

# Oak Leaves

Newsletter of the ELS Historical Society

Volume 5

February 2002

Issue 4

## War Memoirs of the Rev. William and Jean McMurdie

Reviewed by Ryan MacPherson

*I was sitting on the bench under the mango tree near the big house reading my Bible....Suddenly, I heard a swishing sound, such as running people make when their pant-legs rub together. I looked up and saw a fixed bayonet just a few inches from my nose. The bayonet was attached to a gun, and the gun was held by a Japanese soldier.*

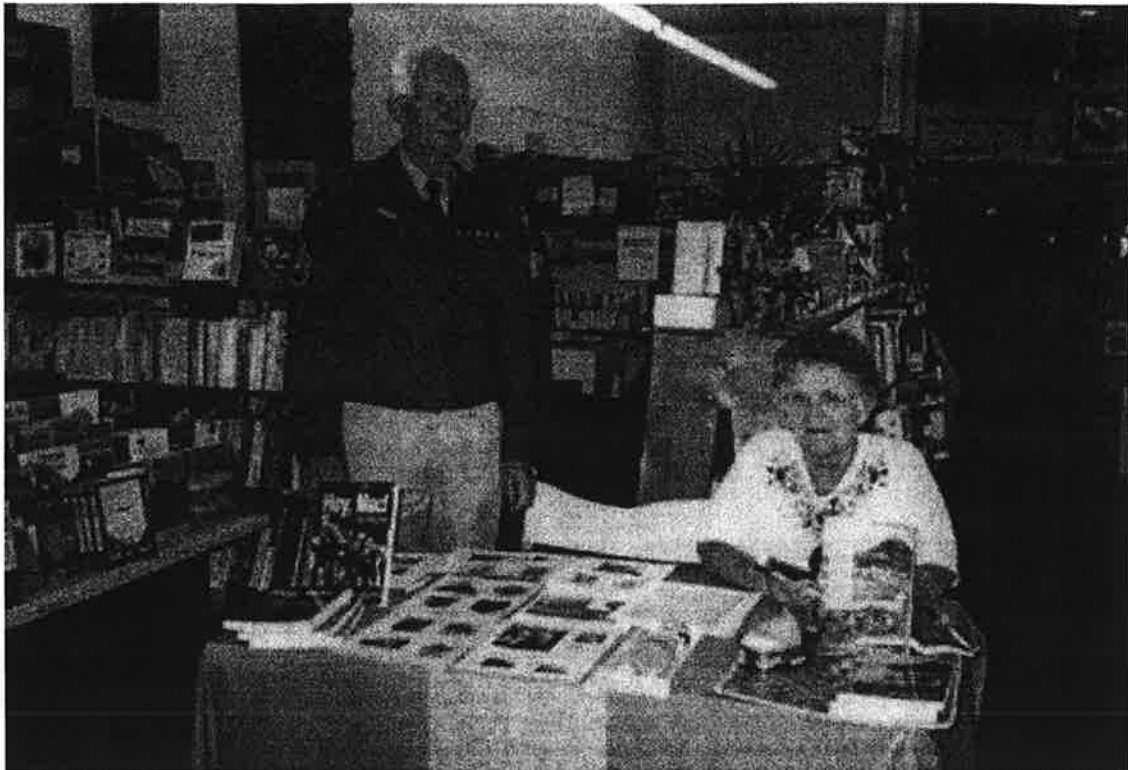
Jean McAnlis, daughter of a medical missionary in the Philippines, July 15, 1942<sup>1</sup>

*I waited, hunkered down in the ditch, looking down the road. Suddenly I was conscious of movement across the road from me. A German soldier stepped out and pulled up his burp gun (machine pistol) to shoot me....I dropped to the bottom of the ditch, and bullets flew over me....Mings, in a most plaintive voice cried out, "Mac, you okay?"*

William McMurdie, infantryman in the Battle of the Bulge, December 16, 1944<sup>2</sup>

During the Second World War, the Lord graciously preserved the lives of Jean McAnlis, the daughter of a Presbyterian medical missionary in the Philippines, and William McMurdie, a Missouri Synod Lutheran from California who was drafted to serve his country in the European Theater of Operations: Jean was hiding with her family in the hills during the hot summer of 1942, when Japanese occupation forces discovered them. American soldiers finally rescued the McAnlises from an internment camp in 1945. Meanwhile, Bill had been enduring the cold winter of 1944–1945 near the center of the "bulge" for which the Battle of the Bulge was later named. Resisting Hitler's last western offensive, he dodged bullets and artillery, fired back, and occasionally found time to write to his parents that he was still alive.

