

Oak Leaves

Newsletter of the ELS Historical Society

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"My God, How Wonderful Thou Art" Part II

[We continue here the biographical sketch of pioneer pastor's wife Dina Anderson Kvelve Torgerson, known as the "Grandmother" of the Norwegian Synod. The article was written in 1933, by Rev. Erling Ylvisaker (See Summer 2001 issue for Part One)].

On several of his long mission journeys, the Rev. Torgerson [Torger A.] asked his wife to ride along in the buggy seat while the ponies trotted their rounds from Northwood to Estherville, to Jackson, and Blue Earth. On one particular trip they reached within six miles of the place of destination when the driver lost his direction in the woods. It was evening, already dark among the tall trees. "Hello, hello!" Torgerson called into the wilderness. Only the wind answered. They drove a little farther, stopped, and the driver called his "Hello!" still louder. After a third attempt husband and wife relaxed in the buggy seat, trying hard to adjust themselves to the strange situation. Then while they were discussing what they should do with the ponies, the missionaries heard the tinkle of a cowbell. "If there are cows, there are people," the minister concluded. Sixty-five years later Grandmother has piously concluded: "Those cows shook their heads for our sake."

The following day, while the pastor was on his professional duties, his wife made use of her time by picking a sack of wild grapes for altar wine along the river. From Estherville they headed the horses northeast towards the present site of Jackson, Minnesota and from that place to Fairmont. On that trail there were sixteen miles of prairie tracks so faint in the grass that they were difficult to follow even in daylight. Towards night they came to a chain of lakes. In their bewilderment the Reverend and Mrs. Torgerson looked in all four directions and saw nothing but lakes and lakes but not passage between them. Even the trail by which they had come was lost. Again they decided to make themselves as comfortable as possible.

About midnight dark clouds and lightning threatened storm for the travelers. Not only was there water on every side, but Dina and Torger were to feel water come down from above. That evening, while they were busy securing the ponies, they saw light as of a lamp moving. But Torger had no simple conclusion now for he thought that no settlers lived on this side of the lakes. Grandmother, however, has the same pious explanation: "Not that night either did the Lord want us out in the dark. The light was the lantern of a Norwegian family who were moving west in a covered wagon. The father when he had seen the storm coming, lit his lantern and went out to look for the cattle. My husband found the man; we were shown the way back to the trail; and we slept in the house of friends that night too."

The Reverend A.J. Torgerson, the son with whom Grandmother has lived since the death of her husband, wrote this to me: "For a number of years, Northwood was the nearest market place for farmers in Winnebago County, Iowa. On account of the distance, the entire return trip could not be made in one day. Consequently, many of them made it a practice to stop over night at the parsonage and they called our home the *Winnebago Hotel*. Mother says that although they had ample room, they had few beds so they carried in hay, spread that on the floor and covered it with bed clothes."

Besides the farmers who hauled wheat, and friends of the family, visiting pastors, who had come to attend conferences, slept at the parsonage and ate at Mrs. Torgerson's table. "In those days," Grandmother said as she leaned forward to emphasize the truth, "we always had a superabundance of food. If our members had put up bakkelser or butchered, they felt that they had to share it with the pastor in order to bless the food. '*Vi maa dele det med presten* [we must share it with the minister]' was they way they put it."

"I never worried about our daily bread. Once we had a hired girl who liked to tease me about my feelings that the Lord would provide somehow. One noon she came up from the cellar saying that she had in her hands the last piece of pork and the last ounce of syrup. Then she added, 'But, I suppose you have enough faith to make pork and syrup just come of themselves.' That very afternoon a farmer brought a slice of fresh pork and a jar of sorghum syrup which he had cooked himself.

"Nor did this happen only once. When I asked a young man who had brought a sack of potatoes how he knew my bin was empty, he answered, 'Oh, I didn't know,

but I thought a few potatoes wouldn't hurt.' There is a caretaker who provides for all our needs. Another time at a meeting of pastors at Silver Lake, I had made preparations to house them at the parsonage. To my dismay, I discovered that I had not enough butter and candles for my guests' bedrooms. Next morning, without a word having been said, a man came with a jar of butter and six candles."

To be a pioneer pastor's wife, however, was not always a superabundance of good things. There were fault-finders in the community who left the church because they felt that the minister was "too strict". One night two men made an agreement that they would put an end to the "rebel preacher". "If you'll come with me, I'll fire the first shot" was the conspiracy.

