

The Life of a Saint

*Helig, helig, helig ar Herren
Jorden ar who av hans harlighett*

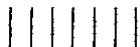
Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of Hosts
The earth is full of his glory.

HYMN QUOTED BY MY FATHER

On a trip to Nebraska with my family, we attended services at the Methodist church in Magnet where my father had been baptized. Even though his parents were Lutheran, they had attended the Methodist church because no Lutheran ones were nearby. The Swedish state religion had been Lutheran since the 1500s, but the Mainquists accepted the temporary change in denomination just as they accepted the change from Swedish to English.

The small white wood frame building was typical of rural areas; the congregation was even smaller. The church didn't have an ordained minister; instead a seminarian who had problems finishing school preached. He talked on the story of God telling Moses through a burning bush, "You are standing on holy ground." As a girl of twelve, I knew the story because I had sturdy Lutheran Sunday School training.

This misfit seminarian, however, took the story one step further. He said, "You are standing on holy ground. You are called by God." The poetry and power of the message stunned me because I was accustomed to sermons on the finer points of Martin Luther's theology on justification by faith versus justification by works. I was in the church where my father had been baptized fifty years ago, and I was standing on holy ground.



Dad didn't talk about the Methodist church because he only attended until he was eight when his family moved from Magnet to Buffalo, Minnesota. That year, 1919, the family began attending Carlslund Lutheran Church, a country Swedish congregation about one mile from the family farm (the site of the present day Zion Lutheran Cemetery). Like other ethnic groups in America, those Swedish farmers made the church as a community center. By using Swedish as both liturgical and social languages, Swedish was also preserved for a few generations.

The Carlslund services were in Swedish, typical of the Augustana Synod of the Lutheran church. According to *Swedes in Minnesota* by Nordstrom, even in the face of

bitter criticism of foreign language usage during World War I, 85 percent of Augustana Synod churches continued to conduct their services in Swedish. Now it is used only sparingly on special occasions such as Christmas or funerals.

In the cemetery near Carlslund rested the Swedish Lutheran homesteaders--the Hoaglunds, the Illstrups, the Nelsons, the Bengstons--who founded Carlslund Lutheran Church. Some of their descendants attended Carlslund, and a few became my father's lifelong friends. Vernon Illstrup was my father's best man, his daughter Lee Ann was in my sister Laurie's high school class. I invited Vernon to my wedding, but now with increased mobility, such multi-generation relationships are rare.

Like the church in Magnet, Carlslund had a plain white exterior, but at the top of the steeple was a traditional Swedish touch--a cross above a ball. Perhaps it symbolized Christ's reign over the world. The interior was also distinctly Swedish. Above the altar, Isaiah 55:6, "*Soken Herren medan han later sig finnas; afalla honom medan han ar nara,*" was inscribed, and where the eaves began, a stenciling in a scroll pattern circled the sanctuary. With no electricity, lamps hanging from the ceiling lit the church. Behind the church a small barn stabled the minister's horses, and nearby were two outhouses.

John Moody, a descendent of a founder of the congregation, played the pump organ, dug the graves, and taught Sunday School. Since Moody never made much money dynamiting stumps and rocks, no tombstone was erected when he died. When Dad saw the small tin marker with his name, he was angered. He told me of Moody mowing the cemetery and running to town with the lawnmower two miles and one-half on Highway 25 to get gas. Dad explained, "Moody never had any money. He never managed to keep things together, but he always worked." Later, the Wandersee brothers, Moody's neighbors, paid for a granite stone to grant the man earthly honor, and my father was content.

The Swedish services were held regularly at 11 a.m. on Sundays, with some Sunday school classes in English and others in Swedish. Dad remembered John Hoaglund with his long white beard teaching children the Swedish alphabet. Dad said Hoaglund must have been seventy-five years old.

In the summer, a few children went to a "Swede school" on week days at Zion Lutheran in town to learn the language and customs. The Augustana Synod patterned these schools after the Swedish *folkskola*. The curriculum included reading the Bible, the catechism and Luther's Bible history in Swedish and singing native songs. My father's sister-in-law, Mabel Mainquist, became fluent in Swedish at the Zion "Swede school."

After a while, the minister from Zion preached in Swedish at Carlslund once a month, and then he went to Marysville, another country Swedish church, to conduct a similar service. However, John Hoaglund and Jim Anderson continued to conduct Sunday School

every Sunday, and then the efficient Illstrup sisters, Effie and Ethel, along with Ruby Anderson, took over.