After the war, Bill and Jean met each other at a nursing college in Pasadena, California. They married and moved to Springfield, Illinois, where Bill trained for the ministry at the Missouri Synod's Concordia Seminary. In the fall of 1961, the McMurdies colloquized into the Evangelical Lutheran Synod. Their recently published memoirs concerning World War II preserve for future generations not only their experiences of the 1940s, but also their testimonies of God's faithfulness amid tribulations. Their Savior's love carried



Pastor William McMurdie and Jean McAnlis McMurdie traveled the United States in 2001 for book signings. Jean also participated in Bethany Lutheran College's "Price for Freedom" week, November 3-9 (Photo courtesy of Jean McAnlis McMurdie).

Bill past his grave on October 3, 2001, and continues to sustain Jean during her remaining time on this earth.

In *Hey, Mac! This Is Serious Business! A Guy Could Get Killed!* (2000), Pastor McMurdie recalls his days as Infantryman McMurdie in A Company, 394th Infantry Regiment, 99th Infantry Division. He assembles this autobiography from letters he wrote to his parents during 1944-1946 and a journal he prepared for his sister shortly after the Battle of the Bulge, illustrating these with photographs and sketch maps. The result is a highly focused story that fits nicely within the broader narrative of Stephen Ambrose's *Citizen Soldiers*. Ambrose demonstrates that not only generals but also GIs merit historians' attention, for no matter how well generals strategized,

the war was waged, and ultimately won, in the bloody fields of human drama.<sup>3</sup> McMurdie recalls the portion of that death-facing drama through which he personally lived.

Throughout, Infantryman McMurdie's book portrays quite vividly the bare realities of war. The cold German winter froze his jacket into a giant ice cube. His boots wore thin. He hungered and shivered, but found friendship in his comrades and solace in his God. He lamented the loss of his wartime brethren when "friendly" artillery fire was tragically aimed too low at times. He puzzled over why the same Americans who fought against Nazism sometimes treated African Americans and Jews with repugnance.

(Continued on page 4)

# Tradition Lost

If you remember "communion announcements", you probably remember the mailman bringing mail twice a day.

What were communion announcements? Once a month, usually on a Friday or Saturday, the pastor offered a time when parishioners could come to his office and tell him their intention of going to communion. The custom at that time was usually to offer the Lord's Supper during the first Sunday service of the month.

My father pastor preferred to meet with the people in the parsonage living room. His "study", as the room was called, was a spacious upstairs dormer but not convenient. There was a french door separating the living room from the dining room and a pocket door separating it from the inner hallway.

Privacy was needed because communion announcement days granted congregation members personal time with their pastor. In addition to announcing their wishes to receive the Lord's Supper, it was an opportunity for confession, unburdening, or for sharing joy or sorrow. None felt they were "bothering the pastor."

Fathers or mothers, whomever had the time, would often announce for their entire families. Widows and widowers, and singles came. What trepidation teenagers probably felt when, after confirmation they went alone (if they wished) to the pastor, to announce.

Since my father's congregation was in a rural area, gifts of poultry (often alive), meat, fruits, and vegetables, were often

brought to the parsonage on announcement days. Pastors' low salaries were supplemented by the sharing of the communicants' harvests. People who have little are often willing to share what they have.

These gifts were usually taken through the parsonage to the kitchen and there my mother would be engaged in conversation. There was an easy camaraderie between the minister's family and the members of the congregation.

When my husband was the pastor of Mt. Olive Lutheran Church in Mankato, Minnesota, he took communion announcements at the church office. He also set aside an afternoon when he would be at Bethany Lutheran College, located a few blocks from the church, to receive students' announcements. He appreciated the opportunity to learn more about the young people as individuals and also to be their spiritual advisor.

