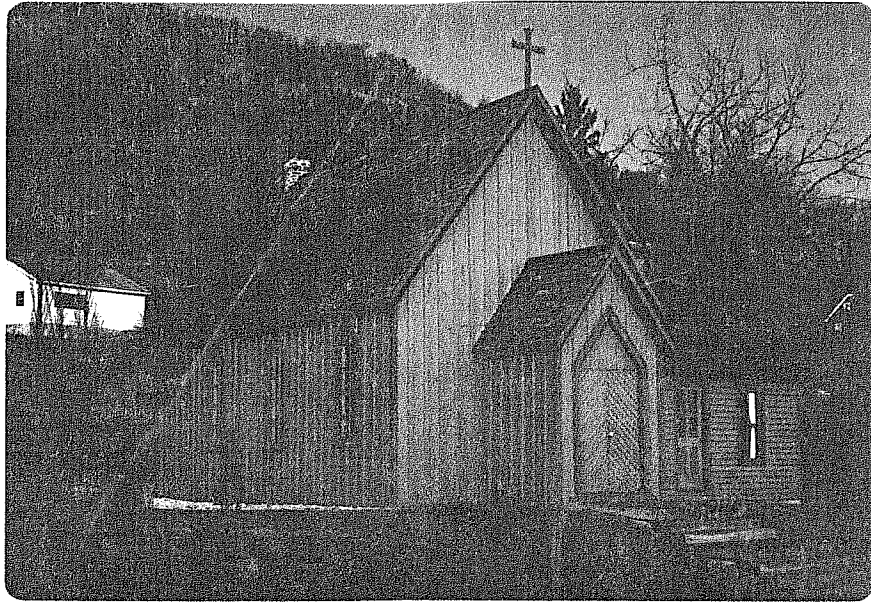


THE LITTLE BROWN CHURCH IN THE VALE



A History of
EMANUEL EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN CHURCH
BROWNSVILLE, MINNESOTA

organized ... 1862
disbanded ... 1963

Thomas J. Smith

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THE LITTLE BROWN CHURCH IN THE VALE

"The Church in the Wildwood"

"There's a church in the valley by the wildwood,
No lovelier spot in the dale;
No place is so dear to my childhood
As the little brown church in the vale.
Oh, come to the church in the wildwood,
Oh, come to the church in the vale."

-- Wm. S. Pitts

The little brown church pictured in William Pitts' "Church in the Wildwood" could very well be a description of Emanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church, Brownsville, Minnesota. The little brown church in which Emanuel congregation worshiped for some 30 years still stands in Brownsville. The Minnesota State Historical Society now holds title to the property and maintains the building as one of its historic sites.

For many of the 906 inhabitants of this sleepy town along the Mississippi, the church has relatively little meaning. Older residents might recall a few incidental facts about it; the Episcopal Church originally constructed the building; the Lutherans bought it from the Episcopal diocese in the mid-1940's; the Lutheran congregation never numbered more than a dozen families. However, for the handful of former members of Emanuel congregation, the little brown church means much more. It was their place of worship for three decades --from the 1940's until the congregation disbanded in 1963. It was the Lord's house--where they gathered to hear His Word, where their children were brought into the Kingdom of God by Holy Baptism, where they received the Lord's true body and His true blood. Moreover, it was a symbol to the community--a symbol that God's Word cannot be compromised, that faithfulness to the Word is required of the child of God.

Today, the little brown church stands as a silent witness to the Truth. Hymns of praise once carried on warm summer breezes are no longer heard from the tiny church. The message of sin and grace, of Christ crucified, is no longer proclaimed from the cracked and splintered pulpit. Emanuel congregation has been gone for twenty years. Yet, the gospel of Jesus Christ--so central to the 101 year history of Emanuel congregation--has not been without effect. Beginning with Emanuel congregation in Brownsville, the Lord allowed His gospel to spread; He blessed its growth. Today, seven Wisconsin Synod congregations in this corner of southeastern Minnesota can trace their roots to this first Evangelical Lutheran church. This is all the more amazing in light of the many obstacles thrown in the way to impede the gospel's spread. Despite schism, controversy, confrontation, God's Word not only survived--but succeeded in gaining an ever increasing number of souls. The history of Emanuel congregation is vivid proof of the Lord's promise: "My word will not return to Me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

