



Oak Leaves

Newsletter of the ELS Historical Society

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Issue 1

In years past, many Norwegian-American churches had altar paintings as reminders of the Savior whom they worshipped.

Although there were a number of local artists, there were few actual "professional" artists who provided the altar paintings. The following article tells the story of the earliest, and foremost of the professional artists: Herbjørn Gausta. His works are an artistic treasure within the Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

Herbjørn Gausta was born on the Gausta farm in Vestfjorddalen, Telemark, Norway, on June 16, 1854. In 1867, when Herbjørn was thirteen years old, the family emigrated to Fillmore County, Minnesota, and settled on a farm near Harmony.¹

As the only son in a farm family of modest means, Herbjørn would have been expected to assume much of the economic responsibility for his mother and sisters upon his father's death. The death occurred when the boy was only fifteen years old and while the Gaustas were still in the process of getting established on their farm in Fillmore County. For almost three years Herbjørn did attempt to contribute to the family economy by working on the farm and taking outside jobs, but in the fall of 1872 he left the farm to enter the three-year program at Luther College for the training of parochial school teachers. With this move, he actually increased the family's financial problems.

Mrs. Gausta continued to operate the farm while the daughters took jobs. Circumstances were difficult for the entire family. In a letter to Herbjørn dated May 17, 1873, his sister Ingeborg writes: "I hope you can find a buyer for your Bible. Mother is going to try to send you some



The Good Shepherd by Herbjørn Gausta
Saude Lutheran Church
Lawler, Iowa

¹ His father was Nils H. Gaustad [sic] and his mother was Anne O. Gaustad [sic] (nee Kromviig). In 1869 Nils Gaustad died, leaving a family of five children.

money if she possibly can." The situation did not improve. In December 1873 Herbjørn is without a coat and writes to ask his sister if he should buy one on credit or wait until he has money. She suggests he wait. A letter from the following year indicates that money is still scarce. Mrs. Gausta, however, has sent Herbjørn butter. She apologizes that she can send no eggs because the hens are not laying.

If Herbjørn ever actually intended to become a teacher, this goal was apparently short-lived. According to his nieces, who grew up in the Gausta household while Herbjørn's mother was still living, it was in art that he distinguished himself even before going to

early years on the farm [sic] the opportunity cartoons and sketch animals, birds, or path." A newspaper unidentified

written about 1882 says during college days class he seems to have the students looked and their forms on paper teach them anything." also dabbling in oils. Norwegian-American painting has a pencilled that it was made by was attending Luther he completed his program wrote to a school in studying penmanship, an practices alongside his Lack of money appears to breaking off his going into art. His



The Crucifixion by Herbjørn Gausta
Western Koshkonong Luth. Church
Cottage Grove, Wisconsin

Luther College. Of his they write, "When ever came he would draw scenery, comics, people, whatever crossed his article by an acquaintance of Gausta's of his practice teaching that, "Both in and out of thought more about how how he could best capture than about how he could By now he was apparently An oil copy in the Museum of a Bergslien note on the back saying Herbjørn Gausta while he College. The year before in teacher's training, he Madison, Wisconsin, about art which Gausta sketching and painting. be all that kept him from teacher's training and sister Anne, who was

working as a servant in the small town of Cresco Iowa, wrote in a letter to him from 1874, "I am very sorry that you cannot take lessons in drawing. I wish I had some money to let you have."

