

FIVE BUILDINGS THAT PLAYED AN IMPORTANT ROLE
IN THE HISTORY OF CHRIST - BIG BEND, *Wt.*

KEITH H. SIVERLY

CHURCH HISTORY
PROFESSOR E. FREDRICH
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11431 W. Seminary Drive. ~~65W~~
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As a person steps out of his car on a Sunday morning and enters Christ Lutheran church in Big Bend, a number of questions may come to mind. Questions like, "Who is going to be there today?" "Will the sermon be very long?" "Will there be plenty of people there?" Or maybe your questions don't center on church-related things, but rather on the work that you have to do at home after the service. Or maybe you have a special activity planned that you can't wait to get to. Whatever the case may be, nine times out of ten, your mind is thinking about something in the near or more distant future. Some future event or activity. It is, of course very beneficial to plan ahead or to have questions in mind. A mind that didn't do this would be stale or unimaginative. A mind only concerned with the status quo. But it is also equally important to not only look ahead, but also to stop and reflect on all that has happened in the past. This is the whole reason for us to study history. To stop, look back, and learn from the past mistakes, failures, and successes of the previous generations. As a result of that, we can avoid the same errors that they had and also capitalize on what made them successful. It is just as important to do that also in a church. What did the members of the past go through for us and accomplish in order that we can be at where we are today?

Oftentimes we as members of a congregation just take these things for granted and never stop and think how

fortunate we are to have had these people do this work for us. This by no means is an excuse for us to sit back, relax, or be lazy, but rather it is an encouragement for us to do the same for future generations. After reading any number of annual reports, mission board minutes, statistical reports, bulletins, letters from previous pastors, or other papers; not to mention a number of conversations with members there, it would be virtually impossible to give a complete history of any congregation that is forty-five years old. It would be hard enough to do for a congregation of five years. That isn't to say that I couldn't read all of these reports and write down all sorts of facts and figures. But that is only part of the overall picture. I couldn't possibly relive the memories of certain church services or activities that went on in the lives of the members back then. I also couldn't possibly remember everything that happened from what I read or heard from others, it is just too difficult. That is why it is necessary to narrow down that broad sweeping subject entitled, "The History of Christ, Big Bend" into a more narrow subject. There could be many different areas to cover in this also. Maybe a history of stewardship practices or evangelism practices in the church. But for the sake of this paper, I will concentrate on five buildings that played an important role in the history of Christ Lutheran church in Big Bend.

To anyone that knows me, I would probably be the least

likely person to comment on any type of building structure. I was the person who took woodshop during my freshman year in high school and got a C+. While some other classmates of mine took shop to raise their grade point average, shop ended up lowering my grade point average. So I, by no means, claim to be an expert on the subject, but will just relate how these five buildings played an important role in the history of Christ Big Bend. The first two buildings were not built by members of the congregation, or even funded by the congregation, the last three were though. Those five buildings are the hut built by the first settlers, the town hall built in 1882, the church dedicated in 1948, the school dedicated in 1966, and the church dedicated in 1987.

The first building may seem very insignificant and a very unlikely one to be included in the history of a church. How could a 12 by 15 hut fit into the picture? Well in order to have Christ Big Bend, it is first of all necessary to have a Big Bend.

It is now September 11, 1836, 11 people set out from Andover, Vermont. They then went to Clinton Park, New York. The trip from Andover to Clinton Park cost them \$1.90. After this, they transferred to the Erie Canal. They then took a steamer across Michigan to Chicago. From this group of 11 people, only four people decided to go on, the rest stayed at various stops along the way. The four men were John Dodge, Purcius Putnam, Orrien and Curtis Haseltine.

John Dodge and Orrien Haseltine decided to go into the Wisconsin territory. They came back from their trip to Wisconsin with this report, "We found the best situations taken, but hundreds of good claims yet to be had west of the Fox River and 75 miles northwest of Chicago, 25 miles southwest of Milwaukee and 5 miles east of Mequanego, an old Indian village."(1) After these two men came back, the other two men joined them in the trip north. This trip north took them five days. Today it would take about 2 and a half hours from Big Bend to Chicago. Here they found some very rich black soil from one to two feet deep, good springs, and pure water. "The land they had just claimed to was twelve miles below the upper fork of the Fox River and seven miles above the lower fork, and in the bend of the river laying in the bow. They therefore established the name Great Bend."(2) This name would later be changed to Big Bend.