When did the custom change? Was there a big fuss similar to the initial debates about giving up the exclusivity of using the common communion cup? I have no memory of a controversy.

The old "Ockham's Razor" - which suggests that given a choice of explanations for phenomena, one should choose the most simple - is probably applicable. Perhaps someone somewhere just ordered communion cards, placed them in the pew racks, and pastors stopped publicizing a schedule for private communion announcements. A theological historian must know the answer.

*by Harriet Handberg*

[Editor's Note: Harriet Handberg's father was the Reverend Walter Nitschke. He was a Missouri Synod pastor who began his ministry in 1913 in the Black Hills as a

*(Continued on page 5)*

McMurdie concludes his memoirs with a September 17, 1945, letter from United States Commanding General Jacob L. Devers, congratulating the 99th Infantry Division for their self-sacrificial fight in the Battle of the Bulge. Gen. Devers refers repeatedly in that letter to the "American way of life" that the 99th Division defended. For McMurdie, that way of life means above all the freedom of religion. He regards the Allied victory in World War II as God's blessing for fostering political states that protect religious freedom so that the Church may continue to proclaim the Gospel.

The deepest meaning of the Second World War, suggests McMurdie, is metaphorical: just as so many soldiers died so that others may live, Christ died that all may live. McMurdie refers in his final paragraph to "the wonderful confidence that through faith in the Risen Christ there is victory and the glory of the world to come (*Hey Mac*, p. 198). On November 1, 2001, at a memorial service held at King of Kings Lutheran Church in Garden Grove, California, this same wonderful confidence was proclaimed for those gathered to mourn the death of Pastor McMurdie and to celebrate God's gift of eternal life beyond the grave. A gravesite service, with military honors, had been held at the Riverside National Cemetery on October 9.

Like her husband, Jean McAnlis McMurdie never thought she would write a book. Also like her husband, she recently published a personal account of the Second World War. *Land of the Morning: A Civilian Internee's Poignant Memories of Sunshine and Shadows* tells of Jean McAnlis's rustic childhood in the Philippines. Traveling on the luggage rack of a 1923 Dodge down an unpaved road, weathering typhoons under tin roofs that sometimes blew away, and breaking into coconuts on a hot summer's day—these gave texture to

the McAnlis children's lives. McMurdie retells such days with rich descriptions of life with her family and "extended family" of Filipino neighbors and church members.

In the Philippines, which is on the other side of the International Dateline, the bombing of Pearl Harbor was reckoned as December 8, 1941. Her family evacuated their home on December 12, with twelve-year-old Jean going to a safe hiding place with her uncle and aunt while her mother and father remained to attend patients in the Legaspi hospital. By Christmas, young Jean had received news that her father remained safe, but not until January 3 did her mother finally arrive, foot-sore from the long walks through the jungle by which she avoided Japanese contact. In that month alone the family relocated twice more in order to dodge the advancing Japanese military presence. On July 2, 1942, her father at last rejoined the family in the hills, where school lessons and Bible devotions had maintained some sense of normalcy.

"But, our stay in the hills came to an abrupt end the morning of July 15," recalls McMurdie. On this day the Japanese captured the McAnlis family, marching them to an unknown destination and permitting no one to speak along the way. Jean's father, however, found a way to communicate to his children. He hummed "His Eye is on the Sparrow, and I Know He Watches Me." Young Jean and her siblings knew the words from memory. She recalls, "what peace came over me as God's promises were renewed in my heart (*Land of the Morning*, pp. 94-95)." The soldiers permitted the family to bring but few possessions with them. Jean's mother brought a Bible. In the years that followed, she kept a journal in the margins of that Bible and a cookbook. From these notes Jean McMurdie has reconstructed her captivity years, which lasted from July 15, 1942, until Feb-

ruary 23, 1945.

