

Faith of their fathers lives at Melrose Lutheran

SOUTH OF MICHIGAN, N.D. — Lois Pautz's wheelchair rolled right up to the front pew where I sat. We met when she turned to me with tears in both of her eyes and a neighborly smile on her face.

in the  Spirit

"You can't believe how happy I am to be here," Lois said. "I started planning six weeks ago to get here. I had people

lined up, and a week ago, they said they couldn't do it so I had to go to other sources."

As it turned out, Lois' cousin, Alfred Peterson, Petersburg, N.D., and his wife, Alida, made the 190-mile round trip to Arthur (N.D.) to get Lois so she could attend the once-a-summer worship service in the old Melrose Lutheran Church.

"Lois really enjoys it," Alida said, "and Alfred never says no."

Founded in 1887, Melrose folded in 1974 because of dwindling numbers. All these years, it's been there on the prairie, lonely, yet dearly loved by for-



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mer members. The church was damaged by arson in 1978, then restored as a historical landmark in time for its 100th anniversary in 1987. Since then, there's been this yearly service plus a few baptisms, funerals and weddings.

Lois, who has multiple sclerosis, lives in a nursing home. She was baptized, confirmed and married in Melrose, and it means the world for her to return to all the wonderful memories.

She met up with more cousins — Mary Bagne, Milton Barney, Avis Madson and Oneal Johnson were among the 75 who came to Melrose on a beautiful sunny Sunday in July.

"We grew up in this church," said Mary of Lakota, N.D. "Our farm was in those trees right over there," she said, pointing out the window. "This was our playground. We used to play on the tombstones, and we would come in and play pretend church. You never locked the church. Heavens no."

"I love coming back," Avis added. "It's like a homecoming."

Lois Orwick honored me with an invitation to speak at the service, which she organizes each year.

"We have come to affirm our historic faith," she said as she led the congregation in a responsive reading. "And to worship the God of our mothers and fathers."

It seemed fitting that my theme should be "The Heritage of Faith," and that the congregation would sing "Faith of Our Fathers," as Jason Flom pumped and played the 114-year-old organ.

I'd met Jason before and heard his wonderful baritone voice when he played for a service like this in Hitterdal Lutheran Church, also closed, but lovingly cared for by David Haslekaas, a Milton, N.D., farmer.

This time, Jason brought tears to my eyes when he swung around to play the piano and sing:

"Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on, help me stand, I am tired, I am weak, I am worn."

Such fitting words, not only for people, but for old country churches now closed.

After the service, Delores Lillehaugen catered a delicious picnic lunch of smoked turkey, homemade buns, potato salad and more. She's provided the food for this special day since 1987.

"They are easy people to please," Delores said, "and wonderful people to work with."

Picnic tables were set up in the shade of the church, and who should I see there but Herbert Krueger, Niagara, N.D., who every spring brings me a bouquet of wild crocus.

Delores was right; these indeed are wonderful people, every single one.

Each year, Selma Chambers, who grew up near Melrose and was baptized and confirmed there, comes from Minneapolis. "It's really nice to see the people," she said. "A lot of people have passed away, and there have been a lot of changes, but it's still nice to go."

Two weeks before that Sunday in July, I stopped at Melrose to walk through its peaceful cemetery. The crimson peonies were in bloom and a

gentle breeze prompted little white daisies to wave a welcome. I ignored the blackbirds who scolded me for intruding.

As I walked around, I read names: Hillebrand, Anderson, Skaggs, Orvik, Kjorsvik, Orwick, Johnson, Opstad, Orseth, Barney, Hoover, Swenseth.

Like I do when I visit the graves of my forefathers and mothers, I thanked God for all those who left behind them a heritage of faith for future generations.

As I stood there in the quietness, I could almost hear Christian artist Steve Green sing:

"After all our hopes and dreams have come and gone, and our children sift through all we've left behind. May the clues that they discover and the memories they uncover become the light that leads them to the road we each must find."

It's my prayer that all of those who come after those of us who are still here, will discover that we've been faithful, and that the fire of our devotion can light their way. May the footprints we leave, lead them to believe, and the lives we live inspire them to obey.

It seems that's what's happening at Melrose.

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Nelson County Arena

Melrose Lutheran Church Yearly Worship Service Held

by Jeannette Klevberg

Once a year the great bell of Melrose Church is heard across the prairie. Although the congregation voted to disband in 1976, because of people like Lois Orwick, the former members come together for a yearly worship service and the bell is heard to ring out over the land. They are the third, fourth and even the fifth generations of the founders of the church. When asked why she arranged this service every year she simply said, "Because I love this church and because I love these people." The names are the same Johnson, Orwick, Flem, and Opstad. A walk through the cemetery confirms the existence of the forefathers. The farmstead of Jan Hover, in whose home the church was organized, no longer exists. But anyone can point to the very spot where the farmstead was. The church is 8 miles south and two miles east of Michigan, ND.

Before the service began, Jason Flom played the old familiar hymns, "What a Friend We Have in Jesus" and "Rock of Ages". The hymns were played on a 100 year old pump organ. The cabinet of the organ was hand carved and very well kept. It was not possible to know how hard he worked to play so smoothly. The sermon was given by Carolyn Sager. A noon meal was served and then the visiting began. As she pushed her oxygen tank ahead of her, a tiny gray haired lady said, "I come because I taught school here and I stayed in many of the homes." Selma Orseth Chambers, 87 years old, said "I come every year because this was my home. I was baptized and confirmed here. This is my roots." A resident of

the Arthur Nursing home said, "I was married her and every year someone comes for me so I can be here." It was a good day.

The church was built in 1908. The walls are still paneled in the original ornate tin paneling. All of the altar furnishings are original. It is truly a beautiful church. Each member gave \$100.00 to the building fund. Some one proudly said, "Oh, but the Ladies Aid gave \$1,400.00. In 1946 the congregation rented 40 acres of land and seeded it into flax. All the work and much of the seed was donated. With the proceeds a furnace room and a new foundation was completed.

The congregation voted to disband in 1976. The doors closed and locked. In 1978 the church was damaged by arson. The church as it was stood until 1985 when a small group of members voted to restore the building as a historical landmark. It is a landmark set high on a hill and the very tall steeple looks out over the surrounding community.

The paper work has begun in hope of having the church listed in The National Register of Historic Places.

Dale Bently, the executive director of Preservation North Dakota, is a nonprofit group that is trying to halt the demise of the rural churches. A state wide initiative to preserve endangered churches through a "Save America's Treasures" grant. As the rural population leaves the land, many many rural churches are left to the mercy of the elements. With their steeples visible for miles the churches have been beacons of faith and hope for rural life. 75% of all the closed churches are in the small towns. A way of life is rapidly coming to a close. That is why former members, and neighbors are banding together to keep their church intact with a yearly service or a heritage service. Churches are not being built like the old churches. "Remove not the ancient landmark, which thy father have set" Proverbs 22:28.