

FIRST PASTOR / FIRST PASTORATE

John Brenner's Years in Cudahy and New Coeln

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John Brenner's Years in Cudahy and New Coeln

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The office of the ministry to which John Brenner so faithfully dedicated himself for 62 years was centered in Milwaukee County, Wisconsin. The first 12 years of his ministry were dedicated to a small dual parish in the Town of Lake area five miles south of what was then the southern city limits of Milwaukee. This farming area had long been served by the Wisconsin Synod, but in the 1890's was feeling the growth pains of Milwaukee and the continuing flow of immigrants from middle and northern Europe.

The parish at New Coeln which is now a landing strip of Gen Billy Mitchell Field, was served by Pastor W. Wrede of Oakwood already in the 1850's. St. John's of New Coeln will celebrate 125 years of God's grace with the Wisconsin Synod this summer. It has been served by many pastors in many different arrangements. For many years it depended upon Pastor Wrede's congregation to share its pastor, at times it was served from Franklin, then from St. Lukas in Bay View, St. Paul's in Cudahy, and finally for a time it had its own pastor in John Brenner's successor Adolf Lederer. For many years the people of New Coeln were truck farmers, but with the tremendous growth of the City of Milwaukee they find themselves in the City and working in its factories today. Fifteen years ago with the expansion of Mitchell Field the church building was demolished and a new church was erected about two miles south on Howell Avenue in Oak Creek. A quick eye will see a cyclone fence circling the little, old cemetery of St. John's as the car descends into the tunnel under the air strip. The open fields of Mitchell Field can give us a picture of the area that became known as Cudahy about 1892.

Looking at old photographs of Cudahy would give the impression that farmers had nothing more to do than to turn the sod and plant their seeds. The flat land along Lake Michigan was without trees and for that matter people. Except for a few homesteads and saplings a glance toward the beautiful blue lake waters

would always refresh the eye.

When in the late 80's the meat packing industry was being considered "an objectionable municipal nuisance" by the Milwaukee city fathers, Patrick Cudahy purchased a 700 acre tract five miles south of Milwaukee at Buckhorn station. Although the ordinance controlling meat packing operations was eventually defeated by the packers who stayed,¹ Cudahy was to remain in Buckhorn and make his mark on history.

His choice of land was based on the availability of rail service and plenty of room for expansion. He built his slaughterhouses just west of the Chicago-Northwestern main line and laid out plans for a company town to the east. What later became the city of Cudahy is a well mapped out town of streets running north/south and east/west. In his master plan for the company town he reserved parcels of ground for different church bodies. Pastor B. P. Nommenson makes mention of this in his article in Das Gemeinde=blatt of 1892 celebrating the dedication of the old Zion church in South Milwaukee:

If our dear God grants us His grace and we should live so long, we may well be reporting still another church dedication next fall. A few (of my) members from St. Lucas Congregation are living two miles north of here in Cudahy, where Mr. Cudahy has built his great slaughterhouses. Mr. Cudahy permitted me to select a place to build (71'x 120') already a month ago. He has reserved it for a Lutheran church and will give it to us as a gift next year if at that time we are in a position to build a church.²

The nucleus of St. Paul's Congregation was made up of members from St. Lucas in Bay View, now a part of Milwaukee's South Side. Some of these people were truck farmers as was my great-great grandfather, Friedrich Mahn. Others had moved into the Town of Lake to find employment at the Cudahy Brothers Co. Pastor Nommenson had members farther south in South Milwaukee who had helped to form Zion Congregation. While the families in both towns were fortunate enough to live near a railroad line, the people in Cudahy on many occasions got up early on a Sunday morning to ride a horse and wagon to church in Bay View. One can well imagine that they would cherish a house of God in their

own growing community.

The residents of the area around the Buckhorn station (a name given by the railroad to determine the stop) grew steadily in number so that in 1895 they voted 153 to 7 to incorporate as the village of Cudahy.³ Already two years before Pastor Nommenson had gathered with six men from Cudahy and Pastor Koch of South Milwaukee to incorporate as a congregation.⁴ Although the minutes and history of the congregation leave the early history of St. Paul's a mystery, much has been found in the Gemeinde=blatt articles and Synodalberichte of this time. The hopes of Pastor Nommenson in his Gemeinde=blatt article of November, 1892 were fulfilled by October of the following year. He writes in the November, 1893, Gemeinde=blatt:

When the undersigned reported the church dedication at South Milwaukee last fall, he spoke of his hope that he might report a church dedication in Cudahy by the next year. That hope has now gone into fulfillment. On July 17 some members of St. Lucas Congregation in Milwaukee, who are living in Cudahy, together with Lutherans, who have recently moved there, have organized and incorporated themselves as "Ev.=Luth. St. Pauls=Gemeinde zu Cudahy, Wis.--Since no suitable premises could be found for holding worship services, subscriptions were immediately gathered for the building of a church and a plan was received for a church 50 x 36 feet with a chancel area of 11 x 16 feet.

