

MISSION EFFORTS AND HARDSHIPS

OF THE EARLY MISSIONARIES TO

THE RHINELANDER AREA

GREGG SCHOENECK

CHURCH HISTORY

PROF. FREDRICH

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11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W

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In the mid 1800's Rhineland, or Pelican Rapids as it was called, was nothing more than a logging camp. But due to its location on the Wisconsin River and the fact that the Railroad ran through it, it was bound to grow. At the Railroad terminal at Rhineland, over 2000 men reached the logging camps where they worked. In 1882, about three years before we have any evidence of Lutherans in Rhineland, the small town consisted of several saw mills, a boarding house, two stores, a motel, a barn and a mill boarding house. There were no saloons in early Rhineland, however this didn't stop the hearty lumberjacks and fur trappers from getting their fill.

Life was not easy in the Northwoods. Almost everyone was connected with lumbering and fur trading in some way, and everyone had to suffer through the bitter cold. And the surroundings, as beautiful as they were, were also primitive. Where streets are today there were just paths through the virgin forest. An axe and a gun were the two necessary items needed in order to live and put bread on the table.

Yet there were some sturdy emigrants in this area who would gather in a log cabin to sing their old German chorals. Once in a while a traveling missionary would speak to them, to baptize their children, bury their dead, and leave. How often these meetings were held and who the very first missionaries were we can't say. Their names, like the original Lutheran movements in this area were lost in the thick of the woods. Either all the early records were destroyed when the first chapel burned, or else the people thought their church activities not important enough to leave any records. However enough Lutheran

consciousness prevailed among them so that a regular preaching station was called into existence.

The first public sermon recorded for us in this area was preached by one Deacon Tibbets who came up from the Congregational Church in Antigo in 1883. In 1885, the Congregationalist under the leadership of J.F. Guyton, built a church. This was the first church building in Rhinelander and is important because the early Lutherans used this church for three years. This is the setting into which Lutheran mission work was to enter now. At this time there were about 1200 people in Rhinelander.

The first historical evidence of the congregaition in Rhinelander was in the fall of 1885. Reverand John Ph. Koehler was commissioned to visit this section of the state. Records also show Reverand Adolph Hoyer of Princeton as another one of the first to come to Rhinelander, to survey mission work there. When they arrived they found about twelve families who wanted to hear the Word. Services were conducted in the Congregational Church. Regular monthly services were begun in 1887 by itinerant pastors who made the trip to the Lake Shore Mission Field as it was called. The reason it was called this is because those pastors who served it, would reach this area by means of the Milwaukee, Lake Shore, and Western Railroad. This area included Rhinelander, Three Lakes, Gagen, Monico, Pelican and Eagle River.

During this time the area was under the spiritual care of the Reverand E. Mayerhoff, chairman of the Wisconsin Synod Mission Board for upper Wisconsin. Many times he himself would come to the area, or else he would delegate other pastors, We have records of Pastors E. Haese, C Jaeger, A. Hoyer, J. Koehler, W. Kistemann serving the congregation. W. Kistemann was a student from our Seminary at Wauwatosa.

Reverend W. Kistemann, the same one who served the congregation earlier as a Seminary student, was the first resident pastor in Rhineland, Under his direction in 1888 the first church building was erected. However, Pastor Kistemann left in November to serve the mission area in Florence.

Pastor C.F. Rutzen was his successor. After a short stay in Rhineland, he was transferred to Rhineland. He gives the reason for this in a letter which he wrote.

Eagle River was at that time more in the center of the large mission field, besides being located on the main line of the railroad, while Rhineland was at the end of a stub line running out of Monico Junction. Services were held every two weeks, the Sundays being given alternately to Rhineland and Eagle River. The remainder of the field was served on weekday evenings.

Conditions were very primitive at that time. The work was hard and not very inspiring, as there seemed little hope for growth. After about a year I was transferred to another field by the Superintendent of missions.¹

From this we see that there were many hardships for the early missionaries and that some gave up hope due to the harshness of the work and the slow growth.

