

## St. Aloysius Catholic Church, near Hague & Strasburg, North Dakota

History of Creek Settlement, St. Aloysius Church, 1949

By Father Richard Steinemann

Before talking about St. Aloysius Church, a little background may prove very interesting. The slogan, "Times Change", makes an impression when attention is called to the changes in our own locality. Going back 50 years and more, we leave the conveniences of electricity, cars, tractors and machinery of all kinds, and end up with the bare necessities of pioneer life. It was like that right here in Emmons county, not too many years ago.

Back in 1886, the Anton Senger family was the first to move into this new locality. This family--as did others who followed--came from Russia. About 100 years before their folks had left Germany at the invitation of Czar Alexander I of Russia. He promised these German people about 100 acres of Crown land in the Ukraine, religious freedom, tax exemption for 10 years and freedom from conscription. To be welcome they had to be good, hardworking people. They were.



**St. Aloysius Catholic Church, near Hague and Strasburg, Emmons County, North Dakota, June 17, 1917**

Soon their holdings spread and the farms became too small to produce a good living. News of the newly - opened Dakota territory was a godsend. (It had not yet become a state).

This part of Dakota territory had been surveyed about 1884 and shortly afterwards the migration began. There were three ways in which the pioneers could acquire large tracts of land--that is, large compared to the few hectares they had worked in Russia. A quarter section (160 acres) could be preempted by working it for six months, then proving it and paying \$200; a quarter section could be homesteaded by building thereon and staying there for five years; and finally, a third quarter section, a forest claim, could be made by planting 10 acres of trees. This latter law was usually disregarded and unfortunately, today there are still very few trees. Deeds were registered in Hoskins, later Ashley, and then forwarded to Bismarck.

Arriving by train at Ipswich, in what is now South Dakota, and the end of the railroad at that time, the immigrants purchased supplies and started on a wagon trail for the northwest. They moved along, with their

supplies of oxen, cart, plow, sugar, coffee and flour (horses and cows were too expensive), making new, and sometimes renewing old acquaintances but always on the lookout for a suitable piece of ground they could claim as their own. They were warned of the scarcity of rain and water, so they were naturally drawn first to the south forks of Beaver Creek. This meant a 50-mile trip for supplies. It was shortened into a one-day trip later when Eureka came into existence.

Everything was prairie with heavy, luxuriant grass, especially along the creek. This clear stream had plenty of good, pure water, abundant grass, large beautiful trees--truly a beautiful stream and a fine place for a home. Today this has changed a little--and it is a shame. The dust storms of the 30's filled in many of the deeper holes and the stream has been so polluted with manure that it is unfit even for swimming. In the early days a claim along the creek was most important and desirable, because of its good water and because good shallow wells could easily be found near it. Other farmers, not so fortunate, often came for miles to get barrels of water. There were plenty of fish and from the creek came the hops from which the early settlers made the yeast for their all-important bread. Its importance is reflected, today, in that the district is popularly known and referred to, simply, as "The Creek."

Home, in those days, was a small building--a sod house--made of a mixture of mud and straw. This mixture was worked into bricks about six inches square and about 12 inches long. The walls were quite thick, making the house cool in summer and easier to heat in winter--providing they did not crack. It was frequently necessary to repair damage done by rains. A large oven, fired with hay, straw or manure, served the dual purpose of heating and baking. The dirt floor was packed hard and well swept. A simple wall was often put up to make the sod house into a two-room structure.

The food was simple. There were no canned goods and early crop failures added to the difficulty of securing food. Bread and milk were the most important, although "Ruebel Suppe", made of rubbed bits of dough and milk, was on the table every day. No cabbage then--so no borsch; no chicken--so no eggs; no hogs--so no pork. Cattle and oxen were too necessary and important to slaughter. The only meat, if any, was from rabbits and from the ducks on the creek.

Going to town was more a task than a pleasure. It was a long hard ride and many and dangerous were the experiences of those who made it--especially if they were caught in a storm or blizzard. There was no radio with its five-day forecast in those days. The trip was one that would be taken, possibly, every three months, except in the fall when enough provisions would be hauled to last through the long winter months--they hoped! Despite these hardships the people were in good health. This was good, for the nearest physician, Dr. Gertes, lived in Eureka, and that was a long way off. There were few adult deaths in the early days, but infant mortality was very high.

