CHURCH BELLS IN THE FOREST

Church Bells in the Forest

A Story of Lutheran Pioneer Work
on the Michigan Frontier

1840—1850

by Theodore Graebner

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INTRODUCTION

THIS STORY OF THE BEGINNINGS OF LUTHERAN CONgregational work in the valley of the Saginaw River and its tributaries pretends to be no more than a simple recital of the founding of the Missouri Synod's work in a small but significant area of what were then the sparsely settled frontiers of the great Northwest. The author, himself a descendant of one of the pioneer pastors, had available a collection of old diaries and letters and personal memoranda dating from the forties of the last century and supplying the annals for the decade covered in this story of the trail blazers in the Michigan forests. A number of congregational histories which likewise were based on primary source material, practically all of it in existence today, were placed at the disposal of the author by the committee in charge of the centennial convention, programed for Saginaw and Bay City and the churches of the Saginaw Valley, in June, 1944. Other source material is listed in the bibliography. For securing some of this basic material and for carefully revising the manuscript, the executive convention committee of the Michigan District rendered services which are gratefully acknowledged by the author. He is under special obligation to the chairman, the Rev. Emil H. Voss, and to the Revs. August F. Bernthal, H. A. Mayer, M. E. Mayer, H. Miller, Mr. F. Weber, and President Andrew Zeile.

The committee, its artist, and its printer have done their share to make the book not only readable but enjoyable, even (let us hope) inspiring and a source of gratitude and admiration for the founders of our Church in America and of heartfelt praises to God for having given us in this late era of Christian history such examples of sacrificing love for fellow man and of loyalty to the truth of God's Word.

It may be a slight volume, to be sent forth with such great ex-

pectations, but even the critical reader is assured by the author and by those who collaborated with him that it is a true story we are telling, with no ingredients derived from the imagination. The story of our pioneers in Michigan needed no such embroidery. The closer one sticks to fact and to the original sources, the more remarkable the characters who pass through these pages, the more inspiring their example.

THEODORE GRAEBNER



PRELUDE

The Waiting Forests

IT WAS THE YEAR 1844.

The United States was a youngster of 68 summers.

The flag had twenty-six stars.

One of these represented the State of Michigan, which came into the Union in the year 1837.

The city of Saginaw consisted of one store and a few scattered huts belonging to hunters and fishermen.

From Saginaw Bay, the virgin forests lay unbroken for many miles.

There they stood – the giant oaks, beeches, walnut trees, maples, and birch trees. Here and there a patch of fir or towering Norways interrupted the monotony. Below, on the floor of the forest, was dense undergrowth, untouched by human foot except by an Indian here and there tracking the wolves, bears, and deer.

These *were* forests! My grandfather told me that they felled an oak six feet in diameter when they cleared the land that became the front yard of the parsonage at Frankentrost.

The Saginaw country was first visited by agents of the American Fur Company, with headquarters at what is now Saginaw. At this point also the Government had a blockhouse, or fort, with a small garrison. The first settlement was made by Leon Trombley, an old Frenchman, in 1831, who built a little log cabin on the river bank. Trombley was a skilled farmer sent out by the Government to teach



the Indians more about agriculture. The first crop of cultivated food raised in Bay County was a harvest of potatoes taken from a clearing next to his cabin.

A few years later a visitor to the settlement described the location as follows: "The Saginaw River . . . is formed by the joining of the Cass, Flint, Tittibawasee, Shiawassee, and Bad Rivers, and is the main artery of a rich, level countryside surrounded by an extensive grassy prairie. The country is so level that the water in this system of rivers rises as the north wind drives the water of Lake Huron inland. Only in the fall and spring the rains and melting snow cause a slight rise. Naturally, this is an aid to navigation and even the smaller streams can be reached by steamboats, sailboats, and canoes pretty far inland."

The forest country was connected by steamboat, canal boat, railroad, and wagon with the Atlantic Coast. Or, if you preferred, you could choose to walk the last thirty miles. You boarded a little steamer at New York City and traveled northward up the Hudson River to Albany. From Albany to Buffalo you became the guest of a canal boat, which required from seven to ten days, and the fare was $1.50. A railroad traveled between these same two cities in thirty-six hours, but the ceiling price was $5.00 for a seat in an immigrant car, and $9.75 for a soft seat in a passenger coach. From Buffalo to Detroit you traveled by lake boat, the length of Lake Erie, steerage $1.50 to $2.50, or cabin $4 to $5. There were daily sailings, and the trip was done in good time – twenty-four hours.

No matter how you traveled, you had to carry your lunch or supply your own food for the entire trip.

