

Just Another Church?

**A History of the Early Days of
St. John Evangelical
Lutheran Church, WELS
Rock Springs, WI**

Senior Church History

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Professor Brenner

Daniel Scharp

Acknowledgments

Thank you to all of the members of St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church for all of your help in writing this paper. Special thanks to Pastor Paul Schroeder for letting me take all of the church's precious records hostage for nearly six months in Milwaukee and for all of his help in digging up some of the obscure information that was needed to give a little character to this paper. Thanks also to the coolest Sauk County historian in the world, Victor Rehr. Victor's love for the history of his church and his county made writing this paper a lot more fun and, quite honestly, possible. I especially thank Victor for his hours on the phone putting up with me calling three or four times a day every now and then. My deepest gratitude goes also to Mrs. Marie Doerring who, like Victor, put up with a lot of phone calls just so I could ask difficult questions about her grandpa.

Forward

Originally my plan for this paper was for it to be a study of the entire history of St. John, Rock Springs, WI. I found that after some very intensive digging into the history of Pastors Kessler and Popp that what I was really interested in learning and writing about was the early history of the congregation. This was a decision I came to only after I had already spent several months interviewing different members of St. John and discovering Christian Kessler's name in *The Lutherans in North America*.

My hope is that this brief paper will not be the end of the study of St. John's early history, but just the beginning. This paper is the result of not being satisfied with the seven or eight lines of text that had previously been written about the early history of St. John. I truly hope that the research that I did for this paper will aid the people of St. John in learning more about their heritage. I feel that, as a Lutheran, I have learned a lot about my own heritage in doing this work. All of my findings are not recorded with the arrogant intention that they are the be all and end all nor the final word.

I took some liberties when drawing conclusions where history left holes and I was shrewd where history was specific. I can freely admit that I am not beyond error nor do I claim on behalf of all of my sources that they are without error. I can only assure the reader that everything in this paper was written with sincerity and was based upon the best available sources.

Please enjoy reading this paper as much as I enjoyed researching and writing it.

Daniel H. Scharp
18 April 2000

Just Another Church?

A History of the Early Days of

St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church, WELS

Rock Springs, WI

Dan Scharp

Some time hop into your car and take a drive out in the country. If it's summer time, roll down the windows and leave the radio off - or better yet, pop in a tape or CD of Beethoven's 6th Symphony. Cruise the rural roads that traverse the landscape, following old animal or Native American trails, weaving in and out of the hills, and marking boundaries between fields. Enjoy the smells and aromas of your georgic setting, taking in as much of the pastoral ambience as your five senses can register. As you ^{now} near and then pass through old settlements, sometimes referred to as towns or villages, pay particular attention to the structures and dwellings that distinguish these vexatious, man-made, interruptions of the landscape that cause you to have to slow your vehicle to a snail's pace of forty-five or thirty-five miles per hour. Amid these edifices of America at rest invariably stands the local church. How easy isn't it to hardly notice - if at all - the myriad of country churches we have passed by in our day. If called to our attention by one wiser than us we might only reply, "What's the big deal? It's only another church." Such would probably be the case when headed west from Baraboo on County Highway 136.

Highway 136 is a winding country road that travels west from Baraboo, WI. Just like any other rustic road of its style, 136 has it's share of hairpin turns, steep hills, and marvelous agrarian scenery. For about eight miles it meanders through Sauk County pasture land and small bluffs until it eventually slows down as it enters the small village of

Rock Springs.¹ The highway gives up its identity to Main Street. Passing the gas station and the bank one eventually arrives at the corner of Main and Park Streets where St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church stands. The recent history of St. John is well-documented since it has been written three different times. The historians, however, had neglected much of the history surrounding the origin of the church which is what this research paper is dedicated to recount for the purpose of securing as complete of a history as is possible. This history of St. John Church will focus on its inception through the year 1930 when the church was relocated in a new building and English was officially adapted as the congregation's chief language.

The St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ableman, WI can be officially dated to the summer of 1872, however, the German immigrants living in the town of Westfield had been in search of a pastor for some years prior. Meeting in their homes, people would gather together on Sundays and sing hymns, read from the Bible, and enjoy a day filled with fellowship and good home-brewed German beer. On occasion, they would be fortunate enough to have a traveling Lutheran pastor come their way as he prospected the mission field among the Native Americans of the Ho-Chungra² and Menomonee nations.

One of the missionaries that occasionally served St. John Church³, founded a church in the town of Westfield named Zion Lutheran Church. The missionary's name was George Christian Kessler.⁴ Born in 1829 in Saxony, Kessler was the son of a farmer named

¹First called Excelsior, and later called Rock Springs because of the natural springs running from the rocks. Later, renamed Alberman's Mills and then Ableman after its prominent settler, Colonel Stephen Von Rennseler Ableman. In 1947, the name was again changed to Rock Springs. The village presently has a population of 392.

