



NEBRASKA COUNTRY CHURCHES

Children of all ages climbed the stairs and walked sedately toward their seated parents. New arrivals entered searching for their favorite pews. A few dedicated smokers moved quietly outside to have a quick break before the sermon began.

At this time in the '40s, a few displaced persons had entered the United States for jobs and better lives. One farmer in our congregation sponsored a family.

The displaced persons entered the sanctuary followed by their sponsoring family. Instead of sitting down with his family, the father of the displaced family turned around and hurried outside.

The service began with the hymn, "Holy, Holy, Holy." As the minister began making announcements, a commotion occurred at the door. The sanctuary door burst open. The missing man, now red-faced and agitated, rushed inside frantically waving his arms around his head. He shouted several foreign words as he scrambled to his seat. Of course, no one could understand the impassioned remarks. It was probably a good thing that none of us spoke German.

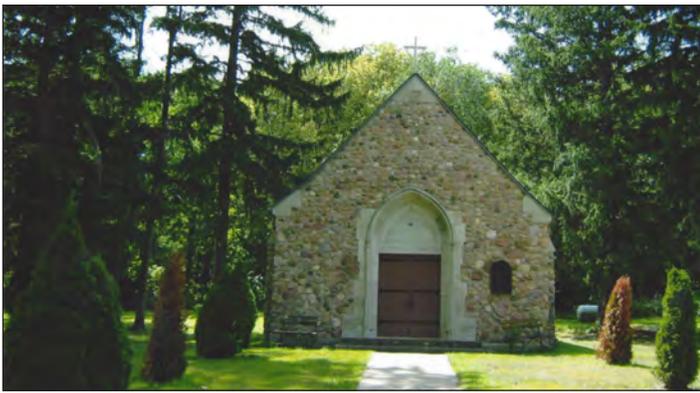
Obviously, he had been attacked by a swarm of wasps who had made their home in the corner of the church entrance. The trustees had tried to rid themselves of those pesky insects with few results.

Country churches! What a role they have played and are playing in the agricultural scene. Many country churches were established while roads were poor and transportation was with horses and buggies.

For many years, early church services were held in homes as there were no buildings available. In one instance, Catholic church services were held at a nearby elevator. As congregations increased in size with more money, churches were built.

At times, a church was founded simply because men located a timber-filled area which would provide wood for a church. In one instance, while men were searching for escaped oxen, they discovered a scenic glen with tall stately trees near the winding muddy creek. Even though four churches had been built nearby, they decided this

The Zion Lutheran church, established in 1882, is located north of Johnson, Nebraska. The roadside sign proclaims "Great is the Lord."



While this chapel was being built, L. L. Coryell gave orders that no profanity or obscene language should be used by the workers. Also, smoking and drinking would not be tolerated. Weddings are often held here. This chapel is located south of Brock, Nebraska.



Surrounded by verdant farm fields south of Johnson, Nebraska, this Martin Luther Lutheran church was established in 1902. The sign advises "Lift high the cross."



After the first Prairie Union Baptist church was burned, this building was constructed to meet the religious needs of the community. This church is located northwest of Shubert, Nebraska.



Worship at St. Bernard's Catholic church, located a mile south of Julian, Nebraska, is made meaningful with a statue of St. Bernard Clair Vaux.

area would be ideal for a church.

A great need existed for worshipping God during settlement days. Such hardships as blizzards, hail storms, drought, dust storms and disease made life difficult. God was called upon in times of need as well as times of thankfulness for bountiful crops.

Ministers were local farmers who had more education or more knowledge of the scriptures and were willing to take on the job of ministering to the flock. During later years with better communication, ministers were hired from other areas. These men and their families, or alone if they were priests, fulfilled the needs of the congregation in the best ways possible.

Often poverty reared its ugly head as salaries were based upon the crop yields in the community. The 1870s and the 1930s, times of depression, were difficult for the preachers and the members of agricultural communities. Church treasuries were often empty even though the preacher had a family to support. Members of the congregations frequently shared farm produce with the minister and his family.

My parents provided milk for several ministers' families. In addition, when one particular minister came to pick up the milk each morning, he often sat down to eat Mother's leftover breakfast pancakes. Chickens were always welcome donations. Also, garden produce such as potatoes, onions and other vegetables were given to the minister in lieu of salary.

Most country churches had bells to call worshipers to services. Some bells have interesting histories. For example, the bell at the Old Stone church in Southeast Nebraska, now 150 years old, was given to the congregation by the German ruler, Kaiser Wilhelm of Prussia. The metal used to construct that bell was from two captured French cannons.

