



Oak Leaves

Newsletter of the ELS Historical Society

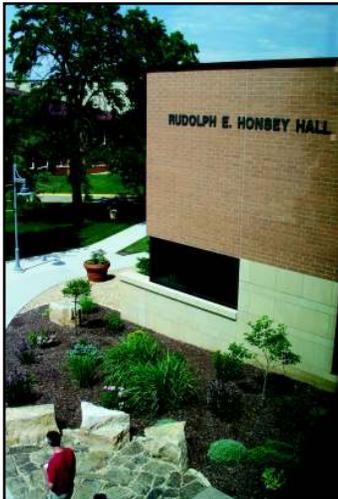
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Issue 2

ELS Historical Society — Sixteenth Annual Meeting Program theme: *Mission Work in China: The Career of The Rev. George O. Lillegard and His Wife Bernice*

by Marguerite Ylvisaker



The sixteenth annual meeting of the ELS Historical Society was held at Honsey Hall on the Bethany Lutheran College campus on Saturday, June 16, 2012, beginning at 1:00 p.m.

Chairman Mark Harstad prefaced the meeting by expressing recognition of three individuals who contributed much to the Society, who passed

away during recent months: Norman Holte, Melvina Aaberg, and Albin "Red" Levorson.

Chairman Harstad then introduced Rev. David Lillegard, who conducted the devotion, which opened with the singing of the hymn, "Spread oh Spread Thou Mighty Word."

Rev. Lillegard used as his text John 3:16-17. In his message he pointed out that all persons, being sinners, have strengths and weaknesses like mirror images. These are echoed in the organizations they form. This applies to Old Testament individuals such as Moses, Elijah, and David as well as to people and their efforts in the modern era, including the Lutheran missions to China in which his parents, Rev. George O. and Bernice Lillegard, were participants. The devotion concluded with prayer.

The presenters, Rev. David Lillegard and his daughter, Deborah Lillegard Blumer, called to our attention that 2012 is the hundredth anniversary of George O. Lillegard's first assignment to China, where he worked from 1912 to 1915 at a mission of the Old Norwegian Synod. He left for China shortly after his graduation from Luther Seminary in St. Paul. During his years of formal education Lillegard showed talent for the study of languages, an aptitude which would prove helpful in the mission field. After arriving in China he studied Mandarin Chinese at Nanking University.



At this time Kwangchow in Honan province was the center of mission activity for several church bodies. Although there were other Lutheran missionaries in the area, Lillegard was the first to be sent there by the Old Norwegian Synod. The challenges were obvious: the population was largely illiterate and followed the prevalent religions, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism. The mission rented buildings for a chapel, reading room, and living space, and began its work of instruction. Eventually the mission compound included schools and a hospital.

Conditions were politically precarious following the 1911 revolution. The northern Chinese, led by Chiang Kai-shek, were in conflict with the Communist-led south, causing much disorder. Lillegard was attacked by a brigand who had also raided missionaries nearby. This episode was at first erroneously reported to the U.S. as Lillegard having been killed.

To complicate the mission's work further, church controversy at home in the U.S. did not leave the mission field untouched. It involved the issues of unionism, syncretism, and the doctrine of election. In 1915, Lillegard's father Lars became ill. Lillegard was not granted permission to return home, but he went anyway. This ended his first period of service in China.

From 1915 to 1921, Lillegard served Lake View Lutheran congregation in Chicago and studied at the University of Chicago. During this time in the U.S. he became one of the founding members of the Little Norwegian Synod (ELS), in 1918. In 1920 he was married to Bernice Onstad in Madison, Wisconsin.

In 1921, George and Bernice Lillegard joined the Chinese mission of the Missouri and Ohio synods, with which the Little Norwegian Synod was in fellowship. Their first station was at Shihnanfu, Hupeh, a small mountain city. Their work included conducting chapel and Bible classes as well as running an orphanage and separate schools for boys and girls. George continued his language study, and Bernice too studied Mandarin as she was not only running a household but teaching in the girls' school.

In 1923 the Lillegards moved farther inland to Wanh-sien, Szechwan, on the Yangtze River, a new field where few Europeans had been. They moved into the hills, away from the pollution of the city. Three daughters, Elizabeth, Marjorie, and Laura, were born to the Lillegards during the years at Wanh-sien.



Pleasant as this station was, conflict dogged the mission. Again, the political situation was dangerous. The northern Chinese were confronted by southern Chinese Communists, cutting off the interior from the port of Shanghai. In addition, there was controversy involving the missionaries, the mission board, and the Missouri Synod seminary over the issue of proper terminology for God. Should "shang-di," a term with connotations of an ancient Chinese deity, be implemented, or was "shen," a more general term, preferable? At a 1926 conference in China, George Lillegard was vocal against using "shang-di." He, along with other "shenites," was asked to leave the mission.

