



Oak Leaves

Newsletter of the ELS Historical Society

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Issue 1

The Life and Times of Pioneer Pastor Guttorm Nesseth

By Valborg Nesseth (daughter of Pastor Nesseth)

Editors' note: Pastor Nesseth was one of the thirteen pastors who met at Lime Creek in 1918.

Not often is a person's obituary referred to at the beginning of the biography of his life. However, that is what we will do as we trace the life of Pastor G. P. Nesseth.

In the week of October 30, 1937, the publication "The Thirteen Towns" contained the following article "Final Rites for Pioneer Pastor". It read: "Rev. Nesseth was well known and a friend to all. He was respected as much by those who were not in agreement with him, as he was loved by those who were his friends."

Now we will trace him through his life's journey.

The parents of Guttorm Nesseth were Peder and Ingeborg Nustad Nesseth. They came to America from Meraker, Norway in 1853. They settled first in Wanamingo Township, Minnesota and a year later bought a farm in Mineola Township, near Zumbrota, where they lived for the rest of their lives

Seven children were born to Peder and Ingeborg, but only three children grew to maturity, namely Nels, Marie, and Guttorm. Guttorm was born August 26, 1867. He was educated at Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, and graduated in 1891. He studied theology at Luther Seminary in Robbinsdale, Minnesota, graduating in 1894, and was ordained that

same year to be pastor in the Norwegian Lutheran Synod.

Upon graduating, he was called to serve as pastor in Duluth, Superior and Cloquet.



1899

A year later the Synod sent him a call as a home missionary to come to an area which was 200 miles west of Duluth, reaching from Bemidji and westward thirty or more miles.

This was largely undeveloped territory. Only a few decades earlier it had been visited by trappers, traders, and explorers from Canada.

A rail line had been laid reaching west from Duluth through also undeveloped land to Walker, Minnesota. Anyone wishing to travel west from Walker either walked or resorted to horse and buggy.

Before leaving for his new assignment, Pastor Nesseth returned to his home in Zumbrota to bid his parents farewell. Before leaving his home he wrote the following lines in one of the small visitation books he carried: "Home, Sweet, Home. Be it ever so humble, there is no place like home. Goodbye my home." And indeed this new home would be his home for the remainder of his life

Rail connections had been developed between Minneapolis and Fosston, which was on the edge of the Red River Valley.

Pastor Nesseth traveled by train to Fosston, bringing his books and his few earthly belongings.

Pastors J. O. Saeter, J. R. Vaaler, and L. J. Jerdee were organizing congregations but needed help with the ever-increasing numbers of families coming into the area. These pastors were older men and must have been grateful to have an earnest young man join their ranks. They would soon be well occupied meeting the spiritual needs of the diverse groups of people literally streaming into the area. Families were seeking new free homes, others were seeking labor, and developers were relocating to avail themselves of what this virgin land could offer.

The Red Lake Indian Reservation would be open for settlement only a year after Pastor Nesseth arrived in 1895. He decided he too would file a claim and make a home in this new area so that he could be in the midst of the people. To that end he lived in a type of hostel only 6 miles from the reservation. In this hostel were several other men also waiting for the reservation to open. Now he could work with the groups that had been partially organized, while waiting for a place to settle. The time was near at hand when this would happen.

It was a bright, sunny morning at about a quarter to nine on May 15, 1896, that a group of young men in their early twenties were lined up like tin soldiers on the Red Lake Reservation line. They were anxiously awaiting the signal to enter and go to their land claim.

There must have been several points of entry. The men who were in Pastor Nesseth's group would claim land adjacent to one another.

At nine o'clock the pistol shots were heard and the waiting groups scurried off.

It had been a rainy spring and at some of the points of entry the settlers encountered swollen streams of water, and if they were bringing cows and horses, had some difficulty getting them through safely.

Pastor Nesseth's group, it seems, did not have that problem, since his group's point of entry was closer to their various claims.

The quarter section Pastor Nesseth claimed is described in the book entitled "History of Clearwater County—Headwaters of the Mississippi". It was a scenic, interesting piece of land. The northern part consisted of hills and valleys with the Lost River wending its way through. This formed the pasture land. The southern part was for hay and cropland. Pastor Nesseth now became a pioneer settler. We assume that he returned to the hostel the evening of May 15, where he had been living after arriving in Fosston.