So we now have the first settlers in this new territory called Great Bend. Four men from Vermont passing through Chicago on their way to the Wisconsin territory. It was here that they traded their horses off for three pairs of three year old steers and started to this land with the rich black soil and bountiful springs and pure water. The land they called Great Bend. It is also here that we have the first building that played an important role in the history of the the church. It can be called the first building in the history of the church because it was in

fact the first building that was built in this new land. It wasn't an impressive structure by any means. It wouldn't be a dream home for any young married couple. It probably never thought it would come into the picture in the history of a church. But it was all that was needed or rather should I say all that could be afforded by four men in a new territory. It was none other than a 12 by 15 hut. But it was this hut that these four men lived in and braved the winter months with. If any of you have ever lived in that area during the winter, you realize the amount of snow that you receive there. Not to mention the cold temperatures and wind chill. But these four men made it through it all with their 12 by 15 hut and we now have the start of a new city.

More and more relatives of Purcius Putnam heard about this city and came to live there. His brother, Aaron, was the first postmaster. The Dodge and Putnam company which they had started , gradually grew. Not too long after that, a Baptist church went up. This was the first church that would go up in this new village. This church wa the result of the regular church society that was formed in 1888. They also started teaching at home and then started a stone schoolhouse where Ira Haseltine was the first teacher. But now we have the second building that played an important role in the history of the church. At first glance, this may again seem like a very unlikely one to include, but we will see why later on. "In 1882 we find 'The people of Big

Bend and vicinity formed a Stock Co. to build a Temperance Hall. The Co. was called a Literary Hall Co. On Dec. 2nd, 1895 at midnight their hall was burned to the ground supposed to have been the work of firebugs. Insured for twelve hundred dollars.' They later rebuilt the hall and sold shares in company for \$10.00 a share."(3) The village had continued to grow as a paper written in the mid 1940's tells us "Today the population of Big Bend is around 550. 3 subdivisions have been started in the past year and another one is planned for this spring."(4)

It is now where our Wisconsin Synod comes into the picture. In March, 1945, Pastor Carl Leyrer was assigned as a missionary at large in the metro-Milwaukee area. He had canvassed several areas and then decided to start at Big Bend. Pastor Leyrer started services on July 8, 1945 with 27 people present. He describes the place where they first worshipped and this second building that played an important role in the church history in this way, "Our first place of worship was a decrepit town hall. The building was condemned, permitted to stand until we could build a church. We rented it for \$3.00 a Sunday. This included a man who built a fire in a pot belly stove."(5) This place was none other than the Temperance Hall the was built in 1882, burnt down and rebuilt shortly after. While worshipping in this old hall, we hear of two stories, one from Pastor Leyrer and another one from a present member who had been a part of that old building, describe some

strange occurrences that probably don't happen very often or may never happen in our services today. Pastor Leyrer in his letter, tells of the times when the offering would be taken and change would fall through the cracks in the floor. I'm sure this was something that the stewardship committee would have to take into account. How much money do we have in the plate and how much money fell out of the plate and through the cracks in the floor? Mrs. Martin in a telephone conversation said, "That building was run down and getting old while I was growing up. The roof was so bad during worship services that if it rained, you would get wet."(6) This had happened any number of times. Today we hear many excuses for people not going to church. These excuses range anywhere from, "it is my only day off," to "I guess I just like to sleep in." But I doubt that anybody would ever say, "I don't feel like going to church today, I hear rain is in the forecast and I don't want to get wet." This could have been a legitimate excuse at this time if a person was really looking for a reason not to go to church.

