



# Oak Leaves

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## Acculturation in the First Generation of Norwegian-American Pastors' Wives: The Divergent Experiences of Elisabeth Koren and Caja Munch

By Tim Grundmeier



*Tim Grundmeier is a senior at Bethany Lutheran Theological Seminary and will begin his vicarship this July. Tim has a Master of Arts degree in History from Minnesota State University, Mankato. He presented on this topic at the 2010 ELS His-*

*torical Conference and presented this paper at the 43rd Annual Dakota Conference in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. He and his wife Erika have one daughter, Emma.*

In the middle of the nineteenth century, thousands of Norwegians began to immigrate to the Midwestern United States, bringing with them their culture and religion. The majority of these settlers belonged to the Lutheran state church and soon they requested pastors from Norway. A number of younger pastors answered this call, leaving their homeland to bring God's Word to their fellow countrymen in America. But

these pastors were not alone. Their young wives also left behind family, friends, and their former way of life to follow their husbands to America.

Various scholars have detailed the experiences and adjustments of these women. L. DeAne Lagerquist's groundbreaking study about the Americanization of Norwegian Lutheran women is by far the most comprehensive. Though her focus is not exclusively on pastors' wives, several of these women receive extensive treatment, as she explains their changing roles in the home, society and the congregation. Scholars of housework and frontierswomen, such as Ruth Schwartz Cowan and Glenda Riley, have also explored the adjustments of these Norwegian women. Other scholars have focused specifically on these pastors' wives. Both Peter A. Munch and Leigh D. Jordahl discuss how the social and cultural changes applied to the Norwegian-American pioneer parsonage.

One area of research that has yet to be fully explored is what factors led certain pastors' wives to more fully adapt to life in America than others. Two members of the first generation of Norwegian-American Lutheran pastors' wives—Elisabeth Koren, and Caja Munch—make an interesting case study in this regard. Though these women shared common backgrounds in Norway

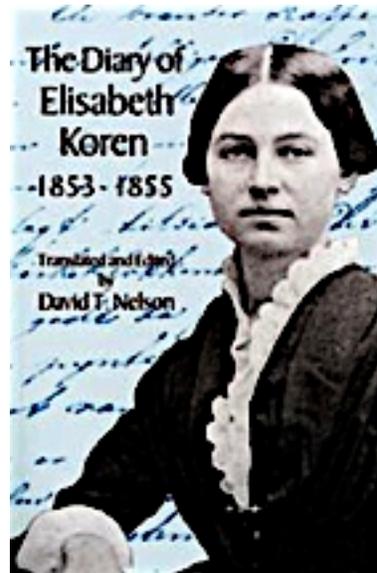
and similar experiences in America, they differed significantly in how they adjusted from their former life in Norway to their new life in the Midwestern United States. The Korens lived out the rest of their days in America, while the Munchs moved back to their homeland after four years.

One solution is to ascribe these diverse reactions to mere differences in personality. Gracia Grindal says as much in her analysis of these women. According to her, Elisabeth Koren entered life in America with a more open mind than Caja Munch and therefore more readily embraced the changes that the frontier necessitated. While there is certainly much truth to this analysis, this explanation does not fully account for the social and cultural biases held by both of these women upon their arrival in America. However, from the personal writings of Elisabeth Koren and Caja Munch a more complete picture of their triumphs and struggles with American acculturation emerges. Each woman certainly had her own unique personality, but just as significant as the attitudes that they brought over to America were their distinctive experiences in America that molded and shaped their respective outlooks.

Both Elisabeth Koren and Caja Munch grew up in a Norwegian social structure that maintained a distinct separation between the common people (*almuen*) and the professional elites (*conditioneret*). This separation was a product of historical development, where doctors, lawyers, businessmen and clergy filled the social and political vacuum left by a weak nobility. Though the *conditioneret* did not regard themselves as ruling class *per se*, that was in fact what they came to be. Long family lineages were intertwined, making rising up from the *almuen* nearly impossible. What separated these classes was an intangible quality called *dannelse*, frequently rendered “culture.” Members of the *conditioneret* were expected to conduct themselves in a way that distinguished themselves as gentlemen and ladies. This included their dress, furnishings,

manners and topics of conversation. This carried over to life in the parish, where the parsonage was to be a cultural center, especially in rural areas.

