

**LUTHERAN PIONEERS:
GOD MADE IT GROW!**

by
Joseph Radsek



Church History
Professor Brenner
March 25, 1993

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library
11831 N. Seminary Drive
Milwaukee, Wisconsin

It was the middle of May, the summer of 1951. Bruce Thompson was spending yet another discouraging evening wrestling with a problem that he had been working on for the past several days. Tired and frustrated, he went to bed. Yet on this particular night, a good night's rest was not to be had. Sometime after midnight, Bruce awoke. As he lay there in bed, still mulling over the problem in his mind, the answer came to him. "Out of the blue," Bruce recalls, "this name *Pioneer* just came to me." Going into his office on the front porch, Bruce picked up a dictionary and began to investigate his revelation. The first definition he read was: *One who goes before preparing the way for others.* "That's kind of neat," Bruce thought to himself. Reading on, he also discovered this definition: *A footsoldier.* Suddenly Bruce realized he had found the name he was searching for. "We are all soldiers of Christ," he thought to himself. Overjoyed with his discovery, Bruce worked through the night flushing out his ideas and getting them down on paper (Thompson, 1992).

As he thought about the early pioneers, covered wagons came to mind and wagon trains. The names for the rank and file soon fell into place. There would be a *Trainmaster*, and *Train Leaders*, *Wagon Leaders*, *Drivers* and *Wagon Members*. When ^{the} Morning came, Bruce's wife Joyce rose to find her husband still in his study. During the night, Bruce had managed to put down on paper the entire basic structure of an organization for young boys, an organization we have since come to know as *The Lutheran Pioneers* (Thompson, 1992).

The Lutheran Pioneer organization took off like wildfire. Within two years, interest in the organization had grown to such an

extent, that a national organization was started. In just five years, 12 Trains were chartered. By 1961, that number had multiplied to 117 Trains. At the twenty-five year anniversary of the organization, the Trains numbered 405. Today the number of Trains chartered by the Pioneer organization has increased to 680 (Pioneer's History; Lorfeld, 1992).

As I began researching the history of the Pioneers, I found myself asking the question, "Why?" Why did this program take off and flourish like it did. If I were to approach this from a purely humanistic perspective, I could contribute the growth to good leadership and perfect timing. However, I know that God is in control of this universe and so I cannot help but see the Lord's hand in the history of the Pioneers. What made the Lutheran Pioneers take off and grow like it did? I am reminded of the word's that St. Paul wrote, when he pointed out to his beloved Corinthians, that it is God who gives the increase. In this exposition of the early history of the Lutheran Pioneers, I would like to borrow those words of St. Paul as a theme of sorts: *Lutheran Pioneers: God made it grow!* To him be the glory.

As a student of Scripture and history, I have seen numerous examples of how God grooms men for service. Two such men that played a key role in the founding of Pioneers was Pastor Rueben Marti, and Mr. Bruce Thompson. Just as the Lord used men from various walks of life and backgrounds so today, the Lord continues to use a variety of men to carry out his purpose.

Pastor Marti graduated from the Wawautosa Seminary in 1925. His first call to serve as one of God's undershepherds was at Sioux

City, Iowa. Before coming to St. John's in 1950, he served at congregations in Allenton and Kekoskee Wisconsin, and Stambaugh Michigan. In Burlington, he met a young man by the name of Bruce Thompson, who was engaged to a daughter of the St. John's congregation. Bruce was taking adult instruction with the previous pastor of St. John's when Marti came on the scene. The story of how Bruce came to be in that adult instruction class, will be helpful in understanding the history of the Pioneer program and is also rather interesting (NWL p410; Studies in Scouting... p.14).

At age twelve, Bruce became a member of the Boy Scouts of America. He became a Scout Master at a young age and was very active in Scouting for ten years. Even after the war, when he returned from Europe, Bruce remained closely associated with the Scouting movement. Bruce had no religious background to speak of. Even as a child, he can not recall going to church. His father was a doctor and had a very scientific world view. His humanistic view of life may perhaps explain why Bruce lacked any religious training. When Bruce returned from Europe after the war, he began dating a Roman Catholic from Burlington. This contact with Christianity led Bruce to take instruction in the Catholic Church and be baptized. The relationship didn't last, but Bruce was now connected to the Roman Catholic Church, a matter of some significance as you will see (Thompson, 1992).

