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German Immigration and the
Spread of Lutheranism
in Southwestern Michigan

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INTRODUCTION

If you were to go to the library and look up the history of Lutheranism in Michigan, you may not get inundated (history books on Lutheranism in Michigan are not that numerous), but you will quickly become enchanted with the stories of Frankenmuth and Saginaw and the Lutherans who migrated there seeking refuge from the Prussian Union and other factors. There is Graebner's history on the subject as well as other books and chapters in general histories.

But is there Lutheranism outside of the Saginaw Valley? One gets the feeling, with all this emphasis on Frankenmuth and Saginaw, that there is not. Koehler, in his history of the WELS, spends little time on anything other than the Saginaw Valley when he discusses Michigan Lutheranism. What about the Lutherans in Southwestern Michigan? Starting in the late nineteenth century a steady flood of German-Russians immigrated to Southwestern Michigan, establishing seven strong congregations within a half hour drive of each other.

So, the purpose of this paper is to trace the German immigration trends into Southwestern Michigan and the rapid growth of Lutheranism there. In other words, there is Lutheranism outside of the Saginaw Valley.

CHAPTER ONE

Though the first regular clergyman preached in the city of St. Joseph around 1829, there was no church building until 1856. The religious meetings were held in the school house until that year. As a rule, the people in the area seemed to take but little interest in religious matters. The following incident illustrates this point.

In 1843, the Rev. Hiram Kellogg, of Oneida county, N.Y., was appointed President of Knox College, Galesburg. While on his way to assume his duties, he arrived at St. Joseph by stage, early one Sunday morning, and stopped at the "Mansion House," then kept by Judge Daniel Olds. Not wishing to travel Sunday, he decided to remain. It did not seem to him that the day was observed as it should be by the people, for they were engaged as on week-days, and many were pitching quoits in front of the tavern. Mr. Kellogg, on inquiring if there was a church in the place, was informed there was not. Wishing to be quiet, he inquired of Judge Olds if there was any person in St. Joseph who feared the Lord. The Judge replied, "No," but after a moment's reflection, said, "Well, yes: there is Hiram Brown, up the street a little ways: I guess he fears him a little," and directed him to the residence of Mr. Brown, where he called and was invited to stay. He related the incident, and, after a little conversation, they found that both were from the same section in the East, and that the Reverend gentleman was well acquainted with the friends of Mrs. Brown. He was requested to preach, and accepted the invitation. Notice was sent out to the people, who gathered at the Old White School House, and listened to a good sermon. Mr. Kellogg remained two days before continuing his journey.¹

Though the religious life in St. Joseph in particular, and in Southwestern Michigan in general, seems dismal according to this quote, one must not jump to any false conclusions. As immigrants move to a new area they bring with themselves their churches. But

¹The Daily News: St. Joseph Directory for 1880 (St. Joseph: Dudley, Jennings and Skinner, 1880), p.26.

in Southwestern Michigan, the introduction of churches reflect the unique immigration trends into the area.

Unfortunately, Michigan was plagued in its early history by false rumors of swamp land and disease. Immigrants were disheartened because of the supposed difficulties and dangers that were rumored to exist in Michigan. Thus, immigration patterns appeared to bypass Michigan, passing through to the south in Ohio and Indiana and Illinois in proportionately greater numbers than in Michigan. But once these rumors were dispelled immigration did come to Michigan at a rate that quickly compensated for the slow movement of people into Michigan in previous years.

Another factor that contributed to this slow trend, and consequently to the situation that faced Rev. Hiram Kellogg concerning the religious life of the inhabitants of Southwestern Michigan, was the difficult wooded terrain characteristic of Michigan. In the fall of 1679 La Salle and his small party of priests, guides, soldiers and trappers set out from Green Bay and came down the west side of the lake, past the mouth of the Chicago River and around to the present area of St. Joseph in Southwestern Michigan. The Griffen, which had brought them to Green Bay, was to return to Niagara with her load of skins and furs, then hasten to the mouth of the St. Joseph river and take La Salle and his party back to the Niagara before the onset of winter.