Norwegian women of the upper class were expected to be cultured housewives. This training began early in an apprenticeship in the home of a close relative or friend of the family. They learned to prepare meals, care for the animals, make clothes, and perform other household chores. Meanwhile they also became acquainted with elements of “culture.” They attended balls, played music, read books, drew and wrote. Already as teenagers, they were expected to be involved in courtship and eventually marry.



Both the diary of Elisabeth Koren and the letters of Caja Munch reflect their privileged upbringing in the Norwegian upper class. Koren’s diary began as she and her newly married husband are about to embark on their voyage to America. She and her husband

of a few months, Ulrik Vilhelm, were first-class passengers on this voyage. She spent most of her time reading, enjoying fine meals and socializing with the other passengers. When they arrived in New York, she and her husband had dinner at an elegant restaurant. Throughout her travels to their parish in Iowa, she constantly showed marks of her cultured upbringing by commenting on the décor of trains, ferries, and other houses. The same concerns mark her arrival in Iowa as well.

Like Koren’s diary, Munch’s letters reflect her privileged upbringing. She and her husband Johan Sturm were, like the Korens, first class passengers on their trip. Upon their arrival

in America they visited “New York’s best restaurant.” Throughout their time in their parish in Wisconsin, she frequently commented on the importance of being with cultured people. Her description of their parsonage showed an eye for proper furnishing and decoration.

Along with their common Norwegian upper class backgrounds, Koren and Munch shared similar experiences in their immigration and adjustment to life in America. Both married newly ordained pastors of the Norwegian Lutheran Church at a young age—Koren at 21 and Munch at 25—and left Norway within a month after their wedding. The Korens emigrated in 1853; the Munchs in 1855. Both settled in the Middle West of the United States—the Korens near Decorah, Iowa and the Munchs in Wiota, Wisconsin (south of Madison).

Both also shared similar adjustments to life on the Midwestern frontier. The most immediately apparent adjustment was doing without many of the comforts of home. When she and her husband Vilhelm arrived at the home of Pastor Adolph C. Preus in Koshkonong, Wisconsin, Koren noticed the plainness of the parsonage. “We found it rather strange in that little house to begin with... The parsonage is a fairly large log cabin with whitewashed walls and unbelievably simple furniture.” Coinciding with this lack of former luxuries were the new challenges in the area of homemaking. Both of these women had some help from hired servants, but were generally negative in their appraisal of their abilities. “America is so poorly supplied with help,” wrote Caja Munch to her grandmother. “I have a young girl, who was confirmed by Munch last year, and who knows nothing.” Elisabeth Koren expressed similar sentiments and frequently commented on the lack of good servants in America. In one of her more exasperated moments, she lamented that the only reason she would return to Norway to live would be for decent household help. These deficiencies in hired help forced them to work more than they were accustomed.

However, what these women truly missed were less the material things from Norway, but things of a more emotional value. Koren bemoaned the lack of natural beauty, “It always makes me sad when I hear that in America the birds do not sing, and the flowers have no fragrance. I feel as if something of the finest were lacking, as if no real joy could be felt in nature; and so my thoughts turn with added melancholy to the beautiful summer evenings at home.” Certainly these women’s most poignant adjustment was dealing with the loneliness that they felt. Both Johan Munch and Vilhelm Koren served several parishes and spent much time away from home. This loneliness was especially strong for Elisabeth Koren. Often her husband would be gone for well over a week, and she would not know when exactly he would return. She was forced to confide her loneliness in her diary, “Well, I am alone again and will no doubt be alone all week. How I long for the time when there will be a little less traveling, a little more reasonable arrangement for this one is really all wrong, and, what is worse, is not likely to get better soon.” For Caja Munch, she was often able to accompany her husband on these journeys until they had their first child; then she usually had to stay behind.