In vivid detail McMurdie takes her readers inside the Los Baños internment camp that became her home. The interns salvaged a radio to receive news from the outside. The guards rationed food, which on good days came to 600 calories per person. All the while, the interns could see coconuts, bananas, and papayas growing just across the fence. (Their camp was located on the campus of an agricultural college!) Water was scarce and skin diseases abounded. "Underclothes were threadbare at best," recalls McMurdie (*Land of the Morning*, p. 127)."

Her mother's journal for December 14, 1944, indicates what sustained the family under such conditions: "Dad read for prayers in Matthew 6:25-34. About no anxious tho't for life's necessities and to-night came 2 Dutch sisters (nuns) with a gift of ten salted fish and about 2 gantas (about 4 quarts) of dry mongo beans. Truly a gift, not only from the sisters, but from God." On February 23, 1945, the day that, according to American intelligence, the Japanese had scheduled Los Baños for a massacre, the United States Army rescued her family (*Land of the Morning*, pp. 118-119).

From a historian's perspective, memoirs make for peculiar source material. They record two stories at once: what the author experienced in the events described and who the author became later on, when the memoir was compiled. By contrasting the present with the past, history so often teaches us what has changed. These memoirs, however, reveal something significant that remained the same. In *Hey, Mac!* and *Land of the Morning* readers will find a man and woman of God who looked to Lord for their deliverance in the 1940s and continued to do so during the lifetime that followed.

#### Editor's Notes:

Ryan MacPherson, a charter member of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod Historical Society, is a Ph.D. Candidate in History and Philosophy of Science at the University of Notre Dame.

For an obituary of Pastor McMurdie, see *God calls a Soldier Home* in the November, 2001 issue of *The Lutheran Sentinel*.

#### Footnotes:

1. Jean McAnlis McMurdie, *Land of the Morning: A Civilian Internee's Poignant Memories of Sunshine and Shadows* (Gig Harbor, WA: Red Apple Publishing, 2001), 94.
2. William F. McMurdie, *Hey Mac! This is Serious Business! A Guy Could Get Killed!* (Gig Harbor, WA: Red Apple Publishing, 2001), 76-77.
3. Stephen E. Ambrose, *Citizen Soldiers: The U.S. Army from the Normandy Beaches to the Bulge to the Surrender of Germany, June 7, 1944, to May 7, 1945* (New York: Touchstone, 1998).



(*Tradition Lost*, continued from page 2)

circuit rider and developed many of the congregations in that region. He was based in Rapid City and was involved in the organization of Zion Lutheran Church there. He was president of the South Dakota District of the Missouri Synod for almost two decades and spent his entire ministry in South Dakota. Harriet was married to the Reverend Hugo Handberg. Hugo served ELS parishes in North Dakota, Washington, and Minnesota. He was pastor at Mt. Olive Lutheran Church, Mankato, Minnesota from 1959 to 1971. He died in 1990.]



## Anniversaries

For the third consecutive year, **Oak Leaves** notes the anniversaries of congregations within the ELS. It is by no means a complete list. The editor encourages congregations to submit photos, articles, and other information regarding anniversaries.

### 135 Years Ago:

Jerico Evangelical Lutheran Church (then called Crane Creek Lutheran Church), rural New Hampton, Iowa, organized.

### 120 Years Ago:

Richland Evangelical Lutheran Church, Thornton, Iowa organized (under the name *Richland Danish Evangelical Lutheran Congregation*).

### 115 Years Ago:

Evangelical Lutheran Church of Our Savior's, Madison, Wisconsin (re)organized.