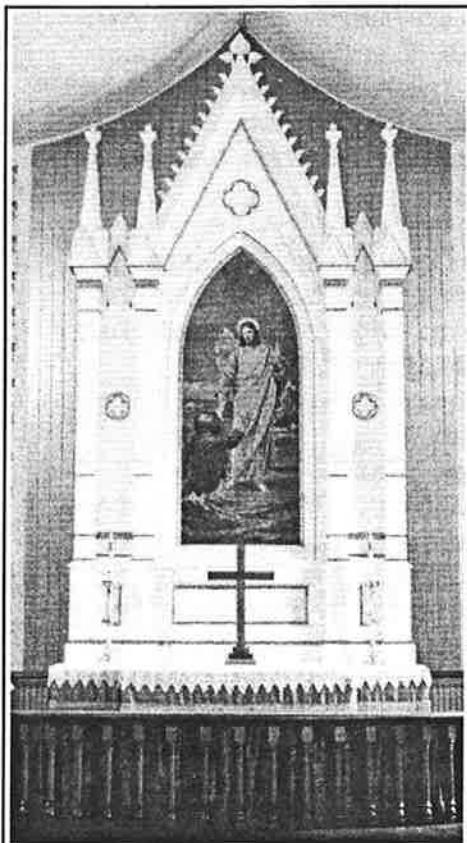
The environment which Herbjørn Gausta entered at Luther College in 1872 was a rather enlightened one. The President, Laur. Larsen, had been trained at the university of Christiania [Oslo]. The year Gausta entered Luther College, President Larsen married Ingeborg Astrup, a sister of the Norwegian painter Nikolai Astrup. Reverend U. V. Koren, with whom Gausta developed a close relationship, was also university trained and came from the prominent Koren

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Oak Leaves welcomes articles of both synodical and local significance for publication; articles may be edited for style, clarity, or length to allow for publication; submitted manuscripts will be deposited in the Archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

family of Bergen. His wife, Else Elizabeth Koren, was from the Hysing family, which in the nineteenth century played a leading role in the cultural and economic development of the Larvik area. In Decorah, Gausta came into contact with people who were familiar with the fine arts and recognized their importance. One can scarcely imagine another Norwegian settlement in America at the time in which the people of the community would have pooled resources to send a student to Europe for the study of art.



Jesus and Peter by Herbjørn Gausta
East Paint Creek Lutheran Church
Waterville, Iowa

returned to Norway, now going directly to Telemark where he began for the first time to concentrate on landscape painting. Late that year, after having spent over six years abroad, he returned to America.

Gausta appears to have considered art his first responsibility. There is no indication in his extensive papers that he felt guilty about placing his professional needs over the immediate economic needs of his family or that he hesitated in accepting support for his education

The remarkable Reverend U. V. Koren, who had settled outside Decorah in 1853 as the first resident Norwegian Lutheran pastor in the area, recognized Herbjørn's special gifts and solicited money from the community to send him to Norway for art training. The effort succeeded.

That fall he departed for Europe, where he studied for two years at the art school of Knud Bergslien in Christiania [Oslo]. Summers and the winter of 1877-1878 were spent with relatives in Telemark. In March 1878, Herbjørn left Norway for Munich, where he studied at the Academy of Art, first under Professor Ludwig von Loefftz and later under Professor Otto Seitz.² In the spring of 1881 Herbjørn

In 1917, Augsburg Publishing House published a book titled *Church Design* which stated: "Quite generally our people like to have an oil painting in the central niche of the altar. In most cases such painting represents an event in the life of Christ. This way of beautifying the altar and sanctuary is commendable. But such painting must be a work of art, otherwise it will do more harm than good. Frequently one may see terrible travesties of art set up in this most holy place, causing pain and distraction even in the most devout of worshippers. It would be far better to place a plain cross (this may be cut out of guilt paper) where the painting should be until such time when someone in the congregation will donate a real work of art to adorn the altar of the Lord."

Material Culture and People's Art Among the Norwegians in America,
edited by Marion John Nelson,
Northfield, Minnesota:
The Norwegian-American Historical Association,
1994,
page 199

² In March [1878] Gausta departed for Munich where he finally became self supporting, largely from commissions for museum copies from Mrs. Isabelle Singer [wife of the sewing machine manufacturer]. In his later life his income was derived almost exclusively from painting altars, of which he is said to have produced over four hundred.

from his family and friends. Even the signs of appreciation from his in the early years were few. He wrote seldom and said little. His sister Gunnil [sic] asks in a letter from 1879: "Why do you never tell us anything about yourself when you write?" Several years later Ingeborg chides him for his neglect of his friend and benefactor Tollef Sanderson of Harmony, Minnesota. She suggests that he send him a painting and adds, "Don't you think he would like if you gave him

that much attention?" Even Reverend Koren got little satisfaction from his correspondence with Gausta. "Did you complete your course in Munich and have you any definite plans for the future?" he asks in 1881. "Please do not take me wrong, I had just begun to wonder. The fact is that I am so very anxious to know how things are going with you."

