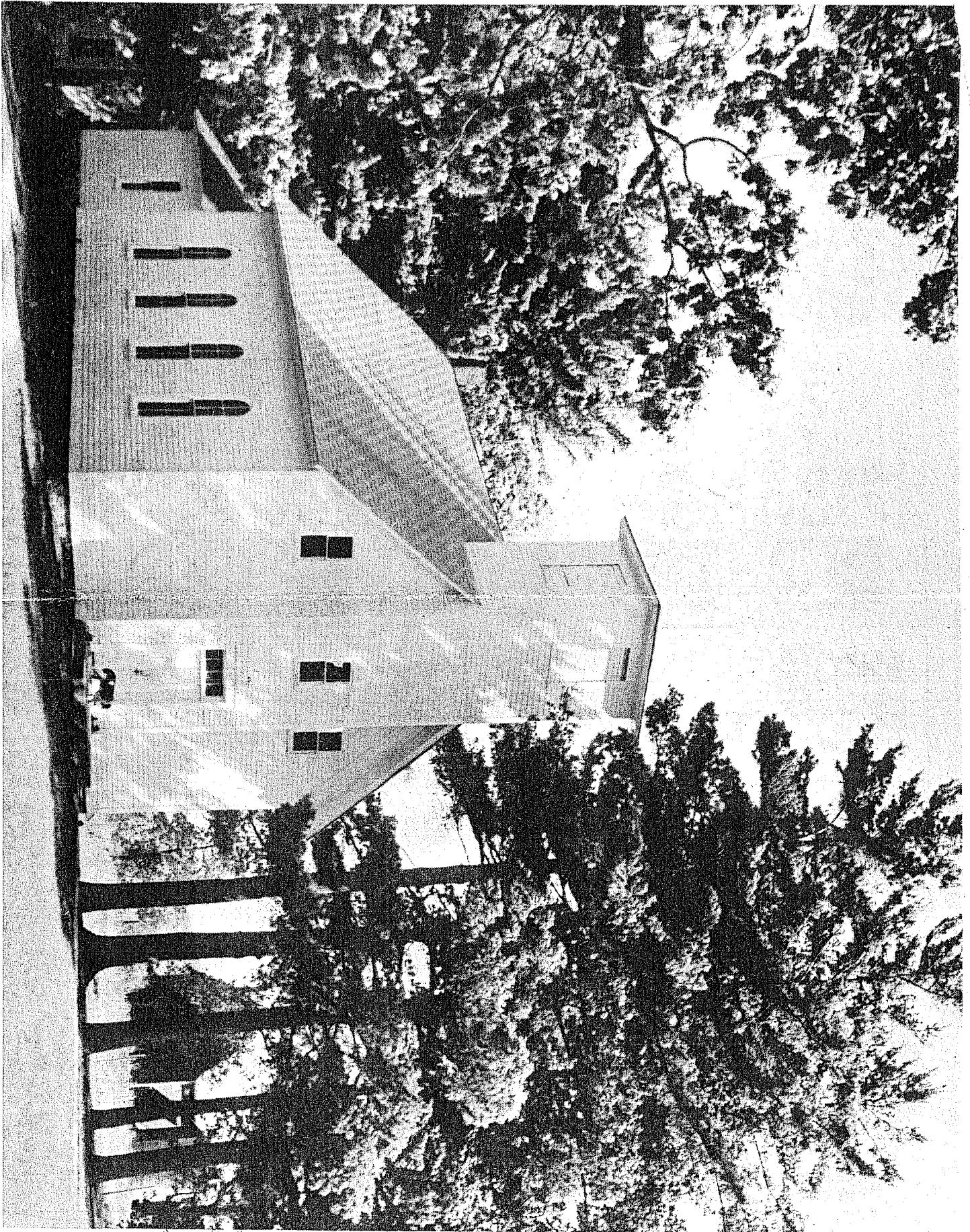


**St. John's Lutheran Church,  
Hay Creek, WI**

***102 Years of God's Grace***

Steven PrahI



I can still remember the drive to St. John's. In the last years of its existence, I was a regular attendee at their Sunday worship services. My dad and I would get into the car after church in Eau Claire and we would travel the 28 miles, listening to the Packer game on the radio. I remember driving past the old saw mill, known as Dells Mill, turned by the giant waterwheel, sitting on the glistening mirror of water. I remember walking up the steps into the old building, up the main aisle but around the iron floor grate because I was afraid I would fall through into the furnace, and to my customary seat near the front of church. I was always the youngest parishioner in attendance by at least forty years. On the Sunday's that I attended, church never started without me. That's probably because I arrived with the last pastor of St. John's, Hay Creek, Pastor Herbert Prah.

