Historical Sketch

The brief historical sketch here following is largely based on addresses and newspaper articles by the Rev. A. O. Alfsen, prepared at the time of the fiftieth jubilee of the congregations held in Valders, Sept. 23, 1900. In the preparation of this sketch the writer has omitted matters that are found in other articles of this jubilee pamphlet, and added information which serves to complete the story told by Rev. Alfsen.

The late Rev. H. A. Stub came in 1848 to America on a call from the congregation established at Muskego in Racine Co., Wisconsin. News of his arrival had reached the Norwegian Lutherans in Manitowoc county. Christian Andersen, later a lighthouse keeper at Manitowoc, sailed down to Muskego and arranged with Rev. Stub to visit the settlers in Manitowoc. Others may have been interested in this enterprise, and Andersen may have been delegated by his countrymen here to make the trip. The further circumstances in connection with this matter we quote from the record.

In reviewing a meeting held in “Maple Grove” (Gjerpen), Oct. 4, 1854, the fourth anniversary of the founding of the charge by Rev. Stub, Rev. Ottesen brings in the story of how Stub was called to come to Manitowoc county to assist in founding the church work. Together with this we get an authentic story of the trials Rev. Stub and his family had been through. This recital is worthy of greater publicity, as it undoubtedly is typical of what the pioneers, both pastors and the members of his flock, had to go through in those early days. We quote from Rev. Ottesen’s record:

“I had recently received a letter from Rev. Stub who had founded the congregations here. As I knew that many would enjoy to hear what he had told me in the letter, I read part of it to them. Rev. Stub tells in the letter that his two youngest children have been down with whooping cough and measles, also his hired man and four hired girls, one after the other as they succeeded one another in coming to help. Rev. Stub then went from house to house to find help to take care of all these, but everywhere he came the same conditions prevailed—all were ill, up to 10 and 12 sick in each family. At last he got a girl at Yorkville; but in five days she left, having been called home by the
illness of her mother. Rev. Stub himself, worn and exposed on his long trip in bad weather, took ill with 'billious fever' and thought he was the victim of cholera. Then his eldest son (the present president emeritus, Dr. H. G. Stub) came down with ague, and shortly afterwards both his wife and daughter were similarly afflicted, and at last also the smaller children. All were sick, and one could not help the other. This, moreover, was the situation in the whole settlement. A neighbor's daughter was the first to be able to come to the parsonage to help, and after a while the plague ceased."

CHRISTIAN ANDERSEN
First Trustee, Manitowoc

In connection with this matter Rev. Ottesen gives the following interesting facts: "The first trustees elected here after the meeting, Oct., 1850, was Christian Andersen from the city of Manitowoc, secretary, Michael Michaeelsen, and Gunder Madsen. The first to be instrumental in bringing Rev. Stub here and by the help of God and the Northmen's devotion to the faith of their fathers, gathered into a Lutheran congregation, was Christian Andersen. He went down to Rev. Stub (at Muskego) to have a couple of children baptized by him. At this time a move was on foot (in Manitowoc county) among some to call Paul Andersen from Chicago, and a letter had already been sent with a request that he come and start a congregation here. The congre-
gation would (if he had come) then have left the sound Lutheran position and become a part of the Frankean Synod. But when Rev. Stub came, the majority preferred to be organized in the Lutheran faith of their fathers in the old homeland, and Paul Anderson was notified not to come."

Another document of much historical interest is the first appeal to members of the congregation to subscribe toward the purchase of the fourty-acre land now owned by Gjerpen and Valders for parsonage purposes. It reads:

"Dear Friends of Manitowoc congregation (the joint congregations):

"As the greatest number of us, Norwegians in Manitowoc and vicinity, are agreed to have a church built to introduce Christian order in agreement with the Lutheran religion, we, the trustees, have endeavored to ascertain where the most convenient place would be to build a church for the settlement. We have an option on 40 acres land situated on the Winnebago Road belonging to Anders Aabol . . . . and the price is $54. If the money can be raised within a short time, we as trustees are willing to collect each in our district. Each one paying, places his name on a list that the collector may have to show. It is our hope that all who are interested in a Lutheran congregation are willing to pay his share in said parcel of land, each one according to his pleasure or ability."