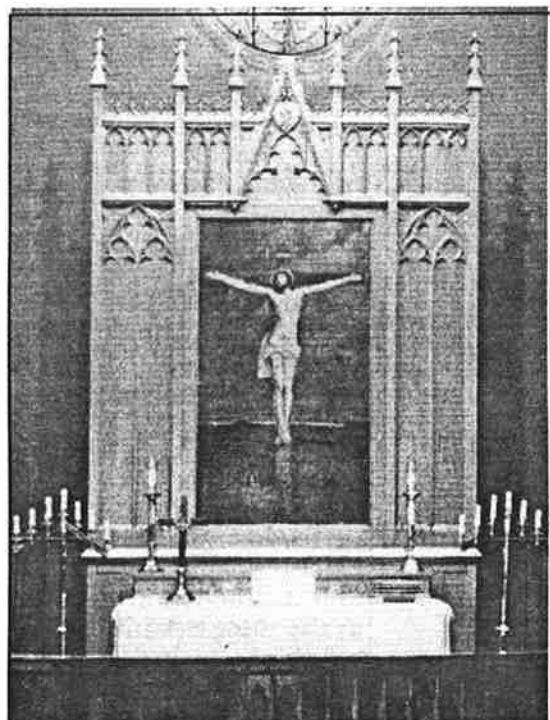
In spite of the above quotations, Gausta retained good relations with his family and friends. They appear to have recognized that he was not so much selfish as he was selflessly devoted to art. His way of life was simple and his manner was humble and kind. He did not seek praise, and he actually shunned publicity. When he returned from Europe, he presented paintings to many of the people who had supported him, and in his later life he assisted in financing the education of a grand nephew.³ The apparent callousness of his early years came to an end when he had achieved the opportunity to paint.

Gausta spent the period 1882 to late 1887 restlessly trying to establish himself in the New World. He appears to have lived about a year in each of several cities, first Chicago, then Madison and La Crosse, Wisconsin, and finally, Decorah, Iowa. In Decorah he taught art at his Alma Mater, Luther College, during the academic year 1886-87. After this the pattern of changing addresses shifted to Europe. In the fall he was again in Munich. From January through March of 1888 he made his residence on Capri in the Mediterranean. The summer of the same year found him back in Rauland [Norway].

Gausta's "wander years" came to an end in the fall of 1888. On returning from Europe, he went almost immediately to Minneapolis. From this time to his death on May 22, 1924, Minneapolis was his home.

Though Minneapolis was now Gausta's permanent residence, he continued to be much on the move. In 1894 and in 1899 he again visited Europe, including France and Germany as well as Norway on the first trip. Summers were almost invariably spent with friends and relatives in Harmony, Willmar, and Akeley, Minnesota, and

³ Sigurd Ylvisaker [noted in a letter to Gausta from Sigurd Ylvisaker, St. Paul, Minnesota, October 17, 1922]



The Crucifixion by Herbjørn Gausta
Norseland Lutheran Church
St. Peter, Minnesota

Decorah, Iowa. There may also have been a trip to Colorado, where a relative was living.

Gausta's devotion to art remained consistent throughout his entire life. From the time he departed for Norway in 1875 until his death in 1924 there is no indication that he ever turned to or even considered an other means of livelihood.

He discovered upon returning from Europe that the Middle West was not ready to support a serious artist doing original work. Portraits and an occasional landscapers or genre painting were commissioned or purchased by a few of the prominent families in the church, such as the Preuses and Stubs, or in the business and industry, such as the J. A. Johnsons of Madison and the Torrison's of Manitowoc, Wisconsin; but the sale of original paintings was generally slow. None of the eight works exhibited at the Chicago Institute of Arts in 1884 sold, and Professor O.J. Breda presents a gloomy picture of Gausta's situation in Minneapolis in a Norwegian language newspaper article dated December 1, 1889.



Mrs. H. A. Stub
by H. Gausta (1886)

His pictures are praised, but there is no one who buys. An artist cannot compete with the chrome manufacturers; and there are unfortunately not so very many people who can tell the difference between the two or who are willing to sacrifice anything to give an artist his daily bread.