The history of St. John's, Hay Creek is not an easy history to trace. The main historical document is the church's record book which contains a listing of births and baptisms, deaths, confirmations, each member's offerings (measured in bushels and dollars) and who communed at each of the celebrations of the Lord's Supper since the church's inception. The majority of the membership of St. John's has already preceded us into glory and so cannot recount their memories. Those who remain have provided invaluable information, especially through their stories.

St. John's, Hay Creek officially came into existence on January 20, 1883. It was organized under the guidance of Pastor H. F. Proehl with 33 charter

members. The three elders of the congregation, Julius Zank, Johann Seig and Martin Luedtke, were named as trustees of "evangelisch lutherische German St. Johannes Gemeinde (St. John's congregation)"<sup>1</sup> when they signed the document of Incorporation and the first constitution of the church on June 6, 1883. At the time, the group met "in the school-house known as the Hay Creek School-house in the Town of Bridge Creek, Eau Claire County, Wisconsin"<sup>2</sup>. Julius Zank donated two acres of land for the purpose of building a church. J.L. Ball supplied all of the materials (lumber, etc) for the sum of \$1,000. Ferdinand Weinkoetz was contracted to build the church and was paid \$300 for labor. The frame church (30 by 40 feet and 18 feet high) was built later that same year.<sup>3</sup> On October 26, 1889, Julius Zank deeded an extra one-half acre of land to St. John's for the price of one dollar. This land was then used when the parsonage was constructed in 1889. Two years later, in 1901, the "school room" was added onto the existing church behind the altar in the front of the church. Pastor Prah remembers the inside of the church well:

The handcarved altar was the handiwork of Charlie Gruen, made around 1909. The pulpit had been lowered from its earlier days, but was still elevated a few feet. This became an issue in the winter. Art Steinke would stoke the wood furnace in the central underground fire room (there was no real basement). The heat would rise through the central 4/4 floor grate and heat the church to a toasty 75 degrees or so, and it was a few degrees warmer at the pulpit level. This made for interesting challenges, both for the robed preacher and for those who had eaten a full Sunday dinner before coming over for worship!<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Document of Incorporation, St. John' Lutheran Church, June 6, 1883.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> *Area Times*, Augusta, WI; Thursday, February 17, 1972; p. 8.

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Pastor Herbert Prah, December 07, 2004

From its inception until 1901, the members of St. John were served by pastors from the Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod. From 1902-1918, the Wisconsin Synod supplied pastors for the congregation. American Lutheran Synod pastors served from 1918-1937. Then, in 1938, St. John rejoined the Wisconsin Synod for good. From 1883 until 1937, ten pastors from the various synods had served St. John's. The major change in 1938 was not only the rejoining of the Wisconsin Synod, but the fact that the pastors were no longer residents who lived in the parsonage. Since then, the pastors who served St. John traveled from Neillsville, Globe, Stratford or Eau Claire. However, this was not an entirely bad situation with all of the parishioners. In an interview with Harriet (Steinke) Deacon, she recalled the first such pastor, William Baumann of Neillsville:

We went to church every Sunday. Many times we walked, and that was a long walk - over 5 miles. Pastor Baumann would come from Neillsville for services in his car. He's the first pastor I remember. He was a peach of a man. We would have our lessons in the back room behind the altar (the "school room") and after lessons he would drive us partway home, out to Hwy 10, where he would drop us off and we'd walk the rest of the way home.<sup>5</sup>

