

The Lehr Tabernacle

By Carolyn Schott

(Reprinted by permission from the Bessarabian Newsletter)

The Lehr Tabernacle claims a special place in the hearts of those who participated in the annual summer camp meetings held there. The services in German were a reminder of the faith that had carried them from the Black Sea to the Dakota prairies. The time of fellowship and community was important for those often isolated by hard work or long winters on farms far distant from each other. My mother is one of those with special memories of "the Tabernacle" which inspired me to write this article.

The Lehr Tabernacle is located on the outskirts of Lehr, North Dakota, a town founded in 1898 by German-Russian families. Lehr prides itself on the distinction of being the "smallest town in the U.S. located in two counties" (McIntosh and Logan).

The History of the Denomination

The Tabernacle was built by members of the German Evangelical Church. This denomination was founded by Jacob Albright, a Pennsylvania farmer of German heritage. Wanting to minister to his German-speaking neighbors and friends, Albright left his own Methodist church (which opposed teaching in any language other than English) in 1796, gave up his farm, and started his own ministry.

Initially Albright tried to have his ministry recognized by the Methodist church. But with the expectation that the need for German-speaking churches would be short-lived as these immigrants assimilated into American life and learned English, Methodist Bishop Asbury refused this request.

Instead of dying out, however, the need for German-speaking congregations grew as migration of German immigrants to the U.S. increased – over 6 million between 1820 – 1952. From 1880 – 1920, about 300,000 of those were our

own German-Russians. With the large number of German speakers settling in the Dakotas, it was inevitable that a church ministering to German speakers would expand there. The Reverend A.C. Schmidt was the first minister of the Evangelical church to come to the Dakota Territory in 1871, starting regular preaching services in private homes in the Odessa and Big Stone City areas in what is now South Dakota. From there the church spread throughout the German-Russian population in the Dakotas.

The German name of the church (die Evangelische Kirche) is also the name used in Germany and Russia to designate the Lutheran Church. Also, the practices of child baptism and confirmation, as well as the types of prayer meetings and services held, were similar to the Lutheran churches in Russia. For our Lutheran ancestors coming from Russia, this church was a natural home for them.

However, the German Evangelical Church is not associated with the Lutheran denomination. After being an independent denomination since 1796, the German Evangelical Church merged with the United Brethren Church in 1946, and then with the Methodist Church in 1968. Although today you won't find German Evangelical Churches in the U.S., it is one of the "ancestors" that formed today's Methodist Church.

The Building of the Lehr Tabernacle

The idea of holding camp meetings in the area started sometime after 1915, with a meeting being tried in Jamestown about 1920. The first camp meeting in Lehr occurred in 1921 and was held next to the old Evangelical church in town.

"The speaker's platform was built out of packs of shingles. There were three services a day. The morning and evening preaching

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services were done by the Evangelist and the afternoon service was conducted by local pastors." (John Erbele, as written by Robert Erbele)

In 1921, the Evangelical churches of Lehr, Streeter, Wishek, Linton, Napoleon, Kulm, and Ashley formed a German Camp Meeting association. The Lehr Tabernacle was built in 1922, and old-fashioned evangelistic tent meetings were held each year for a week or longer. These meetings drew people from Evangelical churches all over North and South Dakota – and were a high point of each summer as friends and families gathered together for worship.

Although supported by all churches of the German Camp Meeting Association, the Tabernacle was especially nurtured by the five churches of the Lehr Circuit. Most of these were country churches that eventually closed as roads improved, allowing people to come into the town of Lehr for services. The Lehr Circuit consisted of:

Zion Church – Five miles south of Lehr, original pastor was Reverend Heinrich Loewen. Founding families included Wittmeier, Miller, Georg, Schilling, Nagel, Ruff, Seefried.

Emmanuel Church – Twelve miles north of Lehr in the Koenig settlement, original pastor was Reverend Philip Laux. Charter families were: Bogner, Sukut, Enzminger, Leischner, Fercho. Other founding families were: Katz, Erbele, Krueger, Fercho, Bogner, Enzminger, Weisz, Christmann, Fandrigh, Elhardt.