### 85 Years Ago:

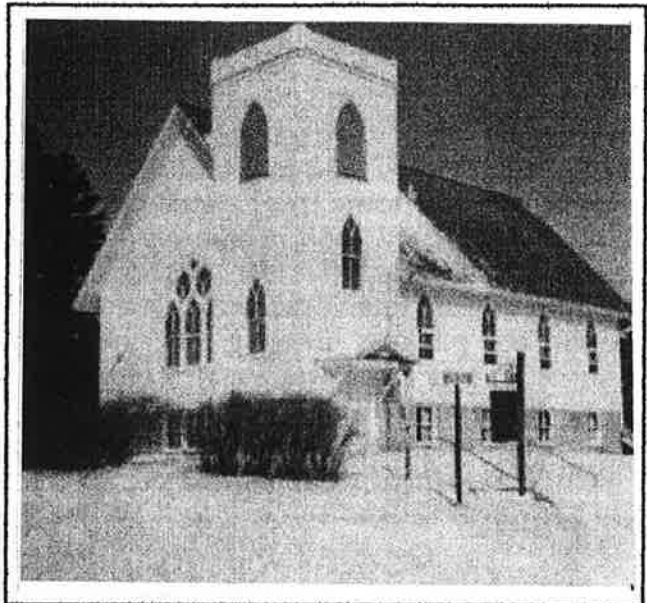
Grace Lutheran Church, Vero Beach, Florida, organized.

### 80 Years Ago:

Forest Evangelical Lutheran Church. Forest City, Iowa joins the ELS. Holton Evangelical Lutheran Church, Holton, Michigan joins the ELS. English Evangelical Lutheran Church, Cottonwood, Minnesota, joins the ELS. Our Savior's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Amherst Junction, Wisconsin organized.

### 75 Years Ago:

The ELS votes to purchase Bethany Lutheran College. Mt. Olive Evangelical Lutheran Church, Mankato, Minnesota (then called Bethany Lutheran Church) organized.



Our Savior's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Amherst Junction, Wisconsin, was organized in 1922.

### 65 Years Ago:

Zion Evangelical Lutheran Church, Tracy, Minnesota organized.

### 60 Years Ago:

Redeemer Lutheran Church, New Hampton, Iowa joins the ELS.

### 55 Years Ago:

Holy Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, Okauchee, Wisconsin organized.

### 50 Years Ago:

Bethany Evangelical Lutheran Church, Luverne, Minnesota joins the ELS.

### 45 Years Ago:

St. Timothy Evangelical Lutheran Church, Lombard, Illinois organized.

### 35 Years Ago:

King of Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church, Golden Valley, Minn. organized.





Jerico Evangelical Lutheran Church, rural New Hampton, Iowa was organized in 1867 by the Rev. U.V. Koren, under the name "Crane Creek Lutheran Church". The congregation hosted the ELS convention in 1924.

**30 Years Ago:**

Our Savior Lutheran Church, Naples, Florida, organized. Our Savior Lutheran Church, Bishop, California, organized. Christ Lutheran Church, Sutherlin, Oregon organized. Our Redeemer Lutheran Church, Yelm, Washington started. Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church, West Bend, Wisconsin joins the ELS.

**25 Years Ago:**

Good Shepherd Evangelical Lutheran Church, Richardson, Texas joins the ELS.

**20 Years Ago:**

Congregation at Wayfarer's Chapel, Filmore, California, joins the ELS. Faith Evangelical Lutheran Church, Irvine, California organized.

**15 Years Ago:**

Christ Evangelical Lutheran Church, Port St. Lucie, Florida, joins the ELS. Oak Park

Lutheran Church, Oklee, Minnesota joins the ELS. Christ Lutheran Church, Klamath Falls, Oregon joins the ELS.

**10 Years Ago:**

Congregation at Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church, Kissimmee, Florida, formally organized. Peace Evangelical Lutheran Church, South Lakeland, Florida begun as a mission church. Faith Lutheran Church, Litchfield, Illinois joins the ELS. Reformation Lutheran Church, Hillsboro, Oregon, joins the ELS. Christ the King Lutheran Church, Green Bay, Wisconsin organized.

**5 Years Ago:**

Bethany Lutheran Church, Hampton, Iowa joins the ELS.

May the Lord continue to bless these and all of our churches and schools throughout the coming year.





Evangelical Lutheran Synod  
 Historical Society  
 6 Browns Court  
 Mankato, MN 56001

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**Somber Lutheran Church,**  
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 since 1955  
 (and substitute organist for  
 some years before that).  
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 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,  
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**Oak Leaves** welcomes articles of both synodical and local signifi-  
 cance for publication. Articles may be edited for style, clarity, or  
 length to allow for publication. Submitted manuscripts will be de-  
 posited in the archives of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod.

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