Grandmother told me the story this way; "My husband was home that night, and we had gone to bed when we heard a slow, hard knocking on the door. I got up, and there were two men who asked to see the pastor. As I walked back to tell my husband, something inside me said, 'He must not go out tonight.' I repeated the same words to Torgerson and warned him strongly. Well, he got up, and without opening the door very wide, he wanted to know the nature of their errand. 'We have lost a man in the woods and would like to have you find him,' was the queer answer. Torgerson, thinking the explanation sounded suspicious, shut the door and went back to bed. If they had said, 'A man is sick and needs the pastor,' my husband would have gone out immediately.

"Not long after we had come here we were put out of our first parsonage. The troublemakers had planned to do their work while Torgerson was on a trip to Decorah, but a faithful friend who had sensed danger, drove his horse on a trot all the way to Freeborn where my husband was staying



Dina's pastor-husband, Torger A. Torgerson. His mission field consisted of more than a hundred miles of new settlements in northern Iowa and southern Minnesota. (Photo courtesy of Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum, Decorah, Iowa.)

overnight. 'Is there anything wrong at home?' were Torgerson's first words as he saw his neighbor. They did manage to take the parsonage away from us, but the congregation built us a new house farther south. Here we lived in peace, proud of our home which at one time was said to be the most beautiful parsonage in the Synod."

It seems a little strange to us who often judge a religious service by the interior decorations that the early settlers were perfectly contented to conduct their services in the woods. The preacher probably used a homemade table for a pulpit and altar combined, while the audience sat on planks, on the grass, or stood against a tree. "Now I have been in the largest church in the world," Torgerson's brother, Thomas, wrote to his father after he had heard Torgerson preach under the trees. It sometimes happened that outdoor confirmation had to be postponed two or three weeks because of rain. "I who have

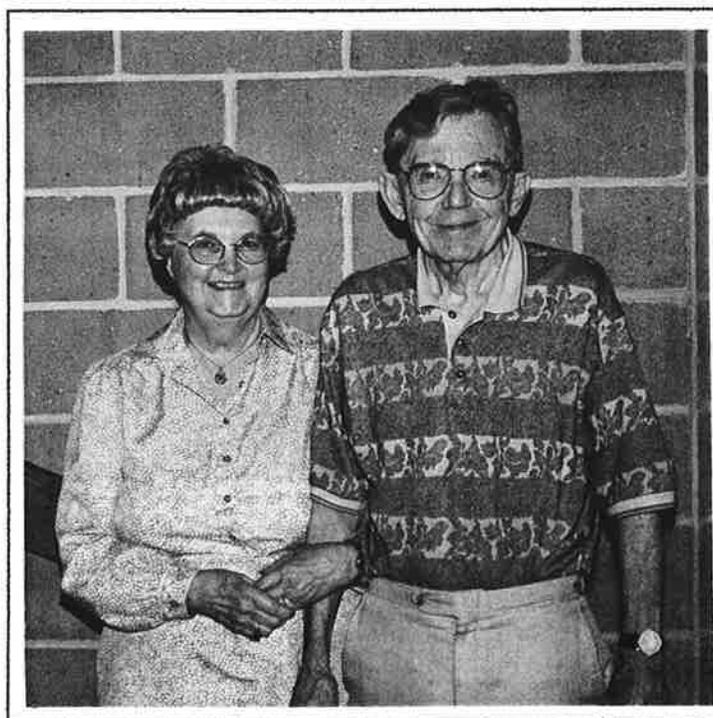
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Historical Society Highlights



Daniel Preus was the featured speaker at the society's annual meeting in June. Preus spoke about his Great-Great-Grandfather, the Rev. Herman Amberg Preus. He discussed H.A.'s tenacity in matters of doctrine. Preus quoted H.A.'s motto, 2 Timothy 3,16: "All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness." In regard to our work as historians within our synod, Preus said: "Our task in preserving history is a critical one, but it will sometimes be an up-hill battle."

Christopher Faye and his wife Ruth attended the June meeting. The collection of Christopher's father, the Reverend C.U. Faye, was presented to the ELS Archives that afternoon. Only-child Christopher recalled his father reminding him, "You have two fathers. In any need, you can come to me and Your Heavenly Father."



Secretary's Minutes
Evangelical Lutheran Synod Historical Society
June 9, 2001
Bethany Lutheran College
Mankato, Minnesota

The fifth annual meeting of the Evangelical Lutheran Historical Society was held Saturday, June 9, 2001 in the theater of the Ylvisaker Fine Arts Center (YFAC) of Bethany Lutheran College. Registration and coffee began at 9:30 a.m. in the Great Room of Old Main.