Fraternally, in behalf of the congregation,

C. Andersen, M. Mathisen, Gunder Madsen.
Dated Dec. 28, 1850.

"The appeal seems to have been written by Johan Christiansen, at that time employed as a tailor by C. Andersen, now merchant and dealer in clothing, provisions, etc., being now known as John C. Johnsen, ship owner, etc. M. Mathisen died as farmer in Nov., 1853, and willed $100 to the church, for which songhouse, pulpit, and altar have been bought. G. Madsen has a farm near the church," says Rev. Ottesen in further explanation.

Anders Aubol was the next secretary.

In 1849 we find Rev. H. A. Stub on a visit in Manitowoc and vicinity. The first visit led to other visits, and in 1850 a congregation was organized and a call issued to Rev. J. A. Ottesen, a recently graduated theologian from the University of Christiania, Norway.

"The first meeting was held in Manitowoc city in Amund Salvesen’s house, October 4, 1850. Here five short paragraphs (constitution) were adopted, and a letter of call issued to the Rev. Jacob Aall Ottesen in Norway. The call is dated on this day and had 113 signatures of adult members."
At a meeting of the congregation held in the home of Ole Larsen Ballestad, June 16, 1851, a more complete constitution and 12 by-laws were adopted and signed by 62 members." (Alfsen.)

Other names were added as new members joined, and the list bears 124 signatures. It is worthy of mention that the great majority of these people personally signed their names to the instrument, though a few used their "mark," not being skilled in the art of writing. None of these people were illiterate, however, every one of them having been trained in the study of the catechism and confirmed in the Church of Norway.

"The meeting June 16 was adjourned to Manitowoc June 17, 1851. At this meeting it was decided to buy 40 acres land, the land to be fenced, and a home for the pastor to be built on it. It was also decided to point off a certain parcel of this land as a graveyard for the Gjerpen and the Valders districts.

"Just at what time the building of the first Gjerpen church was begun is not clear from the records. But the first meeting held in it after it was up, took place November 29, 1852. The last report of a meeting held, with Rev. H. A. Stub presiding, is one held February 16, 1852, and the first report signed by Rev. Ottesen is dated in Manitowoc city November 14, 1852.

"Until the parsonage could be ready for occupancy, the pastor and his wife (Cathinka Döderlein, a cultured young woman of prominent family in Norway) stayed at the home of Hans Madsen.

"The Gjerpen district was looked upon as the principal congregation in the charge. It received in the beginning one-half of all the services and paid one-half of the current expenses. The other one-half was divided equally between Manitowoc and Valders. At a meeting of the congregations December 27, 1852, definite resolutions were adopted for the building of a parsonage. Shortly afterward the Gjerpen congregation was left in the will of Michael Michaelson $100 for a 'Song-house' and its equipment."
“Building of a church in the Valders district was begun in March, 1853. Michael Blekkelien directed the building operations, and by the middle of summer of 1854 the first service was held in the new church, an octagonal structure.” (Alfsen.)

Before this time the services were held in private homes or together with the Gjerpen congregation in its new log church. The record kept by the Rev. Ottesen is illuminating as to the difficulties that arose and had to be overcome these first years. It took both tact, patience, and a fine sense of humor on the part of the pastor to iron out all the wrinkles that constantly appeared.

The first joint annual meeting of the congregations, held in the new Valders church, sat June 24, 1856. It must have been at this meeting that plans were made for the formal dedication of the churches at Gjerpen and Valders. The dedication at Gjerpen took place September 26, and at Valders September 27, 1856. Coöperating with the local pastor in the dedicatory exercises were the pastors A. C. Preus from Koshkonong, Dane county; H. A. Preus of Spring Prairie, Columbia county; and O. F. Duus from Waupaca.

