

**A STORY OF THE
NEXT TWENTY-FIVE YEARS
1985-2009**

Chapter 9: SATERSDAL LUTHERAN CHURCH: A 110 YEAR OLD LANDMARK



Satersdal Lutheran Church: Oil on canvas by Ethel Sanders, 1989. (Painting owned by Leola Dyrud Furman)

There are two churches in Excel Township: Satersdal Lutheran Church founded in 1891 and Silver Creek Lutheran Church founded in 1899. Satersdal closed in 1959; Silver Creek is still active. Both stand along the western edge of the rangeline and are within a mile of each other. Silver Creek Church has been rebuilt twice and is a modern facility. Satersdal was built in 1896 and remains the original, quaint building the way it has for over a hundred years. It is one of the oldest buildings in the township— perhaps the oldest still functioning in its original role. Because of its colorful history, including a forced move, we have devoted an entire chapter to it.

SATERSDAL LUTHERAN CHURCH *by Loiell Dyrud*

The roots of Satersdal Lutheran Church run as deep as Excel Township itself. Today the church at the east edge of the township is perhaps the oldest township landmark; and though the steeple-less structure appears rather bland and colorless, its history is not.

In the mid 1870s, several families from the Setesdal Valley in Norway began immigrating to Bygland, Minnesota, a settlement that once lay between the town of Fisher and the Red River just south of East Grand Forks. At the time Excel Township was organized in 1884, families with such names as Skomedal, Froisness, Bergland, Svenkeson, Ose, Olson, and Johnson were leaving Bygland and resettling along the north and west side of the Thief River that runs through the southeast portion of the township. Since Norway's national religion was Lutheran, it is understandable that itinerant pastors of the Lutheran faith would be passing through the region and holding services two or three times a year in the homes of these families. The earliest of these was Rev. Christian Saugstad of Crookston some forty miles away. In the summer of 1885,

however, he was fortunate enough to have a seminarian to help out in this region, and so begins the history of Satersdal Lutheran Church.

Elias Aas, a second year seminary student from Augsburg Seminary in Minneapolis, was sent as a summer intern to northwest Minnesota. He was to work among the Norwegian immigrants, not only in Excel Township, but a huge territory that included parts of Pennington and Marshall Counties running from St. Hilaire to just south of Middle River and west almost to Argyle. Near the end of his life, he wrote an autobiography called *The Pioneer Pastor* where he recalls what it was like to work in this area in the 1880s. His autobiography records his life among the early settlers in Excel Township.

During the summer of 1885, he lived in St. Hilaire since the town of Thief River Falls did not exist. He did not own a horse. Oxen, he felt, were too slow and cumbersome, so he walked throughout the territory. His duty was to preach, "read" with the confirmands, and hold women's society meetings over the 70-80 mile territory. The land, he says, was so flat and marshy that much of it was under water except for a few sand ridges. His description of St. Hilaire is interesting as well: "It was a sawmill,

2 or 3 stores, 2 saloons, and was located by Thief River. There was much drinking and ungodliness. One day I tried to find out about the deacons, I was told that one of them lay dead drunk in the gutter. He told me he was a Haugian as he had one time belonged to a congregation of the Hauge Synod" (p. 101).