The following months were difficult for the Lillegards as they attempted to conclude their duties and leave for the coast. Bernice's correspondence reflects the tensions. She and the children, one of them very sick, waited for months for a safe departure by riverboat, while George remained behind to close the mission. Reunited in Shanghai, they left China in February 1927.

The presentation included many contemporary photographs, letters, and other documents illustrating the Lillegards' personalities and experiences at this unique time in China. A lively question-and-answer period followed. ■

(NOTE: Deborah Blumer's book, *Called According to His Purpose: Missionary Letters from China*, is available on lulu.com and amazon.com. Search - "All Products," and type "Deborah Blumer" in the box. You may order an electronic version or a paperback version.)



Chairman Harstad (pictured left) called to order a brief business meeting. He thanked the two presenters.

Betsy Hermanson completed her second three-year term on the board. According to the constitution she is eligible for one more term, and she has agreed to serve. The chairman's current term also expired. The Synod president has appointed him for

another term.

Treasurer Peter Anthony reported an increase in the bank balance over a year ago.

Oak Leaves editor Herman Harstad welcomed suggestions for the newsletter. Back issues of *Oak Leaves* are available on the Society's web site.

Rebecca DeGarmeaux, director of the Ottesen Museum, reported that this, the seventy-first anniversary of the museum, has been a busy year. During 2011, 400 visitors, including the Koren family from Norway, were recorded at the museum.

The meeting closed with the singing of “Lord Jesus Christ, with Us Abide” and prayer.

Following the meeting the attendees, including a number of descendants of George and Bernice Lillegard, enjoyed a delicious dinner in Honsey Hall. ■



Laura Lillegard (left), Rudy Honsey (middle left), Margaret Annexstad (right), and Rebecca Lussky and Ron Mathison (bottom) visit at the annual meeting.



Can You Help the Ottesen Museum? by Becky DeGarmeaux

The Ottesen Museum was recently given some interesting artifacts and we would like more information about them.



Pictured is a traveling Communion set found in the house of Pastor Harold Vetter in Iola, Wisconsin. The set includes a chalice and patten. A small container fits into the bowl of the chalice which holds wine in one side and the host in the other. The set also contains

a cylindrical leather case for the set with a matching lid. The scale at the bottom of the picture is marked off in centimeters.

The second picture is of a host box and lid also found in Pastor Vetter’s house. Because these were found after he died, we have little information about where he got them or how old they may be.

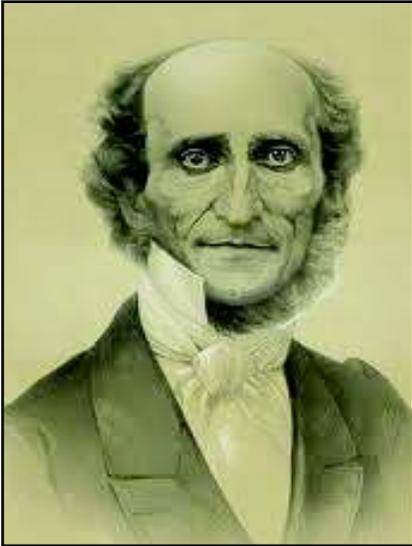


If you have any information on the age of these pieces, where Pastor Vetter obtained them, or anything else which may pertain to the sets, please contact the Ottesen Museum’s Director of Programming, Rebecca DeGarmeaux. She can be reached at: email - museum@blc.edu , or 507-344-7421, or 6 Browns Court, Mankato, MN 56001.

Did you know that the Ottesen Museum has a Facebook page? If you’re on Facebook check out the page at ELS Ottesen Museum. By “liking” the page, you will get regular updates on significant dates in Synod history. ■

Walther and the Norwegians: Some Anniversary Comments by Mark O. Harstad

2012 marks the 125th anniversary of the death of Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther. 2011 was the 200th anniversary of his birth. A few comments on the importance of Walther for Norwegian Lutheranism in America and the Evangelical Lutheran Synod in particular are in order.



Walther was born in 1811 into a pastor's family in the area of Germany known as the Kingdom of Saxony. During his student days at the University of Leipzig, he read extensively in the writings of Dr. Martin Luther, and became thoroughly

convinced that Luther rightly explained the teachings of the Bible. He was ordained into the Lutheran ministry in 1837.

It became apparent to Walther and many other like-minded people that they would not be able to practice their Lutheranism in Germany because of the government-mandated union of Lutherans and Calvinists into one church organization. Government action harshly suppressed the practice of religion which was distinctively Lutheran. About 800 Saxon Lutherans determined that the right thing to do was to emigrate to a place where they could practice their faith free of government restraints. They sailed for America in 1839. Most of them settled in the state of Missouri in the city of St. Louis, and in Perry County south of St. Louis.