Mr. Gausta has during all his time in Minneapolis [a little over a year] scarcely sold a painting. What he has lived on is altar paintings for Norwegian churches in the Middle West.

The circumstances which prompted Professor Breda's article was the fire in the Tribune Building which had occurred the previous night and which wiped out all of Gausta's possessions.⁴

Professor Breda also mentioned that because of the lack of demand for art work among the general public, Gausta had to live from producing altar pieces for Norwegian-American churches. This forced him into a category of painting for which he had shown no inclination as a student. From the very beginning, his artistic interests and talents had

Often the altar paintings were copies of nineteenth century artists such as Heinrich Hofmann (*Jesus in Gethsemane*), Bernard Plockhorst (*The Good Shepherd*), and Hans Thoma (*Jesus and Mary at the Tomb*)."

A few Norwegian churches placed a statue upon their altar (which generally was a copy of Bertel Thorvaldsen's statue ["Come unto Me"] from the Church of Our Lady in Copenhagen, Denmark).

Material Culture and People's Art Among the Norwegians in America,
edited by Marion John Nelson,
Northfield, Minnesota:
The Norwegian-American Historical Association, 1994,
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The Rev. H. A. Stub
(Decorah, Iowa)
by H. Gausta (1886)

⁴ This fire, in 1899, destroyed Gausta's studio. Following the fire, he was "given a studio in the Lutheran Publishing House which he retained until late in his life."

A TOUR THROUGH OUR HISTORY

On your travels this summer, you may want to stop and visit some of the historic sites of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod:

In WISCONSIN you can begin your visit at **Western Koshkonong Lutheran Church** (rural Cottage Grove) at the cradle of Norwegian Lutheranism in North America where the Rev. J.W.C.Dietrichson distributed the Sacrament of the Altar under the oak trees in 1844. An historical marker in the settlement commemorates this event. Continuing north, stop at **Holy Cross Lutheran Church** (Madison) which was the first home-mission congregation established by the re-organized ELS (in 1926); while there be sure to see the carriage stone from the Norwegian Synod seminary when it was in Madison (1876-88). **Trinity Lutheran Church** (West Bend) is the oldest congregation and school in the synod. Visit **St. Paul's Lutheran Church** (Portage) which is the oldest church building in the synod (1873). Be sure not to miss the baptismal font at **Concordia Lutheran Church** (Eau Claire) which was made from the original oaks at Koshkonong; or the stone pulpit in the church park of **St. Martin Lutheran Church** (rural Shawano); or.



When traveling in IOWA visit the historic **Lime Creek Lutheran Church** (rural Lake Mills) which was organized in 1860 as the first Norwegian Synod congregation in the area and split in 1868 because of the slavery controversy which arose in the Norwegian Synod. It was here that the faithful few, who refused for conscience sake to enter the Merger of 1917, met to reorganize the synod. It was also at the synod convention, hosted here, that the synod officially voted to take over the control of Bethany Lutheran College. The **Saude Lutheran Church** (rural Lawler) is the oldest congregation in the synod with a continuous affiliation with the ELS; while there look for the cemetery marker bearing an inscription written by the Rev. U.V.Koren and visit the "Strandebarm" log cabin which was built by Pastor H.M.Tjernagel near the parsonage. In the far north-east corner of the state, at **East Paint Creek Lutheran Church** (rural Waterville) the silver altar candlesticks were given by Mrs. C.K.Preus (Rev. Preus was a former president of Luther College).

Going north to MINNESOTA stop at **Manchester Lutheran Church** (Manchester) possibly was the first congregation organized in protest to the Merger of 1917. Visit **Mt. Olive Lutheran Church** (Mankato) which began as Bethany Lutheran Church meeting in the original Bethany Lutheran College chapel. **Norseland Lutheran Church** (rural St. Peter) from where the pioneer pastor served an area of seventeen counties; while

there view the cemetery marker of an U.S. Ambassador to Norway (L.Swenson). The remnant of the Minority which eventually formed the ELS first met in 1917 at **Fairview Lutheran Church**; the congregation became a part of **King of Grace Lutheran Church** (Golden Valley) and its altar statue is housed there. Father north, **Immanuel Lutheran Church** (Audubon) is the oldest ELS congregation in this part of the state. And **St. Petri Lutheran Church** (Grygla) has an altar, pulpit, and baptismal font hand carved by one of the early area pioneers. The former **Gran Lutheran Church** (rural Bagley) is a log church listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

In MICHIGAN you can visit **Holton Lutheran Church** (Holton) which is the third oldest Norwegian congregation in Michigan. At **Holy Scripture Lutheran Church** (Midland), bricks on the north portico of the church building come from the original 1723 "Old North Church" of Paul Revere fame.

