

The Little Brown Church in the Vale

At the edge of the village of Bradford stands a little, weather-beaten, old church, painted a quiet brown and half hidden among the trees. The bit of forest that civilization has left clustering about the building half hides and half discloses it; the short square belfry is only partly screened by the boughs of several oaks and a towering pine. This is the church immortalized in Dr. Pitts' lyric song "The Little Brown Church in the Vale".

The church itself is very plain — plain in a simple, homely way that gives to it a rare charm and beauty. In the simplicity and dignity of the structure are reflected the New England ancestry and training of the architect, the Reverend J. K. Nutting. The main gabled building, low and rather broad, is fronted with a dignified little tower. Everything is neat although unadorned; even the old doors of the Gothic portal are without ornament.

Little and plain as the church is, it represents courageous undertaking and noble sacrifice on the part of the inhabitants of now deserted Bradford. It was built just after a panic and during a period of inflated war prices. Money was practically unknown; Mr. Nutting indicates this when he writes that his cash salary for 1859 — four dollars — had been brought into the community by an Easterner.

In the year 1862 poverty due to war conditions compelled the parish to reduce the minister's salary from five hundred dollars to four hundred and fifty dollars payable in goods. With his characteristic energy, the young pastor not only accepted the reduction, but increased his already heavy burdens by making his acceptance conditional upon the building of a church.

The young men were in the army; those who remained were practically penniless, but they enthusiastically undertook the task. One man donated the lots, a second gave logs, and a third sawed them into lumber. A "bee" quarried the stone, which Leander Smith fitted into a slanting wall. Since his knowledge of masonry came from experience with the fences of Massachusetts, it happens that the foundation of the church has the same inward pitch that he habitually used in New England. The Reverend Mr. Todd, a friend of Mr. Nutting's father, now came to the aid of the little church. A collection from his Sunday school at Pittsfield, Massachusetts, bought the finishing lumber, which was hauled eighty miles by wagon from McGregor. "And so", Mr. Nutting says, "we finished the building."

Meanwhile the words of the song "The Little Brown Church in the Vale" had already been written. They had been inspired by the beauty of the spot upon which the church stands, but the picture of the building itself was purely imaginative. Dr. William Pitts, while visiting Bradford in 1857, was

impressed by the beauty of the valley that sheltered the little village. Leading from Bradford to Greenwood, a shaded nook on the Cedar River, was an inviting path that became the haunt of the young musician. Nearly every afternoon of his visit found him following the trail up through the grove of oaks and out across the plain to Greenwood. Just where the verdure of the forest merged into the blossoms of the prairie was a little glade that Dr. Pitts described as "an attractive and lovely spot". And this broadening of the wooded lane into the more open country, held for him an enchantment that found expression in his famous song. The place was also a favorite with the people of Bradford, and it was here, a few years later, that they built the Little Brown Church.

The song was written at Dr. Pitts' home in Wisconsin, but it was first publicly sung in the church which it eventually named. A passionate lover of beauty, the young man carried home with him a vivid picture of the little prairie valley, and embodied this vision in what the world knows as "The Little Brown Church in the Vale". Five years later, Dr. Pitts moved to Iowa and settled in the neighboring town of Fredericksburg, but twenty miles from the Little Brown Church, then in the process of construction. In taking charge of the musical organizations of the vicinity, he became the teacher of a little singing school at Bradford. In the spring of 1864, Mr. Nutting, who was a member of the Doctor's class, led the party to the church which, although

enclosed, was as yet unfinished; and here, to an audience seated upon improvised board benches, Dr. Pitts sang from his original manuscript the song "The Little Brown Church in the Vale". Thus the bare, unplastered walls that the lines immortalized were the first to echo their sweet melody.

Published by the H. M. Higgins Company of Chicago, the song became immensely popular. It was sung by the Fiske Jubilee Singers throughout the country and before the royal courts of Europe. Bradford's little church, already closely connected with the song, soon became definitely identified with it. The building, dedicated on December 29, 1864, only a few months prior to the publication of the song, had been appropriately painted brown. Whether this was due to the cheapness of brown paint or whether it is traceable to a desire to conform with the unpublished poem, will probably never be known.