Some time later, Bruce met a girl by the name of Joyce Foltz, who was a member of St. John's in Burlington. When Bruce tried to pursue his fourth date with Joyce, he discovered that the girl he was dating had certain scruples about who^m she dated. According to

Bruce Joyce's response to a fourth date was, "I make it a point never to go out with a Catholic more than three times." To which Bruce responded, "Wait a minute. Lets talk about this." Talk they did, and Bruce found himself sitting at the feet of Pastor Barthels of St. John's, taking adult instruction (Thompson, 1992).

Shortly after he began his instructions, Pastor Barthels left Burlington. Barthels was followed by Pastor Marti and he continued Bruce's instructions. Scouting was a big issue among our WELS congregations in the 1950's and Pastor Marti's instruction concerning the Boy Scouts raised a number of questions in Bruce's mind. Eventually Bruce approached Marti and asked, "What's wrong with Scouting?" To help Bruce understand the errors of Scouting, Marti gave Bruce a recently published paper by Paul Randolph, a layman in the LCA, entitled, *The Testimony Of A Former Scout*. After reading the paper and discussing it with Marti, Bruce gained a thorough understanding of what is wrong with Scouting. Having spent so many years within the organization, Bruce had first hand experience regarding the theological errors of the Scouting movement (Studies in Scouting... p.14; Thompson, 1992).

These two men which the Lord brought together at St. John's, became very good friends in the short time that they knew each other. Bruce's father remained in the service after the war and therefore, was not around very much. Bruce says that Marti became a sort of father figure to him. Bruce spent many an evening over at the parsonage talking to Marti after various church functions were over. It was on one such occasion, that a question was asked and a challenge given, that eventually led to the establishment of

Lutheran Pioneers (Thompson, 1992).

In the early part of May, 1951, Bruce was sitting with Pastor Marti in his study, while their wives were over in the school kitchen cleaning up after a mother-daughter banquet. The discussion, I am told, eventually came around to Randolph's paper. In the concluding remarks, Randolph made this comment:

"We have no other choice but to cut off this growing menace (referring to Scouting) and to develop our own Christ-centered youth program, one that is established by Lutherans, developed by Lutherans, led by Lutherans, and therefore would contain only true Lutheran theology. May God grant us the courage and initiative for setting up our own God-pleasing, Christ-centered, truly Lutheran youth program." (parenthesis mine)

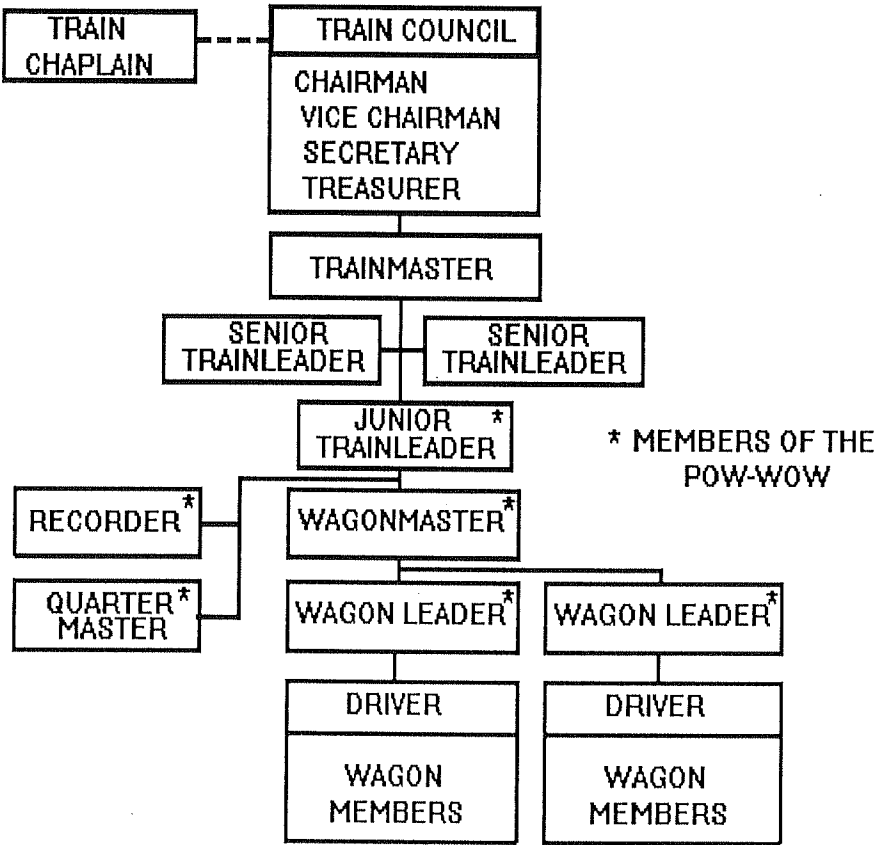
Bruce had found Randolph's paper not only helpful in understanding the errors in Scouting, he also found it inspiring. Intrigued by Randolph's comment, Bruce posed this question to Pastor Marti, "Why doesn't St. John's develop some kind of program of its own?" Marti returned the volley and placed this challenge at his feet, "Why don't YOU do something about it?" Bruce accepted the challenge (Studies in Scouting... p.14; Thompson, 1992).

