

GCD'S GRACE AT ST. MATTHEW'S, "MOSQUITO HILL",
SAVANNA, ILLINOIS

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May, 11, 1992

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library

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While in most cases it should never be said that a single person is solely responsible for the gathering of believers together in a church, St. Matthews, "Mosquito Hill", is the exception. God's grace then only becomes all the more obvious and wonderful as we trace the humble beginnings of this little yet faithful church tucked away in the Northwest corner of the state of Illinois. In spite of its location, the times in which the members lived and the meager membership, our Lord worked through the lives of the individuals at St. Matthews by His precious Means of Grace.

The charter member of Mosquito Hill was Julius Barth, born January 5, 1830 in Eirshausen Lamspringe, Hanover, Germany. A shoemaker by trade Julius was considered to be well respected and above average in education by those in the German community. Eventually through the lure of the promised new world Julius emigrated to America with his family in 1857. After he arrived they initially settled in the Northwest corner of Illinois in a town called Galena. Later the Barth family moved about thirty miles Southeast of Galena, just North of Savanna and remained there.¹

Neighboring Sac and Fox native Americans that customarily came down from Wisconsin to the area for fine fishing, assisted Julius in erecting his homestead, a simple log cabin. This structure would not only serve as a meeting place for several local groups but also became the worship building for the farmers and their families in the immediate vicinity. His home was located approximately five miles North of Savanna just off of Ridge road.²

Prior to any official organizational worship that was led by a called minister, people were served by the Derinda and Massbach churches of the Iowa Synod. Pastors Brickner, List and Seiler were unofficially described

as the "vacancy pastors". While no written records are available to substantiate this information older members attending the church's Jubilee service recall their ministry.³

Through acquaintances, word of mouth and the power of the Holy Spirit active in the Word and sacrament, twenty Lutheran families in Washington township gathered at the home of Julius Barth and his family regularly to worship the true God. On June 4, 1888 these same individuals established St. Matthews Evangelical Lutheran Church. The first trustees elected at the meeting were John Bohnacker, Carl Smith, Christian Reese and Julius Barth the secretary.⁴

The first services were conducted in the second story of the Barth home. Later, it's not known precisely when, services were held in the old district school house also located on Ridge road. When strife arose (it is not known specifically what the strife was) the school board closed the building to the members of St. Matthews. However, when a new school building was erected, the old structure was purchased by the congregation and moved across the road to a parcel of ground donated to the church by Charles Millerschoan. Later Fred Wurster Sr. took possession of that farm and donated another tract to be used for the cemetery.⁵

The largest parcel of land belonging to the church was the burial grounds. This land was formerly occupied by Zion Church established in 1848. It was also an old church that was moved to its final location into Savanna where it became Zion Presbyterian Church and ended up serving as a stable. The people who originally owned this land or at least received the deed for the property failed to have their deed recorded. The property was again

sold to John Bohnacker. He in turn sold the property to St, Matthews for cemeterial use for \$25.6

The building was remolded and served as the church until 1899. At that time the second and final church building was secured under the pastorate of Rev. H. W. Herwig. This new structure was dedicated in January of 1900. Professor Notz from Watertown, Wisconsin was the featured speaker for the service. Also at that time it became known that one of the members possessed a "Sauer Bible," the first American printed German Bible. This was unique since up until this time all the members owned or used Bibles brought over when they emigrated.⁷

Since 1890 the following pastors served the congregation:

Rev. C. Trappe	1890-1893
Rev. P. Mayerhoff	1893-1896
Rev. R. Grube	1896-1898
Rev. R. Herwig	1898-1902
Rev. Michelau	1902-1903
Rev. E. Larble	1903-1906
Rev. F. Raetz	1906-1910

After Rev. Raetz left, a vacancy occurred for five years. During this time Rev. Rader, the pastor of a sister church in Prairie du Chien, Wisconsin served occasionally.⁸

In 1915 Rev. Paul Froehlke was assigned to St. Matthews. Then in 1919 Rev. Gervasius W. Fischer assumed the charge. In 1925 he accepted a call to the newly organized mission at Madison, Wisconsin and was interestingly enough succeeded by his brother Gustave Fischer. Rev. Gustave Fischer had just arrived from a church in Mamburg, Wisconsin. On Christmas Day, 1928 Rev. Fischer was installed. It was during his ministry that English was introduced upon the expressed wish of the members. It remained to be used

exclusively until the church disbanded.⁹

In 1928 Rev. Gerhard Fischer replaced Gustave Fischer (no relation). Also at this time St. Matthew's remained a member of the Joint Synod of Wisconsin and of other states. Regular services were held on the first and third Sundays of each month at 2 p.m. because there was no electricity.¹⁰

