

**LOCAL HISTORY NOTEBOOK  
BY BRAD STEINMETZ**

**FREE METHODIST CHURCH HISTORY**

When I was putting the finishing touches on Volume II of my La Farge history, I had some correspondence with Mark Phillips. Mark is the pastor of the La Farge Free Methodist Church and sent me some information on the history of that church. One item was of particular interest.

Mark sent a copy of a document that pertained to when the church was first formed in La Farge in 1901. In December of that year a group of people had met with La Farge attorney, Alva Drew, to draw up a "Certificate of Organization" for the new church. The meeting held in Drew's offices on south State Street (the same building that currently serves as the office for local attorney Phil Stittleburg) included D.S. Reed, Elizabeth Reed, Sophia Jones, Amelia Bates and Dora Casse, who all signed the document.

As stated in the document, the purpose of the certificate was that the people present at the meeting "have organized themselves into a religious society of the Free Methodist Church of North America located in the village of La Farge, Vernon County, Wis for religious charitable and educational purposes". The document specifies that the new church "shall be known as the First Free Methodist Church of La Farge". By December 10, 1901, the document had been filed in the appropriate Vernon County office in Viroqua and the new church was a legal entity.

Looking for some more early history of the La Farge Free Methodist Church, I went to Volume I of my La Farge history. On pages 65 and 66 of that volume I found the following:

*Between 1880 and 1890, three separate classes in the Free Methodist faith had been organized and met at Bear Creek, Revels Valley (located between Burr Ridge and Wildcat Mountain) and Hills Prairie (located near West Lima). The Bear Creek gatherings were often held in the Baptist Church near La Farge. In 1900, Reverend J.F. Thompson, leader of the three churches, started a class in La Farge, which met at Neefe's Hall (This was a public gathering place on the second floor of the present hardware store in La Farge.). William Riley led the class of ten and Miss Katie Roberts was superintendent of the Sunday school.*

*In 1901, Reverend D.S. Reed assumed leadership of the Free Methodist classes and soon promoted a drive for a new church and parsonage in La Farge. By 1902, the congregation had raised sufficient funds through contributions and pledges to begin the new church and parsonage. Three lots lying along east Main Street were purchased from Jesse Bates in August and work was begun on the church building the following month.*

*On January 11, 1903, La Farge's new Free Methodist Church was dedicated before a standing room only crowd, which was partially caused by the new pews not arriving until the following month. In March, construction on the parsonage, located on a lot to the east of the church was begun. The building of a barn on the site was also begun at that time. William Hayter was hired to construct the parsonage of brick for \$1,000, with the brick coming from Hayter's nearby kiln on Bear Creek. The parsonage must have been completed during the winter as an article in the January 22, 1904 La*

**Farge Enterprise** noted that *John Steinmetz and Mary Gross were married at the Free Methodist parsonage with Luella Steinmetz and John Gross standing up for the couple.* (Luella Steinmetz was my grandmother and John and Mary Steinmetz were my great uncle and aunt.)

From that account, we can surmise that the D.E. Reed mentioned in the account of the first certification was the pastor of the new Free Methodist flock and Elizabeth was undoubtedly his wife. Amelia Bates, another of the original certificate signers, might have been a relative of Jesse Bates and probably part of the Bates family that owned much of the eastern half of La Farge in those early days.

In his e-mail, Pastor Mark Phillips also had mentioned, “There was another church connected to ours at Bear Creek somewhere but no information other than the ledgers.”

For more information on that early church I turned to another local history book, Looking At Bear Creek compiled and published by Trixie Larson in 1995. This local history treasure includes some information about that first Free Methodist Church on pages 193-195.

That original church was located east of La Farge on the Stark/Union town line between the road (that would eventually become Highway 82) and Bear Creek. The church was built on land owned by Eli Gundy. All of this was shown on a plat map in the 1896 Atlas for Vernon County.

Trixie Larson also found a letter written by Adam Shambaugh, noted doctor and minister of the time, telling about a meeting of the Wisconsin Valley Sunday School Association held at the Bear Creek church in June 1874. In the notes about the meeting, Dr. Shambaugh mentions several other prominent family names from the early days of Bear Creek, including Neefe, Crowder, Brewer, Callaway and Stone.

Eventually, the original Bear Creek Free Methodist Church was no longer used. In her history, Trixie Larson, tells of how the original church was converted into a cheese factory during the early 1900s. Ironically, the building eventually becomes a country tavern a few decades later. It was known as the H & H Tavern when owned by Henry Hysel in the early 1930s and later as “Ray’s Tavern” when owned and operated by Ray Merwin.

In the next Local History Notebook, we will continue to look at the early history of the Free Methodist Church in La Farge.

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I did not make it over to Badger Ordnance last week to give my dam talk – icy roads caused a cancellation of that endeavor. We are going to try and reschedule. Speaking of rescheduling, the culmination of my “Last Dam Talk\*” at the Kickapoo Valley Reserve has been set for Wednesday, March 21<sup>st</sup>. Look for more information on both of these presentations in future columns.

Don’t forget that copies of all three of my books are for sale at the KVR Gift Shop, the La Farge bank and the office of the Episcopo. If you would like me to send you a copy of the recently published Volume II of my La Farge history, please send me \$25 along with your address to P.O. Box 202, La Farge, WI 54639.

Recently via Face Book, I heard from Guillaume Caudebec, who lives near Paris, France. Guillaume was a foreign exchange student at La Farge High School during the 1988-89 school year. He was interested in purchasing a copy of Volume II and wanted to know what it would cost. The cheapest mailing fee to “Gay Paree” is a tad over \$36, so I’m not sure if he will be interested – will let you know later.

I recently mailed out a copy of Volume II to former classmate (LHS Class of 1965 – a great class!) Carlyle Stoleson in Mazomanie. In his letter, Carlyle mentioned that he had read my column on Badger Ordnance and that he drove a tram at the ammo plant in 1969. Fellow classmate Rudy Hamilton also mentioned to me that he worked at Badger that year as well.

Working together, we can tell the story of this little Kickapoo River town.