Julota or Christmas services were at 6:30 a.m.--much earlier than regular Sunday services. That meant Roy, the oldest boy at the Mainquist home, rose at 4:00 to feed and groom the horses. He harnessed them to a green grain wagon box, narrow and deep, mounted on sled runners. The high walls of the grain wagon box insured younger brothers and sisters wouldn't jump or fall out. Hay bales provided seating.

Since the temperature was often subzero, my grandmother gathered blankets to keep her family warm for the ride to church. When Roy brought the sled to the house, everyone was dressed and ready to climb on. Then he clicked his tongue, snapped the lines, and drove the horses on the unplowed country road. At Carlslund Roy draped the blankets that had warmed his family on the horses. It was still dark, without a glimmer of dawn.

The church stove was hot because John Moody, the church caretaker, had heated it the night before. The Mainquists still wore their coats and overshoes to stay warm, but at least their breath wasn't visible.

The two Christmas trees were lit with candles, a real treat for the children because most homes didn't have Christmas trees due to the danger. Dad clearly remembered the Christmas trees that nearly reached the ceiling. "Two men walked around with sticks to light each candle, and then two boys with pails of water stood next to the trees. One time a tree caught fire, and it was quite exciting."

When the service ended at 11:00, the children got brown paper bags full of candy and unshelled nuts--perhaps as a reward for sitting so long. The service was long, but it reminded the immigrants of home and comforted them. It was a chance to worship the Christ Child and to wish neighbors "*God Jul!*" during the dark, cold Minnesota winter.

Another important part of Lutheran church life was confirmation. Dad sometimes rode bareback to town for his confirmation classes. When he reached the church, he tied his horse to a hitching post on the north side of the building. Inside the church, my father, with the other confirmands, stood facing the altar and recited the catechism in English.

It was 1925--the first year Zion conducted its confirmation classes in English. Dad's older sister Dora hadn't attended confirmation classes because she didn't know Swedish. The next year, 1926, the Augustana Synod would publish its first complete order of service in English. Harold Dixon wasn't as lucky. He memorized the Swedish catechism one year, and the next year he had to learn it again in English. My father remembered confirmation services being conducted in both Swedish and English.

Pastor Callerstrom asked groups of three or four confirmands to recite, and usually a leader emerged. Dad said, "Dora [his sister] and Dorothy Lieseth knew everything. I was

one of the slow ones."

For his confirmation in 1926, he wore a pinstriped double-breasted suit--his first long pants. Before the ceremony, he always wore knickers or bib overalls. The girls in his confirmation class are wearing new white dresses--mostly store bought.

In my father's confirmation class picture, his hair is parted down the middle, and expressionless, he faces the camera squarely. His face is already reddened from hours of farm work. The confirmation ceremony is as clearly a step toward manhood as taking a team of horses to the field for first time. (I can get the confirmation picture. It's sharp.)

The wedding ceremonies were rarely elaborate because there wasn't enough money, but the groom usually had the financial resources to support his future family. The bride wore a new dress (something that could be worn again) and held a bouquet of flowers. The groom wore a suit--not necessarily new. Almost always a maid of honor and a best man were witnesses, but usually no other guests were invited. Perhaps the parents attended the ceremony, and the honeymoon would be a short excursion within Minnesota.

Often children were born within a year of the wedding ceremony, but rarely before nine months. My grandmother warned my father's sister Dora that if she became pregnant before marriage, her father would not allow her to return home. While such circumstances for romance seem austere, they produced stable marriages and children with fathers.

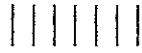
As a farmer, my father talked easily about the final ceremony of life--funerals. When someone in the Carlsund congregation died, John Moody rang the bell once for each year the deceased person had lived. Since it was a small congregation, it was possible to guess who had died by the last chime. Dad remembered doing farm work alone and hearing the death knell across the fields. It was especially sad when the bell rang only a few times for the death of a child.

With no mortuaries, bodies were prepared for burial at home. Dad said it was a law that the doors in homes had to be built wide enough for a coffin to pass through. When he was young, a family member sat with the body day and night. When he was older, people continued to visit the homes to pay their respects. A "house service" was held for the family before the coffin was transferred to the church for the funeral.

My father told me that in the winter, when the ground was frozen, John Moody started a blazing fire above a grave site to prepare for a burial. When the fire softened the ground, John put it out and dug the grave deeper. Then he set another fire and covered the grave. When the ground was softened again, Moody dug the grave yet deeper. The process was repeated until the grave was six feet deep. It was a hard, lonely job with little thanks in twenty below weather, but my father never forgot the faithful John Moody.