At **Pinewood Lutheran Church** (Burlington) in MASSACHUSETTS the historic church bell was cast in 1846 by an apprentice of Paul Revere.

Going south, in GEORGIA, **Resurrection Lutheran Church** (Kennesaw) worships in a Civil War era farm house. While in FLORIDA, **Our Savior Lutheran Church** (Naples) which is the first ELS church in the state; while **Trinity Lutheran Church** (Sebastian) was the first home mission which the ELS established in the state.

Many Norwegian immigrants settled in the Pacific North-west. In an effort to establish a school for the Norwegian Synod, the Rev. B.Harstad went to Tacoma and while there established **Parkland Lutheran Church** (Tacoma) which operates the oldest Christian day school with a continuous affiliation with the ELS. **Lakewood Lutheran Church** (Tacoma) was started with funds gathered by the ELS as a thankoffering at the conclusion of World War II.

Farther south, in CALIFORNIA, **Christ the King Lutheran Church** (Bell Gardens) is the site of "Project Christo Rey" and bi-lingual Spanish outreach.



One also can visit ELS congregations which were organized by the three "Founding Fathers" of the Norwegian Synod:

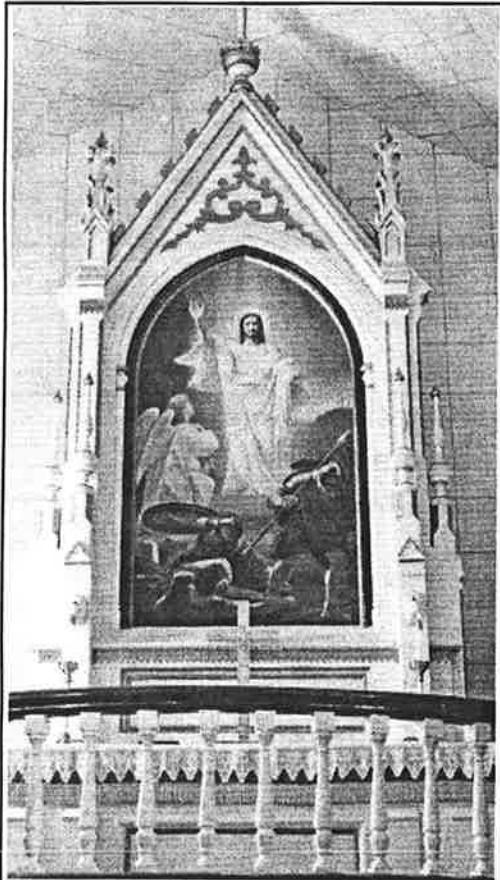
J.A.Otteson: **Western Koshkonong Lutheran Church** (Cottage Grove, Wisconsin)

H.A.Preus: **St. Paul's Lutheran Church** (Portage, Wisconsin) and
Newport Lutheran Church (Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin)

U.V.Koren: **Saude Lutheran Church** (Lawler, Iowa) and
Jerico Lutheran Church (New Hampton, Iowa)

Herbjørn Gausta; Norwegian-American Painter, continued ...

been in capturing momentary impressions from his environment. His idiom was genre and landscape painting. This circumstance, and the fact that the congregations for which he painted could not afford nor did they necessarily want original creations, led to Gausta's copying of the works of other masters for his altars. Most of his models were nineteenth century German works of which he owned reproductions. A system of squares was drawn on these reproductions as a guide to copying and enlarging the subject on the canvas. Only two works in the approximately thirty altars which has been investigated depart adequately from earlier known versions of the subject to be considered original interpretations.