“In the city of Manitowoc, services were for some time conducted in the public school building. The building was later bought by the congregation and used for church purposes. On September 4, 1865, it was decided to buy ground and on it erect a new church. In the following year the church was taken into use, and it was dedicated by Rev. Ottesen February 28, 1869.” (Alf-
K. S. Aaberg superintended the building of the church. He also had charge of the building of the new church at Valders, which was completed in 1869. In Gjerpen the cornerstone for a new church was laid in June, 1875, and on September 17, 1876, this new church was dedicated. Peder Knudsen and Knud Nyhagen were the builders. For this church Søren Larsen Ballestad provided as a gift a pipe organ at the cost of between $600 and $700.

"The Manitowoc congregation tore down its old church and built a new. The cornerstone for the new church was laid December 10, 1899, and on June 10, 1900, the new church was dedicated. The cost of the church was $10,000. The Young Ladies' Society raised $1,200, and bought a pipe organ for the church." (Alfisen.) The architect was Olavus Aslackson.

The Norwegian Lutheran Congregation of Manitowoc and Vicinity, as the charge was named, was incorporated under the laws of the state of Wisconsin August 22, 1859. This incorporation remained in force until 1871, when the congregation in Manitowoc parted from the original call under its own pastor.
congregation was incorporated under the name The Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Congregation of Manitowoc on May 16, 1871. In 1924 legal name adopted was The First Lutheran Church of Manitowoc.

The country congregations were incorporated November 11, 1880, under the name Gjerpen and Valders Congregation.

"The ministerial acts officially performed during the period of the joint pastorate were 1956 baptisms, 800 confirmants, 323 weddings, and 339 funerals."

"Rev. J. A. Ottesen served the joint congregations from 1852 to May, 1859, when he accepted a call from the Koshkonong congregations, but made occasional visits to the charge until July 21, 1861, when he delivered his farewell sermon. The new pastor who had come from Norway, the Rev. L. M. Bjørn, held his first sermon October 6, 1861. In 1871, when the charge was divided, Manitowoc called Rev. Bjørn as its pastor, and included in the charge congregations at Gibson and Kewaunee. Gjerpen and Valders remained together and called the Rev. A. O. Alfsen, who was introduced in Gjerpen July 20, 1873, and in Valders July 27 the same year." (Alfsen.)

The old parsonage in Gjerpen has always been the residence of the pastor for the country charge. When Rev. Bjørn moved to Manitowoc he built himself a home on 711 N. Ninth street. This became the possession of the congregation upon Rev. Bjørn's removal to Zumbrota, Minnesota, in 1879, and has been the pastor's residence ever since. Both the Gjerpen parsonage and the Manitowoc parsonage have been twice remodeled, enlarged, and modernized.

The joint congregations were members of the Norwegian Synod until the days of the great controversy in the eighties. To maintain peace the charge withdrew its membership. Manitowoc and Valders again joined the Synod, but Gjerpen congregation did not again resume formal membership, though they continued to support the Synod denomination as before. In the Manitowoc and the Valders congregations a split came about, causing the duplication of pastors and churches. However, when the Union of the Synod, the United Church, and the Hauge Synod was effected in 1917 all these congregations became members (Valders in 1918) of the united denomination, though the local churches still remain separate units. Remnants of the Gibson congregation have joined a call served by a German Lutheran pastor in that neighborhood, while others in that vicinity and at Kewaunee are served by the pastor of the St. Paul Lutheran Church in Manitowoc, who also serves the seceded Valders congregations.

Toward the close of his address Rev. Alfsen says: "As we now are gathered for this festival (50th jubilee, 1900), we re-
member gratefully what God has done for us during the past years. But we also wish and hope that the younger generation, which has not tasted the trials of the pioneers, nor can be expected to fully realize the sufferings that their fathers and mothers had to endure in the days of the new settlers' battles, and what it has cost to prepare the beautiful farms and comfortable homes they now possess—never may despise the inheritance left them, but honor and keep the Word of God as a priceless treasure, that the faith of the fathers may be preserved.”