It was not just the absence of these women’s husbands that produced this loneliness, but also the absence of a social network like that which they had in Norway. Members of the Norwegian *conditioneret* partook in frequent social gatherings. In America, though the group of about a dozen immigrant Norwegian Lutheran pastors and their wives formed something of a cultured social club, they did not meet nearly as frequently as had social circles back in Norway. Because of the infrequent contact with cultured women of the upper class, these pastors’ wives often longed for more sophisticated company. Before their parsonage was built, the Korens stayed with a local family, and Elisabeth at times grew lonely in their company. “I can indeed talk to them,” she wrote, “and do so, too, and it is

probably my own fault that I find these conversations of so little interest. This is not always true, to be sure; but at times the wish to have a cultured person to talk to becomes very strong.” Caja Munch was happy to meet with more cultured people whenever possible. On one occasion she and her husband “drove directly to a small town called Linden, where a Norwegian office clerk from Drammen lives... These were cultured people, and believe me, we do appreciate meeting people like that in this country.”

Along with the shared Norwegian background and similar adjustments to life in the Midwest, both women immigrated to America with social and cultural prejudices. On her train travels in the Midwest, Elisabeth Koren remarked that “the coaches were filled with an unpleasant mixed company, which one must put up with here where there is only one class.” Later, on a ferry from Chicago to Milwaukee, she complained that these people “should be forbidden to walk upon these lovely carpets.” After a few months into her time in Wisconsin, Caja Munch offered this analysis of the social situation, “Everything considered, we do not really miss anything except the company of cultured people instead of these silly peasants, who for the most part cannot comprehend at all that we are a step above them and have more requirements.... For example, many will simply call me Caja.”

Closely associated with their view of social superiority was their feeling of cultural superiority. These Norwegian women held a disdain for anything “Yankee.” Caja Munch wrote, “The Yankee ladies are terribly lazy, if I can call them ladies; indeed, I hardly think there is a single cultured family to be found here until you get to the larger cities. Although they dress like court ladies, it is still obvious from their conduct and manners that they are of the crudest rabble.” These cultural prejudices showed through especially when their fellow countrymen adopted their customs, as was common in the peasant class. After being welcomed into the home of a Norwegian blacksmith on their journey to Iowa,

Elisabeth Koren gave this appraisal, “They appeared to be good people but were, without a doubt, much ‘Yankeefied.’”

At first glance then, the stories of Elisabeth Koren and Caja Munch appear virtually identical. Both shared the same upper class background and similar adjustments to American frontier life. Both also immigrated with notions of social and cultural superiority. Yet, the way their stories unfolded could not be more different. Koren and her husband would remain in Iowa the rest of their days, while the Munchs would leave America in frustration after only four years in Wisconsin. One of the chief reasons for this divergence was how each woman bridged the social gap between herself and the lower-class parishioners. These two women may well have retained the same opinions on class had it not been for their different experiences in their social lives. For Elisabeth Koren, her experiences challenged her social biases, and helped her adapt more successfully to life in America. Caja Munch’s experiences confirmed her prejudices and made her resent her plight in America.

Unlike the Munchs, the Korens did not have a parsonage ready soon after they arrived at their parish. Because of this, they stayed for several months in the home of the Egges, a lower-class farming family. Already less than two



The Edge Cabin

weeks into their stay, Elisabeth’s attitude was beginning to change, “I soon wished myself home again, I cannot deny it; it was hot, there were so many children, and it is not always pleasant to

watch Anne's naïve, free and easy manners. At the same time, they are so friendly, these people, and in every way make it so comfortable for us that I am ashamed of being critical." When remembering the "Yankeefied" family with whom they stayed on their way to Iowa, she wrote with some regret, "At that time I was not yet accustomed to native rural hospitality." In less than two months of living in Iowa, the Egges and other parishioners had won her over, "We cannot say that we live so exceptionally well here... But our appetites seldom fail. And even though we might find food twice as good at many places, I have not found any other place where I would rather live."

Such a statement does not imply a full assimilation of social classes. Koren still longed for the company of cultured people and grew tired of talking about "cattle and swine." However, she made significant steps in bridging the social gap between herself and the Iowan parishioners. In her lonely times when her husband was away, she went on walks to visit one or more of the farmer's houses. After church services, she felt comfortable to talk to the parishioners. In conclusion, the experience of living in the Egges' home helped her adjust to the harsh living conditions and loneliness of the American frontier.