Some bells were rung at the end of funerals as the deceased was carried to the adjacent cemetery. The bell ringing was free to those who contributed to the cost of the bell, but the church officials charged others a dollar to ring the bell at such a time.

In the 1870s, Danish farmers in the Rock Creek precinct near Davey, Nebraska, formed a congregation. In 1875, a church was built on donated land southeast of town. At the time of the dedication, a debt of \$12.75 remained. Actually, like many other rural churches, farmers and others actually did the work of building churches. The women usually finished the interiors. On June 17, 1946, this particular church was struck by lightning and burned. Later, this church was rebuilt in the town of Davey north of Lincoln, Nebraska.

Sermons in early rural churches often consisted of warnings of fire and brimstone with supporting scriptures. These sermons were presented in loud voices with wild gestures.

I recall one time our minister talked about sin. He used a glass of water and a bottle of ink to illustrate what sin did to our hearts. He especially focused on lying to others. He slowly poured the bottle of ink into the glass of water. The water turned black. He told us that was what our hearts looked like if we had been telling "stories." As a child, I took this all in. I left the church feeling terrified. Because I fibbed, I was sure my heart was now "black."

One of our ministers did not end his sermons at 12 o'clock. He rambled on and on. The young people decided to give him a hint. If the clock hand was after twelve, and he gazed over at the young people, they all looked directly at the clock on the east wall of our church. One day, finally disgruntled with their bla-



tant actions, he advised, "No need to look at the clock, I am not finished yet!"

Preachers of that time lived "strict" lives as examples. They scheduled two services on Sunday and a prayer meeting on Wednesday. There were always summer catechism classes for children during the summer months. Unlike some Bible School sessions held today with fun projects, these meetings were strictly bible study with memorization.

Early churches were havens of quietness and reflection. However, a few young people did not observe the rules for a spiritual atmosphere. My husband recalls being thumped on the head because he was not attentive to what the preacher was saying.

On one occasion, two brothers were giggling and having a good time while the preacher spoke. All at once, their father jumped to his feet. He walked up behind the pew where the boys sat and slapped their heads together.

Many churches had baptismal vats. My husband recalls his experience with baptism. The unheated water gave him quite a shock as he was immersed in it.

Of course, some country church people were baptized in a nearby creek where that water depended on the temperature of that day.

A friend told us of his experience one night after a baptismal service. His family just arrived home from evening services when his father discovered he had left his Bible on the low railing that surrounded the baptistery. His impetuous son, wanting to please, quickly offered to run down the road about a mile to the country church where the baptism had taken place.

Out of breath, the son reached the church. He quickly used a key to open the door and rushed inside. Not wanting to take the time to light the lamps, he moved toward the baptismal vault. He stepped up onto the railing, reaching for the Bible. All at once he lost his footing and tumbled into the basin of cold water. He was soaked! Shaking and feeling like saying some bad words, he crawled out of the baptistry.

Clutching the Bible, he rushed out the door running as fast as he could toward home. Shivering, teeth chattering and nearly freezing, he ran into his home kitchen. His mother could not have been more surprised. She told him to get out of his clothes and wrap himself in some blankets while she heated water. After the water was heated, he immersed himself in the steaming contents of the tub. Finally, he felt warm again.

These country churches often featured certain evangelists who held meetings daily. About once a year, evangelists pitched a tent in my parents' spacious front yard where they conducted services. Mother usually kept the evangelists with the stipulation that others feed them the noon and evening meals. However, she frequently had them for all three meals.

These meetings with rousing messages and impassioned songs convinced people to "come to the Lord," the goal of the meetings. Yes, country churches were the backbone of early country living. During the '40s, an evangelist couple arrived at our church. They pleaded for money to buy a boat to carry missionaries to another island of unsaved people. Times were hard. People were still fighting the effects of the Great Depression. However, many dipped deep into their pockets and gave more than they should.

Several months later, after the couple had left, the minister received a letter from the conference officials telling him not to give this couple money. Actually, they owned a large estate overlooking a lake and wanted a speed boat to travel on that lake!

Down through the years, country churches have strengthened rural communities. With smaller groups, members develop friendships, spiritual strengths, and experience opportunities to serve in many capacities.



The Old Stone church, built 150 years ago, is now a social center as another church has been built nearby. It is located southwest of Auburn, Nebraska.



Two miles west and one mile south of Paul, Nebraska, St. Joseph's Catholic church sits atop one of the highest points in Otoe County. Its cornerstone was laid on May 24, 1915.

With a sense of community and dedication, members make a difference in the lives of others. These smaller churches gave congregations a sense of direction and offered support in times of need. Even in our advanced society today, country churches, even though they are few and far between, make a lasting impression upon their members and those in the surrounding communities.