²The Ho-Chungra Nation (a name they only started to use about 10 years ago and are actually part of the Winnebago) is the same that runs the "Ho-Chunk" casino in Wisconsin Dells, WI. The reason for the difference in the name, Ho-Chunk, is slang.

³The oldest record of Kessler's involvement with the people of the Ableman region is found in an entry dated 1871 for the August 2nd baptism of Sophia Louisa Westphal - almost a year before Kessler would officially serve a congregation in Ableman.

⁴Kessler's name, as it is recorded in both church and county records, is almost as varied as

Heinrich.⁵ He was educated at Wittenberg University but it is unknown which society sent him to America.⁶ He married in March of 1861, just prior to heading out west to do mission work.

Kessler had originally been sent to America to do mission work with the Native Americans at or around Ft. Laramie, Wyoming. In 1861 he established a mission there to the Cheyenne Indians that was rather successful for a while but was tragically disrupted during an uprising in 1862 and again in 1867.⁷ He was forced to abandon his mission and he headed back east.

Always in the back of Kessler's mind was the importance of serving the Native Americans. However, since he had a new bride and already three children, he knew better than anyone, that the untamed wilds of the western regions of North America were probably not the most suitable surroundings for raising a family. Unwilling to return to his fatherland, Kessler (did the next best thing) settled in Wisconsin and began to serve the Native Americans and the many German settlers of that region.⁸

Kessler had become affiliated with the Iowa Synod some time prior to his mission work in the west.⁹ For reasons undiscovered, however, he switched to the Wisconsin

the name of the village in which he was to found St. John. Besides having several different spellings for his last name, historians can't seem to agree on his first name either. This is for a good reason. In many of the church records, including his own autograph, his name is either written as Christian or Christopher Kessler. Yet, in the county records as well as in the manifest of the ship on which he came to America, he is referred to as Christoph. This historian has decided to use the name found on his tombstone, or at least what I assume "Geo. Chr. Kessler" stands for, which is George Christian/Christoph Kessler. For the remainder of this history, he will simply be referred to as either Kessler or Christoph.

⁵Kessler's marriage license - 3/22/1861 as recorded in the Sauk County court house.

⁶This information came from Victor Rehr who is a noted Sauk County historian (he is also a member of St. John) in an interview on 3 March 2000. See also footnote no. 8.

⁷Nelson, E. Clifford. The Lutherans in North America, Fortress Press, Philadelphia: 1980. p. 200.

⁸The primary occupation in this region at this time was farming, however there was some quarry work going on already at this time digging out quartzite from the bluffs.

⁹There's a possibility that Kessler was a Loehe man who was sent to help Iowa with their

Synod some time between his move to Wisconsin and his founding of St. John.¹⁰ One suggestion is that he took some time off for a while and, without feeling any real allegiance to any synod, found it to be convenient to join the Wisconsin Synod since he was in “their territory anyway.”¹¹ Whatever the reason for switching, he soon got back to work and founded Zion Lutheran Church in the village of Westfield in 1869.¹²

While serving in Westfield, Kessler continued his work with the Native Americans and has been credited with being instrumental in educating them in English (quite an accomplishment when one considers that his native tongue was German) and saw to it that they learned more European “ways” in order that they might “get along with” the German immigrants that kept pouring into the region.¹³ Christian was known during his entire ministry in Wisconsin as being a “friend to the Indians” - both by the Native Americans as well as the whites.¹⁴

Kessler was eventually called upon to be the permanent pastor of a “group” of German Lutherans in the Ableman area. The earliest recorded contact that Kessler had with these people is found in a baptism registry dated at 1871. It is safe to guess that he was unofficially serving the Lutherans of Ableman prior to that date if for no other reason than

mission efforts, but this is pure speculation on my part.

¹⁰This is a hunch made by Victor Rehr.

¹¹This suggestion came from a telephone interview with Kessler’s only living grandchild, Marie Doerring, on 9 March 2000.

¹²Kessler was married to Franzisce Teufil on March 22, 1861. They had nine children in all - five of them boys.

¹³Marie Doerring, 9 March.

¹⁴Victor Rehr told me an interesting story. After the Civil War, the government hired the soldiers who had no place to go as special soldiers to take care of “the Indian problem” throughout the United States. Around 1869 or 1870 a detachment of soldiers arrived, as they rode in on the newly constructed rails intending to “export” the Native Americans like cattle in boxcars. Christoph organized a “mob” that surrounded the train and the soldiers and protested with the threat of violence. The soldiers decided to move on - and they took their box cars with them. The people had grown to appreciate the Native Americans because they were such “good neighbors.” Most of them, like the whites, were farmers just trying to survive. Interview with Victor Rehr on 12 April 2000.