Walther quickly emerged among the German immigrants in a leadership role, and was an important figure in the organization in 1847 of the church body which today is known as the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod. He served as parish pastor, president of his church body at various times, seminary professor, and seminary

president. In addition to these duties he was active in the publication of Lutheran theological materials, and took a leadership role in seeking out like-minded Lutherans in America with whom the Missouri Synod might practice fellowship.

The history of the German Missouri Synod and the history of Norwegian Lutheranism in America came together in the decade of the 1850s. In 1853 the predecessor church body of the ELS, the Norwegian Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church (more commonly called simply the Norwegian Synod, or "the Old Synod" in our circles), was organized in Wisconsin by immigrant pastors and laymen. H. A. Preus, U. V. Koren, J. A. Ottesen, and Lauritz Larsen assumed leadership roles. Their goal was to establish a solid, confessional Lutheranism among Norwegian immigrants. These men quickly came to see that not all that went by the name "Lutheran" in America was in fact genuinely Lutheran. They would have to be very careful in establishing connections with other Lutheran church bodies.

But their contacts with Walther and his Missouri Synod colleagues convinced the Norwegian leaders that they had found true brothers in the faith. Out of this conviction grew a relationship which bore much positive fruit for many years. The Missourians manifested the same deep respect for the confessional heritage of the Lutheran Reformation which the Norwegians cherished, and they were committed to the necessity of a thorough education for those who aspired to be pastors. Church work in the American environment, which was filled with various reformed groups and sects lurking on the fringes of Christianity, required pastors with a thorough preparation for the work.

An immediate problem for the Norwegians was how to provide pastors who could organize congregations among the thousands of Norwegian immigrants pouring into the states of the upper Midwest. They established Luther College in Decorah, Iowa, in 1861, and many other schools to provide elementary and secondary education, but in the 1850s, 60s, and 70s they were in no position to maintain their own seminary to educate candidates for the ministry. The number of pastors coming from Norway was inadequate to meet the needs of a growing church body.

Walther invited the Norwegians to make use of the Missouri Synod's Concordia Seminary in St.

Louis to educate candidates for the ministry among the Norwegians. The acceptance of this offer proved to be very important, and a great blessing. About 125 Norwegian Synod pastors were educated under Walther and his colleagues over a 25-year period.

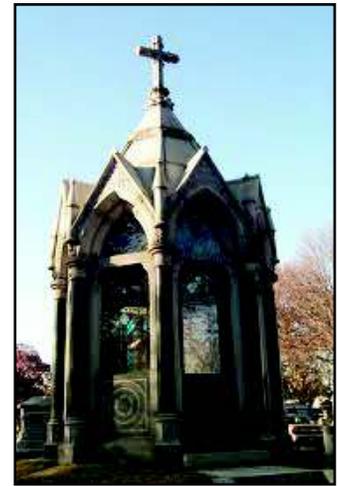
A statement from Pastor U. V. Koren which is often quoted in the telling of the history of the Norwegian Synod asserts that the Norwegians learned nothing new from Walther. That is true in the sense that the early Norwegian Synod pastors had already studied “the whole counsel of God” in their preparation for the ministry. They were thoroughly schooled in the writings of the Lutheran teachers of the Reformation and Post-Reformation periods. Walther did not teach them anything new in the area of doctrine. But Walther’s influence on the Norwegians was great nonetheless. The Missouri Synod provided an example for the Norwegians as to how the confessional Lutheranism they loved could be practiced and perpetuated in America. The Norwegians recognized and copiously acknowledged their debt to the Missouri Synod.

Walther worked for many years to bring together confessional Lutherans into a national organization through which they could express and practice their fellowship in the faith. In 1872 those efforts bore fruit in the formation of the Evangelical Lutheran Synodical Conference of North America. The Norwegian Synod became one of the constituent members of the Synodical Conference along with the Missouri, Wisconsin, and Ohio Synods.

One of those 125 Norwegian pastors educated under Walther was my grandfather, Bjug Aanondson Harstad. He had arrived in America as a 12-year-old boy in 1861 along with his parents and many siblings. With the help and encouragement of family members and pastors he was able to attend Luther College. In 1871 he enrolled at Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, and graduated with the class of 1874. The three years he spent “sitting at the feet” of Walther and his colleagues shaped his theological thinking. He acknowledged this to the end of his life. Throughout his career in the ministry, from the difficult years of the controversy over the Doctrine of Election among the Norwegians in the 1880s, through the years leading up to the doctrinally-compromised Norwegian Lutheran merger of 1917, to the time of formation of the reorganized Synod in 1918 and its early func-

tioning in the 1920s, he was thrust into situations where he had to defend what he had learned from Walther. The issues revolved again and again around the great Reformation themes of Scripture Alone, Grace Alone, and Faith Alone, which Walther had carefully inculcated into his students.