After coasting around the southern end of Lake Michigan, La Salle and his party landed at the mouth of the St. Joseph river in November to await the arrival of the Griffen. They built a fort and

establishing relations with the local Indians. Day after day they gazed across the lake from the bluff at the mouth of the river in anticipation of the Griffen, and day after day their hearts sank as the Griffen was still unseen. The weather grew colder and their provisions diminished rapidly.

Desperate, the La Salle party decided they venture out on their own and race the weather to the Illinois territory to a well provisioned fort. Soon the ice would freeze on the river and escape in that direction would be cut off. On the third of December they set out along the St. Joseph, but turned back by a ferocious blizzard, so they encamped at their fort again. La Salle and his men realized at last that if they were to get back to the fort at Niagara they must find their way through the unexplored wilderness on foot.

They had to build a raft to cross the St. Joseph, to begin with, and were hardly through the marsh on the eastern before their clothing was tattered by the denseness of the undergrowth. They were in constant fear of the wild animals and of hostile Indians who were, at that time, making war in Southern Michigan; and many times they set fire to the grass behind them to hide their trail.²

La Salle and his party did eventually make their way to Detroit, unknowingly as the first travelers of the soon to be Territorial Road that will connect Detroit with Kalamazoo with Benton Harbor.

Another problem was the Indians. Southwestern Michigan was

²J.S. Morton, Reminiscences of the Lower St. Joseph River Valley (Benton Harbor, MI: published under the auspices of the Federation of Women's Clubs, 1909), p.13.

not without its threats from hostile Indians, especially the Pottawatomies. There are stories in the history books about French settlers racing down the St. Joseph river amidst showers of arrows. But the Indian threat was not as much of a problem (especially compared to Eastern Michigan and Wisconsin) as the general nuisance of the Indians to the settlement of the area. For example. In 1804 the government at Washington commenced preparations for the erection of a fort on Lake Michigan, and selected the mouth of the St. Joseph river as the best location. But that fort was never built.

The commissioners commenced preparations for the erection of the fort on the hill overlooking the harbor, but the Indians, who at this time owned all the land on both sides of the river, held a council and refused to let the work go further. So the men and supplies went around the end of the lake and built Fort Dearborn on the Chicago. It is interesting to speculate as to how much this single event affected the subsequent history of both St. Joseph and Chicago.³

Despite the rumors, despite the rough terrain, and despite the nuisance of the Indians Michigan, and especially Southwestern Michigan, grew rapidly with immigrants. Once some of the forested areas could be cleared, Southwestern Michigan proved to be ideal for settlement. The climate with its temperature and precipitation was suitable for crops and livestock. The temperature tended to be mild, 66-73 degrees in summer and 22-26 degrees in the winter.⁴

³ibid., p.20.

⁴Charles F. Heller, et al, Population Patterns of Southwestern Michigan (Kalamazoo, MI: The New Issues Press Institute of Public Affairs, Western Michigan University, 1974), p.5. Some of the following stats come from this same source.

The average growing season was from 140 to 180 days, the longest growing season in the state. Southwestern Michigan also was the most precipitous section of the state, 32 - 38 inches annually. Most of this is due to the lake which made Southwestern Michigan very appealing, especially as it becomes famous fruit belt.

Likewise, transportation became a factor. Before the railroads came, only two roads linked Detroit with Chicago: the Detroit-Chicago road, started in 1824, and the Territorial Road, started a little later. Both roads ran through Southwestern Michigan. But water transportation as the most prominent feature of Southwestern Michigan in its early history. Two-thirds of the urban centers were located on the major rivers: St. Joseph, Grand, Kalamazoo, and the Muskegon. Hence the port cities (Muskegon, St. Joseph, Benton Harbor, and Grand Haven) grew rapidly as Great Lakes transportation bloomed.

