



Mission Festival

by Lenore Salvaneschi

St. Stephen's Lutheran Church and parsonage in Atkins, Iowa, c. 1920, home for the author during her childhood. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

No more dreaded yet exciting words existed in my childhood than Mission Festival. Undoubtedly it was because the words represented literally weeks of work and tension and anxiety on the part of my mother. It was strange that one day out of the whole year should be so significant. But the most important event of a preacher family's summer (exceeded only, in the minds of the children, by the "Grand and Glorious,") was Mission Festival Sunday.

Mission Festival came on a certain Sunday of the summer, chosen by each congregation on a

date not conflicting with that of another congregation, at which there would be two festival services with guest preachers. These guests were not necessarily missionaries (there weren't enough of these ordinarily to go around) but were very likely pastors from other congregations in the circuit. I never knew on what basis the preachers were chosen, but the local pastor certainly had to provide someone who would be a good speaker, and I suspect he also selected people who would be congenial to himself and to his family. The occasion lent itself to social as well as to religious refreshment.

Other congregations were always invited;

the host congregation prepared a refreshment stand; and in the days before World War II, many families made a day of it, attending forenoon and afternoon services, having a picnic lunch in between on the church grounds, and ending with the Walther League having a celebration with "party games," the acceptable name for square dancing, on the lawn in the evening. [The Walther League was the young people's organization of the Missouri Synod Lutheran churches.]

The local choir practiced feverishly to be able to show off the quality of its sopranos, and the parochial schoolteacher exercised his best

the compliment graciously, but inwardly may have thought wryly of his own "out of pocket" situation. I suspect that often he must also have been disturbed when the congregation sang "From Greenland's icy mountains to India's coral strands" having no inkling of the nineteenth century imperialism reflected in the hymn.

If all this was supposed to be so edifying, why should it instill such terror into the heart of the preacher's wife, our Mamma-Gusti? The unfortunate reason was that, whether true or not, each Frau Pastor in the



Representatives of various Benton, Linn, and possibly Iowa County Missouri Synod Lutheran parishes gather against the background of St. Stephen's church in 1923. While this was probably a Walther League rally, a similar crowd gathered for Mission Festivals. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

abilities on the organ. How many sermons were preached on the virtue of missionary (sometimes confused with charity) work at home and abroad, with emphasis upon the tangible expressions of concern for foreign fields. The emphasis upon fields "white with the harvest" never made much sense to me as a child, since fields covered with snow seldom were harvested in Iowa. Our congregation had the reputation of being one of the best contributors in the circuit to foreign mission endeavors. When other pastors congratulated Father upon his generous congregation, he acknowledged

German Lutheran congregations in Iowa in those days thought she was on trial. Mission Festival Sunday was her supreme moment of judgment by her peers, the other ministers' wives (and their husbands, for many a pastor compared his paragon of housekeeping virtue with others less efficient). And so, from Easter-tide on, until the second Sunday in June, our Mission Festival date, all the activities of the household were directed toward that one event.

The whole parsonage, every room of it, had to be cleaned. And housecleaning there was a

thorough affair. In the case of the bedrooms, *all* the clothing and bedding, with the exception of the mattresses, had to be hung outdoors on the lines to get the purifying rays of the sun. The mattresses in turn were carried down to the lawn and beaten frantically with rug beaters. I'm sure that when my mother finally owned an electric vacuum sweeper, its cleaning attachments, to her puritanical conscience, never really effected the proper cleaning of any mattress. Ceilings and wallpapered walls were swept with a broom, over which had been wrapped a soft cloth. Painted walls and woodwork were washed with soapsuds, floors were scrubbed, windows washed with a chamois and water and ammonia. Curtains were washed, and if they were "ecru" in color, given an infusion of coffee rinse, then stretched on curtain frames, merciless arrangements of lathes with tiny nails on which the edges of the curtains were impaled. It was impossible to stretch the curtains without also puncturing the fingers and skinning the knuckles. Usually, the frames were set at an angle against the south side of the



The author and her mother, Mrs. G. Rickels, relaxing in the parsonage orchard during a summer 1921 picnic. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

house, to get the most sunshine and to protect them from the strong winds. It was a tragedy if the whole contraption were blown down and the accursed procedure had to be gone through again.

This housecleaning process, much of it depending upon the cooperation of the weather, could take weeks to complete. Cleaning Father's study would usually be done while he was away at the Spring Pastoral Conference. This gave one a chance to dust all the books very carefully, to polish the glass of the bookcases and probably to varnish the linoleum on the floor, all without disturbing him.

