

Our Church in February 1910; 100 Years Ago

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Jesus answered him, "What I am doing, you do not understand now, but afterward you will understand." This passage from John 13 was the basis of the sermon conducted by Rev. Theodore Bernthal on February 9, 1910, at the funeral of 26 year-old Rev. Carl Demetrio, our congregation's first pastor. Four days later his wife, Ida, suffering from a chronic illness and worsened from typhoid fever, passed away "unable to recover from shock caused by his death".

In February 1910, our congregation suffered what is undoubtedly one of the most tragic events that could occur to a young congregation, the sudden death of its pastor and his wife. There is no question Pastor Demetrio was a charismatic and energetic Pastor who was held in great esteem by the congregations he served. His sudden and unexpected death would begin a series of events that ended two Lutheran congregations and almost a third.

Carl Demetrio was born in Perryville, Missouri, in 1883. His father, Carl Demetrio Sr. was a German university trained Botanist. When he decided to enter the ministry, his uncle ceased to support his education, and Carl Sr. immigrated to America where he graduated from the St. Louis Seminary in 1869. Marrying Emma Kraus in 1873, they had nine children, six of whom would live to adulthood. During his 60 plus year ministry, Rev. Demetrio Sr. would become an internationally known authority on fungi, ferns, lichens and mosses. He classified and named a number of unknown specimens he discovered in Missouri and Colorado. He declined professorships in three universities to remain a minister of the Gospel. Because of his work with the Shaw Botanical Gardens (now the Missouri Botanical Gardens in St. Louis), his two sons, Carl and Edwin were offered full scholarships to study Botany. Both declined and like him would graduate from the St. Louis Seminary. His second parish was Holy Cross in Emma, Missouri, where he would minister for more than 46 years. This was where Carl junior was raised and educated.

During the time Carl Demetrio was growing up in Emma, St. Paul's in Leavenworth was being served by Rev. Carl Hafner, who was also the Kansas District President. In the late 1800's he established a number of mission churches in eastern Kansas; one was located in what was then known as Wallula, and a second in Bonner Springs. He conducted services at these mission churches once a month. By 1905 he could not manage all the various mission sites, his parish duties, and those of District President so a call was made to the seminary for a missionary Pastor to assist him. Two years later it would be filled by Carl Demetrio Jr. to specifically serve the mission churches in Wallula, consisting of 12 families, and in Bonner Springs with 10 families. At the time of his call there were over 80 baptized Lutherans attending the monthly service in Wallula and about 50 in Bonner Springs.

Reverend Demetrio was ordained and installed as the missionary for Wallula and Bonner Springs on September 8, 1907. In February 1908, he went to Milwaukee, married Ida Stark, and returned to Wyandotte County in early March. Exactly when he first began preaching has not yet been discovered, but it was probably the week following his installation. The first written church record we have of Pastor Demetrio is the meeting notes of the Wallula congregation on April 7, 1908, when the decision was made to form St. Martin.

In rural Lutheran churches it was quite normal for the Pastor to be "elected" congregation secretary due to his education and ability to read/write German and English. This is exactly what happened at St. Martin, and it would be the norm in the congregation for the next quarter century. From his meeting minutes we know he dealt with many of the same questions and concerns we have today in the construction of a new church; location, size, cost, style and even what direction it would face. He also had to contend with theological and worship issues in the new congregation such as membership in secret societies, how often to hold communion, and if services would be in English or German; they would be conducted in both. Being two to three times younger than the seven men who were the congregations

voting members we can only imagine the challenges he had with insuring the congregation stayed on the correct path. He was obviously successful. The congregation grew in membership, and from all indications it was in harmony.

While establishing St. Martin he ministered weekly to the mission church in Bonner Springs on Sunday afternoons. He also planted a mission church in the Jarbalo/Tonganoxie area. A few months after the birth of their daughter, Esther, in December 1908, Ida became chronically ill. It's possible her tuberculosis became active or she came down with a malarial type disease; the records vary as to the underlying cause of her death. Assistance came from Carl's unmarried sister, Hulda, who came and stayed for weeks at a time during this period. The synod also assigned a first year seminary student, Richard Goerrs, to assist him.

We have no record of exactly what occurred in the weeks prior to his death. From start to finish typhoid takes about three weeks, he and Ida would have been bedridden for at least the week prior to their deaths. Conditions at the parsonage were primitive by today's standard. The four-room building had no electricity or running water. Water came from an outside pump, heat from a coal burning stove, and the toilet was outdoors. The weather in early February 1910 was cold, with daytime temperatures in the 20's and snow on the ground. Their closest neighbor was a quarter mile away. Members of his family, Richard Goerrs, and probably members of the congregation would have been caring for them and their 14 month old daughter.

After their funeral services at St. Martin, Carl and Ida's remains were buried in Holy Cross' cemetery in Emma. Esther would live with her grandparents in Emma until her death at the age of 13 from meningitis contracted through an inner ear infection. Seminary student Goerrs would minister to the congregation within his capabilities until a new minister was called.

In less than a year more than one third of the congregation left. The new Pastor, Gustav Hafner, arrived in 1911. Pastor Hafner continued to minister to the mission churches and made a number on innovations including the first Sunday School, but his ministry was less than ideal. Within month's he and the congregation were in dispute over finances and his compensation. 1910 was the start of a three year economic downturn in America and with the loss of membership the congregation could not meet its financial obligations. For the good of the congregation, and with their blessing, he resigned after just fourteen months and accepted a call to St. John's in Potter, now in Easton, Kansas. By 1911, the mission church in Jarbalo/Tonganoxie ceased to exist and by 1912 the mission church in Bonner Springs as well.

Rev. Rudolf Rook was called after Rev. Hafner, and the church began to slowly recover. He helped to stabilize the congregation financially and from all indications he served the congregation very well. However there was an underlying wariness during his tenure and he accepted a call after a three-year ministry. It would not be until 1919, under the ministry of Pastor Henry Camin that the congregation was in the same condition as it was the day Pastor Demetrio died.

We won't ever know how the congregation reacted to Rev. Bernthal's sermon on 9 February. That the members were in distress and some questioning why this tragic event occurred is probably an understatement. The St. Martin congregation continued as an active church albeit through some very difficult and tumultuous periods. It would take almost 55 years before a mission church in Bonner Springs, Emmaus, was reestablished, and during the decades after World War Two, Lutherans from Tonganoxie would join both churches. In 2008, St. Martin and Emmaus were served again by the same Pastor; this time as one congregation - Risen Savior. I doubt that on February 9, 1910, any of the people listening to Rev. Bernthal and then experiencing the events of 1911 and 12, could have imagined such a joyous event happening.