We have no record of who helped or how the two-room house with a cozy loft came into being. There also had to be a stable to house the team of horses, which he either had at this time or later acquired.

According to his record books, which are still in existence, he was assigned places to conduct services in homes where the Fosston pastors had already visited—where Pastor Nesseth had made contacts. These records also show that he met for services in Bemidji, which was some 25 miles to travel; also names like Moose Creek and Walker Brook are listed where services were held.

Of the several groups Pastor Nesseth was meeting with, the group that developed to form the Gran Congregation was the first to organize and build a church. This took place in 1897. Pastor Nesseth served this congregation until his death. The Gran Church is a log building and is now listed on the National Registry.

In the Lengby area there was another group preparing to form a congregation. Pastors Ylvisaker, Jerdee and Vaaler had guided them until Pastor Nesseth's arrival. In 1898 they had definite plans to build a church and chose a site. Pastor Nesseth had learned of a tract of land near Pine Lake where trees for lumber were for sale. The Ladies' Aid provided him with \$96. He took a train to Crook-

ston and bought the pine trees on 40 acres of land from the State.

The cutting of the trees began. The men worked in crews, each crew working two weeks, then being replaced by a second crew working another two weeks. They slept in tents in twenty-degree-below weather. The men who could not go paid to have the logs skidded into the sawmill and getting the lumber piled.

In 1901, the building of the church began. By that time Ole J. Lomen had moved from Bode, Iowa to Lengby. He brought a carpenter with him. With the help of nearly all the members of the congregation the church was built. A. J. Bye was also a carpenter and he gave much time and valuable advice to the other workers. They chose the name St. Paul's Lutheran Church. Pastor Nesseth served them until the sad date of 1918.

A third group of settlers had been attempting since 1888 to organize a congregation under the name St. Petri. Due to families moving in and out of the community no real progress was made until February 23, 1892, when the congregation was formally organized. In 1895 the church was built. In 1895 Pastor Nesseth was installed. He continued to serve them until 1918.

The turn of the century was drawing near. Three congregations had been organized and churches built: Gran, St. Paul, and St. Petri.

Another change was about to take place in Pastor Nesseth's life. He had become engaged to Bertha Moen, who was a member of Pastor J. R. Vaaler's parish. They were united in holy wedlock in September 1899 at the Mineola Church in rural Goodhue County.

Pastor Nesseth now had chosen a helpmate who was a courageous, capable, gifted young woman. Creating a home in a wilderness setting was a challenge, but Bertha Nesseth, with a firm faith and a prayer was equal to the task. She not only completed her indoor work, but also developed bee keeping, gardening, and worked with cows, giving them loving care.

Four children were born to this union. The oldest was Noble, born in January 1902; Inge, born on July 4, 1906; Palma, July 4, 1908; and Valborg, July 6, 1910.

Now that Pastor Nesseth was settled in his new home so also were the group of men that had entered in with him on May 15, 1895, when the reservation opened for settlement. More settlers came month after month. In his pocket calendar, we find meetings were held Sunday January 9, 1898 under the entry Red Lake Reservation, indicating the site of the meeting. Worship services were also held in the Twite School House.

At a meeting held in 1899 the group met to adopt the name "Vestre Lost River Menighed"



[*Western Lost River Congregation*]. Later they would change the name to Concordia, when they learned that the first name they had chosen was already in use. The word Concord, embodied in Concordia, is derived from the Latin and sets the tone of "being in the same

mind". Students of theology must know the "Book of Concord" which contains the precious confessions which they must know and adhere to. Pastor Nesseth was also baptizing and giving confirmation instruction privately.

In 1900 they met to decide to vote to become members of the Norwegian Lutheran Church of America. They also requested the mission board to extend a call to Pastor Nesseth to become their pastor. At this same meeting they voted to have every male member 21 years of age furnish 1000 board feet of lumber for the church that was soon to be built. In 1903 the church was built, and Pastor Nesseth was installed. Four churches had now

been built. Concordia was a fitting name for this body of Christians. Concordia conveys the meaning of harmony and agreement, which has characterized the attitude of the members as they have worked together to develop and maintain a Christian congregation.

