

Swedesburg Community Perseveres for Over 140 Years



Figure 1. Photograph of the Swedesburg sign that has declared the site of the First Lutheran Church of Swedesburg for over a century..

Christopher E. Potenski

History of American Agriculture

HIST 533 - Fall 2012

Professor Bonnie Lynn-Sherow

14 December, 2012

The community of Swedesburg is still active and vibrant in 2012. From its initial creation as a combination log cabin church and school in 1871, Swedesburg has endured through the events of World War I, the depression of the 1930s, World War II, and several other important local events. The aforementioned plights that have extinguished numerous towns across the United States of America did take their toll on Swedesburg, but the church was always able to bond together and overcome these difficulties. The strong family and community bonds, in addition to the community's seeming need to expand that has been ever present through fourteen decades, is what has kept this rural, Lutheran church community together.¹

Before there was the church, there was not much in what is now the Garfield township of Clay County, Kansas. Only three years prior to the founding of the church did families begin to arrive in the township. Swedish immigrants established the first homestead in the township in 1868. There was a very strong community over the entire township. Other nationalities also settled in the township besides the Swedes. These included English and Scottish immigrants. These families bonded together and petitioned Clay County to take twelve square miles from the Goshen township and twenty-four square miles from the Sherman township to create a new political jurisdiction of the Garfield township. They named it after the esteemed President James Garfield.²

During the settlement of Garfield township, most people did not travel far by today's standards. They were constrained by how far they could walk or how far a horse would draw their carriage. This led to the creation of many towns, churches, and schools in a close proximity. There were several other schools and churches within a ten-mile radius of the church,

¹ Clay County Heritage Book Committee, *Clay County, Kansas: Heritage Book, 1990* (Clay Center, KS: Clay County Historical Society, 1990) 59-60.

² *Ibid.*, 57-58.

including the Parallel Presbyterian Church, the Mission Covenant Church, Morganville, the Garfield School District #87, and the Johnson School District #98.³

The Swedesburg church congregation met with many trials along its path. Many were just due to the eras that the church survived through. The church community overcame the effects of World War I, World War II, the Great Depression, and a tornado in 1973. Figure 2 below is a photograph of the church bell lying in the rubble after the tornado.



Figure 2. Photograph of the church bell, one of the few remaining items from the church finished in 1906, after the 1973 tornado. Photograph from the Swedesburg dedication ceremony pamphlet, May 18, 2975.

Throughout Swedesburg's existence, music has been a constant theme. There were two bands from the church in the 1890s under direction of Reverend J. Holcomb, pictured below in Figure 3. Additionally, there have been several notable donations of organs to attest to the

³ Ibid., 57-61.

congregation's love of music. Besides the bands and organs, the church has been known for its musical abilities by a church "orchestra, a male chorus, a ladies quartet, and the mixed choir."⁴



Figure 3. Photo of the very large all-boy Church Music Band for a rural congregation. Photograph from the 40th anniversary booklet published by Dispatch Print of Clay Center, Kansas.

Like many rural communities, Swedesburg felt the effects of World War I. Many families lost brothers, sons, fathers, and longtime family friends. But even worse was the "German flu," which scarcely left a family untouched. People would die in days. Some recruits that headed off to camp were brought back only days later in caskets. This was another time that the community came together to help stricken families do chores like taking care of livestock, collecting wood

⁴ *Minnesskrift 1871 - 1911: Svenska Ev. Lutherska Swedesburg Församlingen*, (Clay Center, Kansas: Dispatch Print, 1911); First Evangelical Lutheran Church, c. 1990, Swedesburg First Evangelical Lutheran, Clay County Historical Museum. Clay Center, Kansas, 1.

and cattle chips, feeding livestock, and generally preparing for the winter months. World War I was not completely devastating to the rural community. World War I brought technological advances to rural living that would make rural life more hospitable.⁵

The depression years in the 1930s hit not just Swedesburg, but the entire central United States. The weather dried up all of the crops and grazing grasses so that many cattle died. To save their livestock, farmers shipped in hay from the Kansas-Oklahoma border. They also shipped their cattle down south to those pastures to keep them healthy. Those cattle that did survive from 1934 to 1935 went up from \$20 to \$100 per head.⁶

World War II also took its toll on the Swedesburg church. Again, many young men enlisted, but not as many came back standing upright. The Swedesburg Cemetery located behind the Lutheran church has several of the young men that made the ultimate sacrifice for their country. Below, in Figure 4, is a photograph of the 1945 confirmation class of the First Lutheran Church of Swedesburg. Note the lack of men in the class.

⁵ Eber Anderson letter to grandchildren, 4 April 1965, Eber Anderson's Experiences, Clay County Historical Museum (Clay Center, Kansas), 15; David B. Danbom, *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America* (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006), 161-172.

⁶ Anderson, Anderson Experiences, 16-17.



Figure 4. Photograph from the confirmation archives of the First Lutheran Church of Swedesburg, ca. 1945. There were no young men at home to finish their confirmation classes in 1945.