The worst days were those when the bedrooms or parlor had to be cleaned, for one needed perfect weather for these activities. As mentioned before, bedding and clothes had to be put out to air, and in the case of the parlor, this meant that the big rug — our only one — had to be taken out into the front lawn and beaten. Both Mother and Father would be in a bad mood, for on the most perfect of spring days, when the air was heavy with the scent of



The author's younger brother, Robert, helping his grandmother, Beske Rickels, in the parsonage kitchen in 1925. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

spring flowers and the flickers were wild in the trees, Mother would need help in this cleaning and Father would yearn to be in the Maquoketa timber. Usually, because of her great anxieties, my mother's needs would predominate.

Not only the house, but also the yard and garden had to be in perfect shape and this was where my brother and I particularly had to help. Father did the planting, but my brother and I did the weeding, mowing and clipping, leaving the yard almost shorn.

As the great day approached, another cause of anxiety presented itself: the menu. What would we prepare for the guests? I'm sure that Mother always hoped that the guest preachers would not come the night before; that meant more meals to prepare at a time when the whole focus of her attention was on the Sunday dinner. On the other hand, if the men came the night before, they were less likely to bring their families with them. No matter what, it was an ordeal to plan the dinner. Without question, the entree had to be a roast, very likely of beef, baked in the oven of the old cookstove. Since the middle of June was usually hot and sultry, the joys of using the stove were nonexistent. There would be potatoes: this one time in the year, mashed and then put through a ricer, to be served with exquisite roast beef gravy. What vegetables were to be served? The question usually ended in the decision to have home-canned corn, perhaps beans, all sorts of relishes, beets, pickles, fresh celery, and coleslaw, of course, and then cherry pie for dessert at noon. My poor sister usually spent many minutes trying to whip the recalcitrant cream, which had been chilling for hours in the old cistern.

Imagine the logistics of the whole dinner: keeping the cookstove hot with cobs and wood, keeping some foods cool (milk and cream hung in the cistern, while everything else was placed in the basement, on top of the washing ma-

chine and benches), the setting of the table — two boards brought down from the attic, covered with the flannel liner, then the heavy linen tablecloth with the handmade lace insertion (ironed to perfection) and the "good" white china. In connection with the table settings, I shall never forget the one-upwomanship of a certain preacher's wife who was the feminine version of the *arbiter elegantiarum* for all the preachers' wives in the circuit. This lovely lady had a flair in dress and cuisine which was the envy of lesser souls who had not been blessed with the same degree of creativity. When the leader acquired a pink dinner service, and pink glassware to go with it, Mother — I think for the first time in her life — knew what envy meant. I well remember the time she accompanied Father to the county seat, where he often had to make hospital calls, and looked longingly in the window of a jewelry store which sold Noritake china. One bittersweet day, when she had received the final payment of the government insurance as one of the survivors of her brother, "missing in action" in World War I, she actually spent twenty dollars, after *much* searching of conscience, and thereafter rejoiced in *her* set of pretty green dishes.

At Mission Festival time, the orange blossoms south of the parsonage and Mother's climbing roses were in flower, and thus the centerpieces on the table and on the golden oak buffet were prepared with these fragrant blossoms. The altar in the church also would be decorated with huge bouquets of the bridal flowers, combined with peonies and feather fronds of asparagus, anchored solidly in fruit jars by members of the Ladies Aid.

Together with anxieties about the house and yard, about dinner and supper, there was the concern to be well dressed. Very likely Mother would have sewn a new summer dress for herself and for my sister, and probably made over one of hers for me. It was no small feat to juggle



A June 1922 pastors' picnic in Cedar Rapids. Again, while not a Mission Festival photograph, the summer setting is suggestive of Mission Festival. Mrs. G. Rickels is seated on the far right in the photograph, and the Reverend G. Rickels is standing fourth from the right. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

the preparation of the dinner and the dressing of the family in time for the first service at ten o'clock on Mission Festival Sunday. My brother and I often aggravated the tension by caring more for the offerings of the "stand" than the necessities of the "heathen" mentioned so frequently in the sermons. We tended to disgrace our parents by coming in at the last moment in less than crisply starched finery.

Very often the table had to be reset after we came home from church, for there might be visiting preachers in addition to the invited speakers and their families. There was such excitement in the house. The men would be in Father's study, saturating Mother's freshly laundered curtains with cigar smoke; the women would be in the parlor or a few of the kindly (or nosey) ones might try to help in the

kitchen. The children meanwhile were merrily acquiring grass stains or begging more nickels to get some pop at the "stand."