We hear what the Mission Board thought of this new field in 1946, "Our board sometimes with fear and trembling contemplates a new field. There is no place to be had for worship services...With a prayer we decide to go ahead. Three new missions were begun in the past two years at Milwaukee, Kenosha, and Big Bend." (7)

The mission board when talking about no place to be had for services knew that some of these missions may have

had a place to worship, but it wasn't a suitable place. A case and point being the condemned hall where the first members of Big Bend were worshipping in. These members realized right away the need to build. It was described in this way, "The Town Hall, in which services were held was entirely inadequate in form, facilities, and seating capacity for future growth."(8)

But despite all of this, the mission continued to grow. By the end of 1946, the church now had 100 souls. A new building was still on their minds. Through the Synod's Architectural Committee, a floor plan of the future house of worship was drawn up by Mr. Walter Trapp, the Synod's architect from Milwaukee. But the church now met another roadblock. That roadblock being that due to government restrictions and the shortage of materials during WWII, the church was denied permission to build. But this mission realized that the Lord would give them the right time to move on with this project and they certainly were not going to go against the government. So they decided to wait until early 1947 to make another appeal to build. On March 8, 1947 they received official approval to build. It had been less than two years since services were first begun here, but they realized that with God's help, they could make this new church. The church then received a loan of \$10,000 (later increased to \$15,000) from the Church Extension Fund. Mr. Trapp now realized that he could finish the working plans and on April 29, 1947 excavation for the

basement was begun. We hear of their report on the building, "Progress on the building from that time on was not always as desired. Due to shortage in materials and labor, there were frequent and sometimes lengthy delays."(9)

Pastor Leyrer served as the carpenter, paying bills, and also hiring workers. The cost of the building with Lannon stone was somewhat over \$25,000 including furnishings. The Synod had given him a top figure of \$15,000. As is the case with any building chairman, there is always a little bit of flak that he receives. Pastor Leyrer was no exception "I got into a bit of trouble for spending so much even though our congregation raised all of the money beyond the Synod loan so there could be no secondary debt." (10) And so we have the third building that played an important role in the history of Christ church in Big Bend, the church that was dedicated in October 24,1948. The church that they could call their own. They no longer had to worry about money falling through the cracks in the floor or getting wet when it rained or paying a man to operate a pot belly stove. They now were in the first building that would be built by this church.

A 1948 newspaper article describes the church at its dedication,"Church which is made of lannon stone is designed along Gothic lines. This style which originated in the Middle Ages and was popularized during the renaissance

has been called the most Christian of all architecture. In the chapel the Gothic influence is felt by the steep pitch of the roof, in the pointed arches and high gables, and the interior arched trusses which hold up the roof."(11) From this description, we can see how this building must have left a favorable impression on the reporter and the surrounding community. It certainly must have been worth the \$25,000 spent on it and also worth the time, labor, and patience that was involved in this project. It also was a more ideal place for this new congregation to worship God in rather than the old hall and it certainly would be a church that would promote future growth.

And as a result of this new church, the congregation did continue to grow and grow rapidly. In 1950 SEW district mission board minutes, it was described in the following way, "it is still our fastest growing mission." (12) The church that had started out with 27 people in 1945 had now grown to 186 souls by the end of 1948. Pastor Leyrer also mentions that of those 27 people present in the first service, some were imported in order to swell the crowd. By the end of 1950, there was 245 souls until the end of 1956, the church had gone self supporting with 500 souls under the care of Pastor Norman Menke.

Included in this group of 500 souls, of course, is not only adults, but also children as well. And that is where the fourth building that played an important role comes into the picture for Christ Big Bend. In the 1948 SEW

district proceedings it is reported, "All of our missions wanted Christian Day Schools, but we were able to start just one school at Homehurst." (13) Homehurst was a mission congregation that was established in 1937. I had close ties with St. Peter's church in West Allis, which was started in 1876. Both of these churches though were discontinued in the fall of 1949. Homehurst because it only had 22 communicants and St. Peter because it only had 40 communicants. It was from Homehurst that Christ Lutheran bought a school bus from. They needed a school bus because on August 22, 1948 just before the dedication of the new church, they had started to send children to St. John's church in Root Creek. Christ Lutheran had sent 11 pupils to that school and also supplied Ellen Hackbarth as a teacher. It was Pastor Leyrer who served as the first bus driver for those children.