An opening service was held at 10:00 a.m. in Trinity Chapel. "The God of Abraham Praise" ELH 69, and "Let Children Hear the Mighty Deeds" ELH 180, were sung. Reverend Edward Bryant preached the homily using as the text Joshua 4:1-7, 19-24, "History Bears Witness to the Grace of God."

At 10:30 a.m. 54 people gathered in the YFAC theater. Professor Erling Teigen announced the publication of two books, "Book of Family Prayer," by Nils Jakob Laache, translated by Reverend Mark DeGarmeaux, and letters of S.C. Ylvisaker, written 1907-1910 and translated from Norwegian by Erling Teigen.

Professor Teigen introduced the speaker, Daniel Preus, Director of the Concordia Historical Institute of St. Louis, Missouri. Preus' topic was "Learn it or Lose it: The Life and Teaching of H.A. Preus as Instruction for the Church Today." Preus stated: "Herman Amberg Preus, my great-great-grandfather, was a true gift of God. My inheritance is not so much genetic as it is theological. His words are relevant to us today and surprisingly current. His legacy is a tenacity to the truth that all Scripture is the inspired Word of God. He would not retreat from this truth."

A noon luncheon was served in the college dining room.

At 1:15 p.m. the group gathered to hear Reverend Martin Doepel present "One-hundred and Fifty Years of History: St. Paul's, Portage and Newport, Wisconsin Dells." Rev. Doepel stated that both congregations were started in the fall of 1851 by Rev. H.A. Preus and were members of the Norwegian Synod when it organized in 1853. After the 1917 merger, they remained independent and were served by Missouri Synod pastors. In 1966 they joined the ELS. St. Paul's church was dedicated in August 1853, and is the oldest church building still in use in the ELS.

At 1:45 Reverend Walther Gullixson presented the Christopher Urdahl Faye collection to the ELS Archives. He spoke of Faye's early education, his college and seminary years, his missionary years to the Zulu tribe, Natal, South Africa, and his library work at the University of Illinois and Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary, ending with the comment, "There was no one else like him."

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Bethany College



On Friday, May 11, 2001, 32 students made history when they graduated from Bethany College in Mankato, Minnesota. This historic occasion marks the first-ever senior graduation for Bethany College. The 32 history-making students are, standing left to right: Kelli Kutzler, Josephine, Samuel Schmeling, Mark Davidson, Angela Newhart, Connie, Daniel Finn, JoElyn Marozick, Tara Late, Paul Marozick, Ra, Sarah Faugstad, David Kirschner. Kneeling, left to right: Joshua Tillman, Brian Burgemeister, Christopher Harstad, Aleksandr Kon (Bethany College).

e 2001 Graduates



accepted degrees as graduating seniors at Bethany Lutheran College, senior graduating class of our ELS institute of higher learning. Those his-
ph Becker, Michael Ring, Paul Mellon, Jessica Shelvik, Jonathan Log-
e Rasmussen, Leah Olson, Seth Tweit, Elizabeth Westphal, Jon Kova-
elene Miller, Kjerstin Tharaldson, Jennifer Reagles, Shelby Kirschner,
Lindquist, Matthew Coulsey, Chad Bloedel, Christopher Corey, Scott
narenko. (Photo by Michael Schwertfeger, courtesy of Bethany Luther-

Anniversaries



The Reverend Herman Amberg Preus, who established the Newport and St. Paul's congregations in 1851. Both celebrate sesquicentennials this year. Photo courtesy of the ELS Archives.

This year marks the sesquicentennial celebrations of four ELS churches: *Newport Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Wisconsin Dells, Wisconsin; *St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church*, Portage, Wisconsin; *East Paint Creek Synod Lutheran Church*, Waterville, Iowa; and *West Paint Creek Synod Lutheran Church*, Waukon, Iowa.

All four churches will mark their anniversaries with festival services this fall.

Newport will celebrate on Sunday, September 9, and St. Paul's on Sunday, October 7. Both of these Wisconsin churches were established in the fall of 1851 by the Reverend Herman Amberg Preus, when he was contacted at the Spring Prairie Wisconsin settlement, which he served as pastor, and asked if he would also serve the people of these two communities. Preus

agreed. On September 11 of that year, Preus came to the Moe Settlement and conducted the first worship service in a log house owned by Jacob Thompson. This farm is located just south of the present Newport Evangelical Lutheran Church building. The next month, the St. Paul's congregation was organized. Preus preached in members' homes, and later in the Oak Grove school house.

As with most of the early pioneer pastors, Preus divided his time between these budding communities, preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments. According to church records, Preus was paid ten dollars per visit to come to the settlements for a few days and do the Lord's work. He made his rounds four or five times each year.