They say hindsight is 20/20. In fact it allows us at times to catch a glimpse of God's guiding hand in the lives of men. I believe this to be the case here, for God appears to have had a special purpose in mind when he brought these two men together.

Over the next few weeks, Bruce was busy brainstorming and coming up with ideas for the organization. His background and knowledge of Scouting, made it possible for him to quickly develop a basic structure for the organization. He hit a brick wall however, when it came to the name for the organization. As I talked with Bruce about the frustration he was experiencing at this point,

knowing exactly what he wanted to do, but being unable to come up with a name, I commented, "I know the feeling. Its like studying a text and knowing exactly what you want to preach about, yet being unable to come up with your theme and parts." Bruce responded, "Exactly!" Once Bruce had the name Pioneers, the ranks, *Trainmaster*, *Wagon Master*, *Wagon Leader*, just fell into place and with little change remain intact to this day (Thompson, 1992).

Bruce took his ideas to Pastor Marti and the two soon agreed upon the organizational structure and program for the Lutheran Pioneers. This is how the organization was structured:



With the organization taking shape, Marti and Bruce began to look for men from the congregation who might be interested in helping out with the program. At the semi-annual meeting in July,

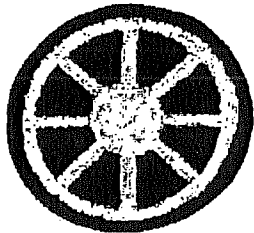
Pastor Marti and Bruce were ready to present their program to St. John's. Marti and Bruce laid out the program, its basic purpose and structure and asked the congregation to try it for a year. At the end of that time, the congregation could either continue the program or drop it. Again we see God's hand, the congregation agreed (Thompson, 1992; Pioneer's History).

Receiving the go-ahead, the two rolled up their sleeves and got to work. Marti drew up a constitution, wrote a prayer and a hymn for the Pioneers. Humanly speaking, Marti was Bruce's inspiration. He also provided a wealth of spiritual guidance for the organization as it began to evolve. His spiritual guidance however, ended suddenly on November 13, that same year. The Lord called his servant home. Yet before he died, God used Marti to help get this organization off and running with a sound theological foundation (NWL p.410; Thompson, 1992).

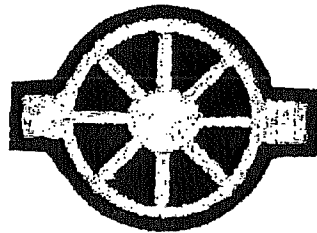
By the grace of God, Marti and Bruce quickly found a group of men to help them develop this new program. A Train Council was formed, consisting of Gilmore Gulbranson (chairman), Jerome Gunderson, (secretary), Harold Koch (treasurer), Hubert Sieker and Paul Meyer. Marti was the Train Chaplain, Bruce was the Trainmaster and the two Senior Leaders were Frank and Ralph Voss. The support from these men was an invaluable tool, a sounding board if you will. Bruce, drawing on his past experience in such an organization, bounced ideas off the others and when they made sense, they ran with it (Pioneer's History; Thompson, 1992).