From this small rural congregation has come one pastor, Alf Merseth; one professor, Norman Holte, who also has served as Bethany College President; one teacher who also became a pastor-missionary's wife, Ione Sundbom Lillegaard; and now another former son of the congregation is preparing for the ministry, John Merseth. Three of these named are either children or grandchildren of one of the charter members of the congregation, namely Bernhard Merseth. We record this in gratitude to God. Mr. Merseth came to America at the age of 12 with his widowed mother and four siblings.

Late in the 19th century, a fifth group of settlers living northeast of Fosston had organized a congregation to which they assigned the name Cross Lake, due to its location by a lake bearing the name. The first pastor to serve them was Pastor Nicolai Heierman.

In 1912 the congregation decided to move the church to a new location and to improve the structure of the building

In 1913 they issued a call to Pastor Nesseth to serve them. The members of this group were most likely working in agriculture and few, if any, were wealthy. Improving the church property had to be done in small amounts.

In this particular congregation the custom had developed that the pastor was elected to serve a one-year term. At the end of the term his call might be terminated. The records indicate that money to pay expenses was raised by cash or wood. People unable to donate cash would give cord wood to be sold.

Six pastors had preceded Pastor Nesseth since 1895. The length of their years of service ranged from three to ten years. Quoting

from their records, Pastor Nesseth's was the longest stay of all the pastors, lasting 23 years.

Pastor Nesseth served Cross Lake until the time of his death. His last sermon was delivered at Cross Lake in August 1937.

Although Pastor Nesseth had faced many challenging situations in seeking to settle and organize congregations in this new area the most difficult period of his life would develop in the years 1915 to 1918 when trouble was brewing within the Synod.

The various Protestant church organizations in the USA were seeking to unite. In order to unite there had to be unity in doctrine. The issues to be discussed related to the differing views held by the various groups in reference to sinful man's relation to a Holy God. At issue were the doctrines of "election", "predestination" and "conversion".

These fledgling congregations were hardly ready or prepared to make decisions on these serious matters.

When meetings were held and Pastor Nesseth presented his view, based on the Bible, that it would be wrong to unite since there was not unity in faith and Biblical interpretation, the congregations of Gran, Cross Lake, and Concordia unanimously agreed with his point of view and firmly supported him.

In the St. Petri congregation some of the members, presuming themselves to be wise in considering these serious issues, voted to unite. The members wishing not to unite were outvoted, while many members abstained. The members not in favor of false unity shifted their membership to the Cross Lake congregation so they were still members of Pastor Nesseth's groups.

When the meeting was held at St. Paul's in Lengby, President Stub requested that Pastor Thoen, the spokesperson he had met the day before at St. Petri, not be allowed to speak. Pastor Thoen was a gifted speaker, and most capable in being able to reach his audience. Pastor Thoen sat back and listened while

President Stub and Pastor Nesseth presented their viewpoints.

In the St. Paul congregation the membership consisted of very well informed people and students of the Bible. There were also liberal-minded people who found it appealing to hold the view that one could participate in one's own conversion. And that "election" is or takes place in view of faith. After listening to the two speakers, to no avail, the liberal-minded outvoted the faithful.

However, the faithful were undaunted. In that group was O. J. Lomen, a new settler in Lengby. He had been a long time member of the synod from Bode, Iowa. This gentleman had four sons and three daughters. They would also have a Bible-centered point of view. Another member, Knute Helle, had also studied at a Lutheran college and would support Pastor Nesseth's Biblical stand. O. J. Lomen stated, "We will build a new church," and his group proceeded to donate land and timber to that end. The church was given the name Immanuel. This congregation was served by Pastor Nesseth until his death in 1937.

In 1924 Pastor Nesseth was yet to assume one more responsibility. A group of families from the Seljord Lutheran Church (now ELCA) chose to leave that congregation and requested that Pastor Nesseth would also serve them. They chose the name Clearwater Lutheran Church. Since there was a dearth of pastors in the Synod, Pastor Nesseth accepted the call. He requested that they in turn provide him with transportation. Transportation rarely materialized. He also served this congregation until his death.

Transportation had been a major problem for the pastor during his ministry. From the beginning, he traveled by horse and buggy, and sleigh in the winter. When cars were introduced into the area the noise of the motor made a problem for the pastor's high-spirited ponies. The ponies fared better if the cars were passing them rather than meeting them.