to consider how short the region was of Lutheran pastors. Weekly services were held in the homes of the members on a rotating basis. Some of the founding members of this church body were Henry Luckensmeier, Christoph Wesselmann, Heinrich Rehr, and Johann Brunnhoefer. The total number of families that Kessler served is uncertain but from the birth and death records it would seem that there were approximately twenty to twenty-five. Kessler's services were not too unlike the services that we are accustomed to in the WELS of today. The biggest difference between Kessler's worship and that of modern times would be that the services could last upwards of two hours in duration, depending upon the length of the sermon.¹⁵ Hymns were sung a cappella and from memory. There was no Sunday school for the children who were often times left with their mothers at home.¹⁶ In the warmer months services were often-times held outdoors or in vacant hay barns (a good indication of drought).¹⁷ Because there was originally no church bell, services began with the firing of rifles.¹⁸ The congregation was always generous to their public servant of the Word and paid Pastor Kessler a salary of \$60 (not to be raised until 1882.¹⁹)

In 1872 plans were made to establish a cemetery for the Ableman congregation. St. John purchased a small parcel of land about 2 miles from the village. The land was marked off and offered for purchase by members of the congregation, Adam and Wilhelmina Link for the sum of \$25 on November 14, 1872, but not purchased until June 11th, 1874. The cemetery was perhaps ready for use as early as 1872. In early 1873 the first two people, infants, were buried there - Ella Goedecke (nine months old) and her sister Amelia on

¹⁵Marie Doerring mentioned that her grandfather was known for his long sermons that could last as long as an hour or even more. 9 March 2000

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Marie Doerring 20 March 2000

¹⁸Victor Rehr 9 March 2000 - Within the year someone pitched in for a large dinner bell that can still be viewed at the Rehr residence today.

¹⁹St. John Centennial Anniversary anthology - 1972.

January 28, 1873 (fourteen years old.) To this day the cemetery is still being used and is named St. John's Cemetery.

October 8, 1871 would be a date every Chicagoan would be forced to remember, but the great fire also had a devastating affect on the tiny congregation in Ableman, WI. By 1872 Chicago was the most lucrative job market in the Midwest. Many farmers and tradesmen, experiencing hard times from bad crops, headed to Chicago to help in the rebuilding of the "Queen of the West." This blessing would soon turn into a sad tragedy. When the men returned in early 1873 they brought back with them an unwanted souvenir - diphtheria. An epidemic soon spread throughout the Ableman area claiming hundreds of lives, many of them members of Kessler's young congregation. Christoph's first year in Ableman was a trying one.²⁰

In 1878 Kessler took a three-month leave of absence to establish another congregation some fifteen miles to the east of Ableman in the town of Caledonia in Greenfield Township where he also made his home. During his absence, Pastor Brueckner served the congregation in Ableman. This is the only information that could be found concerning Brueckner. One possible guess would be that he was a pastor in a neighboring community who simply helped out during Kessler's leave.²¹

²⁰Victor Rehr 20 March 2000. Victor also added that the army would send barrels of kerosene to the affected areas by rail. It seems that in those days when the symptoms of the disease began to come on, you were to drink down a cup of kerosene! A fact suitable for Ripley!

²¹There is no mention anywhere in the archives or in the synod proceedings that I could find on Pastor Brueckner. Perhaps he was of a different synod such as Missouri or Iowa. The other possibility is that he traveled some distance (which may suggest another synod) because in addition to the \$15 he was paid for three months of service, he also received \$10 traveling expense. \$10 in 1878 was quite a lot of money for the standard horseback traveling expenses - possibly he came from the east coast by train.

The members of the congregation began to seriously consider the possibility of building a church in 1881 when a small piece of land was purchased about two blocks west of the current location for \$50. Delighted with their new acquisition, the men of the congregation quickly built a fence around the lot which was situated nicely on a hill. By January of 1882, the church council (actually the pastor and whatever men wanted to have a leadership role) resolved to move ahead with plans for building the new church. They began by initiating a pledge campaign to raise the necessary funds to begin the task. Over \$2,000 was raised in less than a year and by the end of 1882 a brand new white-framed church stood on its prominent perch looking down on the village of Ableman.

Like most German Lutheran churches of its day, St. John was originally built with practicality in mind. The sanctuary had a relatively low ceiling for better heating, unvarnished pews (it's said that this was to keep the children from "wriggling"²²), and a white washed exterior. (Both the whitewashing and the varnishing weren't done until 1887.) Lamps were added to the nave in 1886 - before then the natural light through the windows served the needs of the congregation.²³ A partition ran the length of the church down its center to provide a "proper" separation between the men and the women during worship - the men sitting on the east side, which was the pulpit side. The collection was taken in the "klingelbeutel gelt" which was a velvet pouch attached to a long handle.²⁴ (See Appendix 2) More improvements were made to the building including a hitching post out back for horses (because the fathers didn't want the horses tied to the trees anymore) and stone steps were built for the entrance in 1888.²⁵

The congregation was growing. In the year that the new church was built (1872), seven babies were born to seven different families. The following year recorded eleven

²²Marie Doerring, 3 March 2000.

²³St. John Centennial Anniversary anthology - 1972.

²⁴St. John 125th Anniversary anthology - 1997.