By 1830 there were only five settled "islands:" Niles, Sturgis, Kalamazoo, Marshall, and NW Branch County. But in the coming decade there was a rush of immigrants from New York and New England to Southwestern Michigan, due to 1) the opening up of the Erie Canal in 1825, 2) the conclusion of several Indian treaties (Southwestern Michigan had the largest concentration of Indians in the Michigan territory, comprising 14% of the territory but possessing 25% of the Indian population⁵). By 1839 all of the thirteen counties of Southwestern Michigan (except Muskegan (1859)) were founded before Michigan became a state, and the total

⁵ibid., pp.9, 10.

population in these counties amounted to 31% of Michigan's 500,000 total population!⁶

With the growing population came churches. Though at first religion seemed unimportant, churches flourished as the steady stream of settlers tended to their spiritual needs. In 1847 the first Dutch settlement at Holland occurred, initiating the most deliberate and organized settlement of the area. Today the Dutch Reformed's presence is clearly seen with Grand Rapids as its center.

But the churches that dotted Southwestern represented the normal cultural background of the early settlers: connections with England, New England, and New York and the various beliefs common to those areas. In 1830 a Methodist Mission was formed, known as the St. Joseph Mission. By 1856 it grew rapidly and became a regular station, building its first house of worship in 1858-59. The First Congregational Church of St. Joseph was founded with ten members on April 27, 1854. Across the river, in Benton Harbor, similar churches popped up, representing the eastern and English religious influence of its inhabitants. The First Methodist Church organized in 1868; the First Baptist Church in the same year; the First Congregational Church in 1866; and, showing the strong anglo influence of the east coast, the First Universalist Church in 1870.

But the first settlers were not strictly anglo; the Germans began to come as migrants from the east. By 1860 the German Baptist Church was organized in St. Joseph. These first Germans

⁶ibid., p.15.

were mostly from other parts of the USA, migrating in the search of suitable farm land. But by the 1860's and 1870's actual German immigrants began to come to Southwestern Michigan. The Hessians are coming!

CHAPTER TWO

By 1860 38,787 Germans were recorded among Michigan's population of 749,113.⁷ Many of these, of course, migrated from immigration points along the east coast, or were descendants of previous German immigrations. But most were the result of direct recruitment of the Michigan government.

German immigrants were highly desired in Michigan. They had the reputation for being industrious, religious, often educated or in favor of education, and easily assimilated. So, in 1845 Michigan established its Foreign Emigration Agency in New York City to "encourage immigration into the state (of Michigan) and travel on our public roads."⁸ John Almy of Grand Rapids, Michigan's Foreign Emigration Agent, wrote while in New York a six page booklet, "State of Michigan--1845--to Emigrants" in both English and German. 5000 copies were distributed to new immigrants in New York City.

Almy's successor, Edward H. Thomson of Flint (1849), carried the work further. He became friendly with emigration officers, especially Charles L. Fleischmann, the U.S. consul to Wurtemberg and author of "Der Nord Amerikanische Landwirth." Fleischmann reported favorably on Michigan on his trips to Germany. Thomson also wrote a 47 page pamphlet, "The Emigrant's Guide to the State of Michigan" which included maps, a historical sketch, and

⁷Warren C. Vander Hill, Settling the Great Lakes Frontier: Immigration to Michigan, 1837-1924 (Lansing: Michigan Historical Commission, 1970), p.16.

⁸ibid., p.18.

statistical guide. Thomson claimed over 2000 immigrants. But in 1850 the position of the Emigration Agent was abolished by Gov. Barry, supposedly because Barry felt Michigan was known well enough.

But by 1859 new work was conducted on emigration. Rudolph Diepenbeck, a German living in Michigan and editor of "Michigan Democrat Volksblatt," wrote his own pamphlet with maps and explanations of Michigan's educational and political systems, "Der Staate Michigan." Diepenbeck claimed 561 immigrants.

After a short period of inactivity, Max H. Allardt of E. Saginaw traveled to Germany in 1869 as Commissioner of Emigration, with his office in Hamburg. He published "Der Michigan Wegweiser"--an eight page magazine which provided much useful and enticing information on Michigan. But in 1874 Allardt was recalled.