The growing pinch on cash at first pressured for a postponement of building, but with the help of God they were finally able to secure the needed money for the building and to begin work. By October 8, on the 19th Sunday after Trinity, with most favorable weather and a great many Lutherans from Milwaukee besides the members of St. Lucas Congregation, the cornerstone could be laid. The festival sermon was preached by Pastor Baébenroth on Lk 2:14 and the undersigned took the liturgical part of the service, read the history of the founding of the congregation, and with the assistance of Pastors Baebenroth and Hermann Koch performed the rite of cornerstone laying. A collection of \$53.47 was raised for the building fund.

May God grant His further blessing to the building up of not only this house of God, but also of this young congregation, that it may grow and flourish to His glory and the joy of all Christians.⁵

For his day Pastor Nommenson's congregation was strung out over the southeast side of Milwaukee down into South Milwaukee and as far west as 12th and Oklahoma Avenue in 1890. Even after the members of St. Lucas in these areas formed satellite congregations, they were being served by their home pastor. With

the final founding of St. Andrew's at 12th and Oklahoma the mother church of St. Lucas retained 374 families at its 25th anniversary in 1897. Pastor Nommenson's work in the Cudahy area was lightened by the help of Hermann Koch, the new pastor in South Milwaukee. In the Synodalberichte (Synodical Proceedings) of 1895 there is a request by Pastor Koch for financial assistance from the synodical treasury:

Out of South Milwaukee and Cudahy Pastor Koch reports that an increase outwardly and inwardly is noticeable. It is only a question of a short time proportionally, when the congregation (South Milwaukee?) will become self-supporting. In the meantime the Synod should give an ear to its request for \$150 subsidy.⁶

Several pages later we read:

FOR CONGREGATIONS AND PASTORS NEEDING HELP:

For Pastor Koch, South Milwaukee and Cudahy, \$100.⁷

By the spring of 1896 St. Paul's of Cudahy had grown to a size where it desired to have its own resident pastor.

II

On April 20, 1896 the congregation at Cudahy met with Dr. E. A. Notz of the Wisconsin Synod's seminary then located at Wauwatosa. The congregation was given a list of several candidates to be graduating that spring. In his list of qualifications Prof. Notz may have brought to the attention of the congregation the fact that John Brenner was young for his profession. He had entered the sexta class (9th grade) at Northwestern University in Watertown, Wisconsin, so young (12 years old) that he had to return home to Fondu Lac to be confirmed. At his graduation from Northwestern he was 19 years old and 22 when leaving Wauwatosa. Some of those attending the meeting may have been drawn to John Meyer who had taught school and preached on occasion at their home congregation at St. Lucas.⁸ Whatever the discussion may have been, the congregations elected to call John Brenner and resolved to open its own Christian day school.⁹

Candidate Brenner graduated from the Theological Seminary at Wauwatosa on June 11¹⁰ and a week and a half later was ordained and installed at Cudahy. Prof. Notz records the event in the Gemeinde=blatt:

On the third Sunday after Trinity, June 21, Candidate Johannes Brenner, after completing his theological studies in our seminary and having passed the examination for entrance into the pastoral office, was ordained and installed in the congregation at Cudahy, Milw. Co., Wis., which called him as its pastor, by the undersigned in the stead of the Synod president. May the blessing of the Lord be upon this shepherd and his flock.¹¹

The very next issue carries the notice of Pastor Brenner's installation at St. John's of New Coeln on July 12:

On the 6th Sunday after Trinity Candidate Johannes Brenner was installed in his office as pastor at St. John's Congregation at New Coeln, Wis., by the undersigned in the stead of the Synod president.