One of the first projects they tackled was uniforms. As Bruce commented, "It wasn't so much that we thought uniforms were neces-

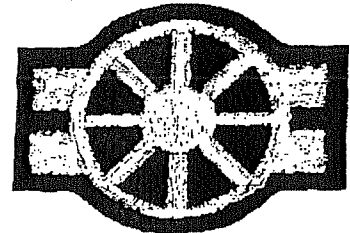
sary, but the Boy Scouts were a big tempting apple at the time and we wanted to give the boys something they could identify with." In search of uniforms, they went down to a local clothing store, to see what was available. They found a royal blue work uniform, which came in both men and boy's sizes. After this they discovered a place in Milwaukee to make up the various patches and insignias they wanted for the uniforms, like *Train Master*, and *Senior Train Leader* etc. Bruce had convinced a local commercial artist by the name of Bill Thall, to design the *Recruit Emblem*, which would be affixed to every uniform. The Recruit Emblems were sewn by a process called swiss embroidery, which produces 164 patches simultaneously. As he recalls today, "I thought these would last me the rest of my life." The Lord however, thought differently (Thompson, 1992).



Junior Train Leader



Senior Train Leader



Trainmaster



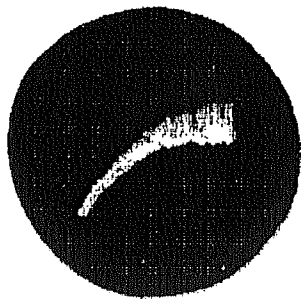
Wagon Driver



Wagon Leader



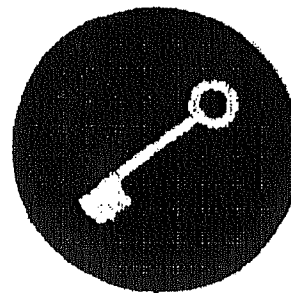
Wagon Master



Recorder



Recruit



Quartermaster

The uniforms turned out to be a big success. They purchased the uniforms and patches with \$200.00, given to them by Joyce's mother and affixed the proper emblems and insignias on them. Then Bruce and his two Senior Leaders, Frank and Ralph Voss, showed up at school in uniform, and the kids as Bruce puts it "went gung-ho." The program got off to a great start and the Lutheran Pioneers were twenty-two kids strong by their first meeting (Thompson, 1992).

The blue uniform quickly faded out (literally). Bruce recalls that they lasted about three washings, by which time the blue had faded terribly. In fact, the manufacturers themselves had given up on the blue. From the blue uniform they went to a silver-gray uniform and have had a form of silver-gray ever since. At one point, the manufacturer of the silver-gray uniforms was even making them directly for Pioneers, since they were ordering them by the gross in a number of different sizes (Thompson, 1992).

The first meeting with the boys was scheduled for September and so the creation of a Lutheran Pioneer handbook received top priority. Immediately after getting the go ahead from St. John's, Bruce began working on the first handbook in order to have

something to put into the Boy's hands. The handbook provided the boys with information about the organization as well as the various subjects they would study.

This first edition was 32 pages long with seven chapters. Chapter one was on the flag of the United States; two, covered knots and lashings; three, taught the basics of fire building; four, was a section on compass; five, was on camping procedures; six, was information on signaling; and seven, covered safety. The book was produce on a rexograph machine and bound with duo-tang binders. The first printed handbook didn't come until 1957. This edition was expanded to 15 chapters, adding information on swimming, mapping, measuring, hiking and outdoor cooking. In 1960, the handbook was slightly expanded once again, adding a short chapter on stalking and a study of nature. The handbook underwent a major revision in 1966, with an extensive study on nature, written and illustrated by Rod and Georgia Lange. This revision more than doubled the size of the hand book from 94 to 256 pages. Since then, the handbook has been periodically updated and expanded, so that today, it is over 300 pages long, containing 23 chapters and a lengthy appendix (Pioneer Handbook: 1951, 1956-7, 1960, 1966, 1986).

As I have stated earlier, reviewing the history of the Pioneers from a purely humanistic perspective, one would be tempted to attribute its success to the gifted leaders who got the program up and running. This however overlooks the fact that the skills these men possessed, were really gifts from God. Furthermore, God's hand can be seen not only in the fact that he brought these gifted

men together on this project and blessed their work, it can also be seen in the way he used the idiosyncracies of the times to help this organization to remain doctrinally sound and grow.

As I talked to people familiar with the era, one thing I find generally agreed upon, is the lack of structured activities for the young. Unlike today, the kids didn't have little league or tee-ball. Their lives weren't filled with soccer and playing in basketball tournaments. The athletics and extra curricular activities at school were virtually nonexistent. In short, the lack of structured activities for kids provided a fertile soil for the Pioneer program to grow in. The extreme popularity of Scouting during that time gives credence to such a premiss. Scouting flourished because it provided something appealing to young boys. It was like placing food before people who were starving. It was into such a time that God ushered in this program called Pioneers.