As a river town, Brownsville itself has a rich and somewhat notorious history. Job and Charles Brown first came to the area known as Wild Cat Bluff in November, 1848. The brothers recognized the site had great potential: located on the river with easy access for steamboat traffic, rich farmland just to the west, and an available supply of lumber. The two opened a sawmill. Charles laid out the plans for a town--the first settlement in Houston County. Soon their dream became reality. Brownsville became the gateway to Houston County. Newly-arrived immigrants disembarked at the steamboat landing and moved westward to establish homesteads in the coulees and on the ridges. Brownsville prospered:

By 1870 the village had grown to a population of 1500. There were

about 40 stores, four churches, a printing office, a bank, various establishments and warehouses, boat yards, a theatre, and other accessories to a thriving town.¹

Problems accompanied the town's rapid rise in population. A former member of Emanuel, Mrs. Harvey Kuecker, whose family resided for a long time in Brownsville, recounted some of the stories told her by her mother:

The river traffic brought a lot of riffraff into town. Invariably, a fight would break out down at the landing and someone would get killed. They would take the body, toss it into the river, and let it float downstream--without as much as a proper burial. This didn't happen only once; it was a common occurrence.²

This ruff-and-tumble river town became the object of attention for a Wisconsin Synod mission.

It was the Rev. Gottlieb Fachtmann who, in the early 1860's, responded to the spiritual needs of the Lutheran immigrants. At the time Fachtmann was pastor of the newly-organized (1859) First Lutheran Church of LaCrosse, Wisconsin. He had served for several years as a traveling missionary for the Wisconsin Synod, first on an unofficial basis and then in an official capacity (as approved by the 1858 Synod convention). The "Wunderlust" in Fachtmann's blood kept him on the move. Even while shepherding the flock at LaCrosse, he made numerous trips through the surrounding countryside to gather Lutherans together. "The Minnesota side of the river, too, engaged the untiring missionary's attention..."³ On occasion, Fachtmann would board a paddlerwheeler and head downstream to Brownsville. There he conducted services for the Lutherans who had settled in and near this fast-growing town.

Fachtmann's efforts generated interest in establishing a Lutheran church right in Brownsville. Within a short time, the Holy Spirit caused to be born the first Evangelical Lutheran church in southeastern Minnesota. Rev. E. G. Hertler, the last shepherd of the Brownsville flock, writes of the event:

On February 26, 1862, at the outbreak of the Civil War, a meeting was held for the purpose of organizing a congregation and calling a pastor to serve them. The following members were elected as members of the Board: John Rader, President; Julius Hanke, Secretary; Jacob Eckhoff, Treasurer. The Secretary was authorized to correspond with the officials of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Wisconsin in the matter of calling a pastor.⁴

Whether Fachtmann himself was present at this organizational meeting is not clear. (He did not remain in the area long--leaving First Lutheran, LaCrosse, in May of 1862 to assume the pastorate of Trinity congregation, St. Paul.) Nevertheless, Fachtmann's influence can be seen in the directive given the secretary of the congregation to contact the Wisconsin Synod. Fachtmann was a Wisconsin Synod man; it follows that another Wisconsin Synod man would be called to serve as their resident pastor.

On the Fourth Sunday of Advent, 1862, the members met to hear the initial sermon of their first resident pastor, Rev. Ludwig Ebert. Ebert, a graduate of the Pilgermission of St. Chrischona, had arrived that year from Germany, in the company of Johannes Muehlhaeuser.⁵ Together with three other candidates, Ebert appeared before the Central Conference of the Wisconsin Synod, meeting in Watertown in early December. He was examined, assigned, ordained, and by the end of the month at this post in Brownsville.

The following year (1863) the congregation erected its first house of worship--a frame building, 20' by 40', at a cost of \$600. Ebert returned to Watertown in May for the Synod convention. The statistical report from that year indicates the congregation numbered 60 communicants and, apparently, was a young congregation--Ebert having performed 20 baptisms in the short time he had been there. Five pastors from that general area (including Ebert) asked for permission to form their own conference, the "Mississippi Conference," and Synod approved their request.

However, Ebert and Emanuel congregation did not remain in the Wisconsin

Synod. In the summer of 1864 Ebert did attend a synodical convention--but not the Wisconsin Synod's convention in Watertown. The Minnesota Synod--meeting at Trinity, St. Paul--received both Pastor Ebert and his congregation into membership in its body.