To reach the Saginaw country from Detroit, you had the choice of two routes. You could ship through Lake St. Clair, Lake Huron, and Saginaw Bay to the mouth of the Saginaw River on a lumber steamer; or you could travel by rail to Pontiac, a little later as far as Flint, and then by wagon or on foot along the forest trails.

Authorities warned the settlers against accepting paper money, because counterfeit and bankrupt notes were in free circulation. Money should be carried in coin.

A land boom was on. The population of the State jumped from 5,000 in 1810 to 300,000 in 1844. The Government was selling a hundred thousand acres of land in the Saginaw country at $1.25 an acre.

The labors of the pioneers were heavy. It was hard work to cut a clearing, and the German settlers suffered all the hardships of the frontier. Everything was strange – the people, their tongue, their customs; even the trees looked grim. "No one," wrote one columnist, "can have a true picture of the North American landscape. No path through the forests. Through brush, swamps, and over fallen trees the path leads to the settlement. A dead silence reigns in these woods, broken now and then by the weird screeching of owls, the chatter of squirrels,

or the cry of wild four-footed beasts. After one has waded, climbed, stumbled almost to exhaustion, one comes in view of the colony. And the settlement – what a doleful sight! A clearing surrounded by a rough rail fence. In the center of it a miserable cabin, built of rough-hewn logs. The most poverty-stricken village in Germany contains palaces compared to this."

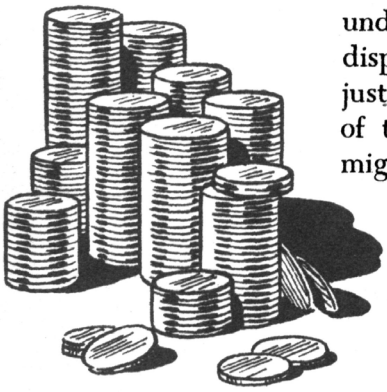
There were a few hundred Lutherans in the Saginaw territory. Wilhelm Loehe, then 36 years of age, a Lutheran minister living in Germany, wrote to a friend, Gottlieb Schaller: "There is now the prospect of founding a missionary colony in North America. All that is needed is a leader."

History has been called the lengthening shadow of great men. The history of the Missouri Synod is the lengthening shadow of great founders such as Walther, Wyneken, Brohm, Fuerbringer, Sihler, Craemer, Sievers. And the history of the churches of the Saginaw Valley is under God the record of deeds and achievements which are traceable to the energy and foresight of a single man. He was Wilhelm Loehe, spiritual father, guide, and provider of the founders of the Franconian colonies. On December 10, 1844, he reported on a meeting held by a society interested in American missions as follows:

"Regret was expressed that German emigrants were not told by their pastors to consider their spiritual welfare before leaving for America. The need of colonies founded on Christian and churchly ideas was stressed. How beautiful it would be if the immigrants would gather about a faithful shepherd and would be led by him in the peace of God over the sea and into their new homeland!

"There was a general approval of the plan, to be realized in the spring of 1845, of planting a missionary colony among the pagan Indians of Northern (?) Michigan.

"Eagerly the suggestion of joining hands with the faithful Michigan Synod for the conversion of the heathen of North America was adopted. As this Synod at the present time has in its treasury 1,500 florins ($600), it was resolved to assign an equal amount to the joint



undertaking. A third of this sum is ready to be dispatched, and we have inquired in Ann Arbor just how best to use this money for the welfare of the heathen. It has been suggested that it might be best to use this sum for the purchase of a tract of land, until the most urgent needs might be known, after the colony has been founded.

"It was suggested that those who favor this project might supply the colonists with a church bell, which in the forest primeval of Michigan might call the heathen to the Gospel of everlasting peace." Signed, "Wilhelm Loehe." (Neudettelsau.)

The Michigan Synod mentioned by Loehe was organized by three Lutheran pastors in 1840.

The Lutheran Church west of the Appalachians was in its infancy. In Indiana there was a synod founded by six pastors and seven laymen in 1835. The Henkels, members of that noble family of missionaries, had traveled through the scattered settlements of Kentucky and Ohio – earnest preachers, tireless circuit riders of the great West. A Synod of East Ohio had been organized in 1836 by four pastors, six candidates, and four lay delegates. In Missouri, the Saxons had grounded themselves in 1839. They had begun the magazine *Der Lutheraner* in September, 1844. Its editor was Carl Ferdinand Wilhelm Walther.

How had Loehe in Germany rather than these small synods in North America come to be interested in the Saginaw country of the Western hemisphere?

Here our story begins.

CHAPTER ONE

A Cry from the Western Plains: Friedrich Wyneken

IT WAS OCTOBER, 1840. THE HARDWOODS PRESENTED a symphony of color. From among the trees toward a small Indiana settlement came a young man 30 years of age. His complexion was weather-beaten, and his figure broad and sturdy. He was clad in buckskin and topped with a broad-brimmed hat. His pony was a pinto, and he rode him with the air of one accustomed to the saddle.