Holidays at St. John's were often extraordinarily special, as Thanksgiving was for Harriet Deacon, "I had confirmation on Thanksgiving Day. It was just my brother, Howard, and myself. I was only 13 and he was a little older, but they didn't want him alone in the class. I remember that we were in the front of the whole congregation and had our examination first. Each of us missed only one question apiece!"<sup>6</sup> Confirmations were a very special occasion at St. John's, because there were not many children there in the 1940's. As Harriet recalled,

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<sup>5</sup> Interview with Harriet (Steinke) Deacon, November 06, 2004.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

"We (the Steinkes) were the only children in the school classes."<sup>7</sup> Harriet also recalled:

Christmas was a big deal out there. They would cut a large tree and we children (there were always more children at Christmas time. I don't know where they came from.) would do all the decorating, even putting the star on the top and putting the candle holders on the tree. But we dare not light the candles - no way. That was a job only the elders were allowed to do. The candles burned the whole hour of service. They were a special "Christmas tree" candle, with different wax or something - they didn't melt as fast.<sup>8</sup>

The other major celebration at St. John's was not one that most people would commonly think of. Mission Festival was always a large gathering. In fact, a newspaper clipping announcing St. John's 90<sup>th</sup> anniversary also mentions that it was to be celebrated together with Mission Festival. This is how Pastor Prah! remembers this less-commonly celebrated holiday:

I remember Mission Festival. It was always in the fall. The members of St John would reciprocate with the members of Immanuel, Globe (6 mi N of Neillsville). St John's members would travel to Globe for its Mission Fest, then a few Sundays later the Globe folks (there were always 4-6 times more of them than of us) would make the trip over. The offering was usually substantial (by comparison) and there was plenty of food served afterwards; the traditional hot dishes and open-faced sandwiches of velveeta cheese spread with imbedded cross-slices of olives. Yum! These were special times of fellowship and evidences of the Holy Spirit at work.<sup>9</sup>

Holidays and festivals were not the only things that were special at St. John's. One of the most interesting bits of history involving this congregation was the way in which they ensured that they would have a pastor to serve them:

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Pastor Prah!

The congregation had at sometime in the '60s become vacant. They tell the story of approaching Pastor Norm Lindloff in Neillsville to come and serve them (as Baumann had done years before). As the story goes, Lindloff came one Sunday and then said this was "too much" and he never came again! So the group approached the Eau Claire fledgling group, then meeting at the YMCA, and struck a deal. They would drive in from the Hay Creek area (it was 28 miles one way) and worship together with those starting St Mark, and once the Eau Claire congregation got established, then its pastor would come out to their church for services.

So Pastor Fred Kogler worked with this agreement. It actually worked out rather well. I see the faces of Hay Creek people on the early photos from the "Y" days. When I came in mid-1973 it was just a given that I also traveled to Hay Creek.

In the summer time those services were at 11:00 (Eau Claire was at 9:00. After St Mark went to two services, we moved the Hay Creek service to 1:30 pm. Being the Packers fan that I am, I am thankful (now) that the Green and Gold fielded such mediocre teams in the late 70's through the mid-80's! More of a challenge was doing the two services, with Bible class in between, hastily eating a quick lunch, then off to Hay Creek for the 28 mile trip and a service there. Then afterwards there was always the visiting that went on (Werner Zank used to – in good weather – follow me to my car and hang his arm over the opened door so that I'd have to talk with him – listen to him, he was starved for adult conversation – until he was done. Many a time it was angels that got me home awake – caffeine from coffee or a Coke wasn't strong enough.<sup>10</sup>

Being a good traditional German Lutheran congregation, the traditional division between men and women existed. The women always sat on the left of the church and the men on the right. The Germanic roots shone through in the leadership of the church as well. Pastor Prah says, "In my years at St John, we had only one meeting per year. Elections were held (!) and the same guys were always re-elected." A newspaper clipping announcing the 89<sup>th</sup> annual church

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<sup>10</sup> Interview with Pastor Prah

meeting also mentions another astonishing fact that in the entire life of the congregation, there were only four secretaries: Julius Zank for 37 years, J.M. Zank for 35 years, Roland Zank for 15 years and Werner Zank for one year.<sup>11</sup> This tradition held true as Werner Zank held the position until the church stopped meeting together.