In 1926 Bjug’s son, my father, Adolph M. Harstad, graduated from Concordia Seminary. Bjug, in his upper 70s at that point, made the trip by train from Tacoma, Washington, to be present at his son’s graduation. My father told a touching story about how his father had insisted that they take time to visit Walther’s grave. In 1892 a large mausoleum had been constructed over the grave site, an acknowledgment on the part of the Missouri Synod of their appreciation for Walther’s work. The elderly Bjug wanted to add an expression of his deep respect for his mentor by visiting the grave. He stood there for some time in silence, no doubt in a prayer of thanksgiving for what he had been permitted to learn from Walther.



Walther’s influence continues in our midst right down to the present time. Every seminary student is encouraged to acquire and read repeatedly throughout his career C.F.W. Walther’s *The Proper Distinction between Law and Gospel*. This work remains required reading for every faithful pastor of the confessional Lutheran tradition. ■



Oct. 17, 2011, Bethany Lutheran Seminary President Gaylin Schmeling shows visiting Koren relatives the chapel window showing the Good Shepherd and the border that says “Scripture Alone, Grace Alone, Faith Alone.”

WONDERS AND LUXURIES OF THE TITANIC.

MAIDEN VOYAGE ON WEDNESDAY.

On Wednesday next the largest ship in the world, R.M.S. Titanic, the latest addition to the White Star Line, will leave Southampton on her maiden voyage to New York.



“CAPE RACE, Newfoundland, Sunday Night, April 14 (AP) — At 10:25 o'clock tonight the White Star Line steamship Titanic called “CQD” to the Marconi station here, and reported having struck an iceberg. The steamer said that immediate assistance was required.”

A Kentucky newspaper headline:

“Millionaire and Peasant, Shoulder to Shoulder, Go to Their Death...”

Class Division: Does it matter?

by Betsy Hermanson

To what class do you belong?

Some may respond that Americans have no separation of classes; others would argue that we definitely do. Most people answer that they are in the “middle class,” although the exact definition of “middle class” is also open to question.

The United States of America was founded on the principle of a freer, less rigid society. Every school child learns the opening of the Declaration of Independence where Thomas Jefferson states, “All men are created equal.” Of course, at the time the document was written it did mean only men – white,

European, landed gentlemen. American statesmen, leaders and individuals, both male and female, have struggled toward the impossible goal of a truly equal society ever since, for over 235 years.

Most of us have ancestors who boarded ships of various kinds to come to this country because they had heard of an America with free land and opportunities for all, rich or poor, gentry or servant. People in Norway, hemmed in by lack of land and limited opportunities, saw the dream of a better and more prosperous life in the new world. Following is a written collage containing a few experiences of individuals who followed the path of Norwegian-American immigration; some statistics on class among travelers on the ill-fated Titanic; and a brief discussion of current class divisions among Americans.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the sinking of the great ocean liner, the Titanic. If you saw the film of the same name you may remember the poignant scenes of people from lower decks crushing against gates that prevented them from straying into the lavish upper decks reserved for upper classes. Because the gates were locked, there was no way out; they were doomed.

There were about 2,225 people on the Titanic for its maiden voyage across the Atlantic in 1912. It carried some of the wealthiest people in the world, people with names like Astor, Guggenheim and Straus. The ship also carried over 1,000 emigrants from Great Britain, Ireland, and Scandinavia—people who were seeking a better life in this new land. On the many ships that brought people to America, people purchased the ticket they were able to afford. They were divided primarily by personal wealth, not ethnicity.

Over 1,500 people died in the sinking of the Titanic. Websites dedicated to the tragedy divide people into categories and show percentages of the groups of people who perished. For instance, many more men than women died; even the wealthiest of men stood back to let women and children go first into the inadequate number of lifeboats.

Only three percent of the first-class women (who had first access to lifeboats) died; but 54% percent of third-class women were lost. Sixty-one percent of all first-class passengers were saved; but only 25% of third-class passengers survived. Third-class ticket holders, or steerage, were the ones who had been barred from access to the lifestyles of the rich and famous – and without access to the top decks and the lifeboats, most drowned. On the Titanic, being in the right class made all the difference. And that class was the money class.