²⁵St. John Centennial Anniversary anthology - 1972.

births and the number peaked to eighteen births in 1884.²⁶ This may indicate that times were pretty good and the farmers were making profits which would explain the reason why they decided to build when they did. Pastor Kessler also benefited when he received a raise in his salary from \$60 to \$80.²⁷

With their new church and prosperous times seemingly unceasing, the church fathers decided that it was time to make their congregation official and record articles of incorporation. On May 5, 1884 the five-man team of Henry Luckensmeir, Wilhelm Heinrichs, Henry Heitmann, Friederick Schulte, and Christoph Weselmann entered the Sauk County Court House and signed their names to the certificate of incorporation. The official name adopted was *German Evangelical Lutheran St. John's Society - Ableman, Town of Excelsior*.²⁸ In 1885 Kessler received a salary increase to \$150.²⁹

For nearly five more years Pastor Kessler would serve faithfully at St. John until he would be called to his eternal home at the age of fifty-nine on March 27, 1889. The cause of his death is unknown. Funeral services were held at one of his other congregations, St. Paul in Caledonia. He was buried in St. Paul's cemetery which is located on the west adjacent lot of the church property. He was survived by his wife and nine children.

In April of 1889 the congregation extended a call to Pastor Frederick Peter Popp³⁰ who was already ministering to St. Paul in Caledonia as well as congregations in Greenfield, Merrimac, and North Freedom. He was also the pastor at St. John Church in Baraboo which was his first call immediately after graduation from the seminary on December 12, 1887 - he was installed on December 18, 1887. Popp's father and his brother-in-law,

²⁶1882-1920 birth and baptism record book.

²⁷St. John Centennial Anniversary anthology - 1972.

²⁸County record book entitled, *Certificates of Incorporations* vol. 2, p. 36.

²⁹St. John Centennial Anniversary anthology - 1972.

³⁰Despite the spelling, his name is pronounced, "Pope."

Pastor Julius Hasse³¹ conducted the service. Eventually Popp served only St. John in Baraboo and St. John in Ableman since both congregations continued to grow at steady rates.

Pastor Popp was born on April 4, 1866 in Warsaw, IL. He is descended from a family whose history goes back almost to the time of the Reformation, and with few exceptions his forbears were all servants of the Word. Popp's parents were Pastor Christian Popp, and Evelyn (Hagen). Soon after his birth the family moved to Kenosha, WI when his father accepted a call to serve a congregation there. There he spent his boyhood, attending the Christian Day School. After his confirmation he attended prep and college at Northwestern University in Watertown, WI where he was schooled until his graduation. After college he went to Milwaukee to study at our seminary, graduating on December 12, 1887 at the age of 21. He was married to Marie Bender, Baraboo, on June 18, 1889. They had four sons, Arthur, Reinhart, Frederick, and Karl.³²

In 1889 something exciting happened at St. John, Ableman for the very first time - an organ accompanied the congregational worship. From the fine education Popp received in Watertown and Milwaukee, he had the skill to play organ and, in addition to being the pastor, he was also the church organist.³³ The organ was powered by an energetic "volunteer" young man each Sunday morning. (Eventually, the boy-power was replaced with electric power when the congregation bought an electric motor to do the job in 1920.) One of the problems with the new music being heard in the church was that the old stove pipe vibrated and rattled, creating quite a distraction until the men of the congregation suspended the pipe from the ceiling.³⁴

³¹Mrs. Milton Repka, compilations from newspapers and bulletins.

³²Mrs. Milton Repka, compilations from newspapers and bulletins.

³³St. John Centennial Anniversary anthology - 1972.

³⁴Marie Doerring 3 March 2000 - Commenting on stories she remembers her mother talking about when Marie was a little girl. The pipe had originally been attached to the walls which, for some reason, carried the vibrations more strongly the ceiling did. (See

While Popp was serving both congregations in Baraboo and Ableman, he and his family lived in the parsonage in Baraboo. The commute was about eight miles from Baraboo and Ableman and required a lot of “buggy time” which made for long days especially in the winter. As both congregations grew, Popp realized that he would not be able to serve both of them with effectiveness. In 1903 a parsonage was built on land purchased from members Christoph and Magdalena Weselman for \$1,600.³⁵ Popp and his family moved into the new house and he resigned his call at St. John, Baraboo.³⁶

The history of Popp’s service to Christ through his dedication as pastor of St. John Church in Ableman is not one that would be recorded in the annals of secular history as being remarkable or extraordinary. Nor would you find a chapter in a book on Lutheran history set aside to give accolades to the man and his memory. This sort of praise could only come from the ones whom he had served selflessly for 43 years. Frederick Popp’s ministry under God’s grace helped to define the unique character of St. John. Over the span of his service Popp baptized, confirmed, married and buried whole generations of families. Since we live in an era which teaches us to not, if at all possible, remain in the same parish for more than ten or fifteen years, we may at times find it hard to understand how a man could serve as long as Popp did without stagnation. Regardless of the era, though, Popp preached the Word of God and that Word had an effect. St. John was in a steady growth stage from Kessler’s time until the early 1970’s with the biggest growth during Popp’s tenure as pastor.