The areas covered by the early missionaries were very large. In 1889 when Pastor J. Dejung Sr., the new resident pastor in Rhineland, served the area, there were 14 other congregations and preaching stations which went from Elcho, Wisconsin in the South to Wakefield, Michigan in the North. Because of this vast area covered by these early men, services in Rhineland could only be held two out of four Sundays. In one year Pastor Dejung conducted 200 services at 15 preaching stations, instructed 55 children at 4 places, baptized 64 children and gave communion to 166.

A special problem the area had was the high turn-over rate of the members. Many came, and left through out the years because the population

¹Zion Ev. Lutheran Church. "Dedication Booklet." 1929. p.13.

of mill towns would rise and fall so fast. An example is that in 1890, there were 4 families in the church, in 1892, 16, and in 1896, 9. However the Lord blessed the work of these early missionaries and saw to it that their hard work was rewarded.

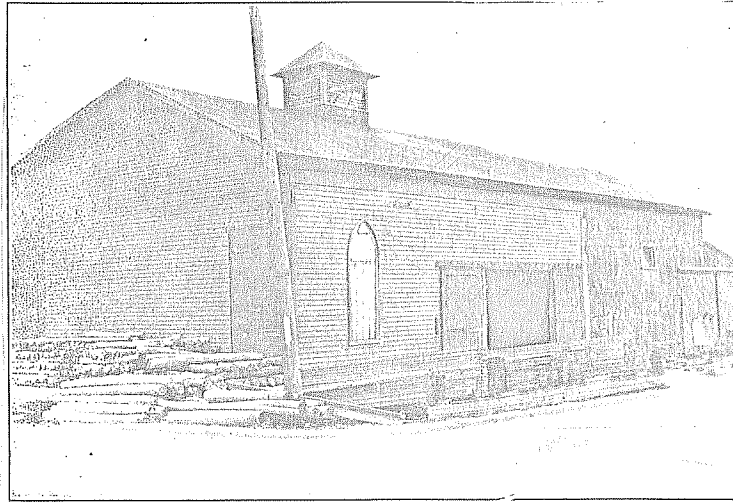
And hard their work was! Sometimes these missionaries walked 20 miles in below O waether, following logging trails in the woods to get to the preaching stations. They would be gone days and weeks from their place of residence. Pastor Dejung Jr. is an example of such devoted service.

At Christmas, 1896, for example, he conducted eight services in as many stations and, in order to do this, travelled 325 miles by rail, 26 by hand car, and made a 20 mile trip on foot at night. 2

Pastor Dejung Jr. served in the Florence area which included distant stations as Iron River, Crystal Falls, and Stambaugh Michigan, and as assistant to his father in the Lake Shore field of which Rhinelander was now the center. However, Pastor Dejung Sr. became so exhausted that his son had to take over the entire duty of the whole area. This was really quite an assignment.

Through the dedicated, hard working sacrifices of the early missionaries in the Northwoods, the Lutheran Church was established, and has grown in these areas through out the years. These dedicated men who put in long hard hours travelling many miles in the bitter cold, through trails in virgin forests, preaching the Gospel of Christ to the hardy frontiersmen, who were scattered throughout the area at the many logging camps and mill towns, were the reason for the presence of the Lutheran Church in this area. Their hard work and endurance of hardships should be an inspiration to all of us who are or are about to enter the ministry. For through their hard work the Lord has blessed the area of the Northwoods, and so promises us with the same success of His Word for it will not return to Him void, but will accomplish the purpose for which He has given it, -4-

purpose for which He has given it, namely that those who hear and believe it shall be saved.



The first church in Rhinelander (Congregational), at present the Macdonald Lumber Co. warehouse on Anderson and W. Frederick Streets.

A picture of the church building used by the early Lutherans for three years 1885-88.



OUR FIRST CHURCH
(Destroyed by fire Oct. 4, 1905)

A picture of all my references going up in smoke 1905.

B I B L I O G R A P H Y

Dedication Booklet. Zion Ev, Lutheran Church. February 3, 1929.

History of the Rhineland Area. Rhineland Public Library.

Our Diamond Jubilee. 75 Years of God's Grace. Zion Ev. Lutheran Church.

Our Golden Anniversary; 1885-1935. Zion Ev. Lutheran Church.

"Rhineland Daily News" October 7, 1935.

"Rhineland Daily News" October 10, 1960.