper was so impressed by what Pastor Strieter had said that he offered him a free fish dinner. The bartender explained that most of the people in the area were sick of the churches because in the past they were burned by bad pastors.

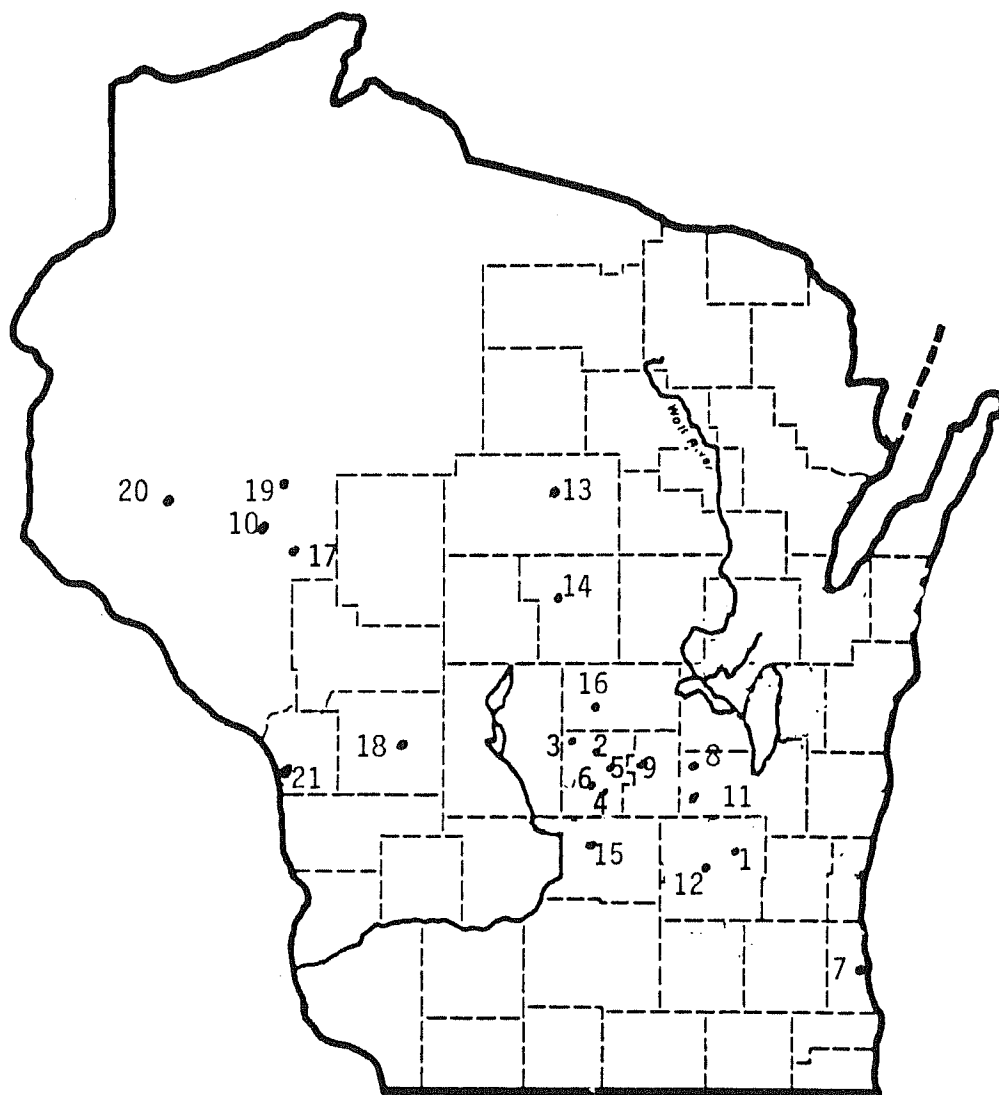
From Reeds Landing he took the steamer to La Crosse and from there took the train to Pardeeville. At Pardeeville he got his horse and began to ride back home. On the ride he became very sick and began to vomit up blood. He became so faint and dizzy that he could barely make the ride home. When he finally got home he was unable to take off his underwear because it was stuck to his legs. After soaking his legs for several hours he was able to remove the underwear. His legs were so soar and raw from riding on that trip that he could not stand to sit down for a while.