Already in 1893, Syrians and Jews came around with their huckster wagons. These were loaded with merchandise and food, and were a great help to the people, for time and the trouble of a trip to town. The prices were high and a common practice was to offer only half of what was asked for any article.

It was a quiet and peaceful life. There were no outlaws and the people were always kind and friendly. They were real neighbors--helping each other in their work and making their common burdens easier to bear. They were a source of pleasure and companionship, helping and doing their part to give the West the reputation of having a very friendly and hospitable people.

Farming was different then. It was slow, hard work breaking oxen to yoke and still worse to break ground with a 14-inch breaker plow. Oxen were preferred for this work for they were steadier and more powerful than horses. Farming was hard on legs, back and arms. Seed was broadcast by hand and then covered with a drag. To put out 50 acres of grain was a lot of work for one farmer. It was cut with a mower with a boxlike attachment to catch the grain and drop it in small piles, thus making it easier to stack. The old ways of threshing by driving horses 'round and round' over the straw and flailing, which was beating the grain out with wooden sticks, were a far cry from the combines now in use. The first horsepower threshing machine was purchased in 1894. Around this time the header also appeared. The large steam engine threshing outfits arrived about 10 years later.

Oxen and horses were brought in, by the carload, to Menno, S.D., and were then shipped to Ipswich for sale to the neighboring families. Breaking in oxen to the yoke was a very difficult job for the farmer, and the work they had to do was tiring for man and beast. A not unusual but still interesting fact concerns the family walking miles to church, even through mud, because the horses and oxen were too tired from the previous week's work. (The third Commandment--no work for horses??).

An education was difficult to receive. The classroom was a room in one of the farmhouses where the gathered children were taught English, reading, writing and also arithmetic. In theory that was good but school seldom lasted more than one month out of the year. The first schools were built in 1897 but many times these remained vacant for years at a time. Few teachers were available. "German schools" began shortly afterwards and they did a lot for the children. They usually lasted around three months and along with German and arithmetic, the children were taught about God and their relation to Him--something that some think is so terrible.

In the 80's, mail was delivered to Ipswich. Charles Pfeiffer had a store there and he would sort and bundle the mail and then give it to farmers headed in the direction of "the Creek." Eventually, the mail was delivered. In the 90's, it was brought from Williamsport, then county seat of Emmons county, to Edward Braddock--Dakem post office down to Jacob Fischer's house. This happened about three times a week. At these two places the farmers gathered to receive and hear the latest news from their homeland. Just before World War I, mail was carried R.F.D. from Hague with many boxes lined up in front of the church, the end of the route. In May 1947, this was made into a daily route.

This, in brief, is the background of the story of the 50-year existence of St. Aloysius church. From the very beginning, as is still true today, almost all the families were Roman Catholics. The families of Anton Senger, Karl Fischer, Joseph Heisler, Ferdinand Kraft, John Goldade and Adam Gefre were among the earliest in this section. Within the space of only a few years, they were followed by many more and in a short time the claims along the creek were staked. There was no priest among these German-speaking Catholics, but word spread quickly even in the early times. It was not long, June, 1887 when Father Bernard Strassmaier, O.S.B., came from Ft. Yates with his two Indian companions and guides and said Mass for the people. This missionary had a vast territory and with the limited transportation of a horse and two-wheeled cart, he could come only about four or five times a year.

Father Strassmaier would mail a letter to one of the families, usually Anton Senger, about a month ahead, mentioning the date he would be there. He always came a day before; so that all preparations would be completed. A small table was used as an altar. The house was jammed with people who had gathered--coming by foot, by horse and by oxcart. They came from miles around. After Mass in the morning came the marriages and baptisms. In the afternoon Vespers would be sung by all the people. John Streifel, Barbara Schumacher,

Katherina Erick and Margarita Fischer led the choir. It was a friendly and sociable group, and a day of religious and social uplifting. Mass was also said in the homes of John Weber, Adam Gefre and Joseph Gefre.

