Most rural prairie churches are gone, but their history is alive today

By David Bohlander

moved to Eureka where again tragedy struck when her little Maria died at the tender age of eight. Johann had an older son, Heinrich, who had stayed behind in Russia but who in 1904, at the age of 32, set sail for the United States on the ocean-going vessel, Frieland. Heinrich brought with him his wife Jacobina (Heinbuch) and their eight-month-old daughter, Amalia.

After becoming a naturalized citizen, Heinrich and his family established themselves on a homestead claim in Campbell County, Logan Township. It was here that Jacobina gave birth to a son, William Henry Sattler, who would go on to be the father of Leroy Sattler.

That is the trail that Leroy’s family took in getting from South Russia to Herreid, but it would be the ancestors of his mother, Lydia (Fuhrer) Sattler who would be instrumental in the founding of Jesu Congregational Church. Lydia’s father, Jacob G. Fuhrer, was born in 1881 at Worms, South Russia, and his mother, Katharina (Heintz) Fuhrer was born aboard the USS Werra on the Atlantic Ocean as her parents were in the process of immigrating to America from Russia. Her family first settled in the Menno, S.D., area before establishing a homestead near Arta. It was at Arta where Katharina met, and then on Nov. 13, 1903, married Jacob G. Fuhrer. Following their marriage the couple made their home on a farm nine miles northwest of Herreid. It was from this farm location that Jacob and Katharina became involved with Jesu German Congregation and played an important role in the eventual construction of the church building.

Though the congregation was officially organized in 1901, it was not until 1906 when a church building was built on the site where the cemetery still exists today. The dedication of the building took place Oct. 21, 1906, with the Reverend C. Wagner (1905-1908) serving as pastor of the congregation. Succeeding Wagner were Rev. Frederick A. Willmann (1908-1910), Rev. William Aumann (1911-1913) and Rev. Herman Ollech (1913-1919). Pastor Ollech led the congregation during the years of World War I which were not particularly good times to be involved with a German speaking group or organization. War hysteria had been on the rise since the start of the war in Europe, but when the United States finally entered the war in 1917 anti-German sentiment increased throughout the country. Speaking the German language was cause for suspect, and many families of German descent even changed their names to avoid persecution.

In 1918 Congress passed the Sedition Act Amendment to the Espionage Act of 1917, and the combination of these legislative works changed how Jesu Congregational Church would function. It was determined that no assembly of German speaking people could exceed five in number, and so in 1918 Jesu German Congregational Church, which conducted its services in the German language, went underground, meeting not in their church building but rather in a granary on the Jacob G. Fuhrer farm which was located in Emmons County, a few miles to the northeast of where the church was located. Following the war the church was served by Rev. P. Buck (1919-1920) and then Rev. Paul H. Weiskopf (1921-1922). A combination of factors cause many rural churches to decline in numbers and activity throughout the years, and it was no less true of Jesu German Congregational.

The Reverend Reinhart Knaus became the congregation’s last pastor and served the church far longer than any of his predecessors, leading Jesu German Congregational from 1922 to the day that it shuttered its doors in April of 1937. The parish members of Jesu then joined the First Congregational Church in Herreid. The church building was sold and moved to Mobridge where it still exists as a garage/shop.

Overtime, fewer and fewer descendants with connections to Jesus German Congregational would still live in the area, and care for the cemetery grounds would fall}

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Leroy Sattler holds a kerosene lamp that was used in the Jesu German Congregational Church.

Leroy Sattler’s home office features historic photos, including the oval photo of the Heinrich and Jacobina (Heimbuch) Sattler homestead.

Pictured is the homestead of Jacob and Katherina Fuhrer which was north of Herreid and in Emmons County. The homestead was built on the site where the Jesu German Congregational Church was organized in 1901, and the building above was built in 1906. The church closed in 1937.

During World War I when German-speaking Americans were not allowed to gather in groups of more than five, members of the Jesu Congregational Church met in a granary on the Jacob and Katherine Fuhrer homestead in Emmons County. The building is the only structure that remains at the site.
on a small group that would gather for an annual cleanup and work day. Eventually the responsibility of overseeing the care and maintenance of the cemetery fell for the most part on Leroy and to Arlo Schmidt, who also has family buried there, and the task eventually became too much for so few to carry out.

Leroy turned to the South Dakota Community Foundation for help in caring for the cemetery, help which came through the establishment of a non-profit maintenance fund which is being managed through Peace Lutheran Church in Herreid where LeRoy is a member.

The fund produces a five percent return which is then used for the care of the cemetery.

Campbell County records show there are 84 burials at Jesu German Congregational Cemetery of which 15 are unknown. Leroy has found and documented 62 grave markers and has put together a detailed map of the grave placements.

The list of grave marker names reads like a history of many of the pioneers who settled in the area, names like Delzer, Fuhrer, Bohlander, Heinrich, Liebelt, Sattler and Schaeffer to name a few.

The last burial was for Henry Schuler, 87, of Eureka who was buried there Dec. 2, 2006.

Many of the people who rest in the cemetery were witness to all the time and change that existed during the years that Jesu German Congregational was in existence.

It is impossible to hold back the flow of time and the changes that accompany it, but it is always a sad time when a community must say goodbye to the institutions — the schools and churches — that have played a role in the community for so many years. Gone from the area forever are most of the small rural church buildings and the voices that filled the air with the sweet sound of hymns, the exuberant preaching of the Gospel message, the joyous celebrations of birth and weddings as well as the grievous events of saying goodbye to loved ones that took place in these buildings. They are gone, forever, but may they not be forgotten, living on in the history the county and state.

For those of you in the area, the next time you feel like just taking a drive, may be swing by Jesu Congregational Cemetery which marks the place where all of these events were once a part of life on the prairie in Campbell County. Stop, listen and maybe the breeze will echo in your ears the wonderful sounds that once filled a building, Jesu German Congregational Church.

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