Caja Munch's experience was quite different. Though the Munchs were also put up in a member's home upon their arrival in Wisconsin, this living situation was only for a few months. Also it was in the farm home of Even Kronborg, an older bachelor who lived across the street from the church, so the Munchs had ample space and privacy in their temporary residence. Along with Kronborg, they befriended a few other congregation members, who did things for them, but, according to Caja Munch, these were "the good ones." Soon she moved into the secluded parsonage, having never established a substantial number of connections with the congregation's members.

A further hindrance to her bridging the social gap between herself and the parishioners

was the proximity of several other pastors and their wives to the Munchs' parish. Caja became especially close to Pauline Dietrichson of Koshkonong, Wisconsin, whom she described as both a "mother and sister to me." She wrote to her mother, "Oh, how wonderful it is to meet such a person over here in America, we are so closely united that hardly any friendship could be tied any stronger between two families." This socializing, though only somewhat frequent, removed the need to befriend any additional congregation members. With her nearby social club, Caja Munch, unlike Elisabeth Koren, was able to maintain what she considered an appropriate social distance from these "silly peasants." She maintained this attitude until her and her husband's move back to Norway.

Another aspect of her personal life that bears mentioning is that for the first year and a half in Wiota, Munch had the company of her younger brother Emil. Though he has been described as "a strange and reticent boy," Caja seems to have been rather fond of him, if almost in a motherly sort of way. She was the oldest of thirteen children and accustomed to such a role. In either case, Emil provided her with company, further insulating her from the lower-class parishioners.

Augmenting the divergent experiences in their home life were the different experiences in their congregational life. Though Koren was certainly a religious person before her emigration, the American frontier experience had the effect of strengthening her spiritual life. "Services here always seem peculiarly affecting and impressive to me. It is so wonderful to see our people in this foreign land streaming together from every direction, and to feel the devotion and attention with which they sing their hymns and listen to the pastor. It all has quite a different aspect from what I have been accustomed to."

Caja Munch's congregational experience was much different. Her heavy-handed husband was in constant conflict with his parishioners. Much of the conflict surrounded the parishioners'

drinking habits, as one letter indicates, “There is, unfortunately, much drinking among the Norwegians in the congregation. You can imagine that it is unpleasant to be their minister, but one cannot exclude them entirely from the congregation. Munch is hoping that the condition will improve in time; besides the congregation is too weak to carry all the burdens that rest upon it without these drunkards.” Consequently she adopted a judgmental attitude toward religious life in America. “There is not, as we thought before we left Norway, an intense longing to hear the Word of the Lord and a craving to partake of His holy gifts.” At one time the congregational struggles turned so bitter that Caja thanked the Lord for the sudden death of one of their “opponents.” On March 1, 1859, Caja Munch sent a letter to her parents announcing her and Peter’s return to Norway. Though she did not go into the details of why they were returning, her husband in the postscript did not mince any words, “In Wiota can no true servant of the Lord work any longer.” The Munchs had failed to adapt to their new life in America.

For Caja Munch, her living situation and congregational struggles shaped her attitudes toward life in America. Ultimately, her only positive appraisal of her American experience was that it had tested her faith. She wrote her grandmother, “[I]n spite of all, I would not have missed this journey. Even though the body is not comfortable over here, I think our souls have had great benefit from the tour, and that we by mere grace have come closer to our God and Savior.... [But] I cannot comprehend the statement that I have heard from several of the ministers over here, that they intend to stay here for years, maybe even forever.”