Friedens Church – In Lehr, original pastor was Reverend Robert E. Strutz. Charter families were: Lachenmeier, Lehr, Ziegenhagel, Mack, Nagel. Other founding families were: Derheim, Kranzler, Kramer, Klein, Aman, Bittner, Becker, Sukut, Bogner, Hoff, Nies, Riech, Mayer.

Ebenezer Church – Ten miles northwest of Lehr, original pastor was Reverend E.C. Oeder. Founding families were: Koeplin, Scherbenske, Klein, Miller,

Lehr Campmeeting **MEMORIES**



Tabernacle in 1922 after its completion.

(Photo from the files of R.F. and Bertha Ruff)

Used with permission, Prairie Bible Camp Board

Kautz, Wagner, Gabel, Weixel, Tarnosky, Finck, Hellmuth, Bauer, Baltzer.

Tabor Church – Twelve miles northeast of Lehr, original pastor was Reverend E.C. Oeder. Founding families were: Ruff, Buchholz, Bender, Krueger, Ehlhardt, Koenig, Grabau, Fercho, Fotte, Kosanke.

The land for the Tabernacle was provided by Jacob Nagel from his tree claim (similar to a homestead claim) providing a wonderful wooded piece of land for this structure. The construction was done primarily by local German-Russian farmers from the towns in the Camp Association, with Phillip Miller as construction boss, and some of the workers including J. J. Scherbenske, William Koepplin, G.G. Scherbenske Jr., and Martin Erbele. Reverend A.H. Ermel of Wishek served as the architect with plans that were thought to have originated in Germany. The women of the churches also contributed by providing noon meals and two lunches per day for the workers. Each construction day began and ended with prayer for this work.

The Tabernacle is octagonal. Originally it had dirt floors covered in straw and provided bench seating for about 1500 with just one center aisle. Some accounts also mention sitting on straw bales covered in blankets. About the fourth year, the Memorial Board was started. Later a cement floor was laid and pews from local churches installed. Seating was expanded to fit 2500 people.

The Tabernacle was considered "modern" from its start, built with electric lights generated by a gas motor (set far enough away from the building so services wouldn't be disrupted). Initially the back of the Tabernacle included four small bedrooms for visiting pastors.

The grounds included a kitchen – only a tent at first, but later a real kitchen building was constructed, although the dining hall remained in a tent. Over time, the campground buildings continued to expand. Dormitories were built, and in

the late 1960's the camp was connected to the Lehr city water system making showers and rest rooms available. The kitchen and dining room were remodeled.

The Camp Meetings

The camp meetings were huge events – both spiritually and socially – that were anticipated and prepared for with great excitement throughout the area.

"We looked forward to Lehr Tabernacle meetings as much as we looked forward to Christmas! Campmeeting was a major highlight of our entire year. For two weeks in June, work on the farm centered around the meetings...the cows were milked early, meals had to be planned so that supper was not late and we had plenty of time to clean up and drive the 13 miles to Lehr." (daughter of Hulda & Albert Kosanke)

"What I remember was that before the special meetings started Mom would say we have to get the garden weeded and the hoeing done before Tabernacle starts." (Idella Wilson)

There was much work to do to get the Tabernacle ready as well. Several days before the camp meeting would start on Sunday, men from all the supporting churches – Lehr, Kulm, Wishek, Ashley, Napoleon Linton, Streeter, Medina, Fredonia, Gackle, Tappen, and even as far away as Hebron, South Dakota, came with tools in hand for the "Tabernacle Arbeitstag" (Tabernacle Workday). They cut the tall grass and weeds around the buildings and trees. The outside "Beckhouses" (outhouses) were repaired, the kitchen scrubbed, tables and benches set up in the dining room, fresh straw laid over the dirt floors, the wooden benches repaired, the well cleaned, the water pump greased, the pulpit polished, and the hymnbooks dusted. The road to the

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Tabernacle was re-graveled, light bulbs changed, the loudspeaker system set up.