As each wave of immigrants arrived in the United States, many of those who came earlier moved up in class, at least in their own estimation, by looking down on the newest arrivals. In this case, people divided classes by ethnicity or country of origin. In the newspaper office where this writer formerly worked, a newspaper article from the late 1800s described an altercation between the town police officer and an inebriated woman. One sentence began, "The drunk, a Swedish woman . . ." as if her nationality was the reason for her behavioral problem.

In his book *Store Per*, author Peter T. Harstad records the voyage of his relative aboard the Rogaland in April of 1852. Harstad says, "Of the ninety-two Rogaland passengers only two paid for cabin passage and ate at the captain's table." The other 90 "steerage passengers," says Harstad, "furnished their own bedding and food." They were crowded into the lower decks with inadequate sanitation and privacy. They had fresh air only in good weather; in stormy seas the hatches were closed. For these people, the crossing was a huge trial to be endured on the way to that dream of a new life.

Some immigrants, however, were of Norway's upper class professionals, such as the Rev. U.V. Koren and his wife, Elisabeth. They had been married only a few weeks when he followed his calling to the mission field on the prairies of Iowa. In 1853, the Korens sailed from Norway to Germany, and then booked passage to America on the Rhein. The ship carried 200 steerage passengers, 20-40 second-class passengers, and a small number of first-class passengers like the Korens. Elisabeth recorded their passage in her diary. She writes that she amused herself by watching "passengers from the second class with their rugs and cushions" as they came on deck for air. She tells of a voyage with fearful winds and stormy seas, and after a few weeks at sea, she describes, "the lowest deck is full of steerage passengers, who look weak and exhausted."

When the Korens arrived in New York, Elisabeth was shocked to find that many American women, though their husbands earned sufficient money, still had no servants. It seems she expected people of upper classes would have servants here, as they did back home; she did not know what awaited her in Iowa.

What she found was not the society she had come to expect. The trip took over three months, and included seasickness on the ship, traveling by train, then by buggy through mud and snow, across the ice-covered Mississippi river to arrive at their new home on December 24, 1853. Only there was no new home. The promised parsonage had not yet been built.

U.V. and Elisabeth Koren traveled thousands of miles to begin a new life. Unknowingly, they had moved from upper class to homelessness! Elisabeth and her husband moved into the Egge family's tiny cabin. The four adults and two children shared a space smaller than most living rooms in today's homes. There was room for a stove, a table, and two beds, divided by thin curtains. The children slept in the loft. It was nine months before they moved into a home of their own.

Store Per and his wife Malene followed a similarly difficult path. The settlement they were headed toward did not meet their expectations, and they moved on. At least they had the advantage of living with relatives for a time as they searched for a better place to settle. Harstad says,

"Store Per followed a common pattern of young men on the agricultural frontier; he 'climbed the agricultural ladder.' The first rung was farm laborer or hired man; second, farm operator (renter, share cropper, or some variant of tenant farmer); third, farm owner who produced primarily for his own family; and fourth, entrepreneurial farmer who owned many acres, engaged others, and produced primarily for the market."

It was five years before Per and Malene settled on land in the center of Iowa. Then they needed to build their log cabin. It was another year, before they purchased that land.

Norwegian immigrant Helga Estby came to America as a child. Then, with husband Ole, she moved from Michigan to Minnesota to Spokane Falls, WA. Their life was plagued with grasshoppers, fire, blizzards, and diphtheria and above all, unending poverty. The American dream eluded them; they remained lower class.

By 1896, the family was in severe financial straits; their farm was near foreclosure. Helga saw an ad in an Eastern newspaper promising a \$10,000 prize to any woman who would walk across America from Spokane to New York. She decided to do it. She planned to leave her husband and seven children and walk across the country with her oldest daughter. This put Helga totally outside the class of fellow Norwegian settlers in Washington. Her neighbors thought "no proper moral woman would do such a thing," said biographer Linda Hunt. Helga was trying to earn money, but she wasn't moving up; by acting outside the norms of conventional society she was moving even lower. Helga was willing to risk it to save her family. She had her eyes opened to the differences in America as she traveled west to east – on foot – without even a change of clothes. Hunt says,

“She saw firsthand the growing gap between the extremely wealthy families and the desperately destitute families. Visual reminders existed within . . . the elegant mansions and enormous ranches of the rich, and the squalid shacks and hovels of the dirt poor. Walking the rails, she knew ‘on the other side of the tracks’ often meant a literal dividing line in a town, keeping people of different social and economic classes apart as effectively as a moat around a medieval castle.”

Seven months and 18 days later, the Estby ladies made it to New York. The party offering the prize said they were late and would not pay. Before Helga made it back to Spokane, 13 months had elapsed. She found that two of the seven children she had left behind had died of diphtheria in her absence. Her Norwegian neighbors were even more hostile to her for discarding “the mantra of motherhood that insisted a mother belonged in the home.” The farm was foreclosed upon, and though the Estby family eventually recovered their working class status, no one ever mentioned Helga’s futile walk again.

