The Tabernacle on the Prairie

By Ron Vossler

All it takes now is the scent of straw on the prairie air, and there it is again—rising from memory—the Tabernacle: the holiest edifice in Black Sea German evangelical country. It’s an eight-sided structure in a shelterbelt outside Lehr, a hamlet straddling the borderline of two southcentral North Dakota counties.

Wrapped by the original ash and poplar trees of a donated tree-claim, the Tabernacle, which dates from 1921, was built at the midpoint of 50 evangelical clapboard churches, all within an 80-mile area. It was completed with donated labor from Dakota German families, mostly farmers, who followed the design brought from Germany by Reverend Ermel, a well-known Tabernacle preacher. The workers raised heavy internal beams, erecting an eight-sided structure with a cupola and overhead windows that were cantilevered open by series of ropes and pulleys to let in fresh air for the large crowds gathered inside.

A Gathering Place

Originally known as the Lehr Camp Ground Meeting, the Tabernacle revival was an annual affair, taking place just prior to harvest as crops turned golden brown from their roots. In anticipation of the revival, the pioneers repeated an old saying, which harkened back to archaic
beliefs: if Tabernacle benches are crowded, so too will the coming harvest be rich.

The original gatherings stretched over two weeks, including three Sundays, with families living together in tents or small cabins—think fish houses—on the primitive campgrounds. They cooked on kerosene stoves, prayed their German prayers and shared their simple fare while those with means ate in the Tabernacle’s dining area. Concession stands offered a treat everyone on the prairie craved then: homemade ice cream.

During half a century and beyond, evangelical farm families, mostly Dakota Germans, crowded the Tabernacle, which was built to seat 1,500. Crowds of 2,000 were not uncommon, and once at least 7,000 worshippers stood 12 deep at the door of the Tabernacle, straining to hear the sermon and the songs. The benches, rough-hewn and backless, faced a raised pulpit where ministers, staying in rooms just off to the side, would emerge to deliver masterful and thunderous sermons replete with images of fearsome beauty and dire portraits of hell, as well as hope of salvation.

Farmers with newer cars and cattle to milk drove daily, 50 miles round trip or more, to the Tabernacle gatherings. After the Sunday sermon, on the stubbled field where they’d parked, families shared a picnic lunch on a blanket floated to the earth, creating in their children a series of vivid and luminous memories of long ago summers.

Dress in early Tabernacle days was common—brost—with the older men in an odd array of old boots and hats, women in black shawls and long black dresses, and heads covered, both genders looking more Russian than American. Later, men worshipped in clean denim shirts and laundered overalls and women in dresses sewn from colored flour sacks. In the 1950s and 60s, men favored starched white shirts, their sleeves with visible creases from the hot Sunday morning irons of their hardworking wives. A constant, as various old photos indicate, was the white, untanned foreheads of the farmers who’d doffed their field caps to worship at Tabernacle.

**Prayer and Song**

The heart of the Tabernacle service was the communal prayer, when people knelt on sweet scented straw that lay thick on the earth floor, which raised dust as attendees sought their seats. Later on, a concrete floor was added, which eliminated the dust and also the sweet scent of the
straw. The communal prayer was a gathering of voices that fell and rose for a long time, a veritable Babel of various Germanic dialects, English and a mix thereof, voices which, it was said, only God could sort out and understand. These plaintive voicings released deep-seated emotions and continued for so long, the story goes, that a person could drive from the Tabernacle to Wishek, which was 11 miles away, and back again, only to discover the Long Prayers, as the elderly were called, still communing with their prairie God. The communal prayers were an expression of group unity, and, during earlier prairie times, a bonding experience for a people who, until the 1940s, were still working and threshing communally, a time when—as this author was told—“You were lonely only if you wanted to be.”

Songs at Tabernacle shifted over time, from old standbys that were not liturgical, like “Gott Ich die Liebe” and “So Wie Ich Bin,” to mainstream American church hymns, like “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing,” whose beauty could not quiet assuage the painful change of sermons, once exclusively in the German language, giving way to English, even if Bible verses in German were still read aloud well into the 1970s.

Tabernacle services—which some called “an unusual visitation of God”—were an outgrowth of 18th century piety. That was a belief system focused on emotionalism as well as the senses (thus the sweet straw underfoot) that came to the Dakota prairie by way of the isolated Russian steppe, where the lack of clergy stressed communal praying, Bible study and German hymns, along with personal witnessing.

Children at the Tabernacle

Tabernacle was a highlight of the summer for children too, happy to escape chores on their parents’ isolated farms, if just for a day or two. There was a children’s chapel with moral lessons taught by means of felt Biblical characters, and there was also freedom to play with friends away from their parents, who, arms linked with friends, conversed about their lives and the Bible as they walked amid the soughing trees.

The Tabernacle grounds and the structure are still in use for family reunions and retreats. The Lehr Camp Meeting continues its earlier mission, hosting an annual week of worship activities and, for five days, Wednesday to Sunday, services are held in the Tabernacle.

The Lehr Camp Ground Meeting’s greatest harvest, however, was its second generation, the settlers’ children and grandchildren, who, in joining the American mainstream, many in helping professions, became nurses, teachers, social workers, ministers, choir members and directors: lives of service.

Now, one thing is certain: wherever the centrifugal forces of American life have scattered them, the children of the Tabernacle can still hear in their innermost ear the gathering voices of their loved ones, the Dakota Germans, still kneeling on the sweet-scented straw, still praying.