The work in southeastern Minnesota expanded under Ebert to include Lutherans living in the areas of Crooked Creek and Portland Prairie (Eitzen--cf. map at rear for locations). Ebert's pastorate ended in 1866, when he left the state and the Synod to serve a Wisconsin Synod congregation at Ridgeville in Monroe County.

Rev. Frederick Reitz succeeded Ebert and ministered to God's people in Brownsville from 1866 to 1871. The Pilgermission had sent Reitz directly to the Minnesota Synod in 1863. Reitz's first charge had been a congregation at Frank Hill, Winona County. Pastor Reitz continued the work already begun and "extended the field to Union, Hokah, and as far westward as Mound Prairie, where he found a group of Lutheran families."⁶

Ministering to the Lutherans in these scattered locales must have been taxing work. The problems which arose within the home congregation certainly did not help the situation. Hertler recounts the unsettling history of this period:

Pastor Reitz ... found it necessary to resign from his post because of ill health, largely due to grieving over stubborn wrangling and quarreling among the members and also shameful conduct not becoming true Christians. In his address to the congregation on January 2, 1871, he stated his position clearly enough for all present to understand, if they would. Said he: "In retrospect at the beginning of a New Year we must confess that we have received many proofs of God's unspeakable love for us and, therefore, have reasons to unite in praise with the Psalmist in the 103 Psalm: "Bless the Lord, O my soul and all that is within me, bless His holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul and forget not all His benefits."

"Dear Brethren: The Lord has been exceptionally good to us. We have not earned the blessings He has bestowed upon us, neither have we deserved them. Consider our many sins of unfaithfulness--individ-

ually as well as the congregation as a whole. We shall, therefore, raise our hearts and hands unto the Lord in sincere repentance and plead for forgiveness, that He may not withdraw His mercy from us--and we be lost in eternity. By the grace of God and the visitation of President Sieker the position of some of our members has been revealed. For years our congregation has been suffering grievously because of these wranglings and we hope that the instigators will now see the errors of their ways and put an end to these evils."⁷

Hertler concludes: "Without question, 'these evils' were well known to the membership."⁸

Exactly what "these evils" were is not, however, precisely known today. From the comments about "the position of some of our members" being revealed "by the visitation of President Sieker," it seems as if Reitz is referring to the lodge dispute. The Masons had arrived in Brownsville five years after the establishment of the congregation (about 1867) and were conducting a very vigorous membership campaign. Some of the church members had been taken in by the Masons' persuasive arguments and were lobbying for a pro-lodge position in the congregation. Personality, as much as theology, played a role in this dispute--which eventually would split the congregation in six years' time. It may be that at this time lines were already being drawn in the battle and that this, then, was the cause of Reitz's appeal. In any event, no change for the better was noticeable. Two months later, on February 27, 1871, Reitz submitted his resignation and, subsequently, accepted a call to serve a Lutheran congregation in Findley, Ohio.

June 2, 1871, saw the Rev. John Jahn installed as the third resident pastor at Brownsville. Jahn had served previously at Loretto, Crow River, and Watertown, Minnesota, and was--from all indications--a member of the Minnesota Synod in good standing. For a time at least, Jahn served faithfully. The "Parochial Berichte" do not indicate a substantial change in statistics during the early years of his pastorate. Jahn was absent from the Synod con-

ventions of 1875 and 1876, and he filed no report in 1876. Yet Jahn became a cause of division within his own congregation and certain of his actions could only have precipitated the split brewing within the congregation.

Piecing together the scraps of information which are available, this is the picture which emerges during the crucial years of 1876/1877: The wrangling and squabbling which had occurred earlier again surfaced. This time the breach proved to be irreparable. The congregation was hopelessly divided into two factions. While this turmoil was growing and when it all finally came to a head, Pastor Jahn was channeling his efforts not into church work, but into farming. This occupation appeared to be more profitable than the ministry, so Jahn was spending his time in this field of labor. Somehow, he did not find his agrarian interests at all in conflict with his call to serve the Lord and His people. Such an attitude was reprehensible enough in itself, but Jahn's next move was even more contemptible. Seeing both parties hopelessly at odds, Jahn resigned as pastor. He then turned right around and offered himself as a candidate to be called by one of the factions! This intensified the bitter feelings. The situation called for action on the synodical level. That action came when newly-elected President Kuhn suspended Jahn and the entire matter was brought up before the 1877 Synod convention--meeting at Salem congregation in Greenwood.