The last to actively recruit German immigrants was Col. Frederick Morley, a Detroit newspaperman who in 1881 published a forty-eight page abstract, "Michigan and Resources," in both Dutch and German. 42,000 copies were distributed. By 1885 the Office of Immigration in Michigan was abolished and by WWI no active recruitment was conducted in foreign lands; only among Germans already in the U.S.

What came about from all this time and energy spent on recruitment? In 1920, a thorough study of Michigan's population was conducted, and estimates concluded that about 670,000 of Michigan's residents were of German origin.⁹ The Germans were

⁹ibid., p.22.

eager to take up roots in Michigan. In the 1840's and 50's crop failures in Europe turned many eyes to foreign lands for a better opportunity, and the failure of the liberal revolt in 1848 forced many to leave. And there was Michigan's emigration efforts enticing them. Also, the Prussian Union of 1817 and other religious factors led many to pack up and head to the U.S.

The impact of this wave of German immigration established, encouraged, and nourished Lutheranism in Michigan. There is the familiar story of Frankenmuth and Saginaw and the flood of Lutherans there. And the establishment of Lutheranism in Southwestern Michigan also resulted from these immigrations.

Lutheranism leap frogged from East Michigan to Southwestern Michigan along the paths the immigrants took. One stronghold of Lutheranism in this area appeared in St. Joseph, Michigan: Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church (LC-MS).¹⁰ The first recorded minutes of Trinity date back to a meeting held on May 13, 1867. A permanent constitution was adopted and signed by twenty men at the next meeting, August 11. The church building was dedicated on September 5, 1867 which costed \$857.21. This young congregation was served intermittently by Pastor J.H. Meyer of Bainbridge, Michigan where Lutheranism has been flourishing for a while. Pastor J. Feiertag was called by the LC-MS to serve as a missionary in Berrien County, Southwestern Michigan, due to the potential of establishing churches among the recent German immigrations into the

¹⁰Brief History of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, St. Joseph, Michigan: 1867-1942 (St. Joseph, MI, 1942), pp.7-11.

area. Pastor Feiertag served Trinity from time to time, and under his leadership Trinity began to grow and prosper. Finally, Trinity was able to and was also blessed to call their own pastor, Candidate N. Soergel, who was ordained and installed on August 15, 1869. By 1875 Trinity had already grown to 280 souls!

From the period of 1882-83 Trinity was without a pastor. The record show that during this vacancy Trinity suffered and was in great danger losing the true doctrine of the Lutheran Church.¹¹ But the congregation pledged itself once again to the true doctrine and in 1883 was blessed to receive another pastor, Carl Zlomke, and the growth continued again. Trinity Lutheran Church represents the flood of German immigration into Southwestern Michigan, and the growth of the Lutheran Church as well. By 1917 the following ministerial acts were performed: baptisms, 2255; confirmations, 1000; marriages, 571; burials, 663. The congregation, by 1917, had a communicant membership of 900 and a voting membership of 261. The school had an enrollment of about 200. Thus, Lutheranism was spreading to Southwestern Michigan in leaps and bounds! Of course, a study of the other LC-MS churches, and other Lutheran churches, would reflect the rapid growth with more startlingly figures. But let Trinity serve as an example of this growth.

The WELS also has shared in this expansion into Southwestern Michigan through the Michigan Synod. On August 16, 1833, the

¹¹Unfortunately, the records do not tell why Trinity almost lost its true Lutheran doctrine. I was not able to find this information in my research, though further research could dig it up. It would be interesting to see what the danger was.

pioneer missionary, Friedrich Schmid, arrived in Detroit. He was sent to administer to the spiritual needs of Lutherans on the eastern side of Michigan. Though he wished to go further west in Michigan, never got beyond Jackson. Christoph Ludwig Eberhardt is credited with the spread of the Michigan Synod further west. Completing missionary studies in 1860, Eberhardt, together with his friend Klingmann, as sent to Pastor Schmid in America. They arrived at Schmid's home on September 27th.

