

A stable, a patch of weeds, and an old tombstone, mark the place where UELC was born.

# The Forgotten Birthplace

By William Christensen

Dr. C. C. Madsen, President of Dana College writes that this article was prepared by Mr. William Christensen as a fruit of his research for his forthcoming book, SAGA OF THE TOWER, a history of Dana College and Trinity Seminary. The article reflects the careful research and the interesting literary style which will characterize the book. A reading of this chapter from the first beginnings of our Synod cannot fail to arouse a deep sense of regret that we have been so coldly negligent in our failure to cherish and preserve such a significant landmark in the history of our Church. It is our sincere hope that SAGA OF THE TOWER, which will be a history of our Church as well as of our Seminary and College, will in some measure compensate for our earlier indifference.

March 18 proved to be the first really springlike day of the year—just the sort of day Einer Vig and I had been waiting for to undertake a little project. So we loaded a camera with film and started north from Blair.

The object of our trip—to find the location and, if possible, some trace of the little country church called St. John's which was the birthplace of the Blair Synod (forerunner of the U.E.L.C.) back in September, 1884. We had three things to guide us—a picture of the church, some old maps, and Einar's recollection of a trip or two into this area several years back.

Of this much we were fairly certain: sometime back in the seventies, a Lutheran congregation had been established by Danes at Argo, Burt County, Nebraska, and had taken the name of St. John's Church; later it had divided, and part of the congregation had moved a few miles into Washington County, where it built its own church and named it St. John's also; still later, when the Danes in the Norwegian-Danish Conference (an early Lutheran synod) split off from the Conference to form a synod of their own, the action had taken place in the Argo church, September 11-14, 1884. Thus the church at Argo was the birthplace of the Blair Synod, which later merged with another synod, the North Church, to become the United Danish Evangelical Lu-

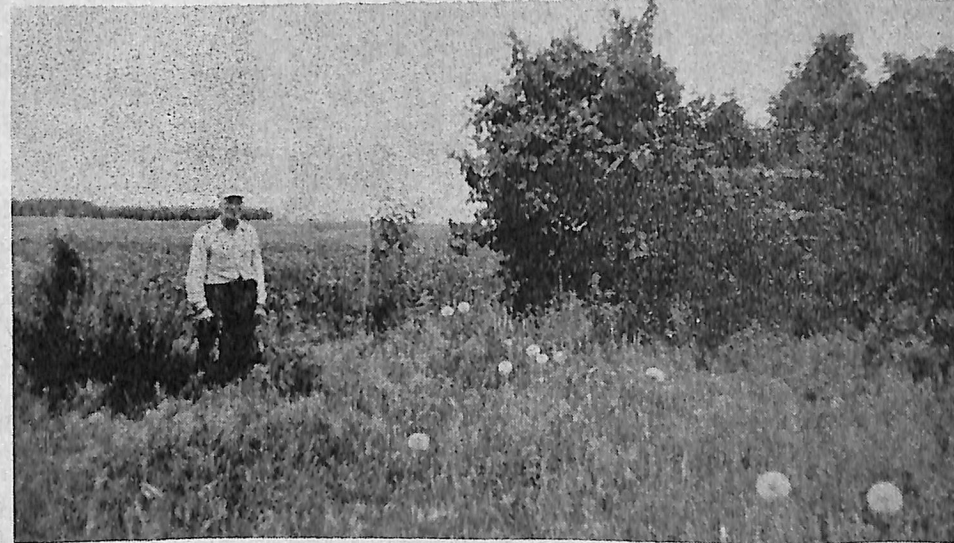
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The second St. John's Church, originally located at West Admah, now serves as a stable on the Fred Christensen farm east of Uehling, Nebraska



Almost hidden by weeds in the abandoned Argo cemetery, this tombstone marks the graves of two girls, aged three and eleven, daughters of the Danish pioneer, P. C. T. Munk



Mr. Emil Peterson stands where the old St. John's Church at Argo once stood. The church faced north (to the left in this picture), with the entrance approximately where Mr. Peterson is. It was on this spot that the Blair Synod (The Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church Association in America) was organized in September, 1884.

