The sturdy black-and-white sign along Highway 200, 17 miles northeast of Hazen, identifies “St. Paul Lutheran Church.” Just to the east, stands the church with the simple wooden cross etched against the prairie sky.

The church rests on a knoll, surrounded by virgin prairie sod. At the base of the knoll, lies a pond where waterfowl and muskrats sport. Deer bow their heads to drink. Bald eagles frequently soar above, and coyotes, raccoons and cougars are known to hunt its shores. God’s creation is evident.

Above the double doors of the entry, a bronze plaque is engraved with the year, 1889. Twenty-eight founding fathers gathered that year to charter the congregation with the Lutheran Church in America, and continuous services have been offered since then.

The first services were held in schoolhouses. Then, a small sod building on a nearby homestead served as the church and the minister’s home. Thirteen years later, a church was erected on the present site. In 2005, the church site was listed in the Registry of National Historic Sites. St. Paul Lutheran proudly shares the 1889 birth year with the state of North Dakota.

SHARING A HERITAGE

A few immigrants arrived as early as 1884, but in the immediate vicinity of St. Paul Church, they began to arrive in early spring of 1886. They were Germans from Russia with the names of Priebe, Schimke, Kruckenber, Sailer, Lauf, Rathjen, Bohrer, Unterseher, Suess, Horning, Grosz, Oster, Richter, Ellwein, Hinsz, Birkholz, Boeckel, Link and Ziemann. Some of these names are found on the membership roll yet today.

These settlers were proficient farmers. They possessed skills, ingenuity and determination learned from their ancestors who had settled the empty plains of southern Russia 100 years before them. Russian ruler Catherine the Great had extended rights and privileges that allowed them to build productive farms and to keep their German identity. Their sons were exempt from service in the Russian army. Later Czars rescinded those rights, and Russian policies became oppressive. Rather than give up their German identity, they left for America and new opportunities.

Most traveled across Europe by train and left for America. The journey by steerage took about two weeks. From New York City, they traveled by train to Dakota Territory. Then they traveled by covered oxen wagons with essentials for life as well as tools and implements for farming, arriving near Stanton in late April 1886 to claim their homesteads.

There were no signs of civilization. They came to a land of few trees and miles and miles of prairie grass swaying in the breeze. The challenges were just beginning.

First, they needed shelter. They turned the wagons upside down for cover and cooked over outdoor fires. When seeding was completed, they built temporary homes of sod.

Once the farm was established, the settlers around St. Paul Church built permanent homes of clay from the
bluffs of the Missouri River. The walls were much like concrete, and one of those homes was still in use 100 years later and is standing today.

Family histories tell of courage, despair and unimaginable determination. The settlers depended on their teams of horses or oxen. Sometimes an animal was injured or died. Family histories tell of the man hitching himself in place of an ox or a horse and his wife guiding the plow because a crop was a life-and-death matter.

There were no doctors in the area until 1903. Home remedies were used, some with merit and some only providing the comfort of knowing someone cared. In 1894, a diphtheria epidemic erupted in the area. One couple lost all five of their children. This despairing mother stood in her desolate home and raised her face to heaven. “Is there yet a God?” she implored. Her faith was assured, and some of her descendants are members of St. Paul today.

Holding onto the tattered ends of faith in the face of tragedy or death was not unique to this woman, but was a common experience to the stalwart pioneers of St. Paul. In grateful praise and thanksgiving, they established a church that has endured for 125 years.

**KEEPING THE FAITH**

In 1902, the settlers built a permanent home for the congregation on the present site. The white frame structure reflected the practicality and ingenuity of the settlers as well as their reverence for their God. A silver crucifix and matching candle holders graced the altar. A foot-pumped pipe organ added richness to the beloved German hymns.

Soon a two-story parsonage was built, and a well was dug nearby. A barn and a small chicken coop were constructed for the minister’s use. A garden spot was provided near the cemetery. The pasture of about 10 acres lay directly east of the church. Some pastors raised sheep and some had a few cows and sold cream.

It was important to the people of St. Paul Church that their children be instructed in the faith and in the German language. In 1905, they built a school on the south side of the church near the cemetery. When the public schools were not in session, the minister taught six weeks of Bible school, teaching children to read and write in German.

The congregation faced challenges. In August 1913, the church steeple was struck by lightning which passed through the entire church. The steeple, church interior, and pipe organ were severely damaged, but no fire erupted. Less than seven years later, on June 8, 1920, a powerful tornado swept through the area. The church and the barns were totally destroyed. The only things recovered from the church were the silver crucifix and candleholders which are still in use today.

The church school was in session that day and was also totally destroyed with all the children inside. Some were caught on the cemetery fence and others were found clinging to tombstones. Some were blown as far as a half mile away. They had cuts and bruises, but miraculously, not one child was seriously injured. By 1921, the congregation rebuilt the church.

Since the church school was not rebuilt, this may be when weekly Sunday school began. The minister would teach the older children, and the parishioners, often the women, would instruct the younger children. In those years, the Sunday school often consisted of more than 50 children.

The Depression and drought of the 1930s caused

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the families to use every strategy possible to survive financially, but they mended, repaired, repurposed and shared.

Sunday afternoons were often spent visiting. Many learned to play a musical instrument, a skill they enjoyed for the rest of their years. Through it all, St. Paul Church remained a focus in their lives.

Near the end of the Depression, the parsonage was destroyed by fire. The investigation revealed an evil that staggered the congregation. The pastor was convicted of arson and manslaughter. The people had always revered their pastors, so the congregation struggled with despair and disbelief, but they bonded together. A new parsonage was provided, and their mission of furthering the Gospel was resumed.

The next defining change began about 10 years later. The congregation considered having services and instruction in the English language. This was inconceivable to the older people who recalled that the preservation of their German identity was so important that the ocean was braved and an untamed land was settled. But, at last, these old leaders capitulated for the sake of the children, who spoke and understood English much better than they did.

During the winter of 1949-50, the area received so much snow the roads became impassable. The minister conducted his duties by riding a horse-drawn sleigh. Eventually, many parishioners — marooned by snow-clogged roads — were running out of supplies. A young member of the congregation flew a small plane, picked up needed supplies, then dropped them onto the church yard. He also dropped the mail for the people at a nearby farm northwest of the church.

Recent years have featured more improvements. The church was wired for electricity sometime around 1949 and is now served by Roughrider Electric Cooperative. The church is now handicapped-accessible by means of an outdoor ramp. The basement was enlarged and now contains a simple kitchen and gathering area. Plumbing was installed for the kitchen, and an indoor restroom.

St. Paul Lutheran hopes to be a beacon of faith on the prairie for years to come, and will have a two-day anniversary gathering June 21-22. The public is invited to this anniversary.

Marguerite Kilber, a freelance writer, is a member of St. Paul Lutheran, and resides near the church.

To learn more: Inquiries may be made at 701-487-3428 or 701-748-3322. For more on the church, visit www.ndtourism.com; search on the home page for St. Paul.
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