Of these three Norwegians who emigrated to America, one came across in steerage, but became a landowner; one started out an upper-class professional but was content to change her status to blend with the people around her; and one failed in her attempt to earn money and prove that a woman was equal to a man.

Although it has always been true to a certain extent, money divides us perhaps more than race or gender in 21st century America. It’s the economic class that counts in this materialistic culture. Most of us like to think of ourselves as middle class. And many of us fit there depending on the criteria sociologists use to distinguish groups of Americans. Dennis Gilbert, in his book *The American Class Structure In an Age of Growing Inequality*, fits Americans into six classes according to profession, income and education.

Capitalist: 1%; top level executive; Ivy League education; some call this the super rich.
Upper middle class: 15%; highly educated; salaried; professional and middle management.
Lower middle class: 30%; semi-professional; craftsmen; some college.
Working class: 30%; clerical; blue collar; work is routine; high school education.
Working poor: 12%; service; low-rung clerical; financial insecurity; risk of poverty; some high school.
Underclass: 12%; limited or no part in the workforce; reliant on government transfers.

In reality, most of us do not fit exactly into any of these parameters: one may be highly educated, but work happily in a position he/she loves for a low wage. Another may have limited education, but through luck or skill become a millionaire. So where do we, as Americans and as Christians, belong?

In this country, the government has set the poverty level for a family of four at \$23,000 per year. It would be difficult for many of us to manage at that income level. But in his book, *The Hole in Our Gospel*, author Richard Stearns states that a family making \$25,000 per year ranks in the top 10% of incomes in the world. And anyone earning \$50,000 ranks in the top one percent of incomes worldwide. Suddenly, just by looking at things in a different perspective, most of us see that far from being middle class citizens, we are very wealthy indeed.

God has showered His blessings on us as Americans, yet disparities exist among us. Former Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice said recently, “It doesn’t matter where you come from. It matters where you are going.” As Christians, we know where we are going. We are to be first-class citizens of heaven because our Lord Jesus took on the form of a servant on earth. And because of His humiliation and death to redeem us, we are now commissioned to work for Him. I Peter 2:13a, 16 & 17 says,

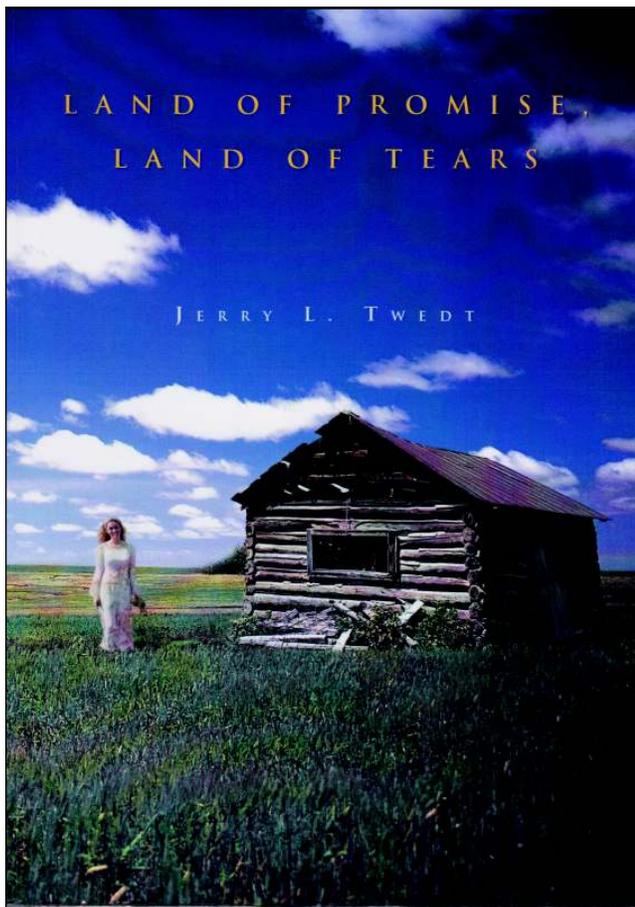
“Submit yourselves for the Lord’s sake to every authority instituted among men . . . For it is God’s will that by doing good you should silence the ignorant talk of foolish men. Live as free men, but do not use your freedom as a cover-up for evil; live as servants of God. Show proper respect to everyone: Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honor the king.”