The young man was a missionary, Friederich Wyneken, the first and foremost of the missionaries of the "West." In Northern Indiana and in parts of Michigan and Ohio Wyneken rode from settlement to settlement, serving the scattered Lutherans with the preaching of the Word and with the Sacraments.



Wyneken had come from Germany in 1838 and had set up his base at Fort Wayne, Indiana. At once he went out to explore the country in behalf of Lutheran missions. He endured seven years of hardships among the pioneers

in the wilderness of Indiana. He made his reports to the Mission Board of the Pennsylvania Synod.

However, Wyneken was not alone in his labors. There was David Henkel, pastor in North Carolina, who not only made journeys into Kentucky and Indiana, but as early as 1817 went into Southeastern Missouri. Andrew and Charles Henkel were pastors in Ohio. The latter translated the Augsburg Confession into English in 1834. Then there was Friedrich Schmidt, pioneer missionary in Michigan.

But of these early frontier pastors only Friedrich Wyneken was able to interest others in the work among the German settlers in the "West." It was he who more than any other helped to bring the Saxons of Missouri and the Bavarians of Michigan together to form one great church body. Not only that, but the power of his words enlisted the genius of Wilhelm Loehe, who sent devoted pastors and laymen into the Michigan backwoods.

It all came about through a tract which Wyneken wrote in 1840. This stirring appeal was directed to the Lutherans in Germany, and it described the distress of the Lutherans in America. It was the work of a soul set on fire by love for his fellow men.

Concerning conditions in the cities, Wyneken wrote: "You will find thousands of our people who, either forced by bodily want or lured on by prospects of carnal liberty and outward comfort which the Prince of Darkness held out to them, have here made their homes. Many, who even in their old German home had sunk into the filth of an immoral life, here give free reign to their beastly inclinations. They have not any reverence for sacred things; the restraints of outward decency mean nothing to them. Horror and dismay fills me even now, while writing these lines, when I remember the shamelessness wherewith vice, not hidden in the darkness of night, but in the broadest daylight, struts about in the streets of a seaport and how I there found the grossest indecency and the most disgusting dens of vice conducted by Germans. Others, happy to have cast off the fetters of the Church as well as of the State, do indeed live in outward decency, yet without

the Church, without hope, alas! even without any desire for anything higher. The ever-changing and yet so monotonous daily routine satisfies them and becomes the tomb of all holy longings after a perfect rest and the bliss of heaven. The children follow in the footsteps of their parents, some grow up without any education whatever, while others learn in the public schools only those things which enable them to get along in this life. The majority are carried along in the current of greed, which in America has reached its greatest depth and most sweeping force and probably here delivers the greatest number of victims into the sea of perdition."

Wyneken next considers the inadequate number of pastors serving those German settlers in America who have not altogether forsaken their God and the faith of their fathers. He says that these have indeed organized congregations and even own churches and schools. "But," he continues, "probably in all larger cities the number of German orthodox ministers is inadequate for the size of the German population. The ministers have enough, yea, more than enough to do with those who voluntarily commit themselves to their spiritual care. But who goes forth to the dens of infamy or into the busy factories where carnal minds are laboring merely for the bread of this present life? Who calls the countless sinners who do not at all concern themselves about church and divine worship? Behold, here we need missionaries who are burning with zeal for the Lord and neither dread the pity and the sneers of the worldly-wise, nor the devilish ridicule of those who have become worldlings, but resolutely seek entrance into their houses and into their hearts to win them for Christ. But these missionaries are wanting."

The sad religious plight of the German pioneers in the forests and upon the prairies Wyneken describes as follows: "Either singly or in small groups our brethren go into the forest with their women and children. In many cases they have no neighbors for miles around, and even if they have such near by, the dense forest so separates them that they live in ignorance of each other. Come now, reader, and

enter the settlements and log huts of your brethren! Husband, wife, and children must work hard to fell the giant trees, to clear the virgin forest, to plow, to sow, and to plant, for their pittance of money runs low or is already gone. Bread must be procured; but this can be gotten only from the ground which they till. In their log huts a strange sight meets German eyes; there almost everything is wanting that you would consider absolutely necessary in the line of furniture. Everything is primitive, and there is no thought of comfort. Shoes and clothing wear out, and the winter is at hand. Small wonder, then, that everybody works in order to support this body and life. No difference is made between Sunday and weekday, especially since no church bell calls them to the house of God, and no neighbor in his Sunday outfit arrives to call for his friend. It is not to be wondered at that the pioneer's tired limbs seek their couch without prayer and that dire need drives them to leave it and return to work without prayer; even the prayer at mealtime has long since been banished by the lapse into unbelief or recent trouble. Alas, Bible and hymnal also in many cases have been left in the old country, as the people, under the influence of Rationalism, had lost the taste for them. No preacher arrives to rouse them from their carnal thoughts and pursuits, and the sweet voice of the Gospel has not been heard for a long time.