Father was always the gracious host, saying grace, then *Gesegnete Mahlzeit* and urging Brother John, or whoever was the honored preacher, to help himself. Through sweat and smiles, Mother, in her best dress and embroidered apron, managed to get through the dinner and dishes (with all the women guests expected to help, the fancy embroidered flour sack dish towels carefully laid out for them) almost in time for the afternoon service. This service was usually more crowded; the elders were well prepared, however, and placed the overflow on wooden plank benches which had been built under the fragrant catalpa trees the day before. The afternoon service usually



A view of the lush parsonage vineyards in 1923. Note the crooked ironwork of the church steeple in the background. The steeple was later removed and rebuilt. (G. Rickels Collection, SHSI)

brought out more preachers' families — I think most of them tried to "make the circuit" every summer — and Mother might be hard put to supply enough food for all the previously uninvited who came to supper. Minced ham, sliced roast, potato salad, more coleslaw from the dishpan in the basement, more jars of preserved pickles and relishes from the store in the fruit room, beautiful fresh bread and rolls baked the day before, jello whip made in crocks, chocolate cake with seven-minute frosting and white cake with lemon filling, Mother's specialties, all appeared on the table.

Finally, in the cool of the evening, after the many dishes had once again, perhaps twice again, been washed, the women relaxed in the rockers in the parlor. The preachers visited in the study or carried the dining room chairs outside to the lawn (who had heard of lawn furniture?), and smoked their cigars and pipes while the children chased fireflies and

played hide-and-go-seek in the grapevines and bushes.

The Walther Leaguers arrived in their Fords and Chevies (one family always came in a *Buick*) and took over the school yard, playing "We've Got a New Pig in the Parlor," and other party games with much energy and bouncing of partners. We children watched for awhile, then begged for one more ice cream cone from the "stand," and came home thoroughly sticky, sick, and exhausted from the excitement and unwonted *Schlueckerei*.

The guests ordinarily left by a prudent hour, eleven at the latest. The cars of the revellers stirred up the dust, the crickets sang, and huge bundles of wash waited for the next morning of boiling suds and sunshine. Once again, the whole family relaxed in the knowledge that the collection had been up to the congregation's standards, and Mother's reputation had been upheld. □

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CONTRIBUTORS

WILLIAM CHARLES LANG received his B.A. degree from Yankton College (S.D.) and his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in history from the State University of Iowa. He has done additional graduate work at the Universities of Minnesota and Michigan. He was a teacher, principal, and superintendent of schools at Kennebec, South Dakota. For thirteen years he taught and administered at Yankton College, spending two years as acting president. He joined the faculty of the Iowa State Teachers College in 1949. There, he served as professor of history, chairman of the humanities staff, head of the department of social sciences, dean of instruction, and vice-president of academic affairs. He was instrumental in helping to launch the humanities sequence in the general education studies at the college and helped guide the institution from teachers college through state college and finally to university status. His writing and published speeches have appeared in the *Journal of the American Speech Association*, the *Music Educators' Journal*, the *South Dakota Educational Association Journal*, the *Annals of Iowa*, *Vital Speeches*, and *Representative American Speeches, 1960-61*. He was coauthor of the high school text *The American Achievement*. The Freedoms Foundation gave him a special award for his defense of civil rights. The Massachusetts State College at Bridgewater conferred upon him the honorary Doctor of Humanities degree. Lang is currently

Professor of History Emeritus and at work on a history of the University of Northern Iowa.

H. ROGER GRANT, an Albia, Iowa, native, is a professor of history at the University of Akron in Ohio. A frequent contributor to the *Palimpsest*, his latest book, *Self-Help in the 1890's Depression*, was published in 1982 by the Iowa State University Press. Another work is forthcoming from the Northern Illinois University Press in DeKalb: *The Corn Belt: A History of the Chicago Great Western Railroad Company*.

LENORE SALVANESCHI was born in a Lutheran country parsonage in western Iowa. Her childhood was spent in a similar parsonage in southeastern Iowa. After graduation from Bethany Lutheran College in Mankato, Minnesota, and Valparaiso University in Valparaiso, Indiana, she received her graduate degrees in medieval history from the University of Iowa, Iowa City. Mrs. Salvaneschi has been the recipient of AAUW and Fulbright grants for postdoctoral study in Italy, and also a grant for summer study at the American School of Classical Studies in Athens. Until her retirement in 1969, she taught in the history department at Valparaiso University and was chairman of the history department at Marymount College, Palos Verdes, California. She now lives with her husband in Glen Ellyn, Illinois.