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theran Church—now the United Evangelical Lutheran Church.

A dozen miles or so west of Herman we found the first landmark we were seeking—the West Admah Cemetery, location of the second St. John's Church, which had split off from the original Argo congregation. Next we drove north three or four miles in search of Argo, following a road which ran between Burt and Dodge Counties. And here we came upon another cemetery, very near where Argo should have been according to the old map we carried. But the names on the tombstones indicated that this was a Swedish rather than a Danish cemetery, so we began stopping at nearby farmhouses to ask questions.

Two or three stops netted us bits of information. The last cemetery we had seen was called the Argo Cemetery, and as we had surmised, it had served a church of Swedish background. The old Argo Church, several people told us, had stood a mile south of the cemetery, on the west side of the road. That would put it in Dodge County, which surprised us—all the records we had seen said that Argo was in Burt County. Finally someone suggested, "Drive over to the east a mile and a half and talk with Mrs. Fred Christensen. She'll know."

When we arrived there, Mrs. Christensen was not at home, but I explained our search to Mr. Christensen. He listened a minute and then asked, "You're looking for the Old Danish church?"

"That's right," I told him.

"Well, there it is," he answered, pointing to a little barn some distance from the house.

For a minute I stared, doubting what he had said. Then I waved to Einar, who was waiting in the car, signaling him to join us. The three of us walked out for a closer look.

As it turned out, this was not the church building we were seeking. This was the **second** St. John's Church, the one that had stood in the West Admah Cemetery until it was moved to the Christensen farm and remodeled slightly to become a stable. No, Mr. Christensen told us, this was not the Argo church. That had stood a mile south of the Argo Cemetery on the west side of the road (the west side—Dodge County again), but had been torn down some years ago. But the town of Argo itself—actually just a country store, a smithy, and a post office—had been a mile east of the old Argo church. Yes, that was in Burt County, all right—but there was never a church located there. The only thing left of the Argo settlement

was an old pump.

We drove to the spot, looked around a bit and then, giving up the search, headed back for Blair. We had found an old Danish church, all right, but not the one we were after. The original St. John's Church and its precise location were still mysteries to us.

And then one evening in Blair, a friend introduced me to Mr. Maynard Andersen, who told me he had grown up in the Argo area. I described our search, and he assured me that we had been all around the spot we were seeking, but had missed it. The Swedish church, the one everyone had said was the Argo church, was located in Dodge County. But the old St. John's Church was in Burt County, a mile south and a half-mile east of the Argo pump. If we would go back and talk with Mr. Emil Peterson, who farms the area around the old cemetery, he could tell us what happened to the church.

Three weeks passed before I had a chance to run down this new clue, but finding myself in the area one afternoon, I decided to seek out the Emil Peterson farm. This was on April 8, a typical late winter day—skies cloudy and sullen, wind from the northwest with a gnawing chill in it. But the roads were fairly dry and passable, and there was no trouble locating the Peterson farm by following Maynard Andersen's directions from the old pump.

Mr. Peterson wasn't in, but his wife directed me to the little churchyard, which lay just to the east of their in-road. No, the church was not there anymore, she said. It had been sold many years before, and she thought it had been torn down. But it might have been moved. Her husband would know, but he was working in the field. I thanked her and drove out to the sagging fence which encloses the old St. John's Cemetery.

Someone had told me that the cemetery had been abandoned to livestock, but this appeared not to be the case. The dilapidated fence was still adequate to keep farm animals out, although wild grapevines had claimed it and were tangled in the wire. As I found a low spot and picked my way between barbs, a frightened rabbit ran across the old churchyard. The sheep in the adjoining pasture bleated loud protests against my intrusion, but I proceeded with my investigation, and they gradually lost interest.