Kuhn announced Jahn's suspension in his "Jahresbericht" with this denunciation:

This individual is an unprincipled person, a man who publicly disgraces the ministry, who not only gives preference to his own gain ahead of the honor of Christ and the welfare of his congregation, but who remains impenitent in his condition, so that I find it incompatible with the nature of our Synod to consider him a member any longer. The honorable Synod now has the duty to examine this situation and render its decision in the matter.⁹

At the convention a special committee was appointed to review the facts in the case and render a decision. The committee felt that the matter could best be handled in a public session, which then took place. Quoting from the synodical proceedings:

After the Synod officials gave a full report on the course of events in the case and on their mode of procedure in the same, and after a deposition of the other party, which contained an accusation and protest against the conduct of the officials, had been read, the Synod had the necessary understanding of the argument. It was resolved to accept the four points of the committee and send them in writing to both parties as the decision of the Synod.¹⁰

The four points of the review committee stated (in essence):

1. that a hear^{ing} would be held at a time and place agreeable to both factions.
2. that Pastor Jahn would submit his resignation both from the congregation and that faction of the congregation which had called him.
3. that the two factions would reconcile, call another pastor, and acknowledge the Synod's action as correct.
4. that Pastor Schmidt (a neighboring pastor) would oversee that calling process.¹¹

The Synod also formally expelled Jahn from its membership on the following grounds:

1. because he excessively and without need, purely out of greed and for the sake of profit, occupied himself with farming and cattle raising and shielded himself behind various counter-charges (e.g. struggle for livelihood, illness, etc.).
2. because he abused his office in a most shameful way for the sake of this unnecessary occupation.
3. because he (in response) to loving admonition gave notice to the congregation in a frivolous way and thereby showed that he either did not know the doctrine of the call, or if he did know it, he acted in a disgraceful way toward it.
4. because he--after he had resigned from his office both verbally and in writing--permitted himself to be set up as a candidate with another (party) and accepted the vote of a faction of the congregation.

Since Mr. Jahn now remains impenitent in the sins of office which he committed, this expulsion is justified before God and Church. The faction of the congregation which still adheres to him is admonished to let him go, so he does not make himself a part of further sin in this; and Mr. Hanke* is requested to work with his party in this that it might take place.¹²

*The Mr. Hanke (mentioned above) is identified as a representative of one of the factions of the congregation. He was the only one from Brownsville present at the Synod convention. (A Mr. Julius Hanke had been elected the congregation's first secretary in '62.)

Of the Synod's resolutions and recommendations only one is known to have been carried out. Pastor Jahn left the Brownsville area to settle in another part of Houston County--Winnebago Township. It is doubtful that the meeting which was intended to reconcile the two parties ever took place. Pastor Philip Schmidt, the neighboring pastor who was to oversee the calling of another man, himself accepted a called and left the area later in 1877. For the Brownsville congregation this action or--more precisely--lack of action was critical. The membership remained divided.

The cause of the division can be traced to a number of things. As mentioned earlier, to a large extent personality conflicts were involved. Certainly Jahn's negligence contributed to the schism. Yet, the lodge issue seems to have been the major factor. Hertler writes:

It is evident that the chief cause of the split was to be found in paragraph 33 of the Constitution of the congregation. This paragraph deals with the Lodge question. Repeatedly this matter had been discussed in congregational meetings--only to be voted down to the dissatisfaction of the lovers of the un-Christian Lodges.

However, when it came to a showdown and the brazen members of lodgism began making threats, a number of the others weakened for fear of losing their rights to the church property and consented to the hiring of a non-Lutheran leader. Thus, they aided in swelling the number of the majority group.

The members of the minority group that remained loyal to the truths of God's Word according to Lutheran principles were frozen out. All rights to the church property were taken from them, nor could they receive any support through recourse to the courts.¹³

Mr. Harvey Kuecker, the last treasurer of Emanuel congregation, recalled hearing about the final meeting between the two groups. In this meeting the few who held fast to the Lutheran position opposing lodge membership were

driven out of the church at knife-point.¹⁴ From that time on, the pro-lodge majority held the church building and property.

This majority group took the name "Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church." The History of Houston County (published 1882) has a brief article about the church under the heading "Evangelical Lutheran Zion's Church." It mentions Pastor Ebert as the first resident pastor and then continues:

Rev. Frederick Reitz came in 1866, and remained until 1871, when John Jahn, now of Winnebago, took charge, and was here for six years when Rev. F. Koysetka assumed the pastorate. In 1880, Rev. Eugene Walter was called to the work, and he still continues at his post.¹⁵

Neither of the last two pastors named, Koysetka or Walter, belonged to a synod of the Synodical Conference.