By studying the early history of the Pioneers, one can see that the time was right for such an organization to flourish. The news about this fledgling organization spread rapidly and quickly gained momentum. Already in November of that first year, the news of this organization had spread to several other congregations in St. John's conference. As a result, Pastor Marti and Bruce, were invited to come to a pastoral conference at Friedens in Kenosha, and explain the program to the those in attendance. During the summer of 1952, a visitor from St. John's in West Bend, read about the Pioneer's activities in the Sunday bulletin and took the idea back home with him. By March of 1953, the second Lutheran Pioneer Train was formed at St. John's of West Bend. With two Trains

established and a third on its way, a national organization was formed later that same year to serve as a governing body for this expanding Pioneer program (Pioneer's History; Thompson, 1992).

Even though the program was experiencing great success, it wasn't entirely free from opposition. A number of people in the synod were skeptical of the organization. I think this was understandable, since the only organization they knew of like Pioneers, was the Boy Scouts and opposition to Scouting was very pronounced at this time. As I began to study the chain of events and the way in which the Pioneers grew in acceptance, I began to hypothesize that such resistance and skepticism actually had a positive effect on the organization. Having recently studied the *Formula of Concord*, I submit that history repeated itself somewhat. Just as confrontation helped our ancestors to become firmly established in Lutheranism, so the resistance that the Pioneer program encountered helped to confirm this organization on a biblically solid foundation and prevented false doctrine (like that which is in Scouting) from creeping into the Pioneer organization.

By 1956, the Pioneer program was beginning to be noticed by the Synod at large. In January, the Conference of Presidents invited Bruce and Pastor Fischer (who followed Marti at St. John's), to present the program to them. The program was well received, but no action was really taken. There was no report of recommendation made to Synod at this time. The program continued to thrive and during the Synod convention at New Ulm, in 1957, President Nauman appointed a committee of five, chaired by Robert Voss, to study the Pioneer program. This committee was scheduled to

report its findings at the next Synod convention (Proceedings, p.299-306; Thompson, 1992).

When the 1959 convention came around, the Pioneers were on the agenda. The report, which the committee of five brought to the convention was studied by a floor committee before being presented at the convention. In the report drafted by Voss' committee, these comments were made: "We appreciate the fact that from beginning to end, from top to bottom the organization of the Lutheran Pioneers is truly Lutheran." The committee suggested that, "**with synodical sanction**, the Pioneer movement continue as it has in the past in its relation to the Church, namely, that it be an organization within the Synod but not of the Synod." Furthermore, their report stated that they found in the organization, "sufficient safeguard to allay the fears of those who feel that the Pioneer movement might not remain what it now is. Such fears have been expressed. We find that they are unwarranted in view of such built-in supervision" (Proceedings, p.299-306).

The committee also commented favorably on the stage advancements within the organization.

"We find the stages of advancement, in reality, to be levels of education. They may be compared to the grades in school or Sunday school. ...There is no moral aspect nor concern for the religious development of the boy involved in this advancement, just as there is no moral aspect or religious development of a child involved in his advancement in the grades. Work righteousness and other false motivations commendably are absent" (Proceedings, p.299-306).

While the report from the committee of five was very favorable and called for "synodical sanction" the report from the floor committee was not positive at all. When the floor committee brought

their report to the assembly, it was met with protest and was thrown back to committee to be reworked. Their second report, which was later accepted by the assembly, was still a far cry from the positive endorsement of Voss' committee. Reading the final report, one can find little more than tacit recognition of the Pioneer program within the Synod.

Resolution No. 1

Subject: Lutheran Pioneers

WHEREAS, It is not the policy of the Synod to give official sanction to organizations within the congregations of the Synod; and

WHEREAS, Many congregations of the Synod have no need for the program of the Lutheran Pioneers; and

WHEREAS, An official sanction of the Lutheran Pioneers could give the impression that those who choose not to use it are remiss in fulfilling their obligation over against their youth; therefore be it

RESOLVED, That we as a Synod, refrain from giving official sanction to the Lutheran Pioneers.

Resolution No. 2

WHEREAS, The real purpose of the Church is to preach the Gospel; and

WHEREAS, It is the primary concern of church organizations to further this purpose; therefore be it

RESOLVED, That we encourage those organizations and pastors who choose to use this program to utilize the opportunities it offers to emphasize spiritual matters in keeping with the real purpose of the Church. (Proceedings, p.299-306).