Thanks to the direction and the motivation offered through the correct preaching of God’s Word, the members of St. John have always been a congregation dedicated to service. This was evident in their earliest days when still having church in members’ homes

Appendix 1)

³⁵Sauk County warranty deeds vol. 83, p. 571.

³⁶While serving these two parishes, Popp continued to serve Zion in Westfield.

and it is still just as obvious today. During the days of Pastor Frederick Popp, St. John always kept itself on the go without growing stale, yet it always maintained its sound Lutheran orthodoxy. One such area in which this was made clear was in their preservation of the German language.

Since its inception, St. John was a German-speaking congregation - as were most Lutheran congregations. The main reason for remaining German was simply because that was the common language of the people in the region. The other reason, though, was their love for Lutheran orthodoxy. They felt the need to preserve the language of Luther to maintain a firm grip on the precious doctrines which he taught so well in German. Popp, as well as others in the congregation, knew that times were changing and English would eventually win out - even in a "stronghold" such as the very-German community of Ableman, WI. In 1920 it was decided, with encouragement from the pastor, to begin having one morning and one evening service in English each month.³⁷ This proved to be a step in the right direction as people who were not of immediate German descent, or even Germans who no longer spoke the language, began to attend these services thus increasing the membership of the church. It's not easy to give up or change traditions. The members of St. John knew this all too well but were unwilling to compromise their greater mission, that which was directed to them by the Lord Himself - "Preach the good news to all creation." By 1929, all the church records as well as all the minutes of the council and congregational meetings were written in English.³⁸

The men of St. John had always been an active group. If it had not been for the dedication of certain men such as Christoph Weselmann, Henry Pfaff, and Adam Schuster and dozens of other men to serving their Lord, the congregation may never have been

³⁷St. John Centennial Anniversary anthology - 1972.

³⁸This entire paragraph was gathered from numerous different people to whom I spoke informally regarding congregational life at the turn of the last century. I was also told that the message board in front of the church was not changed to English until 1942.

formed. We must not forget also the women of St. John who played a big role in service to the Lord, especially during the Popp years.

During the years of Pastor Popp there were two main hot topics with women in America - Women's suffrage and prohibition. It was a time when women were coming out of the kitchens and heading into the work world and yearning to be heard. Yet despite the popular feministic trend, the women of St. John maintained their dignity and their desire to humbly serve their Savior. On November 7, 1907 the first official meeting of the Ladies' Aid (Frauenverien) was called to order by Pastor Popp's wife, Marie, at the parsonage. The formal name adopted for the group was *The Sewing Circle* (later to be called *The Lutheran Ladies Aid Society*). At the first meeting six ladies were in attendance - the second meeting had twenty-six. By the 1990's, the group numbered nearly one hundred women. The charter members of the group were Mrs. F.P. Popp, Mrs. E. Bender, Mrs. E. Schulte, Mrs. Fred Bittrick, Mrs. William Hummel and Mathilda Bender. Mrs. Popp was the first president and served for twenty-three years. Meetings were held once per month and periodically opened with devotions by the pastor. Often times taken for granted, the Ladies' Aid Society never missed the chance to serve at a funeral luncheon, an Easter breakfast, or an ice-cream social. They were always there to provide a comfortable, well-served, fellowship atmosphere. The greatest project that the Society undertook, though, was its commitment to raising the funds needed to build a new church. Their dedication served as an example to the congregation as a whole enabling St. John to retire the building debt by the mid 1940's.³⁹

The final chapter in a blessed career for Pastor Popp began at a voters' meeting on January 10, 1926, when a vote was passed to have an assessment of \$5 per member to start a building fund. In March of the same year the motion was passed to build a new church at

³⁹Mrs. Milton Repka, compilations from newspapers and bulletins.

the site of the old church.⁴⁰ No further mention is made in the records regarding a building project until August 4, 1929, when a building committee consisting of Pastor Popp, Mrs. Lillian Hummel, Mrs. John Geisser, Ernst Dettmann, Wm. Gall Sr., Wm. Gall Jr., and W.C. Holtz was elected and ordered to look for a suitable location for a new church.⁴¹

The minutes of this meeting are the first minutes of the congregation to be recorded in English. At a meeting on October 13, 1929, the decision was made to build at the site of the old church, the vote being 59 to 45. In January of 1929, however, a petition was presented requesting a new vote, and the new vote resulted in 109 votes for re-locating to the present site and 35 votes for remaining at the old location.⁴²

The minutes of the congregation do not record the cost of the present site, which was at that time occupied by a building known as Kiefer Hall, running along Main Street and by a barn which ran along the alley. The treasurer's records do show, however, four payments totaling \$3,200⁴³ which was probably the cost of the property (\$500 on January 11, 1930 "H. Holtz Estate - Part payment for new Church prop.", \$1,700 on February 21, 1930 "H. Holtz Estate", \$500 on March 12, 1930 "W.C. Holtz", and \$500 on February 14, 1931 "W.C. Holtz"⁴⁴)

Two fund-raising drives were made for collecting pledges. These drives brought the building fund up to \$15,000. In addition, the Ladies Aid Society was able to contribute over \$7,000 plus \$1,000 for furnishings to the Treasurer, \$318 was collected by contacting all those who had been confirmed in the congregation and soliciting a gift of one dollar from each. Collections at the laying of the cornerstone and at the three services on the day of dedication brought in \$975. Loans totaling \$10,600 were made at the bank, but some of

⁴⁰Congregational minutes, 1926.