Two locations were vacant, one of them in Adrian, the other a mission station in western Michigan, with its home base in Allegan County. When it came to the question of who was to go to Allegan, and who to Adrian, Eberhardt said to his friend Klingmann: "Do you know what we are going to do? I am strong and healthy and better able to endure hardship than you are. I will become the travelling missionary, while you go to Adrian."¹²

Soon, congregations were formed and became bases for further expansion. For example. In 1903 the parish of Hopkins-Allegan was divided, with Pastor Frey being stationed in Allegan. From this base he performed mission work in Otsego, Brady, and Saugatuck.

Unfortunately, the WELS lost some congregations it had obtained through the Michigan Synod because of the split in Michigan over the unification of the Michigan Synod with the WELS. In 1892 Michigan was to join the Wisconsin Federation and become a district of it. But a minority, distraught over the closing of the seminary in Saginaw, did not like the idea and a split occurred: the minority forming the Michigan Synod, and the rest

¹²Michigan Memories: Things Our Fathers Have Told Us (Michigan District of the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod, 1985), p.163.

joining Wisconsin as the Michigan District. This split was not healed until 1910. As a result, several churches, disturbed by the split, left. Place names include Sherman, Kalamazoo, Marshall and Albion, over protest, sought and obtained membership into the LC-MS. Ludington was an earlier loss. But considering the strife the losses were not severe.

Thus, Lutheranism came to Southwestern Michigan. Michigan was able to get a share of the general immigration en masse from Germany which was prevalent in U.S. history in the nineteenth century. And with the Germans came Lutheranism. And these Germans lived up to their reputation of being religious, for not a few strong Lutheran churches were organized during this period. During the break with LC-MS in 1962 the Lutherans of Southwestern Michigan found it difficult to come to grips with the whole matter (comparable to if not equivalent with the same feelings in Frankenmuth): reportedly the LC-MS churches in Southwestern Michigan were among the most conservative and cooperative with the WELS.

But by the 1890's a new immigration of Germans began which actually put Southwestern Michigan, and especially Berrien County in the history books. For from the 1890's on to the middle of the twentieth century the Volhynian Germans arrived.

CHAPTER THREE

In 1894 the first of the German immigrants from the Russian province of Volhynia settled in the neighborhood of Benton Harbor, at Sodus. He sent a letter home to relatives and friends in Volhynia relaying complimentary information concerning the area which brought others, and soon there was a steady flow of these Germans to this section of the country.¹³ Who were the Volhynians, and why did they emigrate to Southwestern Michigan?

There were two reasons why the Russian government solicited Germans to emigrate to their land: 1) it was necessary to cultivate vast areas of untilled land and introduce agriculture; 2) the German colonists were to provide a protective wall against the Asiatic tribes (intended primarily for the Volga region).¹⁴ To achieve this goal the Empress Catherine II issued a Manifesto on July 22, 1763. Some of the main provisions of the Manifesto are:

"free practice of religion . . . shall not be obliged to pay taxes . . . not liable, against their will, to any military or civil service . . . all the lands allotted for the settlement of the colonists are to be given to them for eternal time . . . (and one more important regulation) If any of the foreigners who have settled here and become subject to our rule should decide to depart again from our country, we will of course grant them the freedom to do so at any time, on

¹³This letter has not come up in my research, though it may still exist. Still, one can guess what the letter mentioned, including how the climate was similar to that of Volhynia and the opportunity for agriculture the area provided. It certainly would be interesting reading as a catalyst for these series of immigrations. 50 Years of Grace: St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Benton Harbor, Michigan (1948) makes mention of this letter.

¹⁴Karl Stumpp, The German-Russians: Two Centuries of Pioneerin (Bonn-Brussels-New York: Edition Atlantic-Forum, 1965), p. 9.

condition, however, that they will be obliged to pay into our treasury a portion of the assets they have acquired in our Empire. After that, each one will be permitted to travel, without hindrance, wherever he pleases.¹⁵

This wave of German immigrations resulting from this manifesto settled the Russian region known as the Volga region (named after the Volga river), a great plains region far to the east. Many from this German colony immigrated to the Saginaw Valley and the "thumb area" of Michigan during the end of the nineteenth century.