"What I remember most...was how everyone seemed to work with a glad heart. There were no disputes, arguments or bad words. Then, suddenly, women arrived with Kuchen and coffee for the 10:00 a.m. lunch....Then the men and women sat on long benches, eating, laughing, rejoicing...before they all returned to their assigned tasks, they bowed their heads for a time of prayer. They all prayed out loud at the same time....I had never heard nor seen anything like it before. Then they went back to work." (Arnold Marzolf)

In the first years, the meetings started on Wednesday and went for ten days through to the next Sunday. Many people "came in wagons or buggies...The horses were kept on the south end of the campgrounds – at least 25-30 teams." (John Erbele, as written by Robert Erbele)

By the 1940's the camp meeting had extended to last:

"...two full weeks and three Sundays. Most people came to the Camp daily, but a good many folks

stayed overnight at the Camp during those 15 days. They lived in tents and small, wooden shacks hauled in (which really looked like ice-fishing huts)." (Arnold Marzolf)

"My Dad built a tent in the back of his 1929 truck and that is where my folks camped in part of the time. My Dad would attend the services sometimes by himself – because my mother would have to stay and tend to the chores with the family." (Alma Reich)

The daily program included a combination of Bible studies, evangelistic services, and fellowship. Bible studies were held twice daily (at 10:00 and 2:00) each day except Sundays for an hour and a half for about 250 people. For the first half hour of the Bible study, the Conference Superintendent would teach on the theme for that day, and then the time was open to discussion by all present.

The evening services would begin at 7:00, with at least 1500 people participating. It would include at least an hour of singing (those old German hymns!) led by the local preacher before the Conference Superintendent called the meeting to order. The service would include a mixture of Scripture readings (by pastors present from various denominations), prayer, and more hymn singing. About a half hour was allowed for people's testimonies (talking about how God had worked in their lives), and then:

"...the Evangelist came to the Pulpit. In those days when there were no T.V.s and few radios (and fewer movie houses), the Evangelist could preach for at least an hour. At the close of his message everyone knelt down on



*Tabernacle speakers' platform and Memorial Board
Photo by Carolyn Schott, 1998*

the straw, and they all prayed out loud at the same time. (This was confusing to me until I realized that God is supposed to be able to hear millions of prayers at the same time)" (Arnold Marzolf)

After the prayer time, there was an "altar call" for people to come forward to dedicate (or re-dedicate) their lives to Christ. The services ended around 10:00 p.m. with a hymn and a prayer.

Sunday services and Sunday school classes were also held with local churches providing choirs and other music ensembles for the services. Sundays included a morning worship service, an afternoon worship service (including special requests for memorials and offerings for missions), and then another evangelistic service in the evening. On Sundays, the Tabernacle was filled to capacity for the worship services, and sometimes there were as many people standing outside listening as there were people inside and seated.

"I remember how the people would gather – there would be thousands – they needed the police to help park the cars and direct the traffic...on Sundays." (Alma Reich)

All services and classes were held in German, although in the early 1940's, Reverend Arnold Marzolf initiated an English devotional service, primarily for youth since they were the ones that were most comfortable using English.

The fellowship time was another important part of camp meetings. People came early to visit with each other, extended families gathered together for meals. With the great distances between farms, poor roads, hard farm work in summer and harsh weather in winter, an opportunity to see friends and family gathered together was not to be missed. This may even have been reminiscent of life back in Bessarabia where people had lived together in community in the village, rather than being dispersed on farms

throughout the prairies.

The author's mother speaks often of "vespers services" where the young people would gather on a hillside outside of the campgrounds and sing songs by guitar. And of course, some young people snuck away from the services to be with their friends, knowing their families wouldn't miss them with all the people!

"Also on Sundays we would pack a picnic lunch and get together with some other friends and eat together. There were people everywhere having their lunch. People spread blankets on the hillside of the prairie and then the food was displayed. I remember the delicious fryers (chicken) that were raised on the farm and Mom and other ladies would bring for our noon lunch. Plus kuchen and other goodies." (Idella Wilson)

The Evangelist

"The Evangelist" was a key part of the camp meetings. He was the primary speaker at the daily evangelistic services. This speaker always came from outside the local area. Sometimes it was the Bishop of the conference from Minneapolis, sometimes the president or faculty members from the Evangelical seminary in Naperville, Illinois. Bishop Praetorious was the speaker on several occasions. In addition, evangelists sometimes came from all over the U.S. – Texas, Kentucky, California, Mississippi, Washington...and even from Canada.