The tombstones were few and far between—a couple along the south side of the little plot, one a few feet north of center, and two or three more to the west. The latest date I could find was 1906. Some of these stones were leaning badly and so worn that

the inscriptions could hardly be made out. Then I noticed a small marker almost hidden in the extreme northwest corner of the graveyard. It was cluttered with brush and grapevines, and two rugged cedars of considerable age towered over it. I pushed my way through the tangle and made out the Danish—"Født 1881 — Død 1883." *Old church marker*

For a few moments I stood in silence in this old churchyard, the resting place of men and women long forgotten, while the cold wind rustled the cedar branches overhead and sent a chill through me. Just where had the old church stood? Probably on the east side of the yard facing north, since the old gate opened on the road to the north.

Here was the location, at least, where the Blair Synod was born. But the fate of the old church building was still a mystery. There was still some searching to be done.

No opportunity for a third trip offered until a Saturday morning in late June, the 21st. I picked Einar up about ten o'clock and we found the Peterson farm, although our main landmark, the old pump at Argo, had been torn out since our last visit.

Mr. Peterson himself came out to the gate to greet us as we drove up. He remembered the old church well, he said, but it had been gone for many years—torn down sometime after World War I. The lumber had been used in a house just east of the town of Craig.

This ended our quest for the old church. But Einar wanted to see the cemetery, so we strolled over. Rank growth of weeds had changed it since my last visit in April. The fence was matted with grapevines, and prairie grasses grew in profusion with wild roses, milkweeds, daisies, and patches of asparagus. The mulberry trees dropped ripe, black berries on the ground as we brushed by them, and wild plum and other growth jammed the corners of the little plot.

Only a half-dozen tombstones remained, although dense patches of flag, obviously planted long ago but run wild through the many years of neglect, showed clearly that there were numerous unmarked graves also. The remaining stones could still be read, with their Danish names—Hansen, Mogensen, Munk, Andersen.

Mr. Peterson noticed that we were still looking around the little cemetery, and he climbed over the sagging wire fence and joined us. When asked where the old church had stood, he walked over to the east fence line, to a point just south of center. About here was the front of it, he said, and it faced north. The present fence runs roughly through the middle of