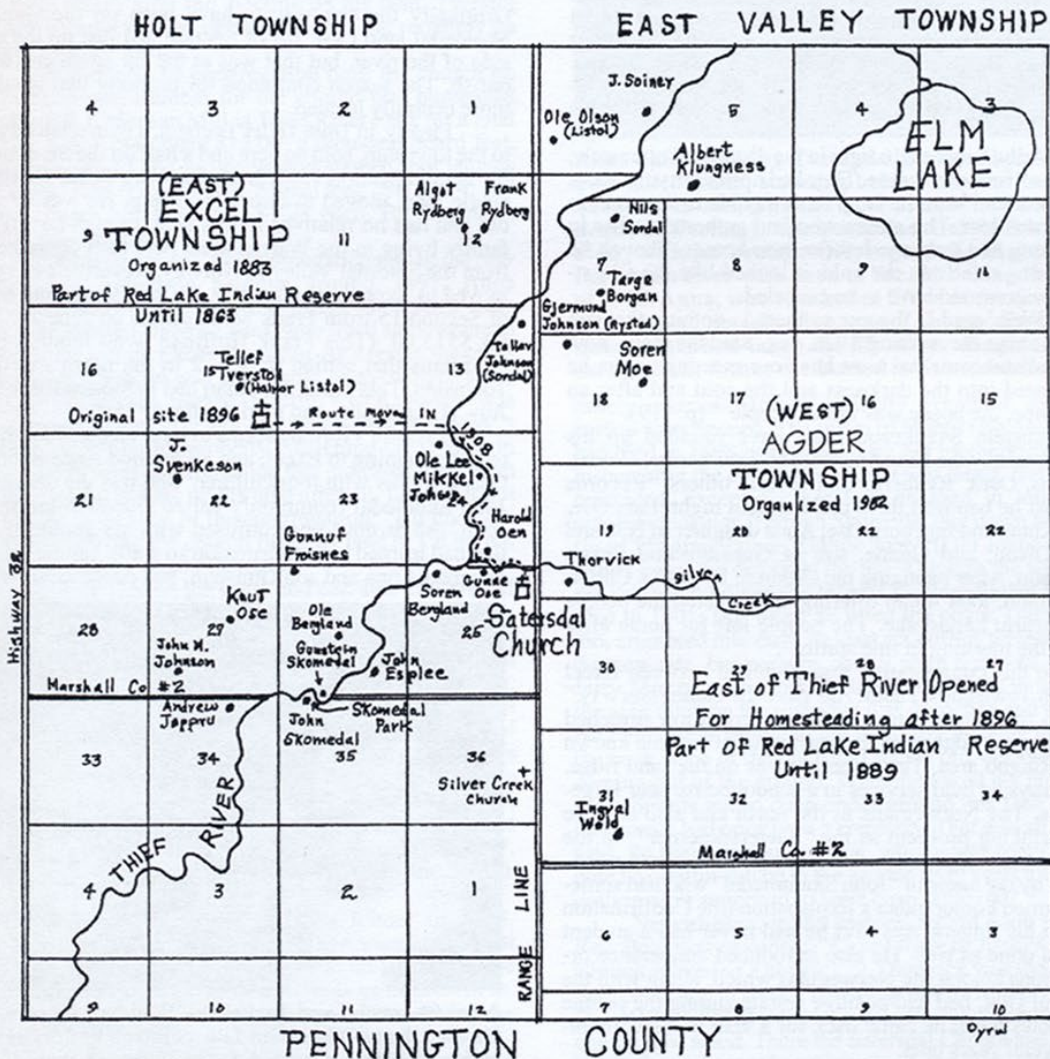
Walking over the road-less area was miserable. He wore low shoes, so the water could go in and out of his shoes quickly. When he reached deep water, he took his shoes and socks off and walked barefooted. Though it was May when he started his work, the frost had not yet gone out of the ground in the sloughs, so he could feel the ice with his bare feet. For the rest of the summer, he says, his feet were never dry.

He tells about his trips through what would have been Excel Township and on into Holt Township: "Also north of St. Hilaire, about 20 or 30 miles, there was a whole settlement of Norwegians. Many were from Saetersdalen, Sogn, Ostlandet (eastern Norway). There was yet no organized work here but Pastor Saugstad had begun to gather the people about the Word of God, and I continued to have devotional meetings among them and to read with the confirmants. All were new settlers. Some had come directly from Norway; others had lived for awhile in older settlements. . . ." (p. 103).

As he walked back to St. Hilaire, he commented on the area that would one day be Thief River Falls: "At Thief River Falls there was yet no town but an Indian camp which I passed both night and day. But they were friendly Indians, and I was never afraid to move about among them. They found sugar-beets which they sold to the business men in St. Hilaire in exchange for pearls, food and clothes. But Indians under the influence of alcohol were dangerous as when a drunk Indian one day rode his pony on the sidewalks of St. Hilaire" (p. 105). Aas more than likely has confused "sugar-beets" with the snake root which was commonly sold by the local Ojibwe Indians.

When he left the area and went back to Augsburg Seminary later that fall, he was never so happy to be away from a place in his life. For the first time since early summer, his feet were finally dry and his nights were no longer tormented by swarms of mosquitos and bed bugs, the ever-present pests in the immigrant cabins where he slept.

When spring of 1886 came and his impending seminary graduation, he received three Calls to Ministry. One was the St. Hilaire area he had served the previous summer. The other two were around Madelia and Fergus Falls, both more settled and stable areas than northwest Minnesota. Unable to make up his mind, he consulted with the president of the seminary, Georg Sverdrup, who told him:



Map of part of Excel and Agder Townships in Marshall County showing original site of Satersdal Church in 1896 and where it was moved in 1908. Early Church member's home sites are also included.

*“... ask the previous generation.
Pay attention to the experience of our ancestors.”*
Job 8:8