Pastor Nesseth bought a vehicle (Ford) in 1918. He was now 51 years old and was not comfortable cranking the car. His young son, Noble, could soon drive the car and would take him to church. Before 1920 he had sold the first vehicle and then bought a small Overland. This was equipped with a self-starter. This the pastor could drive, but did so infrequently. He liked to walk and did so when there was not a ride available.

We sometimes read, "Pastor Nesseth was also a farmer." Simply put, he tilled the ground out of necessity, in consideration of the young settlers who were seeking to establish a home at the beginning of the century. In speaking of this situation, he would often refer to the apostles and say they were tent makers. Pastor Nesseth never verbally grumbled or complained, or envied.

Pastor Nesseth and his wife were very grateful to the young men who helped break up the land and prepare it for cultivation. Trees had needed to be cut, stumps and rocks dynamited, and fences built.

In reminiscing, the Pastor's wife would remember names such as Christian Peterson, Hans Iverson, and Andrew Anderson, who would also read to or entertain the children when the day's work was done.

Between 1900 and 1910 the house was enlarged and more sleeping space was available for visitors

Two circuit meetings were hosted at the Concordia Church and each time at least four pastors were overnight guests in the Pastor's home. By 1932 three of the Nesseth children were married. At various times one or the other of these families came to stay at home for short periods while they were between jobs. While they were there, Pastor Nesseth could relax and let a younger person assume responsibility for the land. During one of those periods Pastor Nesseth turned suddenly ill and for a few weeks was absent from the pulpit. He observed his 70th birthday in August 1937. He delivered his last sermon on a Sunday in August, dwelling on the words,

“Foxes have holes and the birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man hath not a place to lay His head.” Pastor Nesseth passed away Sunday morning, October 17, 1937, about the time he would leave for church.

The following article appeared in the *Lutheran Sentinel*, November 17, 1937, written by Henry Ingebritson, President of the ELS:

Obituary

Rev. G. P. Nesseth

Rev. Guttorm P. Nesseth was born August 26, 1867 in Goodhue County, Minnesota. His parents were Peder and Ingeborg Nesseth, emigrants from Stordalen, Norway, in 1853.

The deceased was educated at Luther College, Decorah, Iowa, and at Luther Seminary at Robbinsdale, Minn., graduating in 1894. This same year he was ordained on a call from congregations in Duluth, Superior and Cloquet, Minnesota.

In 1895 he was called to a large mission field in Beltrami County. The following year a part of the Red Lake Indian Reservation, including also a part of Beltrami County, was thrown open for homesteading. This naturally brought in many new settlers to Rev. Nesseth's field.

Rev. Nesseth was a pioneer pastor. He has helped to organize many congregations in northern Minnesota. He has served the following congregations: St. Petri, Gran Lutheran, St. Paul's at Lengby, Concordia, Immanuel Lutheran, Cross Lake, and Clearwater congregations.

The mission field offered no conveniences and comforts. He built his own house and prepared his own fuel from the virgin timber. He was promised \$35.00 per month from the mission treasury, but it was constantly reported empty; so the pioneer pastor had to shift for himself.

There were no highways—only trails and paths through the woods. So accustomed was the pioneer pastor to walking, that he kept it up until the very last.

In September, this year, it became clear that his strength was waning. After an illness of only a few weeks, death came Sunday, October 17 to remove the servant from the Church Militant to the Church Glorious.

In the year 1899 Rev. Nesseth was united in holy wedlock to Bertha Moen of Polk County. This union was blessed with four children: Noble of Hill City, Minn.; Mrs. Thomas Jackson of Fosston, Minn.; Mrs. Everett Angstman and Valborg, at home

He will be missed greatly, not only by the members of the family, but also by the many who have been blessed by his faithful service during his 42 years in office.

At the funeral Friday, October 22, the undersigned was in charge. The sermon was based on Matthew 25:34. Rev. J. Runholt spoke at the home, basing his remarks on I John 4:9; Rev. C. F. Knauft of Fosston preached a sermon in English based on Luke 2:29-32; Rev. B. W. Teigen spoke briefly on I Cor. 15:10; a quartet sang “Now Rest Beneath Night's Shadows”, and brother pastors from the Missouri Synod and Norwegian Synod acted as pallbearers.