At the 50th anniversary of the churches existence it was noted that Charles Barth served as treasurer for 26 years and Adam Rath served as secretary for 29 years.¹¹

Not great detail is known about the programs or church records since many of the documents either vanished or were destroyed by fire. St. Matt's however, was distinctively and ^{has} traditionally remained to be a farmers church. Women sat on the right while married men and bachelors sat on the left. ¹²

The church itself did not have electricity until about 1949 and it wasn't until a hospital was built on the Ridge road leading out to the church that the road was graveled or paved as it were. Prior to this, traveling conditions were not only difficult but prevented services from being conducted.¹³

Mrs. Fischer (Gerhard) recalls one particular spring. Following a Christmas Eve service which was during a rarely held evening service, an interesting situation developed. The only light available was generated from kerosene lamps, an aladdin lamp and a huge wrought iron chandelier. In those days the surrounding roads were clay and the slightest rain turned them to soup. After this particular Christmas Eve service everyone went home as usual but because of the weather was unable to return until Easter.

Soon after the service and in the ensuing months several snowstorms literally crippled the area. It seemed that when the snow began to melt during the week making safe travel possible, sure enough another storm would blitz the Ridge road area come Friday or Saturday. This continued for months preventing anyone from attending church especially Rev. Fischer who happened to live down the ridge in Savanna. It wasn't until Easter Sunday that the weather relented enough to allow members passage to the tiny country church. When they arrived at the building to their surprise, the Christmas tree was still up. Because of the inclement weather no one was able to get to the church to take the tree down. That Easter (and Mrs. Fischer is not sure of the date) the members of St. Matthew's celebrated the resurrection of our Lord with the Christmas tree up.¹⁴

Because there was no electricity the services were held in the afternoon. This allowed members to complete some of their chores on the farm before church. Sundays with a later worship service especially provided an opportunity for the members to enjoy an incredibly generous traditional potluck meal. These were usually held outside under the shade of the trees. The dishes were prepared or organized in the school house across the road since the church itself was so small.¹⁵

While Mrs. Fischer was the organist throughout her husband's ministry at St. Matthew's she taught lessons. One such pupil was Miss Eunice Rath. She and her brothers took lessons from Mrs. Fischer but it was Miss Rath that continued to maintain her playing skills so that when Rev. Fischer and his wife left she took over as organist. To this day she continues to play as servant and a helper of worship at Trinity Lutheran Church in Mt.

Carroll, Illinois. Her first service happened to be the installation service for Rev. Fischer's successor, Rev. R. C. Hillemann.¹⁶

The organ that was used throughout the years of the churches existence now rests (in working order) at Miss Rath's residence. It is a Crown organ manufactured by George P. Bent of Chicago, Ill. The significance of this organ is that it is a reed organ. The difference between this organ and a more common harmonium is that the shape and twist of the reeds differ in air flow. The harmonium blows out air but the reed sucks air in. Miss Rath related how during Rev. Hillemann's stay the organ began to lose air so badly that no matter how hard she pumped it wouldn't sustain tones. Rev. Hillemann opened it up and found that a mouse had chewed the air bag. After he sewed it up it worked much better.¹⁷

At St. Matt's the pastor was responsible for bringing the communion elements. After preparing the elements through consecration the congregation would sing "Deck Thyself My Soul with Gladness." The women communed first, four per a table then the men. It wasn't until 1943 that the members bought the new "Lutheran Hymnal." Before this members sang from a 4 x 6 book that only held the lyrics of hymns.¹⁸

There were other changes that took place at the church. In preparation for the 50th anniversary many members desired to renovate, clean and basically spruce up the structure. Since times were particularly tough some members adamantly stated that financially this would be difficult to impossible to achieve. There were suggestions to clean the carpet runner, purchase a new alter, refinish pews (which happened to have hinged shelves for school) and perhaps even obtain stained glass of some sort. One member, Arthur Haas,

suggested that a committee be created to make home visits soliciting funds to accomplish some or all of these goals in view of the anniversary. Eventually after considerable debate and through a series of circumstances an alter made in Milwaukee was purchased, a new carpet runner was set in place, the pews were refinished and two stained glass windows were put in on either side of the alter.¹⁹