The various additions and deletions made to the name of Zion congregation tell a good part of its history. In 1889 the congregation dropped the "Lutheran" from its name and joined the Minnesota District of the Evangelical Synod of North America. The congregation continued to grow and so enlarged the church building in 1904. The Evangelical Synod added "Reformed" to their name in 1938, so the church became Evangelical and Reformed. When this body merged with the Congregational Church in 1957, the name again changed--this time to "Zion United Church of Christ." In 1975, the church went independent and is now known simply as "Zion Evangelical Church." The 116 year-old sanctuary became too small for the congregation and was replaced in 1980 by a modern church and fellowship hall. The congregation has its own pastor who also serves a number of other independent congregations. Incidentally, their present pastor does not live in a parsonage, but on a farm south of Brownsville.

How many members remained faithful to the Lutheran position is not known. No individual statistics are available for Emanuel congregation until

1920, because the congregation was being served by neighboring pastors in a tri-parish or even quad-parish arrangement. However, the Minnesota District Proceedings do list Emanuel congregation as having 28 souls, 22 communicants, and 6 voters in 1920. From 1877 until the congregation's dissolution in 1963, these neighboring pastors served the little group at various times:

J. Koehler of Immanuel, South Ridge	1877-1886
C. Gutknecht of Zion, Eitzen	1879-1883
P. Hinderer of Immanuel, South Ridge	1886-1890
R. Heidmann of St. Peter, Union	1888-1895
J. Siegler of St. John, Caledonia	1895-1899
R. Fehlau of Immanuel, South Ridge	1899-1901
F. Weichmann of Immanuel, South Ridge	1901-1916
E. G. Hertler of Immanuel, South Ridge	1916-1974

Though small in numbers, the members of the congregation did not become discouraged. They continued to worship the Lord. For many years they met in the so-called "Brown Church." Mr. Charles Brown had been something of a philanthropist in his day and had erected this church at his own expense in 1864,--freely offering its use to all Protestant denominations. After this church burned down, Emanuel congregation gathered in the homes of its members. When the Episcopalian congregation in town folded, the members rented the church they had built. In 1946, Emanuel purchased the property from the Episcopal Diocese of Minnesota for \$100. This "little brown church" served as Emanuel's house of worship for the rest of its existence.

The "decline and fall" of the congregation came gradually. In part, the congregation's demise was connected with the town's decline. When the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul, & Pacific laid its track along the west bank of the Mississippi, the railroad destroyed the steamboat landing. This new mode of transportation made the old obsolete and carried people and freight right past Brownsville. Any Lutherans who did happen to move into town were directed to Zion Evangelical Church. Here, statistics tell the rest of the story. In 1922 Emanuel numbered 26 communicants, 35 souls, and 6 voters. In 1932 the number

of communicants dropped to 18; in 1942: 18 communicants; in 1952: 15 communicants; and in 1962: 11 communicants. The final statistical report (1963) listed a total of 10 communicants, 12 souls, and 3 voting members. The 1957 and 1959 Statistical Reports of the Wisconsin Synod indicate that only 16 services were conducted in each of these years.

In the background, too, was the fact that Emanuel had to rely on a sometimes complex multi-parish arrangement. This proved to be a significant factor in the later years, when Pastor Hertler found himself shepherding four congregations: Immanuel, South Ridge; Zion, Hokah; First Lutheran, LaCrescent; and Emanuel, Brownsville. Already in 1947, when the Hokah and South Ridge congregations were celebrating their 75th anniversaries and Emanuel its 85th anniversary, Pastor Hertler commented on the situation:

It is evident that other arrangements will have to be made in time. No pastor can serve four congregations indefinitely--as congregations should be served--unless he has the whole-hearted understanding and considerate cooperation of the membership. It is a physical impossibility. Our aim has been to unite Hokah, Union, and Brownsville to be served by one pastor without becoming a burden on Synod. South Ridge and LaCrescent could then be served by one pastor. But so far our plans have not matured. We trust the Lord will show us the way out of our dilemma in due time.¹⁶

The Lord's answer to the dilemma did come--fifteen years later. The Lord showed a "way out." However, His answer, the "way out," was probably not the solution which the handful of members had expected back in 1947. Yet it can be said that it was the Lord's will and part of His plan for Emanuel congregation.