The German settlements in Volhynia (much closer to Germany, in present day Poland) did not come into existence through governmental action or support, but through private initiative. This immigration came in three waves: the first in 1816 from the Danzig and Rhine Palatinate; the second and third (1831 and 1861) from other German cities and colonies in Poland and also Germany. At first these Germans made a living as tenant farmers, but in 1831 a great influx of settlers began as a result of the first Polish revolt against Russian domination. But the peak of the settlements occurred in 1861 after the second Polish revolt, which coincided with the liberation of the Polish peasants from serfdom. The landlords lost their cheap labor so they solicited German farmers to come to their lands. Buyers were also solicited, offered cheap land which often consisted of forest and swamp land. But the Germans, living up to their reputation as being industrious, in a course of a few years made even this cheap land highly productive and profitable. These settlers did not form interdenominational

¹⁵ibid., p. 10.

villages. Rather, Catholic Germans settled in Catholic villages. The same is true for Lutherans, Mennonites and Reformed. Thus, when these groups began to immigrate out of Volhynia, they did so not only as families but also as small bodies of people of the same religion. In this way, many Lutheran Volhynian Germans would rapidly bring about a rapid growth of Lutheranism in an area, such as Southwestern Michigan.¹⁶

But if these settlers had governmental support, and if prosperity seemed to follow them, why did these German Russians migrate out of Russia? Until 1871, an upward movement in all areas of life was noticed among the German Russians. They experienced prosperity and acquisition of vast amounts of land; their cultural condition also improved. But it was precisely this prosperity that became a thorn in the eyes of the Russians. A movement quickly arose against the expansion of Germans in Russia. The German minority was regarded as a foreign factor of a cultural and economic kind within national Russia, and had to be opposed by nationalist Russians. The native Russians also looked upon these Germans with envious eyes and sheer hatred.

On June 4, 1871, these factions succeeded in ending the Codex of the Colonists which had assured the Germans of certain rights when they settled. Hence, their self-administration came to an end and the German settlements came under the control of the Russian

¹⁶ibid., pp.14,15. For an excellent study on German Russians see also Fred C. Koch, The Volga Germans: In Russia and the America's From 1763 to the Present (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977). Fred Koch does mention the Volhynian Germans also.

Ministry of the Interior. All village records had to be kept in Russian. Exemption from military service was abolished, and many young, German men were forced to serve as soldiers of the Russian army. Soon property rights and conducting schools in the German language were revoked. These restriction provoked the settlers to look around for more congenial surroundings. They had two choices:

1. The migration to remote Siberia, where cheap land could still be acquired and where the new laws were not so strictly enforced, since the Russian government itself was interested in the settlement of that region.
2. The emigration to the USA, Canada, and South America.¹⁷

Both roads were taken by the Volhynian Germans.

Overseas emigration appealed to many Volhynians, even though it meant leaving behind their roots and homes. Just like Canada, these foreign nations were interested in settlers to inhabit and develop areas. In Canada in 1872 a law was passed to grant to every immigrant a 160 acre homestead for only \$10, to be his permanent property after three years. The Homestead Act of 1862 offered similar inducements in the U.S. Brazil, Argentina and Paraguay offered similar packages. The great emigration movement of the German Russians began in 1873 and continued right up to the Second World War! The Volga Germans comprised the majority of the immigrants and the widest range (many went to South America). The Volhynians, much smaller in number and who favored forested regions reminiscent of their homeland in Russia, settled more in groups, in Canada, mainly south of Lake Winnipeg and around Edmonton, but their principal immigration magnet was Berrien County in

¹⁷ibid., p.29.

Southwestern Michigan. Pockets of Volhynians can also be found in Kansas, Nebraska and even Texas, plus several other locations. All in all, the number of German Russians in the New World is estimated to be by 1940 about 1,037,000 with the majority in the U.S.