In the 1952 annual report, it is stated that, "Under our present system, the number of children is about as great as we can handle....let us pray that the Lord may soon make it possible for us to have our own Christian Day School." (14) There were a number of factors that led to the increase in the number of children who wanted to attend the Christian Day School in Root Creek. The first one of those was the rising birth rate at this time. This was the time of the baby boomers. And the second one was "What began as a little farm town become part of urban Milwaukee. The movement of young families into the suburbs changed the

way people thought."(15)

In a church meeting in 1954, a letter signed by incumbent chairman, R.L. Weir, states, "It is on record that we build a school."(16) This motion was passed. The church continued to grow in its new building from 500 souls in 1956 to 596 in 1960. The number of students who were bused to St. John's remained fairly steady, an increase from 11 students to 20 students in 10 years. This slight change was due to the fact that St. John's could only accommodate a few students because they had children from their own congregation who attended the school and that number was rising also. Another factor was that the bus was small and could only hold a few students. Only 25% of the children could go to this Christian Day School and learn about God every day. There seemed to be interest shown by some of the rest of the congregation. During these years the Sunday School went from 50 students in 1948 to 185 in 1960, so there was definitely a large number of children in the church in which to draw from.

So it was during these years that a number of positive steps were taken in the right direction to solve this problem. In January of 1958, a committee was designated to investigate the problems of crowding Sunday School, other space needs such as committee meetings, and fellowship gatherings. In April of that same year, it was resolved to plan future expansion of the church building. A designer was hired and planning was to be completed for the new

fellowship hall and chancel by 1959. This building , though, never took place or never happened. All of the plans were made and all the money was spent on the design, but they never went through with it.

It was at this same time that St. John's church in Root Creek gave Christ Lutheran a year's notice that they no longer could send their children to school there. So in 1960, the children of the congregation began to hold school in the basement of a church that already had been described as crowded a few years earlier. Mr. Elmer Jirtle assumed the office of Director of Education at that time. Pastor menke describes that time, "When the members(males over 21) decided to bring it home from St. John's, we were committed. We struggled to help it work and grow."(17)

The plan made in 1955 to operate a Christian Day School seemed to be taking a turn for the worse now. Because of the crowded conditions in the Sunday School and Christian Day School, the congregation voted in January of 1961 to erect a Christian Day School. There were more and more Lutherans moving into the area and the voters thought that a school would be essential for the growth of the congregation. A drive to collect money was set in motion to erect a three-room school. That school would begin in the fall of the year. At this time the school would have cost \$31,500.

But because of the lack of moral and financial support from many members, who didn't feel a strong need for a

school, the fund drive failed. There was talk of renting Norris school. This school was a school for delinquent boys. There was also talk of renting a nearby Guthrie school or sending the children to Trinity in Waukesha or Woodlawn in West Allis. In 1963 Pastor Menke accepted a call back to school. At this time a strong move was made to close the school down. The church had purchased four acres of land behind the parsonage for the purpose of the school. Payments were not being made on this land and the church was getting further and further in debt. it looked like the end of the school, which had started by sending children to Root Creek and had moved to the church basement. The fourth building that played an important role in the history of Christ, Big Bend sure seemed to have a hard time getting started. That is because this fourth building still hadn't taken place or wasn't built yet. This fourth building could have been the church that was proposed during 1958 and 1959 or it could have been the school that was proposed and planned in 1961, but neither of these buildings were ever built and as a result never played an important role in the history of the church.

But in July 21, 1963 Pastor Wilbert Krueger was installed as pastor of this congregation which continued to struggle with the building of a Christian Day School. Pastor Krueger had tried a number of times to get this school built. But in July, 1964 a resolution was passed by a 29 to 5 vote which read, "a Christian Day School-Fellowship

Hall and facilities be erected to solve the problems of space for fellowship activities, Sunday School, Christian Day School, Vacation Bible School, congregation meetings, and related church activities."(18) Pastor Krueger wanted to make this school building work out, he told the congregation, "There were always excuses made that it was impossible. Well with God, nothing is impossible."(19)

A building fund drive was set into motion with a goal of \$75,000, the congregation had pledged \$82,000 for this purpose. They also followed the lead of their pastor and seemed committed to make this school building work. It had also been decided to do as much as possible on the building through donated labor. Many people had promised to help out, but that number gradually fell. The work fell into the hands of a few. Because of the increases of material and wages for the building, the cost went up from \$85,000 to \$95,000. Again an appeal was made to the congregation to donate time for labor. The church said that 600-800 hours of unskilled labor was need. At the present wage of \$3.00 an hour for laborers's wages, it could save the congregation a tremendous sum of money.