Elisabeth Koren and her husband, however, did stay “forever.” Her living situation and congregational life had modified her social and cultural notions. Despite the difficult adjustments to the Midwestern frontier, she was able to look back upon her life in America with fondness. She

wrote before her diary’s first publication in 1914, “With gratitude I look back on my long life here in this land, and think of the many now dead who received us with so much friendliness and surrounded us with love all our lives.”•



THE PASTOR AND HIS WIFE IN THE PARSONAGE, IN OR ABOUT 1909  
(From a photograph in the possession of Mrs. David T. Nelson)

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## From the Museum

by Rebecca DeGarmeaux

In conjunction with the Historical Society’s annual meeting and Synod Convention, the Ottesen Museum is planning a new display of artifacts from the Bethany Ladies College. Come to the museum during Synod Convention and see pictures, a diploma, and other memorabilia pertaining to the early days of the college. The museum’s hours during convention will be Tuesday through Thursday from 1:30 to 4:30.



Also visit the display in the “street” of the Sports and Fitness Center during the convention to see a small display of recent museum acquisitions and artifacts promoting the new book *Store Per: Norwegian-American “Paul Bunyan” of the Prairie*.•

## My Little Missionary

Lois Gail was the name given to a tiny baby girl born to the Missionary Paul Anderson and his wife Emily Gruebel Anderson in Calabar, Nigeria, November 26, 1946.

While baby and mother spend thirteen days in the European Hospital at Calabar, the baby's father Paul is staying at a nearby "Rest House." A group of Nigerian men hear of the arrival of this foreigner. They learn that he is a Bible teacher and they ask him to teach them as much of the Bible as possible in the limited time they expect to share with him.

It is a moment of extreme importance for Missionary Paul Anderson who has come to Africa to start new congregations and serve established ones. He is not settled in his own home before this work begins. The birth of the baby, who comes to be called Gail, is just one in a whole series of events used by our Lord to create the right time for soul-winning. Two threads intertwine—one a human interest tale, the other a missions story, and at once we're reminded that mission church planting is designed by the author of the Great Commission, Jesus Christ.

First, we gather up the strand of life occupying the interests of a young seminarian. Paul attended a presentation by a missionary on furlough from Africa and as it turned out, Paul asked "too many questions," giving away his interest in foreign missions. Paul's professor who is in attendance at this event duly notes Paul's interest. He didn't ask if Paul would like to actually do foreign mission work, merely if Paul were interested in foreign missions. "Shouldn't everyone be interested in missions?" thought Paul, and answered "Yes, I am." And this response no doubt had something to do with Paul's name being placed on a list of names for possible assignment of a graduate to Nigeria.

About this time, Emily Gruebel comes into Paul's life and they fall in love. Emily makes the claim she is never going to leave St. Louis, Missouri and would never marry a pastor! But not so very long later Emily finds herself planning a wedding. The bridegroom is soon to become a pastor-missionary and they will be leaving St. Louis with a plan for moving to Nigeria!

Two hundred dollars Paul had saved buys wedding rings and a like amount put aside by Emily takes care of a wedding dress and food for the reception, and soon vows are exchanged at a wedding the groom later described as beautiful.

Awaiting visas for entry into Nigeria the young couple spends several months in Minnesota where Paul fills a pastoral vacancy. Preparations for their African sojourn mean the young couple is very busy. They must, for example, purchase supplies and non-perishable food items to bring along which will last them for several years. The visas come through and now preparations include trip planning. They are to travel by air for the first time.

Paul and Emily learn they will cross the North Atlantic on a route to Ireland which Pan American Airways pioneered a year or so earlier. Commercial aviation is yet very new. About this time they learn something else that's very important: Emily is pregnant! Adjustments and readjustments come to be the order of the day. Paul and Emily travel to New York City and stay with friends in Flushing Meadows while awaiting departure.

Twelve times they are set to travel. Each time their flight is re-scheduled. Hours and sometimes days pass between re-scheduled flights. Finally, on the 13<sup>th</sup> try they board the airplane and they taxi to the end of the runway. Then the plane is called back!

Soon, however, on the fourteenth try they board a plane which actually lifts off and flies across the North Atlantic. Stops are necessary in order to secure airplane fuel and food for the passengers and crew. These are first in Newfoundland and later in Portugal. The next leg of the journey has South Africa as the destination and they are booked on the first plane ever to travel this particular route!

They disembark in Liberia at the U.S. Army Air Force Base, Roberts Field. Here they are told the men will stay in barracks about a mile from the landing strip and the women will live in separate barracks a mile or so in the opposite direction! They ask about booking a flight for the next leg of the journey to Nigeria on Air France. "Well, Air France has no agent here but they do land here sometimes," they are told.

