

On July 9, 1984, the La Crosse Commission on Historic Sites placed a commemorative placque on Immanuel Lutheran Church at 1201 Avon Street. Participants in the ceremony observed the recognition of a church serving members in today's world, that had its roots in a historic meeting in 1859, when German pioneers established the First Evangelical Lutheran congregation in La Crosse.

La Crosse had been incorporated as a city in 1856, though much of its area remained only rolling prairie extending from the Mississippi River to the bluffs.

The following years brought a surge of European immigrants to the prairie land. Among the immigrants were German speaking people of various Lutheran affiliations.

On April 22, 1859, a group of German men gathered to protest what they considered a liberal, heterodox Lutheran influence in the community. Upon their adoption of a constitution and by-laws, the first worshipping community on the western border of Wisconsin dedicated to the Gospel message of orthodox, confessional Lutheranism was organized.<sup>1</sup>

Seeking a place for worship and a church school, the new congregation purchased a Methodist church building near Cass and Fifth. For years, northside members had to endure long treks over the wretched, plank marsh road in all kinds of weather to attend southside church services.<sup>2</sup>

In 1888, with a constantly expanding north La Crosse population, First Lutheran Pastor C. G. Reim, concurring with the Wisconsin Synod, moved to establish an independent northside congregation.

Enthusiastic church members met on April 29, 1888, in the home of C. F. Heinke. Here, with Wisconsin Synod missionary Pastor F. Stromer, they organized and incorporated as Emmanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church of La Crosse. Placing great emphasis on religious education, the members immediately outlined plans for the establishment of a church school.

In addition, a six member council was chosen, referred to as a kirchenrath in the minutes of that early meeting recorded in the German language. The minutes also state that Heinke was elected president of the council and Henry Kinder, secretary.

The red, brick Heinke home at 1352 Liberty (then known as Berlin Street before World War I) became church headquarters with religious services sometimes conducted there. Today, the home, still on the corner of Liberty and Sill, is a painted white brick apartment house.

The new congregation chose the southeast corner of Avon and St. Paul for the building of its combination church and school. According to Emmanuel Lutheran's 1933 Jubilee Book, old timers remembered the spot as a low, wet area popular as a neighborhood swimming hole which was also great for duck hunting.

Emmanuel Lutheran School occupies the site today. A first school built at that location in 1929 was razed for the construction of the new school in 1981. The church, built there in 1888, was sold in 1929 and moved to the southeast corner of Liberty and St. James. Only the tall, narrow front of the building, which is now sided in white aluminum, would remind one of its earlier function as the Emmanuel house of worship from 1888 to 1907.

The original church was small, but it soon became the spiritual and social center for the people, around which the everyday happenings in their everyday lives took place.

Early membership rolls list names of Will, Holl, Hettman, Boetcher, Brinkman, Bauch, Limpert, Klatt, Jahn, Lachowski, Maier, Mueller, Rick, Retzlaff, and Wittenberg - men who were railroad workers, carpenters, blacksmiths, or merchants.

Money was tight for the church in the years following the Depression of 1893, but with incredible zeal, loyalty, and generosity the people added electricity and new furnishings to the church, donated to the building of the new Lutheran Hospital, and enlarged and redecored their school, which was located on the ground floor of the church.

Emmanuel Lutheran's growth continued into the next decade. People new to the area as well as a new generation of congregational families added numbers to the church census rolls. But growth brought problems.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, English language skills were fast becoming a necessity in America. In 1904, a majority of Emmanuel members recognizing this need, replaced German language textbooks with English ones in their schoolrooms. Others, used to the old ways, resisted the transition from the German language to the English. During the following years two Sunday church services, one in German, another in English, were needed to accomodate church members, until a strong wave of Americanism after World War I replaced the German sentiment.

Apparently, crowding became a problem in the northside church by 1907, for minutes of April meetings in that year indicate plans for the erection of a new church.

The lot at the northwest corner of Avon and St. Paul, chosen as the building site, was purchased for \$750. Pastor Gotthold Thurrow and parishioners Retzlaff, Schmidt, Brinkman, Manke, Zunker, Eberhardt, Bidner, Genz, Horn, and Richter were appointed to a building committee.

On August 15, 1908, the congregation proudly celebrated the dedication of a beautiful new church to EMMANUEL, trusting in the meaning of that old Hebrew word "Lord with us."

Prominent local architects of the time, Andrew Roth and Hugo Schick, designed the church in Gothic Revival style. Albert J. Gutzke, builder, constructed the edifice at a cost of \$11,999. Gutzke's son, Walter E. Gutzke, was to serve the congregation later as pastor from 1935 to 1968.

Perhaps the most unique feature of the church is the impressive altar with its intricately handcarved spires pointing heavenward, forming a majestic frame for a large statue of Christ. Crafted by artisans of the E. R. Hackner Company of La Crosse, a church furnishing business from 1881 to 1967, the altar was a gift from the mother church, First Lutheran of La Crosse. In 1938, it was painted white and trimmed in gold. Today, special lighting highlights its magnificent beauty.

The altar from the original church was given to a Caledonia, Minnesota Lutheran congregation at the time the new church was built.

For years, the large East window of the choir loft, above the church entrance, had its stained glass beauty almost hidden behind an immense organ chamber. When a new, smaller organ unit was installed for the 1958 Golden Jubilee, the full splendor of the window, which depicts the parable of the Good Shepherd finding the lost lamb, was revealed with its glowing, brilliant colors.

At the present time Emmanuel's membership has grown beyond the Avon Street neighborhood, but for most of the 780 communicants the old, small-neighborhood feeling remains. The church continues to be an essential spiritual and social hub of their lives.

Down through the years Pastors of Emmanuel Church have baptized, confirmed, married, and presided at burial services for generations of family members. Most of them gave long devoted years to their work with the people. Reverend John Parcher, 803 St. Paul Street, has served as pastor from 1968 to the present day.

The world has changed considerably since the German community of believers first established their church in La Crosse. What has not changed is the conviction of faith which the Emmanuel worshiping community shares with those pioneers of long ago. Perhaps this enduring faith which has spanned the decades is best described in one of Emmanuel Evangelical Lutheran's jubilee books which expresses their belief in a "changeless Christ for a changing world."

References:

<sup>1</sup>Tom Schnick, "A Church Begins in a Frontier Community."

<sup>2</sup>Myer Katz, "The Plank Road," La Crosse Tribune, January 15, 1984, sec,  
Features, p. 17.

Emmanuel Evangelical Lutheran Church, La Crosse, Wisconsin Jubilee  
1888 - 1908 - 1933.

Emmanuel Lutheran Church, La Crosse, Wisconsin Golden Jubilee 1908-1958

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LA CROSSE COMMISSION ON HISTORIC SITES  
1985

**ADDENDUM:**

According to Joan Rausch, La Crosse architectural historian, Emmanuel Lutheran Church is a well-preserved example of early 20th century Gothic Revival church architecture in La Crosse. The style emphasizes simplicity and the use of traditional details reworked into a new design. The gabled church has relatively simple surfaces, constructed in white brick which was popular in the early 20th century. However, Rausch points out that pointed arch windows and doors, stained glass, and a pair of towers with hexagonal roofs flanking the facade and ornamented by stepped buttresses clearly show the structure's relationship to the Gothic style.