On September 11,1966 that school was finally dedicated. That long awaited and much talked about school with six classrooms, administration office, principal's,pastor's office, fellowship hall, and kitchen was completed. A Waukesha newspaper called the Waukesha Freeman describes that day,"Big Bend youngsters saw their

new school dedicated Sunday; and they began classes in it Monday, Their building is the hard won School-Fellowship Hall built by the skill and brawn of the members of Christ Evangelical Lutheran."(20) It was estimated that the church had cut the original cost of \$200,000 in half by members volunteering and donating their time. The people were right in deciding that the school was very important. I not only was the fourth important building in the history of the church, but it continued to grow. From 1961 to 1979 the school grew from 19 students to 133 students. These years also included many teachers with a range range of God-given ability.

But along with the school growing, the church also continued to grow from the influx of new families moving into the area. This would set the stage for the fifth building that played an important role in the history of Christ, Big Bend. in 1975 the church now had 574 souls. But during the next five years, it experienced tremendous growth. At the end of 1980 that number had grown to 745 souls. The same church that 20 years ago wanted to build on with 540 souls still had the same building with 745 souls. It is thru that they had alleviated some of the problem with the crowded conditions for the children and special activities with the building of a school-fellowship hall in 1966, but the church still had crowded conditions. The church also had continued to have larger and larger percentages of people attending services on any given

Sunday due to the work of its pastor and people.

The beginning of this fifth building started to become a reality when a building fund was initiated in 1980. In the 1981 annual report, Pastor Kom writes, "This past year we initiated a building fund. No doubt that will assume much of our vision and thought as we look to the future." (21) Before this time at the end of 1979, the building fund was at \$327.51 and at the end of 1980, it was \$3,709.82. But by the end of 1981, it had stood at \$37,423.36. These numbers may not be all that surprising at first, but they are when we consider, "There's no doubt that the economy has dealt us a blow-in work layoffs, work slowdowns and even diminishing of new families moving in the area." (23) They often say that history repeats itself. This certainly wasn't the first or the last building project to be dealt a strong blow to its efforts. In 1947, it was the government restrictions that kept the church from building and in the 1960's , it was the lack of financial and moral support that got the school off to a slow start. The only problem was with the building of this church, it was different. Either nobody told the congregation that the economy dealt them a blow or they decided that it didn't matter. That is shown in the fact that the building fund went from \$3,700 to \$37,000 in one year. The treasurer also reported that the offerings were up approximately \$30,000 from 1980 to 1981. That building fund gradually increased from \$37,000 to \$66,000 at the end

of 1983 to finally \$106,000 at the end of 1984. This all happened during a time when the economy was bad and fewer and fewer families were moving out into this direction.

At the January 1985 annual meeting, a Building Planning Committee was chosen. This group included Allen Buchholz, Ed Hall, Paul Herrman, Pastor Kom, James Martens, Ted Westerhaus, and Gerald Boldt. In May of that year they chose Mr. Robert Strauss as their architect. In October of that year the architect showed preliminary drawings and slides regarding the church expansion. It was then decided in conjunction with an every member visit that year, that a committee would go out for pledges to give a substantial amount for the project. The committee realized that the talk of a new church should involve the input of as many members as possible. So an informational meeting with members was held in November for their questions and input. One week later at the voter's meeting, a unanimous vote was taken to have the architect proceed with the working drawings. The chairman of the Building Planning Committee, Mr. Gerald Boldt, expressed with God's help, the same optimism that church members of the past generation had expressed when he said, "Finally, we pray that our members will be given ways and means to carry out this church expansion so that we can better serve our community in carrying out the Great Commission." (23)

The same people who had served on the building planning committee now also served on the building

committee. The congregation accepted the committee's recommendation to proceed with the construction of the new church at a projected cost of \$369,000. On April 20, 1986 ground was officially broken for this building and on May 7th excavation was begun for the footing and foundation walls. Things progressed nicely through the summer with the floor being put in place and the exterior walls put up. October 18th was also a very important day not only for the church building itself, but also for the people in that church. For it was on this day that the congregation with the help of 43 volunteers could in one day put on the entire roof of the new church addition. This fifth and final building, for now, in the history of Christ, Big Bend was dedicated on July 19, 1987. Pastor Kom , the present pastor of that congregation, estimated the final cost of the project including asphaltting and landscaping at 420,000. Again the Waukesha Freeman article aptly describes the new church and hours of labor done by its own members, "Someone figured out that we did about \$75,000 worth of labor ourselves, said. We did the staining and varnishing, put in all the ceiling boards, knocked out old walls and did the preparation work for adjoining old and new buildings, he said."(24)