St. John's, Hay Creek celebrated their centennial with a special worship service on August 28, 1983. Pastor David Witte, who served St. John's from 1963-1968, preached for the occasion. Pastor Marvin Zank, a son of the congregation, even played the old foot-pump organ for the service (This instrument is now in the WELS Historical Institute's Salem Church in Granville.).<sup>12</sup> There were many visitors on-hand for the grand event, which, as it turned out, was the beginning of the end for the congregation of St. John, whose membership at time of the centennial service numbered 14 communicant members and a total of 15 souls. Pastor Prahel tells of the end of the congregation:

The coming of the Amish in force into the farmland surrounding the church, coupled with a few Christian funerals, led Art Steinke and the rest to suggest to me one day the idea of closing down the church. While I could truly say that I enjoyed my ministry among them, it was time. They recognized I could probably make better use of my time, and besides, they could load up into a car or two and make the commute into Eau Claire. They saw that as getting involved in a larger fellowship of Christians and besides, they could use it as an excuse to go to K-Mart or to a restaurant. I continued to serve those who were shut-in or hospitalized. Right now there

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<sup>11</sup> *Area Times*, Augusta, WI; Thursday, February 17, 1972; p. 8.

<sup>12</sup> Interview with Pastor Prahel



are only two who remain: Deloris Steinke lives in the old parsonage, and Howard Steinke is in the nursing home in Colfax.<sup>13</sup>

When I asked Pastor Prah! about his fondest memories of St. John, Hay Creek, he told me this story:

Among the many stories that stand out in my memory is the one about "Aunt Heidi" (Adelheid Zank). She played the organ (a small electric one) virtually every Sunday. In fact, we celebrated her 50 years of service as organist on a chosen Sunday, another gala event. It was at that event that her nephew, Orville Gruen, commented to me, "You know, I've been coming on and off to this church for all of those fifty years, and I don't recall being able to recognize a single tune she plays for preservice." I thought, "You know, Orv, you're right!" It was one of those things. She would have some sort of sheet music in front of her, but never was there a recognizable melody from favorite hymns, from Bach, etc. It was just harmonic notes that "moved along" for a couple of minutes before the worship formally began, and all to the glory of God.<sup>14</sup>

Even after closing their doors for the last time, St. John's members were still generous with their gifts. Their communion ware and baptismal font were donated to Grace Lutheran Church in Fayetteville, Arkansas after seeing an inquiry in the *Northwestern Lutheran*.<sup>15</sup> The pews, pulpit, lectern and hand-carved altar were made available to the congregation in Hot Springs, South Dakota and their pastor, John Schuetze.<sup>16</sup> The building was sold to the local Amish for \$500. The Amish dismantled it for the lumber, removed the foundation stones and the furnace pit and backfilled everything. The only

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<sup>13</sup> Interview with Pastor Prah!

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Correspondence between Pastor Prah! and Pastor Charles Huebner, Grace, Fayetteville, AR

<sup>16</sup> Correspondence to Pastor John Schuetze from Pastor Prah! and Deloris Steinke (member of St. John's)

physical remembrances of St. John today are the parsonage, currently inhabited by Deloris Steinke, and the St. John cemetery where many of the members lay.<sup>17</sup>

If you are ever driving out of Eau Claire, towards Augusta on highway 12 and you turn right into the Amish country to buy some of the fine furniture sold there, you will see plenty of beautiful land, some buggies pulled by horses, and of course the beautiful serenity of Dells Mill. What you will not find is the building where, for over 100 years, the gospel of Jesus Christ was preached and his praises sung. In fact, you could drive right past the exact piece of land and never know that a church had stood on that spot. Fortunately, the Lord knows those who are his. Eternity will reveal the harvest of souls that took place on that sacred plot.

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<sup>17</sup> Interview with Pastor Prah

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Correspondence to Pastor John Schuetze from Pastor Prah and Deloris Steinke (member  
of St. John's)

- This paper was also made possible through the generosity of Deloris Steinke, who allowed me to look through the few remembrances she has left of St. John's, including the bulletin from the centennial service, as well as various other articles and clippings.