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	Total	10 Mo. Period Ending Mar. 1, 1960 Synodical	Calendar Yr. 1959 Luth. World Action
Budget—Regular			
Forward Phase		\$438222.00	\$53114.00
Previously acknowledged		82500.00	
Castro Valley, Calif., Faith Luth. Church for Synodical Dues	\$37697.71	\$22463.88	\$15233.83
Faith Luth. Church for LWA	500.00	500.00	
Los Angeles, Calif., Mrs. Helen Duerr for T.B. Sanatorium at Santal Mission	40.00		40.00
North Hollywood, Calif., Valley Luth. Church for Synodical Dues \$334.25, Santal Mission \$6,	10.00	10.00	
Forward Phase \$100, LWA \$70.35	510.60	440.25	70.35
San Francisco, Calif., Ansgar Luth. Church given to Pension Fund; Ansgar Congregation in memory of Mr. J. P. Andersen \$15; Mr. and Mrs. C. Krause in memory of Mr. J. P. Andersen \$5			
Sierra Madre, Calif., Bethany Luth. S. S.; \$30 for Sudan Mission and \$30 for South Am. Mission	20.00	20.00	
Selma, Calif., Pella Luth. S. S. \$66.79 for the Japan Mission and \$55.51 for the China Mission*;	60.00	60.00	
from the Daily Vacation Bible School for LWA \$72.43			
Whittier, Calif., St. Andrew Luth. Church for Forward Phase \$32.87, Synodical Dues \$176.94, LWA \$23	139.22	66.79	72.43
Aurora, Colo., Altura Luth. Church for Synodical Dues	232.81	209.81	23.00
Kankakee, Ill., Trinity Luth. Church for Synodical Dues	140.00	140.00	
Council Bluffs, Ia., Our Savior's Luth. Church for Synodical Dues \$151.84; \$36 in memory of Mrs. L. P. Madsen for Foreign Missions	45.00	45.00	
Elk Horn, Ia., Elk Horn S. S. for LWA	187.84	187.84	
Hamlin, Ia., Hamlin Luth. Church for Missions	23.00		23.00
Royal, Ia., Bethlehem Luth. Church for Synodical Dues	41.45	41.45	
Scranton, Ia., Mr. and Mrs. Harold Christensen, Scranton, Ia., and Mr. and Mrs. Leonard Jensen, Glidden, Ia., for support of native Evangelist, Santal Mission	700.00	700.00	
Elk Horn, Ia., Elk Horn Luth. Church given by Elk Horn Jr. Luther League for LWA	10.00	10.00	
Humboldt, Ia., Trinity Luth. Church for Synodical Dues	22.00		22.00
Moorhead, Ia., Bethesda Luth. Church given by Bethesda Luth. S. S. for Sudan Mission	100.00	100.00	
Moorhead, Ia., Bethesda Luth. Church for Synodical Dues	8.00	8.00	
Portland, Me., Emmaus Luth. Church for Synodical Dues	87.00	87.00	
Milton, Mass., R. C. Panduro Rasmussen in memory of his wife for the Pension Fund	199.99	199.99	
Sidney, Mich., Sidney Dorcas Club for South America Mission \$25, for Sudan Mission \$25	5.00	5.00	
Sidney, Mont., Pella Luth. Church, Mrs. Chris and Otto Dige in memory of Mr. Lars Grovasen (Oklahoma) for LWA	50.00	50.00	
Sidney, Mont., Pella Luth. Church for LWA	5.00		5.00
Sidney, Mont., Mrs. F. Hansen in memory of Mr. Chris Norregard for LWA	418.90		418.90
Dannebrog, Nebr., Dannebrog Luth. Church given by Eva Christensen	1.00		1.00
Fremont, Nebr., First Luth. Church Lenten and Easter Offerings for LWA \$871.30; in memory of Mrs. Andrew Anderson for Foreign Missions \$38, Mrs. Bernhardine E. Juter for LWA \$100	10.00	10.00	
Omaha, Nebr., Pella Luth. Church for Synodical Dues	1009.30	38.00	971.30
Viborg, S. Dak., Spring Valley Luth. Church for Pension Fund \$41, Home Mission \$35, General Fund \$30, School Fund \$35	60.00	60.00	
Luck, Wis., First English Ev. Luth. Church given by Fred Petersen for Japan Missions	141.00	141.00	
Oregon, Wis., St. John's Luth. S. S. for LWA	15.00	15.00	
Waupaca, Wis., Trinity Ev. Luth. Church for Synodical Dues	81.78		81.78
	400.00	400.00	
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>\$42971.60</b>	<b>**\$26009.01</b>	<b>\$16962.59</b>

\* Not included in Synodical Quota. \*\* Included in this amount are special gifts for Forward Phase amounting to \$1,829.46.

Received with Thanks.

Blair, Nebraska, July 10, 1959.

P. V. Hansen, Treasurer

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of where the building once stood.

It was getting close to noon, so we thanked him for his interest and took our leave. Before we did, he asked if there was anyone in Blair—any church group or individuals—who might have an interest in the old cemetery, at least interest enough to repair the fence. We looked around again and appreciated what he meant—grass, weeds, and brush competing with each other on the graves, the few remaining tombstones leaning badly, the fence covered with vines and falling into disrepair. No, we didn't know of anyone. We got into the car and headed back toward town.

There it stands—the birthplace of the old Blair Synod, forerunner of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church. No sign or marker to indicate to the passing traveler that here, 75 years ago, a little group of men, both pastors and laymen, launched a venture of faith that has grown through the years.

One of the old tombstones bore a Danish inscription. The weathering of three-quarters of a century had blurred the middle portion of it beyond legibility, but the first and last lines could still be made out. Einar translated them for me.

"Blessed are the dead that die in the Lord . . . their deeds go with them."

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