The Resurrection by Herbjørn Gausta
West Paint Creek Lutheran Church
Waukon, Iowa

Since the price for altar painting ranges from about seventy five dollars to two hundred dollars, Gausta would have had to produce on the average of one or two a month to make even a modest living. This amount of purely routine painting would naturally be detrimental to his creative powers.

Gausta's dependence on altar paintings for a living have had a certain amount of cultural significance for the Norwegians in America. They were largely copies, but Gausta brought to them in his good moments a masterful technique and even an occasional touch of genuinely inspired painting. His models, though now not rated especially high as examples of religious art, were drawn from his own time rather than from the much imitated works of the great masters. They are comparatively simple paintings which Gausta simplified even further in his unpretentious renderings. An air of sincerity is generally present in the Gausta altar pieces which distinguishes them from much religious art produced for a general public. By including a few Scandinavian works among his models for altar paintings, Gausta also helped maintain a link between the part art of the old country and that of the immigrant. One of his

most popular subjects was E.Birkeland's *Women at the Tomb* from the church at Molde. Tidemand's *Resurrection* from the church at Drammen was another work in his repertoire, as was a Tidemand *Baptism* known to Gausta through a reproduction of a drawing in the National Gallery in Oslo. Copies of a powerful *Come Unto Me* and a *Crucifixion* by the Danish artist Carl Bloch are also found among Gausta's paintings for the church.

Economic reasons enter into Gausta's finally settling in Minneapolis. He could apparently not make a living from painting in Chicago, where he had settled after his first European sojourn. He moved slowly north, discovering that the

his first European sojourn. He moved slowly north, discovering that the Norwegian-American clergy and the church itself were his best patrons. When he established himself in Minneapolis in 1888, it was undoubtedly because this city was now rapidly becoming the center of Norwegian Lutheranism.

He brought the art of painting and European tradition in Christian iconography to Norwegian settlements in all parts of the country through his altar paintings. And, most important of all, he established a place for art in the culture of the Norwegians in America.



selected portions reprinted, with permission of the author:

Marion J. Nelson

Herbjørn Gausta, Norwegian American Painter

Oslo, Universitetsforlaget, 1971

*Original manuscript prepared
especially using original sources from
the Herbjørn Gausta estate
preserved as the Gausta Papers
in the Luther College Library,
Decorah, Iowa.*

The most significant "professional" artists of Norwegian-American altars paintings were:

Herbjørn Gausta, (1854-1924),
August Klagstad (1866-1949),
Arne Berger (1872-1951), and
Kirkeberg Raugland (1862-1960).

Altar paintings (and their subjects) by August Klagstad have been identified, in ELS church buildings, at...

... Calvary Lutheran (Ulen, Minnesota)	Gethsemane
... First Shell Rock (Northwood, Iowa)	Gethsemane
... Manchester (Manchester, Iowa)	Ascension
... Newport (Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin)....	Gethsemane
... St. Paul (Lengby, Minnesota).....	Prodigal Son
... St. Paul's (Portage, Wisconsin).....	Gethsemane
.	

Announcing the
Second Annual Meeting
of the
ELS Historical Society

Saturday, June 20, 1998
Bethany Lutheran College
Mankato, Minnesota

- 9:30 am - Registration and Coffee
10:00 am - Devotion in Trinity Chapel
The Rev. Erling Teigen
10:30 am - Symposium on Mission Work prior to 1918:
George Lillegard—China; Anena Christiansen—India; C.U. Faye—South Africa
11:30 am - Business Meeting
12:00 noon - Luncheon
1:15 pm - Presentation on the first ELS home mission congregation
1:30 pm - Mission work in Nigeria through the Synodical Conference
by the Rev. Paul Anderson
3:00 pm - Coffee and Fellowship

Cost: The noon luncheon will be served at cost in the Great Room of Bethany Lutheran College.

Housing: For those who wish to stay overnight, synod convention housing will be available in the dormitories. "The following rates for lodging will be in effect: \$8.00 each for the first night and \$7.00 for each additional night. Those who intend to stay overnight are reminded to bring their own towels, wash cloths and soap. They are requested to bring a pillow and blankets, if possible, unless it is necessary for them to travel lightly. Sheets and pillow cases will be provided for all. Lodging will be available beginning the evening of June 20, 1998. Please contact Mr. Greg Costello."

