

O Holy night on the high plains

By Jeff Paulsen

As Christmas approaches, it is a time to reflect on those who have come before us, and how we as a community have been shaped into who we are today. A part of the fabric of St. Francis is Salem Lutheran Church, which is the only surviving rural Lutheran church in Cheyenne County.

Salem Lutheran Church was founded in 1901. In 1925 the congregation outgrew its original church building and built a new church on the same site. A 2-ton bell was brought from St. Louis on a Model T truck, and that bell remains housed in the 75-foot gothic bell tower. The congregation celebrated its 100th anniversary in August 2001.

As a girl growing up on the family farm near Salem Lutheran Church, St. Francis Good Samaritan Village resident Alice Isernhagen remembers the Christmas holidays and going to church along with her parents and four sisters and eight brothers. In the winter cold (circa 1930) they drove to church in their LaSalle automobile.

Her father was a German immigrant from Russia, her mother was from McCook. The language spoken at home was German, as was das Predigen of the Word at church.

The church was heated by a coal stove, which her father was responsible to stoke

before the services on Sunday. Although the church was wired for electricity, the Tannenbaum was lighted with Kertzen (candles) in the German tradition. Whenever the candles were lit, three men of the congregation stood by with long-handled snuffers.

A piano and pump organ (one member operated the organ foot pump) accompanied the singing of O Du Frohliche, Stille Nacht, O Tannenbaum, O Kinderlein Komme, and other traditional favorites. Sunday school children came forward and sang by class grades.

Christmas Eve Heilige Nacht festivities concluded with sweet bread German Stollen and Stierum confections. Alice never cared for the traditional Zwiebelkuchen onion pie.

As true then as it is today, "As the Lord blessed our forefathers in the past, we pray that He will continue to bless this congregation in the future. May Salem Lutheran Church continue to stand as a tower of strength in the rural area surrounded by the productive fields of grain and the vast and endless beauty of the Kansas Plains." (July 14, 1968, by L.E. Zwegardt)

Editor's note: The above article was published in the Good Samaritan Village newsletter.



Alice Isernhagen, left, tells Jeff Paulsen about the Christmas holiday and going to Salem Lutheran Church with her family.

Herald staff photo by Casey McCormick

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