A peek into the minds of the young missionaries might have revealed thoughts such as these: *Let's see now. We have a baby on the way and*

*we're going to be separated by about two miles during the evening and night hours and well, um... In all your ways acknowledge Him and He shall sustain you. Sustain us Lord in this journey with its many twists and turns and delays and unknowns.*

About a week later an airplane belonging to Air France leaves Roberts Field with the Andersons on board. They arrive at Lagos, Nigeria. The Andersons have now spent about sixty hours of their journey actually in the air.

From Lagos to the mission headquarters at Obot Idim is about 300 miles. However, no autos or trucks are available for the trip. It is much farther by train, about 800 miles. The train follows narrow-gauge tracks around an enormous swamp providing Paul and Emily with a geography lesson.

The Stork has not informed the missionaries precisely as to the day of the new arrival but they know the time is coming quite close.

A fellow missionary comes to meet them at the depot when the train arrives. When the travelers are about six miles from their new home, the 1937 Chevrolet in which they are riding loses a front wheel. Emily spots it first, rolling ahead of the vehicle. It bounces into the ditch. She gets out and tracks it into the bush and shows the others where it is hiding! Paul and the others find the bearings, spacer and nut which have fallen along the way and put the wheel back in place.

They arrive and are welcomed by happy missionaries, eager to receive new colleagues and news from home. Talk eventually turns to the congregations Paul will serve. There will be six churches in his pastoral care. Arrangements are made for Emily and Paul to stay with fellow missionaries until a house can be built for them. (Not long later, in the manner of the local construction, their new home was built in six days.) But first, they had something to take care of at the European Hospital in Calabar. The baby's arrival is imminent.

The hospital is on the other side of the Cross River. "The only way to reach it was to travel by motor launch from Oron to Calabar. This launch made the crossing only once a day. We thought we had better go right away even though we originally believed we might have a wait of two weeks or so in Calabar," said Paul.

*"Andersons like to be early, so Gail came that night!"*

Things had happened fast. Paul and Emily reserve a room at the British-operated Rest House. When the hour comes, they have only to walk up the hill to the hospital. The soon-to-be parents make the walk at about midnight. Paul is not allowed to wait nearby in the hospital, but medical staff members order him to "go home!" When morning comes Paul glimpses Gail for the first time. He has to leave when she is brought to her mother.

Now we're coming full circle. Paul returns to the Rest House. A bit later, the young men whom I mentioned at the beginning find him and the makings of a new Christian congregation are coming together.

Two weeks later, Emily and Gail are able to travel and the little family takes up temporary residency with Paul's sister and brother-in-law, Pastor and Mrs. Carl (Emma) Rusch, at Nung Udo, Ibesikpo. And Paul has something important to report to his fellow pastors and the supervisory personnel of the mission. Paul tells them of the instruction classes he conducted while he awaited Gail and Emily's dismissal from the hospital. The newest missionary has been busy, they learn. He has not only been occupied supporting his wife, a first-time young mother, but he has been busy teaching. He is able to relate the keen interest in the Gospel of the young men of Calabar. Discussion and prayer ensue among the missions staff and the question arises—Can we leave these men behind with no further instruction planned? In time it becomes clear that an ordained, national pastor ought to be extended a call to serve this group. And this leads to the formation of a new congregation in Calabar. The Rev. Jonathan Udo Ekong, native to Ibesikpo, receives and accepts this call.

