

West Denmark

Lutheran Church

Luck, Wisconsin

West Denmark and the surrounding area was settled in the spring of 1869. The area had been chosen for Danish colonization the previous fall by M. C. Pedersen after he had traveled extensively throughout Minnesota, Iowa and Wisconsin looking for land that could be homesteaded at little cost. This land was available for fifty dollars for forty acres, with thirteen dollars down payment. Up to this time the only white inhabitants were William Foster and Dan Smith. Foster had built an inn and trading post on the west shore of Big Butternut Lake on the St. Croix to Clam Falls Trail in 1857. Dan Smith had started a saw mill there in 1868.

The official establishment of the West Denmark Lutheran Church was on the evening of June 2, 1873, though early families had held worship services in each others homes since their first arrival. They were served from time to time by a Norwegian minister, Pastor O. Olsen. Pastor Jens Petersen, educated in the Askov Folk High School in Denmark, came to serve the congregation in the summer of 1874.

The second pastor, K. S. Norgaard, who arrived in 1880, attempted to establish a folk high school in 1884. Because Danes from other "colonies" found the distance and the difficulty of travel into the northern Wisconsin woods too discouraging, his dream was abandoned after one year.

In 1886 the school building and parsonage Pastor Norgaard had built were bought by the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Synod, and the first Danish seminary in America was founded. Of the number of young men who received training there, sixteen entered the ministry of the Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church. The seminary was closed when factional strife within the synod caused a schism.

A church building had been the dream of the early settlers for many years, but there was no pressing need because the seminary building and the public school building were available. In 1899, however, the building of the first church was begun. It was designed by Niels Hansen, a member of the congregation, a farmer, and a man skilled in building. This church burned on the 9th of September, 1937, after being struck by lightning.

The corner stone for the second church building was laid on November 14, 1937. The church was designed in the style of old country churches in Denmark by Jes P. Smidt, a member of the congregation. The altar, altar rail, pulpit and the pictures that decorated the walls were also the work of Jes Smidt. The work of this Danish wood carver, who was eighty-four years old at the time this work was done, may still be seen in many other churches throughout the country. This church, together with all its treasures of pictures and wood carving, was destroyed by a fire of unknown origin on the morning of June 10, 1985.

The present church building again reflects the architecture of many rural Danish churches. The basic plans and design are a composite of many ideas considered over a period of two years of planning and building. It incorporates touches of both the modern and the traditional. The congregation has attempted to make use of the beautiful setting of woods and lake, both in the way the church is situated above the lake and through the use of windows that give a feeling of being in harmony with nature, even as one worships protected from the elements of weather. Someone has remarked: "It just feels good to be here."

The church has been built almost entirely by members of the congregation. The general contractors are three brothers who have done the actual building, added many personal touches and directed the volunteer labor. The chancel furniture is also the work of church members-- two brothers, grandsons of Jes Smidt whose work decorated the previous church. The two side chairs were made by this man for the old Luck Lutheran Church building. The pews and chairs are manufactured by the Northland Church Furniture Company of Luck.

The bell has a history of its own. It first called members of the St. Peter's Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church of East Port Chester, Connecticut, to worship beginning on Easter Sunday 1907. After the merger of that congregation with the Our Savior's Lutheran Church of Fairfield, Connecticut, the bell lay in disuse until our need was made known. It is inscribed in Danish with the Christmas message of: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace and good will to all mankind". This message is repeated on the lecturn and has become the motto and symbol of the West Denmark Lutheran Church.

This is a church built for the future, grounded in tradition, cooperatively planned and built, and dedicated, not as a monument to the past nor to its builders, but to a community of God's people living in harmony with each other and with nature.

The glacial stone placed before the main entrance of the church was dug from the basement excavation where it has lain for fifteen thousand years. It is a fitting memorial to the early settlers--unpretentious, square, hard, but with the softened edges that come with hard work, suffering and caring. It symbolizes the toil of the first settlers as they cleared the land of trees and stones to gain tillable land to sustain themselves and their children.

The stone stands almost in the center of where two previous churches have stood. In this way it may also symbolize the durability and stubbornness of this congregation in building again and again.

An earlier monument of concrete was erected in 1894 to commemorate the first twenty-five years of the community. The Danish inscription reads: Erected by Danish men and women.

The present parsonage was built in 1943. The first parsonage built at West Denmark still exists; it was moved to Luck in 1907 and still stands, very much altered, on Park Avenue, midway between Main Street and old East Luck. The original seminary building, converted to serve as parsonage in 1907, was destroyed by fire in 1943.

Basic to the Grundtvigian and the Danish Folk School tradition is the principle that the spiritual, the social, the physical, the artistic and the intellectual aspects of human life are all God given and important. It was in this tradition that the Parish Hall was built in 1915 by the Young Peoples' Society. Its purpose was to serve as a meeting place for social gatherings, as a lecture hall for speakers, as a gymnasium for the instruction in Danish Gymnastics, as a theater and a place for enjoying folk games and dances.

The stone planter and the historical plaque by the Parish Hall commemorates the Danish Seminary. The bell is the same bell that called the congregation to worship for the first twenty-five years of its existence in the little public school house that was located on the corner of the crossroad just north of the Parish Hall.

The date and author of this brochure are unknown.

It was published on the group Facebook page of West Denmark Community History.