To this illuminating sketch of Rev. Alfsen, written twenty-five years ago, may be added a few observations of interest to those who had no part in the first fifty years of church work in this vicinity:

In the book containing the record of the joint congregations from the organization of “The Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Congregation in Manitowoc and Vicinity,” October 4, 1850, to the peaceful parting of the ways in 1871, when the Gjerpen and Valders congregations consented to a brotherly separation of the Manitowoc congregation under its own pastor, a wealth of information is found, throwing light on the conditions under which the congregations lived, grew, prospered, met the problems which from time to time arose, and filled the mission of a church for the pioneers in a new land. The sailing was not always smooth. There were difficulties within, and often serious troubles coming from without, which tested the loyalty and the faith of the members. There were sorrows often hard to bear; but also joys to encourage and stimulate to praise and thanksgiving. Even in the days when outward rupture threatened the feeling of brotherly fellowship in Christian service with disruption, there remained at the bottom of the hearts and in the consciousness of the minds an essential unity in spirit and character. This was undoubtedly due to the fact that in spite of divergent opinions in minor matters, in all fundamental things the members stood upon the same foundation, namely, the doctrine of the catechism and the truth
of the Lutheran confession. In this matter there was a beautiful unanimity, controversies and outward splits to the contrary notwithstanding. The teaching of all the young in the precepts of Luther’s catechism has been the greatest cementing and uniting force in the church of our fathers, and remains so among their descendants in faith today.

This lesson permeates and flows through the records of the congregations as the living energy and the most powerful current from first to last.

The “Record” opens with a copy of the law enacted by the “territory of Wisconsin,” providing for the legal “incorporation of the Protestant Episcopal Church and other religious societies,” and approved February 8, 1847. On a page which was originally left blank is a copy of the articles of incorporation of “The Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Congregation of Manitowoc and Vicinity,” dated August 14, 1859, and witnessed August 22 the same year, stating also that the articles are “recorded in the Registry of Deeds of Manitowoc County, Vol. I, of Church Record, pages 27 and 28.”

On the same leaf is added the articles of re-incorporation of “Gjerpen and Valders Congregation,” November 11, 1880.

The first entry is made in the handwriting of Rev. H. A. Stub, who also has written the first formal constitution into the records as well as the proceedings of the meetings of the congregation until the arrival of Rev. Ottesen in 1852.

This constitution left a permanent imprint upon the method of conducting the business matters of the organization in all three congregations, especially upon the two rural churches, where the old rules have become well established tradition.

At the same meeting it was decided to delegate to Rev. Stub the power to hire a teacher by the name of Rasmussen, “unordained reader,” to serve the congregation one year, the salary to be $200. Without waiting to hear from Rev. Stub, this “reader” at once seems to have taken up his work. But in so doing he had exceeded the propriety of a “lay” preacher by assuming the full prerogatives of the “ordained minister.” Hearing of this, Rev. Stub returns to Manitowoc, Sept. 3, preaches in Manitowoc, Two Rivers, and Gjerpen, and calls the voting members together to have the matter about Rasmussen straightened out. At the close of the record of a meeting in Ole Hjelle’s house, it reads: “I proposed that the people furnish him (Rasmussen) traveling expenses and let him depart, which I hope will be done.”

In this connection Rev. Stub mentions Christian Andersen of Manitowoc as first trustee of the organization. In July, 1852, Anders Aabol, H. Mørstad, and I. Satter are recorded as trustees, with Aabol as trustee-secretary-treasurer.
Present First Lutheran Church on site lower left corner of this picture.
Three-story building still at corner of Sixth and York Streets.
The first report entered by Rev. Ottesen is dated November 14, 1852. In these first reports “Maple Grove” is used to designate what later is called Gjerpen congregation.

Rev. Ottesen urged the congregation to have a representative present at the meeting, which historically became the beginning of the Norwegian Synod.* The meeting was to be held at Muskego. At a meeting of the congregation December 27, 1852, Hans Madsen was elected representative, and Nils Madsen alternate.