Memories

Those who attended the Lehr camp meetings seem to have universally fond memories about it.

"So many people came that it filled up the Tabernacle and people were also standing along the outside listening to the Word preached with such moving spirit that it made you want to seek the Lord and to serve him. Then after the service you

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could go for lunch, it was a picnic, and then back for the afternoon service. It was so wonderful fellowshiping and also the friendships that I will never forget... Oh what a blessing, it always seemed like a family reunion at Lehr." (Lorine Schlecht)

"There were large attendances on Sundays. Many stood outside along the big wooden windows which were pulled open." (Erna Nagel)

"I can also remember the Mass Choirs that would sing at our worship services. These choirs consisted of many church choirs from all areas singing praise and making a joyful noise unto our Lord." (Alma Reich)

"In the early days, people who came a distance set up tents among the trees. They slept on cots and ate most of their meals there...The pace was much slower then. Work was planned ahead so we could attend the camp meetings, which was the highlight of the year." (Erna Nagel)

"The Memorial Boards are an important part also. Ministers on the board have a cross by their names. And lay people or family members were placed on the board by family members giving memorials." (Lorine Schlecht)

"At first all the singing and preaching was in German. Gradually more and more turned to English, as many of the younger generations could not understand German. This was hard for the older German people, many could not read or understand English." (Erna Nagel)

"As a youth I remembered that

there were Youth Vespers. At this time the youth would meet in the hills north of the camp...we could gather in a circle and praise God." (Alma Reich)

"I remember also that haystacks of straw was spread around on the floor. It became very dusty at times. After the Campmeeting was over, we helped to take the straw out again. The reason we were anxious to help was that we would find coins of money on the floor. Dimes, nickels and pennies meant a lot to us." (William Kranzler)

The author's only memory of the Lehr Tabernacle is from the summer of 1998 when the Sunday services for the Lehr centennial celebration were held there. I was astonished to hear my mother singing along enthusiastically to "When We All Get to Heaven." I didn't remember ever hearing her sing along in the Presbyterian church in Seattle that I'd grown up in! When I asked her about it she said something scornful about not liking "those Presbyterian hymns" but she really liked that "Evangelical music!"

And of course, the primary purpose of the camp was to worship God and spread the Gospel. Memories of the spiritual impact of the camp are strong too.

"After the message [sermon], the people knelt to pray out loud for a revival. In 1931, a revival broke out and souls kept coming to seek salvation so the meetings continued for another two weeks... What a glorious time that was!" (Erna Nagel)

"When I was young there was drought....hot weather, wind and no rain....The prayer was so powerful that when the people prayed at the camp meetings it would quite often rain. Even though they prayed for the rain – and received it – it was inconvenient for these people

attending the camp – some of the people attending these meetings were staying in tents – the clothes – bedding would get wet. When the sun would come out the bedding was hung on all limbs of the trees and shrubs to dry.” (Alma Reich)

One has to be careful what one prays for!

The Lehr Tabernacle Today

The Lehr camp meetings probably reached their peak in attendance in the 1940's. But the Lehr Camp Meeting Association continued to hold the June camp meetings, and the Tabernacle continued to be used by the denomination (Evangelical, Methodist, etc. as the various church merges happened) for their summer Bible camp program.

In the mid 1990's, the North and South Dakota United Methodist conferences merged, and chose at that time to close down the Lehr camp. The Lehr Campmeeting Association bought out all conference rights to the camp and formed the inter-denominational Prairie Bible Camp.

To this day, the Prairie Bible Camp continues the tradition of the weekly camp meeting (second Sunday in June through Father's Day) each year. Being inter-denominational, the camp now has an even broader base of speakers to draw from. The Prairie Bible Camp also sponsors other unique events such as this year's "Connecting Generations" weekend where grandparents are encouraged to bring a grandchild. Other events include a pastor's retreat (with focus on revitalizing the rural church – all denominations), a women's camp, and a Sportsman's camp that combines target shooting, taxidermy, and Bible study! The camp is also available for family reunions and other church camps.

