

# Pastors Turning Sod

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On the occasion of Luther College  
“100<sup>th</sup> Anniversary—Century of Faithfulness”

## Pastors Turning Sod

On the 30<sup>th</sup> 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 ~~pay for~~ [crossed out] 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.

- Local Observer, Melville, May 30, 2013.

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.

## 2

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 2<sup>nd</sup> 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.*

5

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.