"Thus one month passes after another; material conditions improve, want is relieved, the fields flourish, the log huts have disappeared and made room for statelier homes, you

see better clothing and more cheerful faces. But look at their souls — for years they have not been fed with the Word of Life, no Table of the Lord has been spread for them. They have grown used to their spiritual death and can now get along quite well without their Lord, as their farm provides everything which they need in order to enjoy their daily existence. To be sure, in the beginning, when Father or Mother looked out with forlorn faces upon the forest from their log hut and hunger or death peered into their cabin, or when a little child had been born, or when the heart for a moment by the grace of God had become still and with the longing for home also the memories of the beautiful divine services of their childhood and therewith the longing for heaven softly came into their soul — then perhaps a sigh was heaved: 'Ah, if we but had a church, a minister, a school! What shall become of our children?' But you know quite well how soon temporal affairs stifle such emotions, especially when people do not hear the Word of God. So the longing which at first was kindled dies away by the art of Satan and the inclination of our own flesh and blood. A person gets accustomed to living without church, divine service, and school; the external life fascinates more and more, one is ever more absorbed by temporal affairs and finally finds it convenient to be no longer disturbed or reproved by the truth. The old sins and self-reproaches are forgotten, the quiet, monotonous, and yet so busy life in the forest does not offer so many occasions for the outbursts of sin and thus covers up the old deep-seated evil of the heart, yea, a person may finally imagine himself righteous and in good standing with his God and may thus perhaps calmly die.

"Picture to yourself thousands of families scattered over these extended tracts of land: The parents die without hearing the Word of God, no one arouses and admonishes, no one comforts them. Now, behold, young and old are lying on their deathbeds, their soul perhaps does not as much as give a thought to preparation for the solemn Judgment; but a servant of the Lord would be able to direct the lost one to the holy God, who outside of Christ is a consuming fire, but in

Christ a reconciled Father; he might, by the grace of God and the power of the Word, lead the heart to repentance and faith, and the dying soul would be saved. Or suppose finally that, behind the curtains of their deathbed, the serious step into eternity and the near Judgment has roused their souls and they would like to be reconciled to their God, even now, now at their last moment, but, behold, the fountains of their memory are stopped up, the old consoling Bible passages will no longer come forth, and no servant of the Lord is present to comfort them effectually with the Word of God concerning the grace in Christ Jesus. The poor soul stares into solemn eternity, the shudders of death dim the vision of the spirit, so that it cannot behold the reconciled God and the Mediator, the merciful High Priest in the Holy of Holies. Oh, what a blessing the ambassador of



peace would now be with the effective absolution for the penitent soul and with the Sacrament of the body and blood of Christ, that might stablish the doubting, wavering soul and direct its vision to that body which was given for sinners and that blood which was shed for the remission of our sins. How many thousands go forth unprepared and uncomforted into eternity!"

Thus did Wyneken set forth the spiritual needs of the German settlers whom he visited on his long horseback trips from his Fort Wayne headquarters. He did more. He made a trip to Germany to acquaint wider circles with the condition of the Lutheran Church in America. He pictured to them the immense distances of the Western prairies and forests. "It happens," he wrote, "that after some years a traveling pastor arrives in one of these settlements. Then the children are brought, and I myself have baptized a dozen or more of children at one time, children of various ages, up to ten and twelve years; but who instructs the baptized? How can the washing of regeneration continue its blessed effect and power when there is no preaching of the Word and no Christian instruction? Who will confirm the children, who distribute to them, later, the Lord's Supper? Their parents, of German birth, are themselves heathen, unbaptized; consider that – *German heathen!* . . .

"Thousands upon thousands of Germans immigrate every year, only in the last two years between eighty and one hundred thousand. Five thousand have landed in one week alone at Philadelphia. There is a great movement westward. The descendants of those who have lived for some generations in the Eastern States follow this westward trend. A territory of increasing vastness is being settled by members of our race, and ever wider the area is becoming in which there is such great spiritual destitution. Ever greater become our difficulties in the task of surveying this enormous field and of granting these people spiritual aid, and hence with ever-greater insistency the call of the Lord addresses itself to your hearts: 'Help! Help in the name of Jesus!' "

That was Friedrich Konrad Dietrich Wyneken and his Cry from the Western Plains.



"He never failed to attend the celebration of Holy Communion, which, according to Bavarian custom, took place in a special service early Sunday mornings"