Pastor Menke in his recent letter to me, while sitting and counseling with a group of a dozen violent men convicted of crimes of assault an sexual abuse, writes to me, "Could there be any possible link between that

experience and a suburban church of the 1950's"(25) In a lot of ways there isn't. The people in the 1950's didn't have to face a lot of things that the people of our time do. Things like rampant use of drugs, widespread homosexuality, and many of the problems that are facing the families of America today with the high divorce rate etc. But in a lot of ways there is a link between the 1940's and 1950's and today. No matter what time or year it is whether it was the first settlers of Big Bend in 1836, the builders of the church in 1948 or the builders of the church in 1986, people still face the same hurts, problems, and pain. But the members of Christ, Big Bend can be thankful to God that they had a place to get away from the problems surrounding them in society whether that be in a decrepit town hall or in a beautiful and modern facility. That place of refuge was their church. And we can see God's hand at work in the course of history even when he brought some men here from Andover, Vermont. None of these men may have ever known about Christ, Big Bend, but God used them to serve his purpose. God has used, guided, and directed many willing and able Christian men, women, and children to build a beautiful church in 1948, a very practical school in 1966 and a very beautiful church in 1986 and 1987. The members of this congregation supported these projects with their able bodies, their hard work, their continued prayers, their hard- earned money, or maybe just by their continued and constant support. All of these people helped

the members of Christ, Big Bend grow in their appreciation of God and His Son whether that is in Sunday morning worship services or in the Christian Day School. These people didn't only do it for themselves or for their own benefit, but also for their children and for the future of the congregation. It also wasn't only for the visible church, but also for the growth of the invisible church. Pastor Kom describes that in a prayer at the last service in the church that they had been worshipping in from 1948 to 1987,"... all this simply means is that this building has served for forty years as a gateway to heaven itself. For that undeserved love we thank You and also humbly ask that our new church may prove to be an even greater gateway to heaven."(26) I really don't know how this will effect the future members of this congregation, but I know it will effect me the next time I step out of my car on a Sunday morning and enter the church.

Endnotes

1. History of Big Bend by Glenn Abel, p.1,2.
2. Ibid, p.2.
3. History of Big Bend by Marjorie Yug, p.6.
4. Abel, p.4.
5. 2/2/90 Pastor Leyrer letter
6. 4/14/90 telephone conversation with Mrs. Martin
7. 1946 SEW mission minutes, p.26.
8. 1948 Dedication booklet, p.7.
9. Ibid, p.8.
10. 2/2/90 letter from Pastor Leyrer
11. 1948 newspaper article
12. 1950 SEW District proceedings
13. 1948 SEW District proceedings
14. 1952 annual report
15. Pastor Menke's letter, p.3.
16. 1954 R.L. Weir letter
17. Menke letter, p.3.
18. Pastor's parochial report 1964, p.11.
19. Ibid, p.11.
20. Waukesha Freeman article, Sept. 1966.
21. 1981 annual report,
22. Ibid.
23. 1985 annual report.
24. Waukesha Freeman article, July 18, 1987.

25. Menke's letter

26. Pastor Kom's farewell bulletin in old church March
18, 1987.

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2. History of Big Bend written by Glenn Abel 1948
3. History of Big Bend written by Marjorie Yug 1962
4. Dedication booklet 1948-Christ Big Bend
5. Letter from Pastor Carl Leyrer dated 2/2/90
6. Letter from Pastor Menke dated 3/6/90
7. Letter 1954(R.L. Weir) in church files
8. Newspaper article 1948-paper not known
9. Pastor Kom's final bulletin in old church 3/18/87
10. SEW District Proceedings, Mission Board Minutes
1940, 1942, 1944, 1946, 1948, 1950, 1952, 1954, 1956.
11. Waukesha Freeman article 7/18/87
12. Waukesha Freeman article 9/66
13. WELS statistical reports 1946-1989