Once the new alter was in place (pulled out a short distance from the wall) the minister at times used that space as a sacristy. As you can tell from the picture an aladdin lamp hung in the front of the church. It is not known what specific purpose or meaning it served.²⁰

After Pastor G. P. Fischer left Rev. R. C. Hillemann served the parish from 1949-1956. The tin interior (which supplies excellent acoustics) was repainted during his ministry. It was also during his service there that the Ladies Aid was initiated. The ladies met in different homes every meeting conducting silent auctions, selling bakery goods and above all always centering their gatherings around God's Word.²¹

After Rev. Hillemann left Rev. Alfred Nicholaus served as minister for one year, 1956-1957. Following Rev. Nicholaus, Rev. Wilmer G. Hoffmann took over as spiritual leader from 1957-1961. Rev. Hoffmann changed the regularly scheduled first and third Sunday worship services to weekly occurrences.²²

When Rev. Hoffmann took a call to another parish Rev. Theodore Mahnke arrived. Up until this point Rev. Mahnke only served Trinity Lutheran church in Mt. Carroll and St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Savanna for one year. Rev. Mahnke entered this position suffering from poor health due to a heart condition. Because of his health he returned to the first and third Sunday wor-

ship schedule at St. Matthew's.23

It was during Rev. Mahnke's ministry that seniors from Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary came down twice a month during the school year to assist in worship and or to preach. They resided with Rev. Mahnke and his wife Irene at the parsonage located next to Trinity in Mt. Carroll. The following men carried out this service for the three churches from 1962-1970:

Jerald Plitzuweit	1962-1963
Ronald Roth	1963-1964
Charles Flunker	1964-1965
Douglas Bode	1965-1966
Alfred Jannusch	1966-1967
LeRoy Martin	1967-1968
Jon Schmuggee	1968-1969
Ralph Stuebs	1969-1970

Some "vicars" have fond memories not only of Ted Mahnke who appeared to be a good-humored and well liked minister but also of the extremely generous attitude and actions of the little country church. After one Mission Festival service a pastor recalled receiving \$60 for preaching, a very handsome sum especially during the mid-60's.24

Towards the end of Rev. Mahnke's ministry there were only three families remaining as members of St. Matt's. They were the John Wurster family, the Alan Haas family and three brothers and a sister (Joe, Fred, Paul and Eunice Rath). It was mutually agreed upon with great sadness and perhaps regret that St. Matthew's be disbanded. In September of 1970 due to "poor attendance" according to newspaper reports and due to the fact that Rev. Mahnke was called to his eternal home on July 27 of that same year, the little country church was officially disbanded. Trinity and St. Peter's churches assimilated some of the members while others eventually drifted away from church all together.25

There have been suggested by some, reasons as to why St. Matt's continued

to decline in numbers the way it did. Some claim that it was due to the fact that it was a farmers church and that farming was not as strong in the area as in other places. Others point to its location and the two other larger Lutheran churches in the vicinity. But even if those things did contributed to the churches demise Mrs. Fischer seems to have a plausible reason (humanly speaking). She felt that there was little or no growth because of the "proving grounds" nearby, the railroad personal and the extremely high turnover rate of people in the area.²⁶

It's difficult to reason, justify or even understand how and why God in his infinite wisdom would allow a gathering of believers to disband. Yet we are assured that God's ways are not always our ways and that his will is beyond our understanding. We also know from Scripture that our God is a loving God who gave his only Son for the salvation of the world. Our God is a God that assures us that he allows to happen to us only those things that will cleanse us from all unrighteousness, draw us closer to him, strengthen our faith and give all glory to him alone. So while things from our perspective may appear to change, our God does not.

It is well worth noting that a "son" of the congregation of St. Matt's became a full time servant in the preaching ministry. James Rath, son of Joe and Viola Rath was led by the Spirit through Word and sacrament as it was faithfully administered to enter our Lord's kingdom work and today serves at Lake Mills, Wisconsin. ²⁷ Consider that if the only purposes for St. Matt's existence were to serve it's twenty five or so families and to lead Pastor Rath to service as a minister of the gospel, God certainly touched many lives and continues to touch lives with that little church known as Mosquito Hill.