The earthly remains were laid to rest in the Concordia Cemetery, from whence they will arise, as we firmly believe, to eternal glory on the day of resurrection.

H. Ingebritson.

Valborg Nesseth served as a Christian Day School teacher for 42 years in Milwaukee and Beaver Dam, Wisconsin, and Saint Paul, Minnesota. Today she is a member of Our Savior's, rural Bagley, Minnesota.



Send us your ideas, articles, and suggestions for **Oak Leaves**. We welcome information and articles on church anniversaries, and articles of Synodical and local significance.

Remember the 150th Anniversary of the Norwegian Synod in 2003.

In the next issue: Bethany Lutheran College 75th Anniversary.

“Pilgrimage” to Lime Creek

Adapted from Secretary’s minutes by Amanda Madson

The ELS Historical Society held its sixth annual meeting on June 15, 2002, at the historic Lime Creek Lutheran Church near Lake Mills, Iowa, with ninety-two registered in attendance.

Pastor Karl Hermanson led the opening service. Ruth Gullixson served as organist. Pastor Hermanson read a brief history of the congregation, prepared by Rev. Alf Merseth (who was hospitalized after a heart attack). The first service was conducted in 1858. The church building was dedicated in 1888. In 1895 the Young People’s Society donated a kerosene chandelier which still hangs above the aisle. In June 1918, 13 pastors with faithful laymen met here and voted to organize what came to be known as the Little Norwegian Synod (now the ELS). In 1927 the synod meeting delegates at Lime Creek voted to purchase Bethany Lutheran College.



Interior of the Lime Creek Church

Pastor Craig Ferkenstad spoke on “*Art and Architecture*,” describing the simple beauty of the Lime Creek Church. Some of the distinctly Norwegian aspects are: wood frame, white-painted altar with gold trim, Gothic style, raised pulpit with canopy, no lectern, a kneeler and semi-circular communion rail in front of the altar. An unsigned painting of the crucifixion is the focal point of the altar.

Professor Mark Harstad, grandson of founding president Bjug Harstad, presented a historical review: “*The 1918 Founding Convention of the Norwegian Synod at Lime*

Creek,” with an outline of a brief chronology of events leading up to 1918. He quoted an announcement in the April 1918 issue of *Luthersk Tidende* concerning a meeting at Lime Creek of those who desired to “*continue in the old doctrine and practice of the Norwegian Synod*.” He included a list of those in attendance: Norwegian Synod pastors, about 200 lay people, and visiting Missouri Synod pastors. Pastor Bjug Harstad of Tacoma, Washington, was elected for two 2-year terms as president of the reorganized Synod. Professor Harstad wrote in his biography of Bjug:

He retired at age 80. He expressed no regrets over his refusal to participate in the Norwegian Lutheran merger. A friend applied these words to him from the writings of Alfred Lord Tennyson: “He never sold the truth to serve the hour, Nor paltered with Eternal God for power.”

After lunch many drove or rode the bus 1 1/4 miles north to the Minnesota border where a tent had been erected for the business meetings in 1918. Iowa’s laws during the First World War forbade official meetings in a foreign language.



Brian Brudvig, Prof. Mark Harstad, Camilla Dashcund, Prof. Erling Teigen, Prof. Juul Madson, Prof. John Moldstad Jr., Peter Harstad, Pres. George Orvick, Nathan Harstad, Rev. Greg Sahlstrom, Prof. Mark DeGarmeaux, Albin Levorson, Kurt Huttzell, and Beret Ouren (beneath the sign).

In the afternoon we heard reminiscences by descendants of pastors and lay people who participated in the 1918 convention, including Rev. Paul Anderson, Rev. Walther Gullixson, and Valborg Nesseth.

The resonant Lime Creek church bell was rung before a closing Hymn Sing led by Chaplain Mark DeGarmeaux.



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

Mange Tusen Takk
(Many Thousand Thanks)
to the Lime Creek
Congregation
rural Lake Mills, Iowa

for hosting the annual meeting of the
ELS Historical Society
June 15, 2002

Have you renewed your membership
to the **ELS Historical Society** yet?

Name: _____

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Send completed form and check (see box below right
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MEMBERSHIP

All membership
renewals are due **June 1**

Voting Membership:

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\$5/year: student