Mark A. Jeske, author of *People’s Bible Commentary: General Epistles*, says of this passage, “Submission is one of the greatest Christian virtues.” But he also notes that because of our sinful pride and selfishness this subservience is hard for us to do. Jeske adds,

“We are free in Christ . . . But we are also servants. We have powerful obligations to God, to our families, to our fellow Christians, to our communities and country, and even to unbelievers. Yes, to unbelievers too.”

We willingly take on servant class because He did. And we know that one day when He brings us to Himself in heaven, there will be no class difference, no ranking by ethnicity, by gender, by education or by wealth – “for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).■

Information for the article on pages 6-8, "Class Division: Does it matter?" taken from *The Diary of Elisabeth Koren 1853-1855*, edited and translated by David T. Nelson; *Store Per*, by Peter Tjernagel Harstad, *Bold Spirit: Helga Estby's Forgotten Walk Across Victorian America*, by Linda Lawrence Hunt; "New Experiences on the Iowa Prairie: Else Elisabeth Koren," by Rebecca DeGarmeaux, printed in *Oak Leaves*, Volume 8, Issue 2, Summer, 2004; *The Hole in Our Gospel*, by Richard Stearns; *The People's Bible Commentary: General Epistles*, by Mark A. Jeske; *The American Class Structure: In an Age of Growing Inequality*, by Dennis Gilbert.; The Holy Bible NIV (1984). Online sources: www.titanicuniverse; and www.Wikipedia



**A Review of the book,
Land of Promise, Land of Tears
Reviewed by Mark O. Harstad**

Land of Promise, Land of Tears by Jerry L. Twedt. Published by Authorhouse, 2012. 451 pages. Paperback. Genre: historical fiction. Contents: Author's acknowledgments, 45 chapters, brief explanatory notes, and list of works consulted.

Historical fiction is a literary genre which tells a story which takes place in a real historical setting, and includes historical persons among its *dramatis personae*. The writer attempts to provide a window into the past through which the reader can experience what it was like to live at a particular time and place, and understand what people were thinking and doing in response to important trends and events of the time. The writer works within a tension between strict adherence to known historical facts and the artistic license deemed necessary to create an engaging narrative.

Author Jerry L. Twedt is the great-grandson of Scandinavian immigrants who settled on the prairies of central Iowa near Story City in the 1860s. He clearly has a passionate interest in the struggles of his ancestors to carve out a new life for themselves in America, and achieve the promise they believed would be theirs through hard work and perseverance. He has good reason to have a passion for the story, because it is an engaging and important story, one that encompasses the common history of many families who trace their history to the same times, places, and experiences.

Most of the narrative is presented in the standard, third-person-omniscient style of novel writing, but many of the 45 chapters conclude with first person reflections and flashbacks of several of the chief characters. The story takes place in the months between April and December of 1869. The book ends with the reflections of the chief female character nearly 50 years after the events of the story.

The chief characters in the story are Ole Branjord and his wife Helena, real people, great-grandparents of the author. They and their three children interact extensively with people of the agricultural community around Story City, Iowa, including the great-grandparents of this reviewer, Ole Andreas and Martha Karina Tjernagel. Many readers of *Oak Leaves* will also be familiar with another character who appears in several chapters from the beginning to the end of the book, Peder

Larson (Tjernagel), better known simply as Store Per (Big Pete).

The list of themes the author weaves into his narrative is extensive:

- the history of agriculture: the struggles connected with breaking the virgin sod and wresting a living from the rich prairie loam through back-breaking toil;
- natural disasters in the form of drought, prairie fires, and blizzards;
- the diseases which plagued the pioneers and their children, diphtheria and scarlet fever in particular, and the desperate remedies to which helpless people turned;
- the church controversies pitting the extreme, pietistic followers of Elling Eielsen against those who favored historic Lutheranism;
- pioneer virtues of neighborliness and hospitality;
- a Civil War veteran trying to cope with life-altering physical and mental scars of war;
- coping with mean-spirited, malicious, and dishonest people;
- the question of why God allows pain and suffering to come into the lives of virtuous people;
- and, a dark side of immigration history, the exploitation and abuse of the young girls who out of necessity took jobs as menials in the homes of the more wealthy.

In the brief explanatory notes at the end of the book, the author owns up to specific places where he has exercised his artistic license to take liberties with established historical facts. The most egregious example is that he has a widowed Peder (Store Per) Larson alive, well, and participating in the events of the community in 1869. The real Store Per died in February of 1863, and his wife outlived him by several decades.