Their mission continues the vision of the German-Russian founders of the original camp meeting association "To bring the Gospel of Jesus Christ to the

people of the Dakota prairies." And with usage of the camp by many denominations growing over the last five years, the legacy that our original German-Russians began seems destined to continue.

Sources:

Erbele, Robert. Current President, Prairie Bible Camp Board; former Chairman of the Lehr Campmeeting Association (1979 – 1997). Robert's family history includes an uncle who participated in the building of the Tabernacle. He personally has been involved in the association boards managing the Tabernacle for many years. He provided me great help on the background of the Tabernacle and how it is currently being used.

"Lehr Campmeeting Memories." Compiled for the 75th Anniversary of the Tabernacle in 1996. Available from the State Historical Society in Bismarck. 287 .678455 L524 1996. This has lots of great recollections from people who have attended the camp meetings over the years. Most of the quotations in this article are from this source – worth checking out to read more!

Lunde, Richard M. "History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church in the Dakotas." Master's Thesis, University of North Dakota, 1959. CH 289.9 LUN h 1959. Lots more detailed information about the history of the Evangelical denomination.

Marzolf, Arnold H. "The Lehr Tabernacle," published in the GRHS *Heritage Review* 21-3, 1991. However my quotes were taken from a pre-publication version of his article given to me by my Aunt Idella (Ruff Schott) Wilson. This article has lots of additional background information on the religious background of the German-Russians who started the Tabernacle as well as the Reverend Marzolf's first-hand account of the campmeetings as pastor of

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A Children's Story – Or Perhaps Not!

by Duane Schrag

Grandmother Maria Waltner Preheim was born in Russia in 1860 and came to the United States in 1874. She often told us kids hair-raising tales. Among my favorites was the story of how her parents once left Waldheim, their Volhynian village, for a larger town to buy some piglets. They wrapped grandmother, a baby then, carefully against the winter cold. The horse-drawn sled raced over the snow-covered ground toward their destination. On the way home, the family took a shortcut through a forest that was already darkening that late winter afternoon. They shuddered as they suddenly realized that a pack of wolves was following them. As the hungry predators neared and their howls grew louder, the father desperately whipped the horses to greater speed. But the hungry carnivores gained on the terrified family. The nearest wolf began to jump up at the sled, trying to seize the mother from her seat as she held her baby to her breast. Quickly the father reached into the sack and tossed a squealing piglet to the voracious beasts. They stopped and ripped it apart as they fought over the bloody flesh. But soon the pack was behind them again. So grandmother's father tossed out another piglet. This went on until all the piglets were gone. But the family made it home just in time

to escape the hungry wolves.

Grandmother always told the story as though it were true. And so did I.

As I retold the story to granddaughter Bianca Aughenbaugh, four at the time, she listened enthralled. Two-year-old Emily also listened, but she was too young to grasp the significance of the story. Modifying the account somewhat, I said that when the last piglet was gone, the family was still some distance from home and that the wolves were quickly gaining on them. Then I paused. When Bianca anxiously asked what happened next, I told her that grandmother's father seized grandma and threw her to the wolves. Bianca gasped. It took her only a second to recover, and she laughed and



Photo by Jim Zuckerman

said, "Graaampa!" dragging out the word in a mock chastising voice. For a time she repeatedly begged me to retell that story, and as I did, we always went through the same charade, pretending that the tale was being told for the first time. Finally my wife LaVonne ordered me to stop telling that story. It seems that Bianca began to suffer from nightmares. Hungry wolves were chasing her in her sleep. Now the girls are 13 and 15 and have other interests.

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the Lehr Evangelical Church from 1941 – 1944.

Wilson, Idella. Many thanks to my Aunt Idella who helped me with background information and contacts to find out more and kept encouraging me to write this!



"Your word, O Lord, is eternal" Psalm 119:89 (NIV)