

Glencoe Church

By D. McGarvey

In the late 19th century a settlement on the stage trail between Bismarck and the ferryboat crossing to Fort Yates bore the name Glencoe. Today the town is gone. No trace remains of its stage stop and post office, hotel and dance hall, store and school. Only the church stands on the prairie above the Missouri River, a lonely remnant of a pioneer settlement.

Glencoe can't be found on a North Dakota road map; but the farm community, with the historic church as its hub, still calls itself Glencoe.



Glencoe village, Argyllshire, Scotland

The historic building provides more than a place of worship for local Presbyterians. Recently established as a historical site on the Lewis and Clark trail, the church attracts many visitors. Photographers capture the lone white church in all seasons and against the changing moods of the prairie sky. It is the subject of Bismarck artist Gary Miller's *Country Church*. But Glencoe isn't just monument and memory. People of all

faiths gather at the church for social events, as they did in 1885.

In December, 1885, pioneer settlers to the Glencoe community, Dakota Territory, celebrated the building of their church with a festival. Farm women loaned their iron cookstoves, which were hauled to the church by horse and wagon. The feast included pressed prairie chicken, roast venison, and oyster stew.

People from surrounding settlements and from across the river to the west came by horse and buggy, by ferryboat, and on foot for the celebration. At booths they bought handmade doilies and shawls and aprons. They leaned against the new stone walls of the church basement, exchanging news. Caught up in the excitement of a social gathering, homesteaders bid as much as \$10 at auction for three-tiered cakes, which they sometimes resold for \$30. Folks brought their accordians and violins and gathered in groups to play and sing.

The gala lasted three days and became a Glencoe tradition. Church suppers, annual harvest festivals, continued for eighty years.

On June 9, 1985, the community and hundreds of former residents and Glencoe devotees gathered at the church for a centennial celebration. Former pastors stood at the hand-hewn pulpit, carved by Isaac Oliver Sloan, the church founder, and read from the fragile yellowed pages of the pulpit Bible, inscribed to Father Sloan in 1885.

After the commemoration service, people gathered in the warm spring sun to exchange news, reminisce, play horseshoe, and enjoy another feast.



At the centennial celebration, Harold Van Heuvelen played the violin while community members and friends gathered in the churchyard.



During the afternoon, visitors strolled across the road to the cemetery — to find family graves, to walk through the past, etched in gravestone marble.

A cluster of worn stones bearing Scottish names stands in one corner of the graveyard. Among them is the stone of Dugald Campbell whose nephew, another Dugald Campbell, donated the land on which the church was built.

The Glencoe community was settled by Scots — MacDonalds, Campbells, McPhersons, McShannons — 24 meandering stagecoach miles south of the little frontier town of Bismarck. Although these Scottish immigrants came to Dakota Territory from Campbeltown, Scotland, they chose to call their new home Glencoe. Perhaps, after a long journey over the flat dry prairie, they sighted the cottonwood-

lined Missouri with hills rising above it and were reminded of the mountain-river village of their homeland.

Glencoe, Argyllshire, Scotland, lies above Loch Linnhe at the end of the wild and broody mountains of Glen Coe. The Highland village, ancestral headquarters of clan MacDonald and site of the infamous Massacre of Glencoe, inspired the naming of the early stage stop and post office.

The Dakota Territory Glencoe thrived by 1885. Squatters and homesteaders of the sparsely-settled prairie and riverbottom land came for miles to trade at Glencoe's general store. They bought grocery staples, dry goods, and leather to sole their shoes and patch harness.

The dance hall attracted party-goers from as far as Fort Rice. In summer, they came by ferryboat. In winter, wrapped in buffalo robes with heated whetstones at their feet, they crossed the frozen Missouri on sleighs to attend the "socials".

The stage arrived at the Glencoe Stage Stop in the evening. Horses were cared for and a hot supper served to stage passengers. Here Sitting Bull and his guards spent a night in the barn on the Sioux Chief's fateful return to the Standing Rock Reservation.

The Corbin Hotel, built above the river bank in 1881, offered food and lodging to ferryboat passengers and crew. Woodcutters who provided fuel at ferry landings along the Missouri stopped for a hot meal and to swap yarns.

Gradually the town dwindled and died when railroads began moving people and freight, and the church became the center of the farm community. Settlers gathered on Sunday mornings for church services and the weekly exchange of news. For a century homesteaders and their descendants have worked and celebrated together at harvest festivals, basket socials and ice cream socials. The church has served as a refuge during blizzards and from Missouri River floodwaters.

Glencoe Church is as Presbyterian as its Scottish founders were. Its congregation worships on Sunday and gathers under the elm tree after the service to chat. Together they clean the cemetery before the annual Memorial Day Social, and provide a summer picnic in the churchyard for lay pastors and friends.

And it's as ecumenical as the community. Local people of all faiths are buried in the cemetery. The church stands on the prairie above the Missouri as a symbol of the community's identity and as a reminder of its century of rich history.

What has kept Glencoe together? "A church," says local historian Naomi Buckley Oder. "We can't go back to the little country post office, nor to the hotel. Nor to the store nor the dance hall. But to the church that we have kept. That, to us still, is Glencoe."