In 1938 the old Swedish church built in 1887 was torn down, and the congregation

united with Zion Lutheran in town. With cars and better rural roads, country churches were less needed in Buffalo as throughout the United States. However, my grandmother lost yet another link with Sweden and so did I.



When I took confirmation classes at Zion Lutheran in 1965, my mother drove me to church in our big green Chevy Bel Air, a car that would have later been termed a gas hog. My class sat in small desks with blonde Formica tops in a Sunday School room with cinder block walls. The girls wore dresses, none of the boys wore jeans, and Pastor Cornell wore his clerical collar.

I had seen Pastor Andrew Cornell's tall figure in his long black robe at a distance from the pews. He led the confession, "I have sinned against thee by thought, word and deed," every month before Communion and absolved communicants of their sins. He wasn't God, but he was His representative.

When I had released time classes Wednesday mornings during the school year in 1966, Pastor Cornell shared his liberal beliefs with my confirmation class that he didn't include in his sermons. We learned about the effect of poverty and discrimination on African Americans, or Negroes, as they were called then. He quoted someone who called a rabbi a Christian because he worked diligently for civil rights for blacks. During my confirmation class, he talked about a mother placing her child in a bathtub at night so the rats wouldn't bite him. He also told of a woman on welfare who was given a bouquet of flowers. It brightened her outlook so much she cleaned her dirty apartment.

Another of Cornell's concerns was the abandonment of Kitty Genovese in New York City. The young woman screamed as loud as she could, but none of her neighbors called the police and she died a brutal death from stabbing. During Cornell's confirmation class, I learned of the Warren Commission's prediction that someday corridors of safe travel would allow whites to pass through dangerous neighborhoods. That minister didn't just confirm me; he changed my views forever.

This contrasted sharply with what I heard from my father. The books I read in later in high school supported Pastor Cornell's liberal views and rebuked my father's conservative ones. For a while, I lost respect for Dad because his attitudes seemed so conservative to me. I didn't understand the complexity of human nature and the influence of culture and history; it took a long time for me to learn.

A couple of years later, when I was high school senior in 1970, I read most of the death row inmates were blacks sentenced for raping white women. I was angry not only at the injustice, but that the church of Pastor Cornell had seemingly not taken a public stand on an issue important to me, but continued to emphasize Sunday services, women's

organizations and Luther League.

I wondered, "Did the church leadership not know something a high school senior did? Or didn't they care? Was "justification by faith" all that was needed for a godly life in my Lutheran church?" I thought some of Luther's detested "works" were required for these ignored black men, but I never dared voice such heresy in a small town church or a farm home.

This Southern issue involved another race--many miles culturally and geographically from the Swedish neighborhood services at Carlslund. No wonder the younger and older generations were angry and confused.

With the passage of twenty-five years, I realized that most people only have time for jobs, families and friends; consequently political issues are a low priority. I learned to respect my father for his devotion to work, friends and family. In fact, I bragged to an Episcopal priest a little about my father. He replied my father was "a saint--someone who lights up the room when he enters it." The priest told me the lives of such people are rarely recorded and urged me to write a book about my father. I said nothing because I was daunted at the task of writing about a man who had lived so long and so well.

No matter who you were or the size of your last bonus, Dad made you feel important. When you saw him with his snappy cap and red suspenders, you knew a charming conversation conjured out of the whiff of a wind would soon cast its spell. You could see his interest in you in the way all his gold crowns showed in his smile, the way his blue eyes sparkled, the way he leaned a little forward, the way he said "Yah." He always recognized people's strengths and mostly ignored their weakness. He never mentioned my sisters' extraordinary successes, and yet he appreciated the lesser achievements of others.

Even though my writing was worth nothing on the market place, he blessed it. When I told him, "I've given my life to my writing," he replied, "That's a good thing." This comforted me when I was under-employed, wondering if I would ever get a job with a living wage. My father was a saint to others, but he was my patron saint.

Two hundred people came to his funeral. One grandniece drove 300 miles, a business couple closed their store to attend the service, and the memorials were generous. The Wright County *Journal Press* printed my father's obituary and photograph on the cover page, and the local radio station, KRWC, broadcast a program about my father on the day of the funeral and later repeated sections of his eulogy. His grave was visited like a shrine.

I haven't visited his grave, but I tell my father about my life, our family and his friends and neighbors. I even ask him, "Wouldn't this be a nice day to ride the mules?" Sometimes, to my surprise and joy, I feel--even from the grave--my father's love and encouragement for the love of a saint never ends.