But no account of life in the pioneer period around Story City, Iowa, fictional or otherwise, would dare to ignore such a colorful and storied figure as Store Per. The engaging tales involving Store Per, preserved in Peder G. Tjernagel's *The Follinglo Dog Book*, apparently presented a trove of rich material the author could not resist. Al-

most all of the known anecdotes about Store Per are woven into Twedt's narrative, but put into settings very different from those in the original tellings. This will be somewhat disconcerting to those who know and love the historic Store Per. It should also be mentioned that Twedt's Store Per is somewhat different from the character enshrined in Tjernagel family lore. He is strong, musical, kind, and playful, as was the case with the historic Store Per, but he is also somewhat feistier, and ready to use his strength in ways which the real Store Per may not have used it.

Two specific areas (and there are more) in which the author deserves high marks of approval for his portrayals include his descriptions of the details of agriculture in the pioneer period, and his presentation of the controversies in the area of religion. Since the story encompasses the full agricultural cycle from planting to harvest, we get detailed, accurate descriptions of every step of the process. His portrayal of the pietistic and schismatic followers of Elling Eielsen fits well with what the historical record reveals about them. The words which he puts into the mouth of Pastor Nils Amlund in refutation of the "Ellingians" also fit well with the known history. When the Ellingians attacked, among other things, the authority of the Lutheran clergy to pronounce the forgiveness of sins, Twedt has Pastor Amlund responding with what amounts to a defense of the theology of the Means of Grace in general, and the scriptural basis for absolution in particular. This is what one would have expected of a faithful Norwegian Synod pastor.

The portrayals of the interaction of the members of the Branjord family are engaging and charming. Likewise most of the depictions of how the Branjords related to their fellow pioneers. Much of the story has the ambience of episodes from *Little House on the Prairie* about it. One is not surprised to discover that the author was in fact a screen and TV writer, a TV producer-director, and a playwright, and that his work has received recognition from the National Association of Television Program Executives. The dialog he creates is often captivating.

One character this reviewer struggled to regard as a believable, flesh and blood human being was the villainess, Hanna Signaldahl. Could such unmitigated villainy really have existed among the pioneers? Hanna is the Wicked Witch of the Prairie and the Cruella de Vil of Story County. But have we stepped over a line here that separates believable characterization from over-the-top caricature?

Land of Promise, Land of Tears takes on the problem of evil, if not at a philosophical level, at least at the level of popular religion. The characters wrestle with the question of why God permits unspeakable tragedy to come into the lives of hard-working, honest, virtuous people. The response of some of them in the face of tragedy is to echo the shriek so plainly audible in the 3rd chapter of the Book of Job.

May the day perish on which I was born, . . .
May that day be darkness;
May God above not seek it,
Nor the light shine upon it.
May darkness and the shadow of death claim it.

But Twedt takes some of his characters beyond that level to the point where they espouse the counsel of Job's wife, who told her suffering husband, "Curse God and die!" He even has Store Per shaking his fist at heaven. Some of their words serve to trivialize prayer and religious faith in general. What is missing here is that neither Pastor Amlund, nor any other character for that matter, is allowed to deliver a clear message of redemption.

The pioneer pastors and lay people knew their theology well enough to acknowledge that life in a fallen world is sometimes unbearably harsh. It is filled with tragedy, pain, and suffering that causes people to wonder about the goodness and justice of God. The faithful will always cry out in their anguish, "Why, O Lord?" and "How long, O Lord?" But the gift of faith also enables them to say with Job, "I know that my Redeemer lives."

At some appropriate time those pioneer families would have gathered around the Branjords at the

St. Petri Church, embraced them physically and figuratively, and lifted up their voices employing the words of Norwegian hymn writer Hans Adolph Brorson (1694-1764), which, in all likelihood, they knew by heart, and sang from the heart:

Death doth pursue me all the way,
Nowhere I rest securely.
He comes by night, he comes by day,
And takes his prey most surely.

But also this:

I walk with Jesus all the way;
His guidance never fails me.
Within His wounds I find a stay
When Satan's powers assail me.

The poetry of H. A. Brorson was simply part of the fabric of the culture in which the Norwegian pioneers lived, moved, and had their being. It is simply the case in any culture that in times of grief and sorrow people will turn to the spiritual wisdom enshrined in their poetic texts.

It may also have been the case that they would have sung the words of another Norwegian hymn writer, Magnus B. Landstad (1802-1880), their contemporary:

I know of a sleep in Jesus' name,
A rest from all toil and sorrow;
Earth holds in her arms my weary frame
And shelters it till the morrow.
My soul is at home with God in heaven;
Her sorrows are past and over.

This reviewer spent a quiet two days in a hotel digesting *Land of Promise, Land of Tears*, while his wife attended a music teachers' conference. It was a captivating experience. Other people whose lives connect with this aspect of immigration history, will, no doubt, have a similar experience.

Land of Promise, Land of Tears represents Twedt's third venture into the writing of books. It is available through Amazon.com. Two previous works were published by Iowa State University Press. ■

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