H. Monhardt¹²

By July 21 the young pastor began his baptism by fire with his first funeral followed by the second on July 27. With fall came his congregation's first mission festival. The celebration was held at St. Paul's in conjunction with New Coeln. Guests came from Bay View and South Milwaukee for the all day affair. In the morning and afternoon the guest pastors preached in German with a special English sermon in the evening. It was noteworthy that even the English service drew a large amount of hearers. Teacher Steffens helped to beautify the celebration with the brass choir from Bay View.¹³ Besides hosting his own mission festival Pastor Brenner himself preached at many neighboring congregations for their mission festivals that fall. By the mission festival of the following year St. Paul's had its own choir (organized October 9, 1896) of which it was reported that the director, its pastor, was first-rate.¹⁴

German was the language of Lutheranism until almost World War II. But even in Cudahy some English services were held on an occasional Sunday evening beginning in 1902. Pastor Brenner took a strong interest in reading English becoming proficient enough to help his fellow pastors in their own eventual transition into English preaching.¹⁵

The congregation at Cudahy had resolved to open its own school even before Pastor Brenner was called. In September just two months after his arrival the school opened in the spacious basement of the church with 12 students and the pastor as teacher. By the end of the month there were 19 students and at Christmas 22. In a one room school the students were expected to perform the janitorial work under the direction of the pastor. In 1903 the basement was divided to provide two classrooms. Miss Viktoria Lueders was called to help the pastor by teaching the lower grades.¹⁶ Since the pastor was still single, one can imagine many heads were considering other areas where the teacher could help the pastor.

An older gentleman remembers his school days in the church basement when he had to start the fire in the potbelly stove in the lower grades room. He had learned to open all the windows in the room and close them again just before lighting the fire. The fresh air in the room made it an easy chore to start a fast fire. His room became warm before his counterpart in the upper grades room. Students from the whole school would come to huddle around his fire to get warm before school.

There was such enthusiasm over the success of the school that in 1904-06 six lots were purchased across from the church. In 1908 there was talk of relieving the pastor of his teaching duties by calling a male teacher to head the school. This, however, did not materialize because the pastor was called away that year.¹⁷ In the vacancy which followed the departure of its second pastor in 1911 the school began to undergo hard times. Pastor Brenner had heard in Milwaukee that St. Paul's was considering the closing of its school. He was able to raise \$325 with a Mrs. Sophie Meyer and came to Cudahy with a plan to keep the school open. The school was saved.¹⁸

Before Pastor Brenner left St. John's in New Coeln a Christian day school had started. It underwent a stormy period much sooner than did the school in

Cudahy and died when the pastor left, never to be revived.¹⁹ How the two schools were operating with Pastor Brenner teaching at both, is probably understood if we imagine a situation in which the teacher of the lower grades in Cudahy also taught the upper grades perhaps in the afternoon. Two of the minute books from New Coeln covering the years 1867-1907 are lost and would today supply much interesting information in this area. It is to be remembered that the pastor was all of six feet tall and probably moved at a fast gait.

At the same time that St. John's was preparing to celebrate its 50th anniversary as a congregation in 1900, the decision was made to build a new brick church. St. John's also saw fit that year to contribute toward the building of a parsonage at Cudahy, a plan which had been delayed from 1897.

One would imagine that all the work carried on between these two parishes required more than two long legs. No doubt the pastor owned a horse to make the three mile trip between Cudahy and New Coeln. In 1902 St. Paul's gave permission to a group of Slovak Lutheran families to use their church building for worship services at \$3 a year. While a Rev. Ladislav Boor of Chicago frequently visited Cudahy to conduct worship services in the Slovak language, it remained for Pastor Brenner to perform pastoral acts also for these needing souls.²⁰

The avid reader that Pastor Brenner was known to be in later years began long before coming to the Town of Lake area. An elderly lady remembers a banquet at St. Paul's when the priest from the neighboring Catholic church got up to speak. "Whenever I pass your parsonage, I see Pastor Brenner studying for his sermon. I leave mine go till Sunday morning. That way the devil can't try to ruin it."

Pastor Brenner showed himself an adept student of languages and endeared himself to the Slovaks by learning to read and write their language well enough to perform baptisms, weddings, and funerals in Slovak. Eventually he

learned to speak Slovak adequately to preach Slovak sermons.²¹

While the Slovaks requested use of St. Paul's church already in 1902, they did not exist as a legally incorporated congregation until 1906. Their history dates back to the early 1890's, but as the Slovak Evangelical Union, a fraternal insurance society.²² As a boy I often wondered why the Slovak church built in 1908 with the same architectural lines was just two blocks south of St. Paul's. When I discovered that the pastor of St. Paul's even served the Slovaks in their language the question became more puzzling. The answer lies in the fact that while Pastor Brenner was asked to serve them on an individual basis, he was never formally called as their pastor. They were already gathered into a congregation and John Brenner had no calling to gather these sheep into his fold as an addition to St. Paul's.²³

Along with the building programs at New Coeln at the turn of the century came the decorating of the church at Cudahy and purchasing of pews in 1905. About this time the young people at Cudahy were permitted to begin a collection for a church bell.²⁴ The project was completed in 1974 with the installation of a taped carillon system in the new church.