And now we ask about the driving force behind all the above. Was it the Foreign Mission Board of the Synodical Conference under whose auspices Paul worked? Was it that seminary professor who detected Paul's early interest in foreign missionary work? Or was it Paul? Or Emily? Or maybe it was little Gail! And what about the timing? The Mission Board members may well have been imagining the careful preliminary studies of any new areas Paul might want to test before start-

ing any actual work. Timing? Well, Gail's arrival and Mama's stumbling across a ditch to look for a wayward tire and 800 miles on a train and sixty hours in the air and "Air France stops here sometimes," not to mention days of delays in New York City all have something to do with timing. Chalk it up to blind fate that those young men were nearby when the Bible teacher arrived? No, we don't think so. When God wants to start a new Christian congregation, he arranges events to see that the job gets done! The human interest story and the missions story turn out to be one and the same. Evidence lines up in real life pointing to the great truths taught and implied in Romans 8,28: *"In all things God works for the good to those who love him, to those who are the called according to his purpose."*

The younger generations have a term we might well apply to the above story, "Awesome!" At least for us Christians it seems amazing the manner God chooses for arranging to get his work done. In this and similar true life stories, we can truthfully say our Lord is reminding us who really is in charge, though we may puzzle over budget and personnel decisions and missions' priorities.

In a certain sense, Gail came to be a little "missionary" at the time of her birth. How could this be unless a heavenly hand guided her parents to the moment described? How is it that her birth comes to be such an important event in the many steps leading to the formation of a new congregation? Yet, there are more reasons for giving her the title "missionary."

The setting is in Rochester, New York. The writer knows a father who remembers spotting his seven year old daughter sitting next to a little friend to whom she is reading. The father begins to walk on tip toe, and stealing close he sees the two children each holding a copy of Luther's Small Catechism. Papa catches the last sounds of Gail's voice as he steals quietly away... "My little missionary," he thinks to himself. He is very glad.

Years pass, and in time Gail winds up living in Alaska, a mother, and the wife of Gary Lillo. It became known that she encouraged many people who were new to the congregation. Only recently, Gail passed from this earth and entered her heavenly rest after a courageous battle with cancer. The service folder from the funeral points to her strong desire for sharing the Gospel.



The service folder for Gail's funeral service reads as follows: "December 30, 2010. Memorial donations can be made to Faith Lutheran Church, 5200 Lake Otis Parkway, Anchorage, AK 99507. Gail hoped that

the congregation could acquire the equipment needed to stream the (Sunday) worship services live on the internet."

Her works follow her!

"My little missionary," is how her Dad described her. Faith Lutheran Church of Anchorage can call her "Our Missionary." The ELS can likewise embrace her story, calling her "our missionary" as she played a part in the earliest history of her father Paul's work in Nigeria for Paul's work represented some of the very early work of the Synod in foreign missions. He was a member of the ELS and so in a special way, and through the arm of the Synodical Conference, our synod was doing foreign mission work in the 1940's. •

The events which make up the above story were told to James P. Olsen, P.em., by Paul Anderson, P.em., in an interview in the fall of 2010 with additional details gleaned from the writings of Pastor Anderson. Pastor Anderson's retirement home is in Eau Claire, Wisconsin. After his service to our Lord in Nigeria, Pastor Anderson served congregations in the U.S and in Australia. He served many years on the ELS Board of World Missions.

Gail, on right, as BLHS sophomore. (1963 Fidelis)



## The Old Muskego Lutheran Church

By Herman Harstad

The first structure built by Norwegian immigrants to the United States dedicated exclusively for worship now stands on the campus of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. It has an interesting history. The two story log structure was originally built in Muskego in southeastern Wisconsin. It was completed and used for worship in the summer of 1844 and was dedicated in March 1845. Prior to having their own church building, the immigrants held services in their homes similar to the practices of the first Christians described in the book of Acts.



If the logs could talk, what would they say about those early years? They might say they remember bereaved mourners who lost loved ones to malaria and small pox and other epidemics. Perhaps there are memories of men in blue uniforms who were home on leave during the Civil War who asked for God's protection before they returned to their units. There were happy occasions such as baptisms, confirmations, and weddings of parishioners who were thankful for their own place of worship.



For the first five years the faithful huddled on cold winter Sundays shivering and seeing their breath since there was no heating stove until 1849. But they were warmed by the gospel message proclaimed from the towering pulpit. Initially the church had no organ. The song leader known as the *klokker* led the singing with the help of a simple stringed instrument called a psalmodikan.