1962, Emanuel's centennial year, arrived without fanfare. No major celebrations were planned. No notice appeared in the Northwestern Lutheran. There was no official announcement of the anniversary at the District convention. The milestone of 100 years marked the end of the road for Emanuel cong-

regation. It wasn't simply coincidence that the congregation decided to disband following their centennial year. Emanuel's members certainly wanted to continue worshipping as long as possible. While Pastor Hertler might well have persuaded the members to close sooner, this anniversary was a goal which he wanted the congregation to reach. With his shepherd's heart, he recognized that this occasion was special for the little flock. Undoubtedly, Pastor Hertler also viewed Emanuel's closing with mixed feelings. He had ministered to these people for 47 years. But when the final "Amen" was sung in the last service, it was not sung with a note of failure--or even necessarily sadness. Rather, pastor and people left the little brown church after that service with a sense of triumph. For they realized something which the world in general cannot appreciate--God's Word is never proclaimed in vain; the gospel can never be suppressed; the Word of the Lord always accomplishes His purpose.

Emanuel congregation passed quietly from the scene. Synod and District reports do not record the dissolution of the congregation. The 1963 Statistical Report makes mention of it. An asterisk follows the entry of 12 souls, 10 communicants, and 3 voters and the note at the bottom of the page reads: "congregation disbanded, figure not included in total of communicants."¹⁷

The 12 members joined other WELS churches in the area. Pastor Hertler continued to serve the tri-parish of South Ridge, Hokah, and LaCrescent. It is here, in the growth of the other Wisconsin Synod congregations, that Emanuel's contribution can clearly be seen. Beginning in Brownsville, the gospel gained a firm foothold in southeastern Minnesota. It was tried and tested in those early years. But Satan's intrigues proved futile. The Spirit of the Lord continued to breathe His blessings on the Word. The church spread and grew, resulting in the founding of seven other Wisconsin Synod congrega-

tions:

St. Peter's Ev. Lutheran Church, Town Union	organized	1870
Zion Ev. Lutheran Church, Eitzen	"	1871
Zion Ev. Lutheran Church, Hokah	"	1872
Immanuel Ev. Lutheran Church, South Ridge	"	1872
St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church, Nodine	"	1878
St. John's Ev. Lutheran Church, Caledonia	"	1895
First Ev. Lutheran Church, LaCrescent	"	1942

From February 26, 1862 to the present day, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in southeastern Minnesota has been served by 39 pastors. As of this date, 121 years later, the area is being served by five pastors in charge of seven congregations. The number of souls in the care of these five pastors totals 2342, of which 1749 are communicant members of the seven churches.

On Sunday morning the members of these seven churches come together to worship the Lord. The little brown church in Brownsville, however, stands empty each Sunday morning. To judge the history of Emanuel congregation on the basis of an empty building is to judge unfairly. Emanuel played a vital and significant role in the establishment and growth of the Evangelical Lutheran church in this corner of the world. When the purpose which the Lord had intended for this congregation had been fulfilled, Emanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church came to a quiet, dignified end. It left behind seven congregations--each as dedicated and firmly committed to the gospel as it had been. And, in the quiet town of Brownsville, Minnesota, it left behind a memorial, a silent witness to the the Truth of the gospel, the little brown church in the vale.

ENDNOTES

- ¹History of Houston County, quoted in The Diamond Jubilee, p. 7.
- ²Interview with Mr. & Mrs. Harvey Kuecker, 3/19/83.
- ³Koehler, History of the Wisconsin Synod, p. 60.
- ⁴Hertler, The Diamond Jubilee, p. 6.
- ⁵Koehler, p. 127.
- ⁶Hertler, p. 6.
- ⁷Hertler, p. 6.
- ⁸Hertler, p. 6.
- ⁹Minnesota Synod Proceedings 1877, pp. 9-10.
- ¹⁰Minnesota Synod Proceedings 1877, p. 55.
- ¹¹Minnesota Synod Proceedings 1877, p. 55.
- ¹²Minnesota Synod Proceedings 1877, p. 55.
- ¹³Hertler, p. 7.
- ¹⁴Interview with Mr. & Mrs. Harvey Kuecker, 3/19/83.
- ¹⁵Neill, History of Houston County, p. 340.
- ¹⁶Hertler, p. 11.
- ¹⁷Statistical Report of the WELS for 1963, p. 22.

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