As much as this author tried to pursue the history of the title "Mosquito Hill", no explanation was available. As with several other interesting tidbits of historical information that perished in fires or were simply lost, that mystery will have to remain just that.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Phone correspondence: Mrs. Euveta Bleakley
- 2 Phone correspondence: Mr. Robert Krejci
- 3 Pastor Gustav Fischer's report for the Jubilee service: 1928
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Ibid.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Ibid.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Ibid.
- 12 Interview with Mrs. Gerhard Fischer: 4/20/92
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 Ibid.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Letter of coorespondence: Miss Eunice Rath
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Interview with Mrs. Gerhard Fischer: 4/20/92
- 20 Letter of correspondence: Miss Eunice Rath
- 21 Phone correspondence: Pastor Hoffmann
- 22 Phone correspondence : Miss Eunice Rath
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 St. Peter's Lutheran Church records/ Phone correspondencs: Professor James Tiefel

25 Phone correspondence: Miss Eunice Rath

26 Phone correspondence: Mr. Joe Rath

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MISCELLANEOUS:

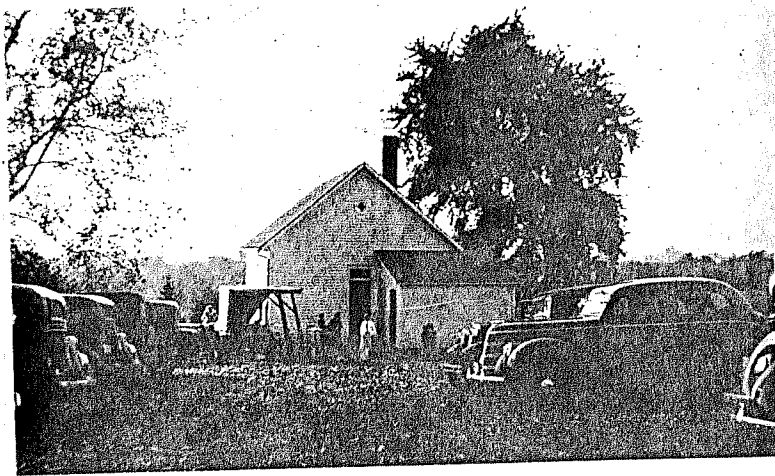
Letters of Correspondence from members of Trinity Lutheran and St. Peter's Lutheran churches, (Miss Eunice Rath, Mr. Joe Rath, Mrs. Euveta Bleakley, Pastor Wayne Schneider)

Interview with Mrs. Gerhard Fischer

Phone Correspondence with members of Trinity Lutheran and St, Peter's Lutheran Churches, (Miss Eunice Rath, Mr. Robert Krejci, Pastor Hoffmann, Professor Tiefel)

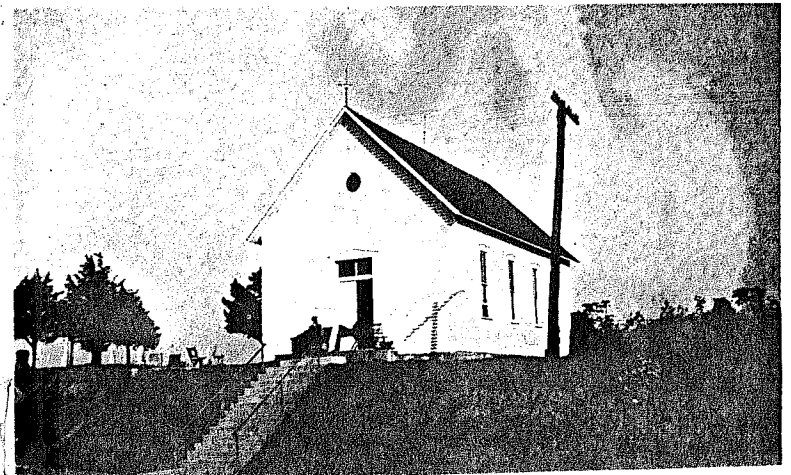
St. Matthew's Church, circa 1938





The schoolhouse across the road from St. Matthew's Church circa 1938.

St. Matthew's Church shortly after Ridge road was graveled, 1938.



St. Matthew's Church in 1970 after it was d'sbanded and donated to the Historical Society.