It was these health problems which eventually forced him to leave "Indianland." In 1865 Strieter received a call to Aurora, Illinois, and after much deliberation and council with other pastors from Milwaukee he decided to take the call to Aurora. The pastors advised him to accept the call because they were worried about his health.

The two greatest difficulties which Pastor Strieter faced while he was in Wisconsin, besides the weather and hardships, were the Methodists and the Fanatics. By the time the "Reiseprediger" program had gone into effect the Methodists had already developed their circuit rider program. The result was that many Lutherans who were living in the woodlands, and had gone a long time without hearing a sermon, fell prey to these Methodist circuit riders. Strieter had to do battle with these Methodists on several occasions. At times when he preached at the "Straw Church" in Mecan he would be challenged by some of the local Methodist church members. They often came to Strieter's services and challenged him publicly on some point of Lutheran doctrine. Pastor Strieter always responded by challenging them to a debate, which usually turned out to be a shouting match (probably because Strieter was partially deaf).¹¹ Strieter always held his ground in these debates and his challengers usually left.

On several occasions Pastor Strieter also had to deal with the Fanatics or Enthusiasts. At times they would interrupt him during his sermons and demand to know if he had been "born again." Strieter always insisted on the Means of Grace rather than the random working of the Holy Spirit without the Means. They, however, did not pose as big a threat as the Methodists because fewer members were lost to them.

Every Lutheran church in Marquette County, and many other areas of Wisconsin, can be thankful for "Reiseprediger" Strieter. He did much to strengthen the organized churches that he was called to serve so that other congregations were able to grow out from them. He planted the seed of the gospel in many areas where today exist established Lutheran congregations. His six years in Wisconsin were difficult and certainly not very glamorous, but the Lord used this man's labors for the good of his kingdom.



PLACES MENTIONED IN THIS PAPER ASSOCIATED WITH STRIETER'S WORK

- | | |
|--------------------------|--------------------|
| 1. Theresa | 16. Wautoma |
| 2. Crystal Lake (Budsin) | 17. Fall Creek |
| 3. Newton | 18. Tomah |
| 4. Mecan | 19. Chippewa Falls |
| 5. Germania | 20. Menomonie |
| 6. Montello | 21. La Crosse |
| 7. Milwaukee | |
| 8. Ripon | |
| 9. Princeton | |
| 10. Eau Claire | |
| 11. Fair Water | |
| 12. Mayville | |
| 13. Big Bull (Wausau) | |
| 14. Stevens Point | |
| 15. Pardeeville | |

ENDNOTES

1. Martin Stephan was born Aug 13, 1777. He was an early Lutheran leader in Perry County, MO. He later moved to Illinois and died on Feb 22, 1846.
2. This information was taken from Arnold Lehmann's Wisconsin Synod "Reisepredigt" Program, page 23.
3. This information is taken from Strieter's autobiography.
4. Quote taken directly from Strieter's autobiography.
5. Pastor Moldehnke was the "Reiseprediger" in north and central Wisconsin from the Wisconsin Synod. He made his home during the winter months near Fort Atkinson, Wisconsin.
6. President Johann Bading was president of the Wisconsin Synod from 1860 to 1889.
7. This quote is directly from Moldehnke's letter to President Bading dated December 2, 1861. This letter was printed in Lehmann's Wisconsin Synod "Reisepredigt" Program.
8. Colic is severe pain in the abdomen caused by spasm or obstruction.
9. Quote taken directly from Strieter's autobiography.
10. This quote also taken from Strieter's autobiography.
11. This information was taken from the history of St. John's Lutheran Church located in Harrisville, Wisconsin.

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