By 1865, Preus was serving seven churches in south-central Wisconsin, in addition to his duties as President of the Norwegian Synod [an office to which he was elected in 1862]. For more information on festivities at Newport and St. Paul's, please contact Rev. Martin Doepel at (608) 742-4286.

A congregation at Paint Creek was also organized in 1851, and in 1853 the Rev. Ulrik Vilhelm Koren was called to serve the parish. Because the parish grew so quickly, it was divided into two congregations in 1858. Koren served these two parishes until 1862 [for more on the Paint Creek Churches, see *Oak Leaves*, Volume 3, Issue 3].

Anniversary festivities at Paint Creek will be held at 10:30 a.m. on Sunday, September 16. For more information, please contact Rev. Harvey Abrahamson at (641) 394-2296 or e-mail him at:

pastorabe@yahoo.com



grown up with the Synod and have seen how easy it is to forget the One Thing Needful, believe that we should not waste money on extravagant church buildings. What is more: Jesus never said 'Build churches' but he did command us to feed his lambs. The Christian day school is a more worthy cause than even a pipe organ."



Dina was "intimately acquainted with the founders of the Synod." This included Linka Preus (above) and her pastor-husband, H.A. (Photo courtesy of ELS Archives.)

The pastor's wife made the altar wine, accompanied her husband on missionary journeys, entertained farmers and preachers, besides nourishing six sons of her own. Add to that, she assisted in the confirmation instruction. On account of the many Norwegian dialects spoken in the neighborhood, it was very difficult for the boys and girls to understand the book language of the Catechism. When he found a

pupil who had no comprehension of the text, the minister made arrangements for the child to stay at the parsonage for several weeks in order that Mrs. Torgerson could instruct the little newcomer in the meaning of the simple words. She asked one girl to explain "legeme" used in the first article of the creed. There was no answer.

"Ved du hvad *Krop* er?" (Do you know what *body* is?)"

"Nei!" ("No!")

"Ved du hvad *skrot* er?" ("Do you know what *body* is?)"

"Ja!" ("Yes!")

With this babel of dialects to contend with, the pastor's first task could not be to make the children memorize the Catechism and hymn verses, but to translate each word of the text into the several dialects. A certain boy was learning the prayer *Gud trøste all i deres nød* (God comfort all in need). The patient Mrs. Torgerson asked if the boy would explain *Trøste* (comfort). "Yes, that I can," he answered very readily in his own language. "It means to get goods at the store without paying cash for them."

Like many of the early preachers, the Rev. Torgerson loved his horses. Grandmother likes to tell the story about "Charley", a horse which her husband drove many years, to illustrate the maxim that it pays to be good to animals.

Torgerson had a mission station called Six Mile Grove thirty miles east of here across the Cedar River. On one of his visits to the Grove such a terrific rain flooded the Cedar River that it became dangerous to ford the stream. The congregation, of course, pleaded with the pastor not to return the first day. "Oh, Charley will make it," the preacher assured them. When they saw that he insisted on going home, the whole congregation escorted Torgerson to the

river. As the anxious spectators lined the shore and the preacher stood erect in the buggy seat, Charley waded in. In the middle of the stream where the current was strong, Charley lost his courage and stopped. Torgerson didn't whip the horse, he didn't even scold. "That's all right, Charley, take your time and rest a while.

ly, when these newcomers faced the question, "To which church body shall I belong in America?" they followed the lead of their former pastor. Grandmother told about one girl who had heard Nils Ylvisaker preach in Sogndal. From Mrs. Torgerson she wanted to know if Ylvisaker was a member of the synod. Upon being assured

"I...believe that we should not waste money on extravagant church buildings. What is more: Jesus never said 'Build churches' but He did command us to feed His lambs. The Christian day school is a more worthy cause than even a pipe organ."

Dina Torgerson

You'll make it" was the way the driver encouraged his friend. After a few minutes, Charely got over his excitement, and with his strong legs he made it. I am sure that if Torgerson had scolded the horse, Charley would have turned back."

Grandmother, of course, was intimately acquainted with the founders of the Synod. At a Kaffelag in the Nordby home in Northwood, where Mrs. H.A. Preus was also present (Mrs. Nordby was a daughter of the Rev. and Mrs. Preus) a fly kept pestering Mrs. Preus, crawling up and down the lady's face. "Mother, how can you stand to have the fly crawling on your cheek and chin?" Mrs. Nordby asked. "Sena, we older folks had to tolerate more than a fly. We had no screens; we had to put up with both flies and mosquitoes." Turning to Dina Torgerson, Mrs. Preus added, "Ah, these young people can endure so little." Then, speaking as if to herself, Linka Preus admitted, "But it is we older people who have trained them that way."