The building that we know as the Little Brown Church expresses very well the sentiment of the lyric whose name it bears. It may be interesting to note just how the little church has fulfilled the statements and predictions of each stanza of the poem. Allowance must be made, however, for the fact that at the time of writing the nook selected by Dr. Pitts had never been popularly considered as the site for a place of worship, and that the church and graveyard of the song are the product of an idealistic imagination that felt no necessity for conformity with the real.

There's a church in the valley by the wildwood,
No lovelier spot in the dale.
No spot is so dear to my childhood,
As the little brown church in the vale.

The valley that shelters the church is charming in its simple beauty. The building stands at the edge of the break in the prairie. To the east, and yet really including the church within its borders, lies the vale, scatteringly wooded and appropriately set with the old-fashioned buildings. To the west stretches the blossoming prairie until it ends in the wooded skyline along the Cedar River. A few rods from the church, a wooden bridge spans the grassy-banked creek that courses through the valley. It all reminds one very much of an etching of an English landscape. Lofty oaks and stately pines still enshrine the little church, but the wildwood of the poem has gone with the life of the village that it surrounded. In the days when Dr. Pitts described the village as "a veritable beehive for industry", Bradford boasted of two saw mills, and these were so busy that the logs for the frame of the church had to wait several months before there was room for them in the mill yard. The size of the forest monarchs that once surrounded the church is indicated by a black walnut timber, three feet square and forty feet long, which supported the top saw in one of these mills. A very pretty grove still clusters about the little building, and though it is but a suggestion of the former wealth of verdure, it forms a glade that

at once secludes and dignifies the structure. The simple little church has sequestered itself among the protecting foliage, and there, enshrined in memories, it continues in its quiet homely way.

How sweet, on a bright Sabbath morning,
To list to the clear ringing bell,
Its tones so sweetly are calling,
Oh come to the church in the dell.

This praise of the bell is upheld in the love that the community bore it. Bells play a prominent part in many of Dr. Pitts' songs, but no other ever held for him the charm of the one whose soft enticing tones he immortalized. "The Bells of Shandon" may be as grand as the poet has pictured them, but you will never convince an old Bradfordite that they can rival the clear sweet tones of the bell that calls from the Little Brown Church. "The bell", it was called throughout the countryside, for it was the only one in the county and was the pride of all Bradford. Cast in Meneeley's famous foundry at Troy, New York, it was personally selected by Mr. Nutting because of its clear sweet tone. The bell was obtained through the benevolence of the young pastor's eastern friends; the inscription proclaimed it the gift of Mr. Thomas Cole and Catherine, his wife. Brought from Dubuque by wagon, the bell was rung almost the entire distance, and a considerable crowd gathered to view its entrance into the village, for the

arrival of "the bell" was an event in Bradford's history.

There close by the church in the valley,
Lies one that I loved so well.
She sleeps, sweetly sleeps 'neath the willow,
Disturb not her rest in the vale.

A pretty myth to the effect that Mrs. Pitts was buried at the Little Brown Church has grown around the sentiment that is expressed in this stanza. To the rear of the church is a little swale that would have been beautiful as a graveyard. This is the mythical resting place of Mrs. Pitts, and here the willows still grow, just as the poet described them. But there are no signs that the spot was ever used as a burying ground. The writing of the lyric seven years before the dedication of the church accounts for the inconsistency in regard to the graveyard. At the time of writing, Dr. Pitts never suspected that a house of worship would later be built upon the very spot on which he erected his dream church. With his usual sense of aesthetic fitness, he not only created the church for which nature had supplied the setting, but he added the churchyard that completed the picture.

There close by the side of that loved one
'Neath the tree where the wild flowers bloom,
When the farewell hymn shall be chanted,
I shall rest by her side in the tomb.

The sentiment of this stanza was fulfilled in the

case of Dr. Pitts, though the burial did not take place at the Little Brown Church. In his later life the Doctor moved to Clarion, Iowa, and then to Brooklyn, New York, where he died in 1918. The ceremony for him at Fredericksburg was fittingly simple; the singing of "The City Four Square" by his eight year old grandson was the only distinguishing feature. He was buried beside his wife in the local cemetery at Fredericksburg where at last he "rests by her side in the tomb".

The very simpleness of The Little Brown Church endears it to all who knew old Bradford. After all it is only a little, very plain, storm-beaten church. But within it dwell the hope and love of God-fearing pioneers; around it cling the fondest memories that a scattered people cherish for their deserted village.

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