Already in 1899 at the fifth anniversary of St. Paul's Congregation it had unanimously decided to urge its pastor not to accept a call to the Indian mission in Arizona. In 1904 the new Lutheran high school had extended a call to Pastor Brenner to become the school's first professor and director. But again the congregation prevailed upon him to stay. After declining two further calls at the request of the congregation, one in September, 1907, to Jerusalem of Milwaukee and another in April, 1908, to Racine, Pastor Brenner was released to accept a call to St. John's on Vliet Street in Milwaukee, which he served until his retirement in 1958. St. Paul's took heart to call another pastor immediately and independently of New Coeln that summer.²⁵ It is interesting to note that Pastor Brenner installed his successor at New Coeln in September,

Pastor Adolf Lederer. St. John's set their first resident pastor's salary at \$550 a year and paid an additional \$108 toward the pastor's rent.

During his pastorate in Cudahy and New Coeln John Brenner

	<u>Cudahy*</u>	<u>New Coeln</u>
baptized	<u>66</u>	<u>73</u>
confirmed	151	76
married	31	12
buried	66	

*St. Paul's records include many Slovak names.

Conclusion

To be able to look back 80 years into the past, we see the typical growth situation our city congregations found themselves in. St. Lucas members living on the edge of the city and those moving in that direction desired the continued ministry of the means of grace administered by God-fearing men in accord with God's Word. This same migration to the suburbs and once rich farming areas continues today. The Lord grant us the same success in 2000 as Christians continue to call for the message of reconciliation that the Lord gave Pastor Brenner and many men like him in 1900.

NOTES

- 1 Cudahy, Wisconsin--A Fifty Year Review: 1906-1956, p14
- 2 B. P. Nommenson, "Kirchweihe", Gemeinde=blatt, XXVIII, November 15, 1892, p47
- 3 Cudahy, Wisconsin--A Fifty Year Review: 1906-1956, p14
- 4 St. Paul's 50th Anniversary: 1893-1943, Cudahy, Wisconsin
- 5 B. P. Nommenson, "Grundsteinlegung", Gemeinde=blatt, XXVIII, November 1, 1893, p23
- 6 Synodalberichte (Wisconsin Synod), June-July, 1895, p55
- 7 Ibid., p58
- 8 85th Anniversary:1872-1957, St. Lucas Ev. Luth. Church, Milwaukee, Wisconsin,p7
- 9 Minutes of Congregational Meetings, St. Paul's Ev. Luth. Church, Cudahy, Wisconsin, April 20, 1893
- 10 Synodalberichte (Wisconsin Synod), June, 1896, p 14
- 11 E. A. Notz, "Ordination und Einfuehrung", Gemeinde=blatt, XXXI, July 1, 1896, p104
- 12 H. Monhardt, "Einfuehrung", Gemeinde=blatt, XXXI, July 15, 1896, p111
- 13 H. Koch, "Missionsfest", Gemeinde=blatt, XXXI, October 15, 1896, p158
- 14 O. Hagedorn, "Missionsfest", Gemeinde=blatt, XXXII, September 15, 1897, p142
- 15 John W. O Brenner, a biographical sketch by his son John F. Brenner, Bay City, Michigan, undated
- 16 St. Paul's 50th Anniversary: 1893-1943, Cudahy, Wisconsin
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 proposed 125th anniversary booklet, St. John's Ev. Luth. Church, Oak Creek, Wisconsin.
- 20 St. John's 50th Anniversary: 1906-1956, Cudahy, Wisconsin, p12
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Ibid., p5
- 23 John Brenner's Presidency, Roger Ph. Drew's personal file
- 24 St. Paul's 50th Anniversary: 1893-1943, Cudahy, Wisconsin

25 Ibid.

26 St. John's 100th Anniversary: 1850-1950, New Coeln, Wisconsin

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Roger Ph. Drews, John Brenner's Presidency

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