Many of the newcomers had known certain of our pastors in Norway, and, natural-

ly, when these newcomers faced the question, "To which church body shall I belong in America?" they followed the lead of their former pastor. Grandmother told about one girl who had heard Nils Ylvisaker preach in Sogndal. From Mrs. Torgerson she wanted to know if Ylvisaker was a member of the synod. Upon being assured

that Ylvisaker was *Synode mand*, the girl said as dogmatically as any theologian, "ja, da er jeg også Synode (then I also am a member of the Synod)."

However, we must not suppose that church affiliation to our grandparents was a matter of convenience. Grandmother Torgerson, for example, knows how to defend the doctrine of the Synod as well as she knows how to manage her wheelchair. I quote from a letter which I received from her son, A.J. Torgerson:

"Rev. O.P. Vangsness spent two of his summer vacations in our home, Mother says, while he was a student at St. Louis, and got to be like a son in the family. He served as tutor for the three oldest children and preached on Sundays. When he joined the union movement, she felt so bad that she prayed earnestly to God to hinder Vangsness from doing what was wrong. She considers it an answer to prayer that when Vangsness was on his way to the Synod meeting, he was taken sick and died in a hospital in Minneapolis.

During the years that the Rev. Torgerson often had to be away at night, his wife never felt that the safety of her family depended upon a locked door.

"One evening at Christmas time as I was waiting for my husband, I heard a rapping on a shanty door which we never used, and I figured that it was a stranger. I went out, around the shanty, and recognized there in the snow a young man who had become notorious for his drinking. He stood there mumbling, 'Oh, how I would like to quit drinking, but nobdy will help me.' I led him in and while he sat by the stove and I tried to feed him something warm with a spoon, he trembled so violently that one of my sons burst out, 'Mother, pray for him to go to heaven.'

That Christmas Eve my husband and I talked it over and we decided that perhaps the Lord had directed the young man to our home. The next morning when he realized he was in the preacher's house, the poor fellow was embarassed. He sneaked out, walked over to a bush where he had hidden a gallon jug the night before, and started down the road. I sent my oldest son to bring him back.

"That young man became our seventh son. He made his home with us for many years, attended the University where he graduated with honors, and then went back to Norway to marry his childhood sweetheart - a bride by the way, who was supposed to be the prettiest girl in all Telemarken. But this is the sweetest of all: some weeks after Christmas he received a letter from his mother in Norway telling how she had prayed for her boy on Christmas Eve until the pillow was wet with her tears of supplication."

Today this man who asked for help on Christmas Eve is dead; Grandmother Torgerson, who led him into her kitchen, is

still here to welcome strangers at her door.

If you wonder how Mrs. Torgerson at the age of ninety can recall details and incidents, wonder still more that this Grandmother has never had a headache. A doctor would undoubtedly add that she has been exceptionally well physically. But is this all? Rasmus B. Anderson [Dina's brother] remembers that from a child Dina was pious. Perhaps this wholesale piety has preserved her mental faculties. Anyway, Grandmother herself puts it this way: "God has been wonderful to me."

[Correction: In the Summer, 2001 issue of *Oak Leaves*, it was noted that Erling Ylvisaker's book, "Eminent Pioneers; Norwegian American pioneer sketches" was published in 1962. This was actually the second printing. The book was originally published in 1934. Editor]



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Evangelical Lutheran Synod
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(Secretary's minutes, continued from page 5)

The business meeting was called to order at 2:45 p.m. by chairman Erling Teigen. Secretary and treasurer's reports were read. Robin Ouren, "Oak Leaves" editor, gave a report. Erling Teigen was re-elected chairman for a three-year term. Marguerite Ylvisaker was re-elected to the Board of Directors for a three-year term.

The meeting adjourned at 3:15, followed by coffee in the YFAC lobby.



Amanda Madson
Secretary

Oak Leaves is published periodically by the ELS Historical Society: 6 Browns Court; Mankato, MN 56001

Editor: Robin Ouren.

Board of Directors: Erling Teigen (Chair), Joseph Abrahamson, Craig Ferkenstad, Norman Holte, Erik Olsen, Albin Levorson, Amanda Madson, George Orvick, Marguerite Ylvisaker.

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.

Membership

All membership renewals due **June 1**

Voting Membership:

\$10/year: individual
\$15/year: husband & wife

Associate Membership:

\$15/year: individual
\$25/year: institution.
\$5/year: student