⁴¹Congregational minutes, 1929.

⁴²St. John 125th Anniversary anthology - 1997.

⁴³Original Total reported in 1997 anniversary anthology incorrectly stated the purchase amount at \$2,200, missing the March, 1931 payment and the February, 1931 payment.

⁴⁴1930 Treasurer's Report, p. 48.

this was borrowed for short terms only as a convenience in paying bills as they came due. About \$7,000 remained to be paid after the dedication of the church. The treasurer's report lists a payment in full of a mortgage in 1944. This could have been another debt such as for the purchase of a new parsonage in 1941⁴⁵. Since the debt in 1944 was less than the cost of the present parsonage (\$4,000), it may be assumed that the building debt had been paid by that time.⁴⁶

The total cost of the new church was \$30,670 included the drilling of a well, architect's fees, heating system, wiring, electrical fixtures, and pews. Both the original bell and the original pipe organ were brought to the new building for use there.

The new church was dedicated on December 14, 1930. Three services were conducted with an attendance of over 1200 people. The morning service started at 10 a.m. at the old church from which the congregation "marched" to the new building.⁴⁷ The following is from a bulletin of 1930:

Ableman Church to Be Dedicated - 1930

"The newly erected St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church of Ableman, which was built during the past summer, will be dedicated by the members of the congregation at three services to be given on Sunday, Dec. 14, 1930.

The morning service at 10 o'clock will open at the old church, and after a short session there the congregation and friends will proceed to the new edifice, where the Re. G.E. Bergemann, of Fond du Lac, president of Joint Synod, will preach in German. A short address will also be given in English by the Re. H. Kirchner, of Baraboo.

During the noon hour the women of the church will serve a dinner free, and the second service will begin at 2 o'clock. The Rev. A.C. Hasse, of St. Paul, will address the congregation in German. The Rev. W. Keturakat, of Sun Prairie, and the Rev. G. Gerth, of Greenfield, will preach the evening services at 8 o'clock. Special music has been arranged, and Miss Lorraine Marquardt of Milwaukee and Miss Milda Schneider, of Reedsburg, will

⁴⁵1941 Treasurer's Report, p. 130. "Farmers State Bank on Church Mortgage - \$52.89"

⁴⁶1944 Treasurer's Report, pp. 146-151.

⁴⁷Mrs. Milton Repka, compilations from newspapers and bulletins.

assist the regular organist, Mrs. W. Hammermeister. The building cost approximately \$30,000. Rev. F.A. Popp is pastor, and elders are Wm. Gall, Sr., Wm. Gall, Jr., and Wm. Bartenbach. W.C. Holtz, John Ninneman, Otto Meyer, August Lange and Herman Dreifke, trustees.”⁴⁸

Thus ends the final chapter of Pastor Frederick Popp’s career. On Thursday, December 19, 1930 Pastor Popp died in his home of a sudden heart attack just five days after the new church’s dedication and two days before he would have preached his first sermon in it.⁴⁹ On Wednesday, December 18 he had just celebrated his forty-third year in the ministry. Like his predecessor, George Christian/Christoph Kessler, Popp gave his entire life to the ministry.⁵⁰

In April 1931, Pastor Phillip Lehman⁵¹ (class of 1913), formerly a pastor in Hubbleton and Richwood, WI, was installed as the fourth pastor of St. John. In the interim Pastors Kirchner and Gerth served the congregation.⁵²

This has been a student’s view of the early history of St. John Evangelical Lutheran Church of Rock Springs, WI. There are many more stories that can still be told about this beautiful little country church. A church not so unlike the many churches one may pass by - but certainly not **Just Another Church.**

⁴⁸Mrs. Milton Repka, compilations from newspapers and bulletins.

⁴⁹See Appendix 3 for an excerpt from Pastor Popp’s Obituary from the Northwestern Lutheran by C. Kirchner.

⁵⁰St. John 125th Anniversary anthology - 1997.