Registration: To assist with preparations: please return the Registration Form, which is being mailed under a separate cover, prior to June 10. Or telephone 507-386-5354

Visitors: are welcome and invited to attend!

Norman A. Madson

The seventh president of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod (1942-46) was the Rev. Norman A. Madson.

Norman A. Madson joined the ELS in 1925 when he was called to serve Our Savior's Lutheran Church at Princeton, Minnesota. He had joined the "Merger" in 1917, even though he was among the minority of pastors who had opposed that merger of Norwegian Lutheran churches. He had gone along with that unhallowed union because he, like many others, had hoped that his testimony to the truth in the new body would be heeded, and the tide turned toward conservatism. He told of how when the big parade of uniting churches marched down the streets in St. Paul, Minnesota to the city auditorium, in June of 1917 for the organization of the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America, he sat on the street curb and cried.



Pastor Madson was born on November 16, 1886 to Andrew J. and Marie (Hoverson) Madson at Manitowoc, Wisconsin. After attending Lutheran academy at Wittenberg, Wisconsin, he enrolled at and graduated from Luther College, Decorah, Iowa (1907-11). He spent one year at Chicago University, and then attended Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota, from where he graduated in 1915. During his years in college he excelled both in the classroom and on the football field. His love for theology and athletics stayed with him throughout his life.

On August 31, 1918 he was united in marriage to Elsie Haakenson of Decorah, Iowa. Their marriage was blessed with three daughters and four sons. Elsie was an exemplary wife and mother, and supplied the needed counsel and moral support for her husband and large family.

When Pastor Madson finally withdrew from the Norwegian Lutheran Church in America for conscience reason in 1925 the Lord supplied him with a Call to an ELS congregation in rural Princeton, Minnesota. There he labored for twenty-one years as a faithful, and well-liked rural parish pastor. In 1946 he was called to be the first Dean of Bethany Lutheran Seminary, Mankato, Minnesota. He fulfilled that office until his resignation in 1959.

God had blessed this servant of His with many talents. But the thing he will be remembered for the most was his preaching, and in his preaching the emphasizing of objective justification—namely, that we sinners have been declared righteous fully and freely by a holy God because of the life and death of Jesus our Savior.

He is the only theologian in the old Synodical Conference who was privileged to preach for graduations in all four of its seminaries. Many of his sermons and sermonettes have been preserved in several books of sermons: *Ved Bethlehemskrybbe* (1935), *Evening Bells at Bethany I* (1948), *Preaching to Preachers* (1952). One of his colleagues in the ministry described his preaching thus: "When Dr. Madson preached the Law, heaven is closed tight to the greatest saint; when he preached the Gospel, the gates of paradise are opened wide for the greatest sinner."



submitted by
The Rev. Norman Madson



Oak Leaves
ELS Historical Society
6 Browns Court
Mankato, MN 56001

TO

OUR SYNOD

by Erling Ylvisaker

It was on September 2, 1844, that the Rev. J. W. C. Dietrichson preached under two massive oak trees on Koshkonong Prairie. How glad the assembled young farmers and farmers' wives--most of the "newcomers" were comparatively young people--were to hear the Word of God as the pastor preached and administered the Lord's Supper. The text of the confessional address was CAN GOD FURNISH A TABLE IN THE WILDERNESS? from Psalm 78,19.

Those two famous oaks on the Juve farm stood for many years. One blew down during the time of the doctrinal controversies in the eighties. The second tree remained to give shade and rest until the afternoon of a certain funeral. The last person living of all those who had been present at the service under the oaks in 1844 had died. As the church bell tolled from the hills, a thunderhead was seen on the western horizon. So violently did the wind blow that the last of the massive oaks was blown down.

And the parable is this: Those two giant trees seemed determined to give shade from the hot sun to all who had heard Dietrichson preach. So the Word of God which the pastor preached that beautiful September day was the seed of the greater tree of which Jesus says, "a tree, so that the birds of the air come and lodge in the branches thereof." Matthew 13,32. Yes, here in America we have had the shade of the Gospel for more than a hundred years.

from the booklet:

The Centennial of the Norwegian Synod of the American Evangelical Lutheran Church
Mankato, Minnesota: Synod Sunday; May 31, 1953