As a building committee for a parsonage served, besides the minister and the trustees, Nils Riis, Hans Madsen, Michael Blekkeli, Stephen Olsen, and Johannes Eriksen. In the first meeting of this committee the contract was let to Michael Blekkeli for $415, but he turned the job over to Stephen Olsen.

At the annual meeting 1853 we find record of a complete set of officers in the congregation. Trustees: For Manitowoc, Jacob Halvorsen; for Maple Grove, Hans Madsen and Nils Riis; for Western part (Valders), Anders Christophersen; for Twin River, Even Gjeraldson. Assessors: For Maple Grove, Gulbrand Prestegard, Ole Bolstad, Jacob Madsen, Jens Gundersen; for Manitowoc, Osul Torjussen (Torrison), Amund Salvesen, Michael Michaelsen; for Twin Rivers, Ole Aabol, Nils, Sørensen, Boje Amundsen; for Western, Thomas Olsen Helle, Knud Oppen, Nils Aslaksen. The congregation empowered the pastor to name his deacons.

Just a few matters of this kind are mentioned in order to indicate that these people who here were making new beginnings in Lutheran church work in the then far west, and who came to this work without any previous experience in the management of free and independent congregations, tackled their problems in an orderly and intelligent manner, inaugurating a representative system of government in the congregation so fully in harmony with the fundamental law and the spirit of the United States. These Norwegian newcomers practiced American principles in the foundation of their church work. They were true Americans before they mastered the American language, or had been trained under American institutions. In this the pioneer pastors and the pioneer laymen thought and acted in full harmony.

In 1854 Osul Torrison, Ole Bolstad, Gulbrand Christensen (here Gjerpen is used as name for the middle congregation), and Ole Gigstad (Gjestad) are elected trustees.

About 1860 the names Gjerpen, Valders, and Manitowoc had become common usage in the record.

The Manitowoc-Gjerpen-Valders charge became interested in other fields in need of pastoral service. Gibson and Kewaunee

* An observer at the very first attempt at Synodical organization on Rock Prairie was elected, and may have been present.
soon became served from this charge. Later Claybanks and Sturgeon Boy looked to Manitowoc for assistance, and Sheboygan was for a number of years taken care of by the pastor in Manitowoc. The distance as well as the local needs in the home congregations made this arrangement unsatisfactory both to the outlying missions and to the home charge. Yet, the pioneer pastors here showed a willingness to make the long trips and to bring the comfort and the blessings of the church to the early settlers, that speak well of their zeal and their unselfishness. The remuneration was often less than nothing.

The first visit of inspection to the charge by the president of the Synod is recorded September 20, 1864. The late venerable Right Rev. H. A. Preus has entered under this date the following:

"From September 13 to 20, 1864, the undersigned president of the Norwegian Lutheran Synod in America visited (inspected) Mishicot, Kewaunee, Valders, and Gjerpen congregations. I examined also the pastor’s record of congregational proceedings as well as the record of ministerial acts. A regularly kept record of the members belonging to the congregations, a record for the school, and a copy of the pastor’s official correspondence are wanting. In spite of all imperfections that I found, my testimony is that pastor and congregations work together as the Lord’s shepherd and the Lord’s flock according to the Word of God."

As the men of the Manitowoc congregation were away, either as sailors or on jobs in town, no meeting could be held, but the president catechized the children and preached a sermon in the evening.

In his notations to the president’s visit the Rev. Bjørn says: "These days were rich in evangelical comfort, earnest reproof and admonition for the pastor and congregations alike. The Lord bless him (the president) for every word he spoke, and help us to keep them in our hearts!"

At a meeting held April 3, 1871, the request of the Manitowoc congregation for "brotherly release" from the charge came up. At first the members of the country congregations frowned on this move. After lengthy deliberations consent was given, with the understanding that the Manitowoc congregation receive the amount it had furnished for the parsonage, $175."