Father Joachim Widmer, O.S.B., of Strasburg and Father Stephan of St. John's Church, succeeded Father Bernard in his work but facilities were not satisfactory. The people needed and wanted a church. But where was it to be built? Three locations were discussed in the meetings that were held. The present site was chosen because it was most centrally located. This was in preference to places 1-1/2 miles north and another 1-1/4 miles to the southeast.

Construction of the new church began in 1897, on land donated for that purpose by Anton A. Fischer. The lumber came from Eureka. The land on which the church was built was deeded to Bishop Shanley on September 23, 1898. A small church, about 20x30 feet with a very beautiful interior, was built under the direction of John Schweitzer. It had no tower, the bell hanging from two poles directly in front of the church. Priests from the neighboring town of Strasburg came over regularly, once a month, for Mass and instructions. One afternoon in the fall of 1906, after Father Justus, O.S.B., had been over for Mass in the morning, smoke arose in the clear blue sky. The church burned to the ground. Plans were immediately begun to build a larger church measuring 30x60 feet. In the meantime Mass was said in the home of the neighbor, Joseph Gefre. Father Justus O.S.B., is the oldest pastor alive at this writing.

The new church, also dedicated to St. Aloysius, was blessed by Most Reverend Vincent Wehrle, O.S.B., in 1907. The organ was donated by Kasimir Mastel and John Eberle. The following year the people were promised a resident pastor and for that reason work on the rectory began immediately. Father Hermann Decker, the first priest, stayed but two years. Up until his coming, Benedictine priests had been in charge of the parish. Father Karl Hierlmeier stayed until 1915 when Father Matthew Minnixhofer took his place. Father Raphael Schaefer came in 1923 for a stay of two years. The church was already becoming too small and under Father Aloysius Fiorioli, a 25-ft addition was built at the rear of the church. Father Fiorioli, the last diocesan priest was here until 1930, and is still living.

Since 1930, priests of the Society of the Precious Blood have been in charge of the parish, and of Sacred Heart church, Rosenthal. The latter was added as a mission church. Father Henry Friedal, C.P.P.S., remained here for almost eight years, and during this time the tower began to pull away from the church. The tower was razed and another built alongside the structure. Father Paul Denzel, C.P.P.S., left in 1939 when Father Charles Meyer, C.P.P.S., took over.

In 1941 the entire interior of the church was covered with Nuwood, improving its appearance and also acting as an insulation from the cold and heat. A blower was installed in the furnace making the church warm for the first time, and creating a saving in the fuel bill. A shelter belt of trees was planted, showing the farmers that trees could and would grow in North Dakota. Father Joseph Maichler, C.P.P.S., was here until followed by Father Richard Steinemann, C.P.P.S., in 1946. In observance of the Golden Jubilee, and in thanksgiving to god, stained glass windows were put into the church this year.

The records of the church go back to 1899 to the first of 1,143 baptisms, which was Wendelin W. Horner. The first adult burial was that of Nickolas Heisler on December 19, 1898. The first wedding--a triple ceremony--occurred on November 6, 1899. In that ceremony John, Peter and Philipina Horner were married to Barbara Boehm, Helen Kelsch and George Bosch, respectively. There are 149 recorded burials and 185 marriages.

In the past few years the people have progressed. One of the first real pushes to obtain REA power for Emmons county came from the people of St. Aloysius. Another example of their ideas of progress was the time they asked the priest to stop preaching in German so that their children might better learn the English language.

**Golden Jubilee: June 21, 1949**

On June 21, 1949, the members of St. Aloysius Church celebrated the Golden Jubilee with a Solemn High Mass. The Reverend Ministri were the following: Very Reverend Ignatius Wagner, C.P.P.S., Superior of the Western Division of the Society of the Precious Blood was celebrant; Reverend Thomas Jundt, O.S.B., pastor of Sts. Peter and Paul Church, Strasburg was deacon; Reverend Francis Lauinger, pastor of St. Michael Church of rural Linton was subdeacon; Reverend Joseph Biegler, C.P.P.S., pastor of St. Anthony's Church, Linton, was Master of Ceremonies. Reverend Joseph Niebler, Dean of the Hague Deanery, preached the sermon. Thus all the priests--Benedictines, Diocesan and Precious Blood--who have served the people of St. Aloysius were represented at the altar. There were thirteen priests present for the celebration. The church was far too small to seat all who came, from miles around, to attend the Mass.