Victor A. Reisig of St. Joseph, Michigan, and an authority on the German Russians, estimates that approximately 60,000 of Berrien County's residents in 1975 were of German Russian extraction. That means that about 85% of Southwestern Michigan's German population came from Russia. In fact, Berrien County, Michigan, has the largest concentration of Germans from Volhynia in North America!¹⁸

Besides being a forested region that reminded them of their homes in Russia, the Volhynian Germans found the agriculture of Berrien County, especially the fruit farming (Berrien County is known as the "fruit belt") most appealing. These immigrating Volhynians literally took over the fruit and nursery farms in Southwestern Michigan from 1890-1910. Then they became the sugar beet, peppermint, dill, cucumber and muck farm specialists between 1900-1930. To get an idea how productive Berrien County was as the "fruit belt," and what kind of market the Volhynians joined and helped to grow, the number of half bushels of fruit shipped from the port of Benton Harbor and St. Joseph in 1916-17 amounted to 5,101,825.¹⁹ No doubt, these were many advantages that the Volhynian German in Sodus wrote home about.

¹⁸George P. Graff, The People of Michigan (Lansing: Michigan Dept. of Ed., State Library Services, 1974), p.43.

¹⁹Morton, Reminiscences, p.95.

With the Volhynians came religion. Most of them were of the Lutheran, Reformed, or Roman Catholic faith. And as they immigrated to Southwestern Michigan en masse, all three faiths grew rapidly. But many, if not most, of these immigrants were Lutheran, and many were attracted Benton Harbor, Michigan, an up and coming town that would soon gain dominance in the area, even over St. Joseph. And they were also attracted ^{to} the small, new Lutheran church in Benton Harbor--St. Matthew's Evangelical Lutheran Church.

As far back as 1894, a small band of Lutherans in Benton Harbor made repeated efforts to gather fellow Lutherans within the city limits, to unite and form a Lutheran congregation. But their efforts were not supported by Lutherans in the area. So they sent a letter to Rev. Phillip von Rohr, President of the Evangelical Lutheran Joint Synod of Wisconsin and other states, asking him for assistance, advice and aid in procuring a Lutheran pastor.²⁰

But why did they appeal to the WELS for a pastor, especially since there was a strong and growing Lutheran church across the river in St. Joseph (Trinity Lutheran by 1917 had over 900 communicants)? And what is meant by this lack of support mentioned in St. Matthew's 50th anniversary history? A number of theories can be offered, and any one of them or combination thereof will answer these questions.

1. There was the common, unwritten rule in the LC-MS of not starting another LC-MS church within a two mile radius of another. So, maybe these Lutherans in Benton Harbor were turned down, or

²⁰50 Years of Grace: St. Matthew's, n.p.

knew they would be turned down. And related to this, maybe Trinity Lutheran in St. Joseph refused to help form a new congregation, telling these Lutherans that if they want the Word and sacrament, they will have to cross the river to get it.

2. The influence of St. Paul's Lutheran Church in South Haven, Michigan. With the steady stream of Germans coming into the area, Lutheranism began in 1881 in South Haven with the construction of St. John Lutheran Church, near Packard mill. This was probably the first Lutheran church in Van Buren county. In 1926, St. John's joined with St. Paul's.

By 1882 preaching services were held in St. Paul's with Pastor Schoenberg of Zion in Kalamazoo taking the train to South Haven to preach there. He was able to preach with enough regularity to keep St. Paul's going until they can get their own pastor in 1882. Pastor Merz, who was also to serve St. John in Covert and the area around Bainbridge. He was replaced by Pastor G. Wenning in 1884, and by then St. Paul's became an established church with a series of faithful pastors serving it. In 1895 the parochial school was started and the total communicants reached 116. Perhaps St. Paul's connection with the WELS led St. Matthew's to write to von Rohr.

3. The general animosity between St. Joseph and Benton Harbor, especially St. Joseph's looking down their nose at Benton Harbor. The history of these "twin cities" is plagued with envy and antagonism. In 1858 the bridge between the two cities burned down. It was the only means for the Benton Harbor farmers to get their goods to the port of St. Joseph. But St. Joseph, who owned

the bridge and the surrounding land, refused to rebuild the bridge, even after the money was raised in Benton Harbor for its construction. As a result, Benton Harbor built its own canal and harbor! There are numerous other stories of fights, of church members wishing to move and join a church in Benton Harbor but refused a release by the St. Joseph church, etc.