The most recent trial that the church had to overcome was the storms that passed through Clay County on September 25, 1973. These devastating storms completely demolished the First Lutheran Church building. The community members came together after the storms to clean up the area. The church bell, the altar cross, and many stained glass fragments were salvaged from

the wreckage. It was then that the Swedesburg community showed again its resilience to survive despite one of the most powerful acts or, in this case tests, of God.⁷

The Swedesburg church has a long history of building and updating their structure. It was on September 4, 1871, that Swedish settlers came together to form the First Lutheran Church. It was in the house of Hans Johnson that the charter was signed by 27 men and their families. Reverend Dr. S. P. A. Lindahl led the discussions to form the church of Swedesburg and its surrounding community. The name Swedesburg originates directly from the number of Swedish people signing the church's charter. At its founding there were 47 communing members. Shortly after organization, there fees set for those that took communion of \$12 per couple plus \$1 for each eighty acres of land owned. For a single communer, the fee was only \$4.⁸

In 1875, the church voted to start construction of a new stone building and an adjacent parsonage. Both were completed in 1877.⁹ It was likely during this time that the school was disconnected from the church and moved to the Northeast corner of the section. The school was closely tied with the church since many of the families had children attend, but no more records connecting the two institutions were found. However, there are records that indicate that the school stayed open through the 1959-60 school year with Betty Algren as the teacher of 31 students from ages 0-17. The Swedesburg school board then came to an agreement with the Morganville school board to send the students to them for \$25.00 with a contract to be signed at a later date.¹⁰

⁷ First Lutheran Church Dedication pamphlet, May 18, 1975, Swedesburg First Ev. Lutheran, Clay County Historical Museum (Clay Center, Kansas), 3.

⁸ *Minneskrift 1871 - 1911*, trans.,1-2.

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ Clay County Heritage Book Committee, *Clay County, Kansas*, 58.

By 1886, the church members had built a new parsonage with a church tower to follow in 1893. A bell was also donated by S. J. Nelson to ring on Sundays. At a total cost of \$5,760.20, the church was completed in 1905 and dedicated the following year with no outstanding balance. Another parsonage was added to the premises in 1924. This was luckily later moved to a property near Morganville in 1969 and did not get damaged by the 1973 tornado.¹¹

The First Lutheran Church has been very active in celebrating its anniversaries. There were large celebrations in 1911 and 1946. There was a large booklet published for the church's 40th anniversary in 1911. The booklet was written in Swedish. At a later date, a translation was made available, but it did not have the photographs to go along with it. The information for the 75th anniversary in 1946 was basically the same as 1911, but written in English. It was not until 1919 that the church first began having services in English.

Nancy Doberer recalled festivities for anniversary celebrations or just any other occasion that presented itself to have a get-together. There would be dancing to a live band, singing, eating of traditional Swedish dishes, and all-around merriment. These shindigs would last for many days, even up to a week. They would carry on long after dark with the use of Delco-lights, because this was prior to power lines in that part of the county. Nancy also described the interior of the sanctuary and "the all seeing eye of God." She said, "We are watched by God always, but that eye would just seem to follow you if you stood up in the church." She believes that after the tornado someone found it, but it will likely not be replaced in the sanctuary because it was a "little bit creepy."¹² Figure 5 is a handout from a funeral service at Swedesburg church that shows the ornate glass cherished by the congregation prior to the tornado.

¹¹ *Minnesskrift 1971-1911*, trans., 1-2; Nancy Jo Doberer, conversation with author, 13 Dec. 2012.

¹² Doberer, conversation.



Figure 5. The Lutheran church's beautiful stained glass that was scattered across the countryside in the 1973 tornado. Photograph of a funeral pamphlet.

From 1973-74, the church continued its tradition of building. Unfortunately, this time it was a re-building of what was lost to the storms. During this time there was what seems to be a peak in membership of the church with approximately 100 members. Swedesburg used parts of the former Clara Catholic Church to rebuild their church. Additional amenities were added,

including a pastor's study, kitchen, and additional storage.¹³ After the tornado, the bell that was recovered was placed in front of the church as seen in Figure 6.



Figure 6. Photograph of the church bell knocked down in the 1973 tornado, now in front of the church in Swedesburg. Photo taken by Christopher Potenski on December 13, 2012.

The need to build is still evident in 2012. Despite a decline in attendance since the 1980s, with just 70 members and 35 regular worshippers the Church is building a new gazebo where the

¹³ Dedication pamphlet, May 18, 1975, 3.

parsonages used to be. This will be used for church functions when the weather is nice or for those coming to visit the adjoining cemetery.¹⁴

Swedesburg has always been a very active church community. They obviously have the Lord on their side to be able to persevere through as many turmoils as they have. Their background of strong family and community ties and determination to keep building seems to be the key to this rural community's success. The First Lutheran Church of Swedesburg should continue to survive through any act of pestilence well past its 150 year celebration as long as it continues to maintain its strong cohesive congregation.

¹⁴ Doberer, conversation.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Eber. Letter to grandchildren, 4 Apr. 1965. Eber Anderson's Experiences. Clay County Historical Museum. Clay Center, Kansas.
- Clay County Heritage Book Committee. *Clay County, Kansas: Heritage Book, 1990*. Clay County, KS: Clay County Historical Society, 1990.
- Danbom, David B. *Born in the Country: A History of Rural America*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006.
- Doberer, Nancy Jo. Conversation with author, 13 Dec. 2012.
- First Lutheran Church Dedication pamphlet, May 18, 1975, Swedesburg First Ev. Lutheran, Clay County Historical Museum. Clay Center, Kansas.
- First Evangelical Lutheran Church. c. 1990. Swedesburg First Evangelical Lutheran. Clay County Historical Museum. Clay Center, Kansas.
- Minnesskrift 1871 - 1911: Svenska Ev. Lutherska Swedesburg Församlingen*. Clay Center, Kansas: Dispatch Print, 1911.
- Minnesskrift 1871 - 1911: Svenska Ev. Lutherska Swedesburg Församlingen*, trans. c. 1945. Clay Center, Kansas: Dispatch Print, 1946.