Looking back on that era, I believe there may be a tendency to judge too harshly those who struggled with these issues. Looking at the Pioneer program today, we may wonder what was all the concern about. As I dug around in some of the polemics of the times, I discovered a couple of different concerns. As was brought out in the floor committee's recommendation, there were those who felt that the church's function was to preach the gospel. Since this was not the primary function of the Pioneers, the church shouldn't be bothering with it. While there is truth in this statement, it

overlooks the edifying benefits of fellowship. Moreover, as we survey our church today we see that such organizations, which exist within the church and have as their primary function to provide good Christian fellowship, fulfill a vital need among our people (Studies in Scouting... p.1-43; Proceedings, p.299-306).

Another concern that seemed to be an issue, was that some believed Pioneers to be just a substitute for Scouting and anything substituted for something that is initially wrong, must be wrong in itself. Now I can't say as I understand the logic of such an argument, nor do I agree with it. However, they may have a point, although poorly expressed. If the Pioneer program was simply started to keep boys out of Scouting, an organization which should be avoided, this in itself, would not be a good reason for starting the Pioneers. But this was not the fundamental reason behind the program. As I conversed with Bruce about why he wanted to start such an organization, he told me it was because he saw that young boys were no longer being taught some of the useful things he learned in Scouting. The schools didn't teach it and by and large, it wasn't something taught at home either. So the main reason for starting Pioneers, was to teach boys things like leadership, First Aid and compass, fire building, knotting and signaling. Just because these skills were being taught in Scouting didn't make them any less worthwhile for young boys to know. As one of our professors at the Seminary used to say, "Why let the devil have all the good stuff?" The Pioneer program, I believe, is a good example of how Christians can reclaim things which the devil has used to lead men astray (Studies in Scouting... p.1-43; Thompson, 1992).

I wonder if those who opposed Pioneers, believing it to be a substitute for Scouting, would have felt differently if they had studied closely the constitution of the Pioneers. Article I states that the Pioneer program was to be a "Christ-centered, truly Lutheran boy's organization." Its purpose was to teach boys,

"Good citizenship.... A knowledge of the great outdoors.... First Aid and its application. Skills and crafts.... Hiking; swimming; life saving; nature study; signaling; measuring; map reading; stalking; safety in handling knife, axe and firearms; and many other useful skills interesting to the adolescent boy. We would also keep our boys within the companionship of their own Lutheran boys from early youth" (Article III).

In spite of the skepticism and opposition the Pioneer program encountered, the organization flourished. Yet to ^{attribute} contribute the Pioneer's success simply to good leadership and opportune timing, is kind of like missing the forest because of all the trees. When we look at the history of the Pioneers we will certainly want to acknowledge the hard work, dedication and leadership of those who made this program what it is today, but we will not stop there. Every individual who played a key role in the development of Pioneers was a gift of God to his Church. They were not indispensable nor was the success of the program inherently due to them. They were simply tools of God. Men who had the privilege of giving of their time and talents in service to their God. Therefore, when we consider the success of an organization like Lutheran Pioneers and wonder, "What made it grow?" we should not stop short of the real reason. As Paul pointed out to the Christians in Corinth, who were wanting to praise the efforts of Paul and Apollos, God gives the increase. To him be all the glory!

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Constitution of Lutheran Pioneer of America, 1951.

Lorfeld, Dale, Personal interview, Dec. 31, 1992.

Lutheran Pioneer Handbook, Published by Lutheran Pioneers Inc.:
1951

Lutheran Pioneer Handbook, Published by Lutheran Pioneers Inc.:
1956-7.

Lutheran Pioneer Handbook, Published by Lutheran Pioneers Inc.:
1960.

Lutheran Pioneer Handbook, Published by Lutheran Pioneers Inc.:
1966.

Lutheran Pioneer Handbook, Published by Lutheran Pioneers Inc.:
1980.

Lutheran Pioneer Handbook, Published by Lutheran Pioneers Inc.:
1986.

Lutheran Pioneer's History, (Ongoing Journal) 1951-1986

Proceedings of the Thirty-Fifth Convention, Aug. 5-12, 1959.

Studies in Scouting and the Lutheran Pioneers, Published by Lutheran Pioneers Inc.: 1989.

Thompson, Bruce. Personal interview. Dec. 28, 1992.