⁵¹Mr. Victor Rehr mentioned that during the ministry of Pastor Lehman at Ableman, the standing joke was: “We had 43 years with a pope and now (such and such) years with a layman!” - the older members still make this joke from time to time. One of the earliest memories that Victor has of Lehman is from when Victor was five-years old. It was a common custom for men to brew their own beer in those days. So when the pastor came to visit, Victor’s dad would break out the special brew. One hot day as the family was gathered outside, Victor was sent to the deep cellar to get two bottles of beer. On his way up the steep ladder, one bottle fell to the dirt floor but didn’t break. But, when his father opened the bottle a geyser shot up causing his dad and Lehman to hold out their hats to catch the precious brew!

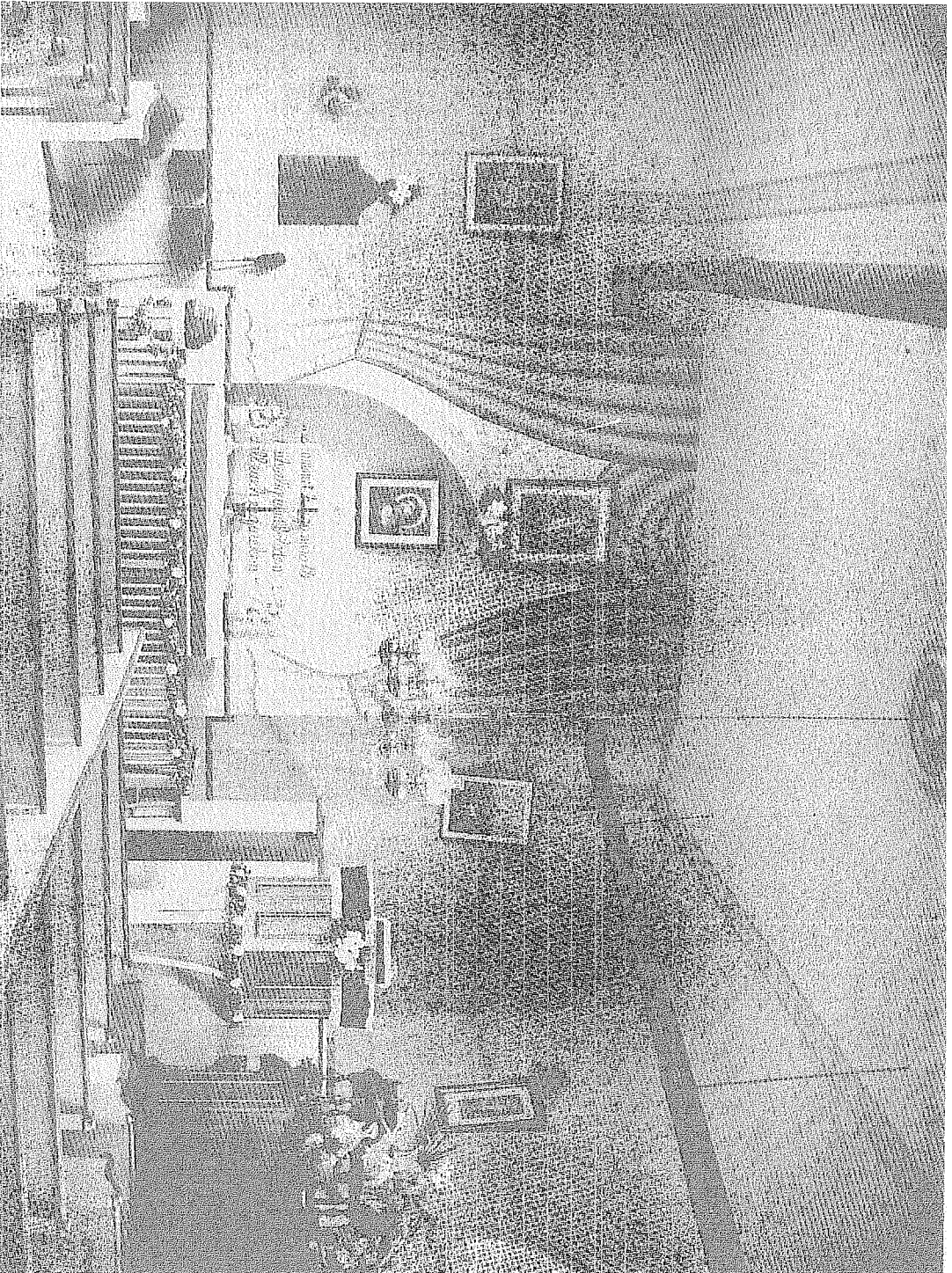
⁵²Information drawn from 1931 payroll report.



This is an inside view of St. John taken between 1886 and 1889. Pastor Kessler is standing in the pulpit. Notice the stove pipe running along the upper wall. This was not the most cozy place on a frigid Sunday morning.

There was no communion rail, though for show Christian put out the communion ware for the photograph - the candles are not lit. On the altar are imitation plants under glass domes. The baptismal font is a glass bowl sitting on an ornate, marble-topped, table to the left of the altar.

Pastor Kessler climbed eight steep steps to get into the pulpit every Sunday morning.



This is a view of the inside of St. John taken in 1903. From this photograph it is easier to see the low ceiling and the way the pipes were suspended from there instead of being attached to the walls as in the older photo.

