Pastors Turning Sod

Gerald Hill

On the occasion of Luther College
“100th Anniversary—Century of Faithfulness”
On the 30th of May at 4:00 in the afternoon there gathered at the place where our institution is to be erected a large number of English-speaking citizens of Melville and members of our congregation together with members of the Board in order to pray for God's blessing upon our institution.

- Translation of account appearing in Der Nordwesten

You couldn’t find a patch of sod now except the ditch along highway ten.


1

The first pastor dressed not to dig but to stand on the dais of a Model T in his band-collar and frock coat and creased trousers, to scratch a name on the prairie for the families who gather now, dressed up themselves, in a ring to see this breaking of ground and hear what the pastors tell.

This hot Friday afternoon, the men hold slouch fedoras to block the sun, as do the women with umbrellas and bonnets and scarfs. One man, casually dressed, leans against the seat of his bicycle. A few women gather round a pram. The pastor looks starched, ill at ease with a shovel, which he grips like a cane.

He’d heard stories of fights for congregations in the Canadian west, stories with characters called Norwegians and Missouri Synod and, playing the villain, the Baptists. Like any pastor, he saw a congregation in need of pastoral care as an open field, tended by the closest shepherd, which we hope will be one of ours.

An institution of learning will greatly
benefit our work, the pastor knows,
standing with the shovel at the centre
of open prairie. Construction
begins tomorrow. Perhaps the Synod
would help procure beds and mattresses.
And he would ask a coal baron
for a carload of coal.

The pastor’s left hand at arm’s-length by his side
shows a wedding band, the brim
of his felt derby, and today
of all days, his Holy Book
from which he reads
Psalm 103 “Bless the Lord, O my soul,
and all that is within me,”
whereupon he turns the first sod.

Now the second pastor gives praise
for the land they are about to dig,
ten feet of basement for kitchen
and dining room and washrooms
and a door leading to the six-seater outhouse,
classrooms on the first floor,
study rooms on the second,
two large dormitories on the third,
69 steps from basement to top floor,
and a dumb waiter, and plaster so true
even a hundred years later it’s smooth,
and a Lutheran ensign in stained glass
(where a boy, in years to come,
will find a moment to read
in the cubicle beneath the glass
*The Mill On the Floss* and *Silas Marner*
instead of Latin or Algebra).

We will hold their lives within these brick walls,
the pastor knew. The boys will cherish
summer and Christmas holidays at home
and odd Sunday afternoons
ogling town girls at the reservoir, but they’ll live
most of their lives right here, where we dig,
where we *prepare* them for the prairie beyond,
that field we move toward.
The second pastor pictures us all
a year from now, the first
term finished, Academy new
behind us and stacks of lumber
and patches of late spring snow.
“Our beginning be in the name of the Father,
Son and Holy Ghost,” says the pastor,
whereupon he turns the second sod.

3

Now the third pastor speaks in English upon the words
“Fear of the Lord is the beginning of Wisdom”
and he hears the train whistle and its story
in two words: immigration, railroads.
This was the place to tell it: Melville!
(after Charles Melville Hayes
President, Grand Trunk Pacific,
who’d gone down with Titanic), Melville the main
divisional point west of Winnipeg.

And here the voice of the town booms
through the mouths of Messrs Franks and Rowan
(who grumbled that the sod-turning
service started at 2
and promised to last a while yet)
and former Mayors Dowsey and Taylor
and Sherriff McCloghlan
all of whom had helped to arrange
sewer and power and the road from town—
BOOM! went their voices, WONDERTOWN!
3,000 people in six years.
See the splendid Town Hall,
post office and, on the northeast quarter
of section 31 township 22 range 6
west of the 2nd meridian, as shown on
the Town of Melville Board of Trade map,
the Luther Academy!

Again, the third pastor hears
the train and what it means
for the future we build here,
wonderful works (reading Psalm 111)
to be remembered, whereupon
he turns the spade full of earth
and passes the shovel to Messrs Franks and Rowan
who take their turn at the sod.

4

The fourth pastor rises with the wind
that blows the buffalo grass. He knows
better than to curse if he turns
that first sod and dirt blows
in his face. Any prairie form
begins in wind, some days.

What he reads in the wind is the rise and fall
of national tensions in Europe, Balkans War,
build-up of the German navy,
eventual fate of the Lusitania.

What he gathers from the wind is Pentecost
and circuits of the bright planets on the WNW horizon
and Treaty 4 land and lightning
striking the bell tower at St. Paul’s
and typhoid fever and influenza.

What he hears in the wind is the rise and fall
of young male voices, a glee club, breath,
cornets and euphonium, Academy band,
and schottisches and quadrilles we may love
but may not encourage.

What he sees in the wind that blows us here
is prairie brick become Academy
the Lutheran farmers will work
the summer to build, become
Children’s and Orphans’ Home, become
Old Folks’ Home, become Heritage Museum

whereupon the pastor
turns a spadeful of earth and says
May the Lord our God be friendly to us
and propagate the work of our hands, yes,
may he bless the work of our hands.
And though history’s kept it from us,
a fifth pastor spoke that day
as a man a hundred years later who buys
a portable shovel and drives to Melville, wondering,
as sod-turning was largely an outdoor pursuit,
if the pastors had kept their eye on the weather.

He didn’t know what he’d do with the sod
he turned or what he’d say
if anyone saw him. He’d retire to the Legion
for a grilled cheese and Diet Coke and later
measure the distance from the station
to the Academy and wonder what it was like
to walk, or ride in a democrat, a boy
with his trunk, to that schoolhouse
on the northwest horizon where,
they would pray, *may grace
and truth abound*

whereupon he left his
shovel in the car and climbed
the fire escape on the west side
and sat down between the hours of 4 and 5,
one hundred years to the hour
after the turning of the sod to imagine
the pastors on the dais of a Model T
and the ring of men and women
and the broken ground.