But regardless of this lack of support, the Lutherans in Benton Harbor received aid and assistance from von Rohr and the WELS. The Rev. A. Cronheim was sent to Benton Harbor and the congregation was organized under the name of Zion's Evangelical Lutheran Church. But a disagreement arose between pastor and congregation and the congregation was dissolved.

A second appeal to von Rohr resulted in the arrival of the Rev. H. Peters, who was installed on February 15, 1898. The church was reorganized under the name of St. Matthew's and from then on it experienced a very fruitful and heartening growth.

It was during Rev. Haase's ministry at Benton Harbor (1908-1948) that St. Matthew's grew at an amazing rate, due to the mission zeal of its members and the ever constant stream of German Russians from Volhynia. Within the first three years of his ministry St. Matthew's increased by over 200 communicants! And when he retired in 1948, the total of communicants reached 780.²¹ And the number of churches that were started by or received assistance from St. Matthew's and their rapid growth (due again to

²¹Freddy M. Krieger, Rev. H.C. Haase, (WLS Senior Church History Paper, 1984), p.9.

mission zeal and the Volhynian immigrations) witness also the tremendous growth of Lutheranism in Southwestern Michigan: St. Paul's, Stevensville, 1900; St. John's, Dowagiac, 1910; St. Paul's, Sodus, 1912; Grace Eau Claire, 1922; Grace, Benton Harbor (eventually moved to St. Joseph), 1945; Good Shepherd, Benton Harbor, 1955. Indeed Southwestern Michigan has seen and become a center of Lutheranism. Maybe not the numbers of some areas, or the prestige of others, yet Lutheranism has flourished and still flourishes today

CONCLUSION

Southwestern Michigan Lutheranism will not leave an indelible mark on the history of Michigan Lutheranism. Saginaw and Frankenmuth do deserve the foreground in the history of Lutheranism. But the purpose of this paper was to simply alert attention to the fact that Lutheranism does indeed exist outside of the Saginaw Valley, and that its humble beginnings and its stories of immigrants coming to a new land and finding, in fact transplanting, sound Lutheran doctrine is a heritage for which to thank God.

Mark Zarling wrote an interesting senior church history paper in 1980 on the contributions of the German-Russian immigrants on the WELS. The piety and dedication of these Lutherans to sound doctrine is inspiring to this day. Pastor F. Beer, who served several congregations in eastern Michigan and Canada, had this to say concerning a certain Volhynian at Peace Lutheran Church at Fredensfeld:

. . . The singing conducted by Mr. Steinke at the morning service was a special delight to me. He came from Volhynia with his family a short time ago, and every Sunday conducts reading services which are well attended by the congregation. What a change--this time for good--can things take so easily!! It is a wonder to my eyes and a quiet warm joy in my heart.²²

This Mr. Steinke is my great grandfather, and I still hear stories from my great aunts (his daughters) and grandmother of two hour prayer vigils around the Christmas tree; home devotions and hymns which my Aunt Henrietta still recalls by memory, in German and

²²Four Sisters, n.p.

English, the words and tunes of those hymns; of many dedicated hours spent at church and for the church. Henry Steinke was the lay preacher/teacher in Friedensfeld during Pastor Beer's absence as he traveled on his circuit. He unfortunately had to give up that practice when he and his family moved to Benton Harbor because he did not have the proper preaching credentials.

Though they share many of the common problems facing WELS churches today, they are living examples of God's love and blessing. An area Lutheran high school has been in existence for twenty years; each WELS church in the area has a Lutheran gradeschool with which to feed his lambs; and the many graves of these pious Lutherans who now await the final Day and the resurrection of their bodies bear mute testimony to God's grace and providence showered on them and their descendants. May God's grace continue to bless these Lutherans as he continues to bless the church militant here on earth. SDG.

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