Another obvious change is in the altar. A façade was erected in the front of the church with a newly added communion rail around it. To the left of the altar is the *klingelbeutel* get leaning against the wall. Next to the pulpit is the organ that Pastor Popp would have to play. Notice how handy it was for him to get to.

Appendix 3



Pastor George Christoph/Christian Kessler

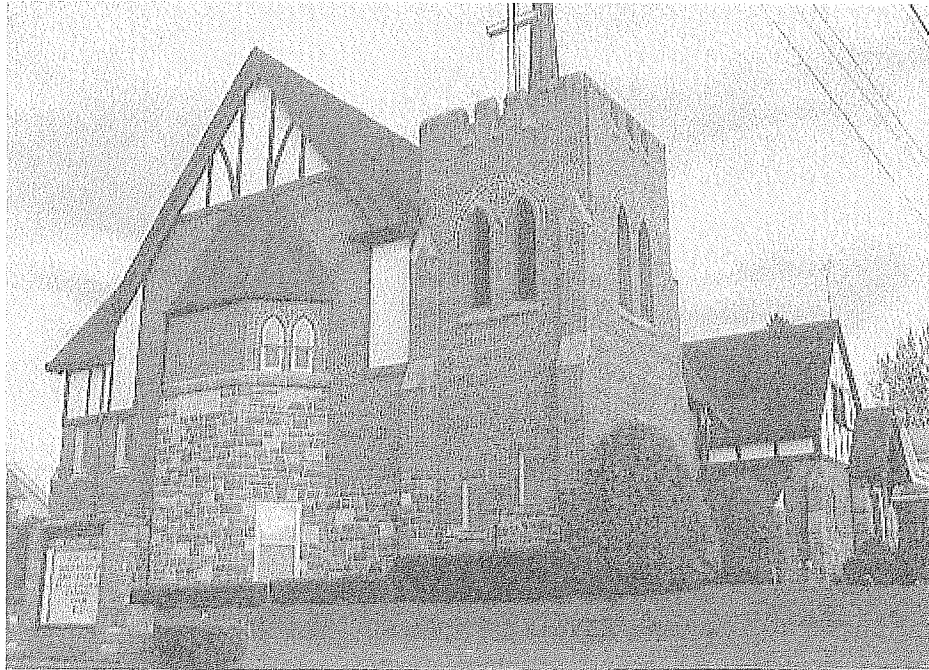
The Early Pastors

Of St. John

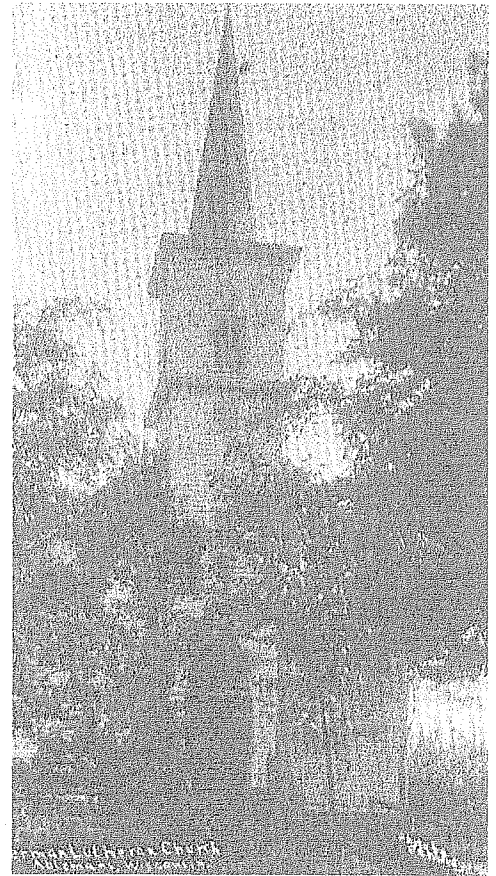


Pastor Frederick Popp and his wife, Marie

Appendix 4



St. John Today



The Old Church



Inside St. John Today

Appendix 5

Obituary of Pastor Popp

"On the 19th of December, 1930, Pastor Frederick Peter Popp died suddenly and unexpectedly at his home in Ableman, Wis. His death was caused by a disease of the heart. Funeral services were held on the 23rd of December in the new church edifice of the congregation in Ableman, which had been dedicated unto the service of the Lord on the Sunday preceding Pastor Popp's death. The Rev. G. Bergemann preached the funeral sermon in the German language, basing his words of consolation and exhortation upon Isaiah 40:1-2, while the undersigned spoke in the English language, using as text the words of Simeon, Luke 2:29-33. The Rev. G. Vater and the Rev. G. Gerth officiated at the private service held in the home of the deceased, at the altar, and at the grave. Interment was made in the cemetery at Baraboo, Wis. (Pastor Herbert C. Kirchner, *Northwestern Lutheran*, 1930, Page 42.