After the church outlived its usefulness it was converted into a barn. Visionary and historically-minded people decided the building was a one-of-a-kind structure worth saving. So in 1904 the church was dismantled and the logs were carefully numbered and transported from Wisconsin to the campus of Luther Seminary in St. Paul, 400 miles away. The seminary was part of the church body known as the Norwegian Synod. Luther Seminary was established in 1876 in Madison, Wisconsin. It then moved to Decorah, Iowa and then to Robbinsdale, Minnesota. While the campus was in Robbinsdale, my grandfather, Rev. Bjug Harstad, taught there for the school year of 1889-1890.



(When a small group of pastors decided they could not go along with a merger of the old Norwegian Synod in June 1917, they formed a new synod June 1918 with the official name of the "Norwegian Synod of



the American Evangelical Lutheran Church.” Bjug Harstad served as the first President of the synod and John Moldstad was elected Vice President.)

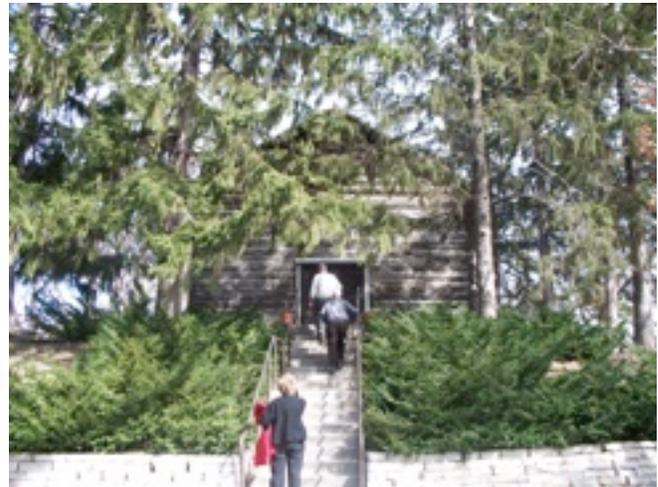
The Robbinsdale Luther Seminary building burned in 1894 and classes were temporarily held in a hotel until the seminary moved to its present location in St. Paul in 1899. Five years later the Old Muskego Church was moved to the campus. Luther Seminary is now part of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA). Currently 796 students are studying for the ministry. Almost half of the student body are women.

Arrangements can be made with the Luther

Seminary staff to tour the old church. They say it is the most popular site visited on the campus. It was designated as a State Historical Site by the Minnesota Historical Society in 1963 and is also listed on the National Register of Historic Places. The old church has a seating capacity of 75 and can be rented for baptisms, weddings and wedding vow renewals, and it is occasionally used for chapel services; weather permitting, as there is no heat or air conditioning. When the house of worship was reassembled in St. Paul in 1904, many trees were planted around the building. Now over one hundred years later the mature trees obscure long range views of the two-story log structure. Even though the church stands on an ELCA campus, our small synod’s spiritual and cultural heritage is also clearly represented by the Old Muskego Lutheran Church. •



Information for this article was drawn from a visit to the old church, a Luther Seminary brochure, the seminary’s web site, a book by O. M. Norlie titled *History of the Norwegian People in America* published by the Augsburg Publishing Co. in 1925, and *Grace for Grace* published by the Lutheran Synod Book Company, copyright 1943. The book was reprinted in June 2010 with forward comments by President John Moldstad and Mark Harstad, chairman of the ELS Historical Society. (Photos by Carolyn Harstad and Cheryl Harstad.)



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### **Did it used to be easier to get into college?**

**A notice for Bethany College in the “Convention Daily” for Synod Convention 1951: Parents who are interested in having their children or child attend Bethany next year are urged to contact Pres. B. W. Teigen or Prof. N. Holte during the Synod meeting and make the arrangements.**

**Oak Leaves**  
ELS Historical Society  
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**Editors:** Herman and Cheryl Harstad - [heharstad@charter.net](mailto:heharstad@charter.net)

**Board of Directors:** Mark Harstad (Chair), Peter Anthony, Camilla Dashcund, Craig Ferkenstad, Betsy Hermanson, pacity Robin Larson, Ryan MacPherson, Paul Madson, John Moldstad

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All membership renewals are due **June 1**

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\$10/year: individual

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#### **Associate Membership:**

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