

Nuggets of History

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HISTORY OF ROCKFORD CHURCHES

By W. Ashton Johnson

(Concluded from last issue)

St. James Holy Roman Catholic Church parish was organized in 1851 under the leadership of the Rev. Fr. John A. Hampston. It all came about when Bishop J. A. Van de Velde of the Chicago diocese made a brief stop here while enroute to Galena by stage. Having been directed to six Irish families by the hostler at the stage depot, the bishop gave his hearers assurance that a priest would be stationed here and at Pecatonica within a few months. Accordingly, late that year Fr. Hampston assumed the role of father confessor to the followers of the Catholic faith in Rockford and its western neighbor. The first Catholic church was built in 1852 on the present site of St. James Pro-Cathedral on North Second Street between Lafayette Avenue and Prairie Street. Of the well-known priests serving St. James, Dean T. J. Butler was perhaps the most famous. He had been a Civil War chaplain and had sung in the Papal choir during seminary years. The present pastor is Rev. Norbert M. Richter.

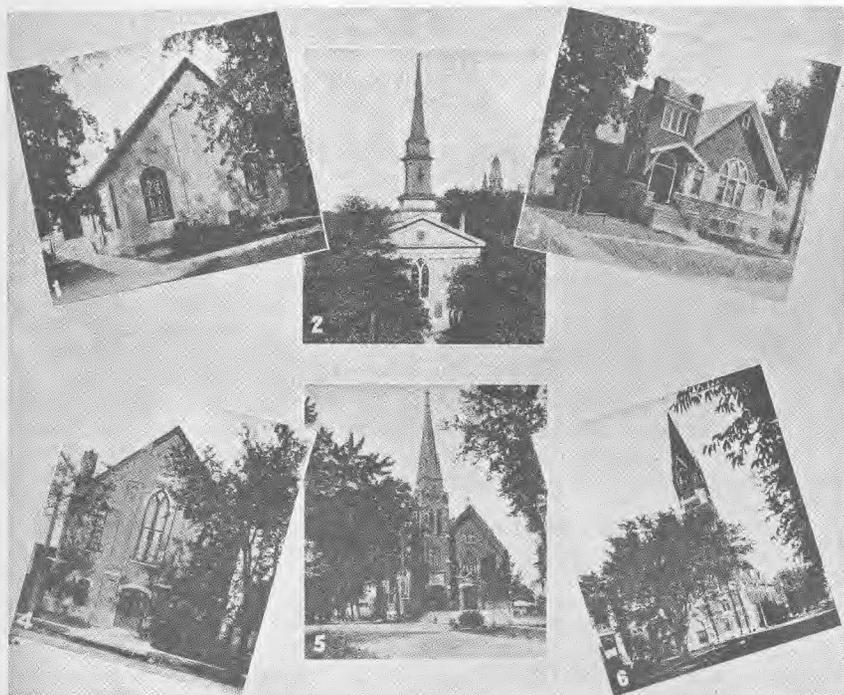
Court Street Methodist-Episcopal Church organized in 1853 with a membership of 40. Their brick structure, 48 x 70 feet in size, was dedicated in 1854 while the Rev. W. F. Stewart was its spiritual leader. It was located across the street from the present Court Street church. It outgrew this structure, and in 1883 the present site was purchased. A church edifice was built in 1884 and occupied in 1886. Additions have been added in 1917 and 1964. The present pastors are Dr. Harold McElvany, Rev. Albert B. Wagner, and Rev. Robert R. Ives.

First Presbyterian Church came into existence in 1853, following a visit here by Layman E. Tomkins the previous December. Being amazed that there was no semblance of "Old School Presbyterianism" here, Tomkins addressed an inquiry to the Chicago Presbytery. Printed tracts and a missionary came here from Marengo.

In December, 1853, Rev. Hugh A. Brown visited the field and held services "twice each Sabbath", first in a small hall on the southwest corner of State and Main Streets. In 1854 a church organization meeting was held in the Court House. Rev. Brown became the first minister, serving until July of 1857. In the late fifties a church was built at State and Winnebago Streets and after three enlargements the congregation erected a beautiful edifice on North Main Street one block north of State Street. In 1905 the cornerstone was laid for a new building on North Main and Park Avenue. In 1925 a Sunday School addition was built, and in 1962 a chapel and Christian Education building was completed.

The Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Church, now known as First Lutheran Church, was the first Swedish denominational organization in the city, its inception following by two years the arrival of the first immigrants from the Scandinavian peninsula. The influx of immigrants resulted from

Some Rockford Churches About 1915



1. BNAI ISRAEL CONGREGATION. 2. FIRST BAPTIST CHURCH 3. BRETHERN CHURCH 4. SWEDISH METHODIST
5. ST. PAUL'S LUTHERAN EVANGELICAL CHURCH 6. ST. MARY'S CATHOLIC CHURCH

the completion of the Galena and Chicago Union railroad. The Rev. Erland Carlsson arrived here by train from Chicago late in 1853, and on the 15th of the following January organized the church with 45 charter members. Shortly thereafter, a portion of the group removed to Pecatonica, where promise of more fertile lands was a lure.

The depleted charter list was soon filled by new arrivals from Sweden. Pastor Carlsson came to Rockford on six successive Sundays for morning and evening preaching, and then agreed to lead the congregation on a once a month basis throughout the year. On June 30, 1855, the society voted to erect a church and purchased a lot on the northwest corner of North First Street and Lafayette Avenue. Pastor Andreas Andreen was called on October 10, 1856, to become the first resident pastor of the congregation. The church building was dedicated on November 23rd of that year. Growth of the congregation was such that in 1867 the membership purchased two lots at the northwest corner of South Third and Oak Streets and erected a much larger edifice which was dedicated on January 1st, 1870. By 1883 this building was also inadequate, so it was razed and the

present church with its twin steeples was built.

The years that followed saw many improvements and extensive remodeling. In 1946 the Westminster Presbyterian Church was gutted by fire, and the First Lutheran board was authorized by the members to purchase the burned-out shell for a new parish building. The interior was completely rebuilt, and it was named Loreen Hall in honor of their pastor, Dr. Albert Loreen, who at 87 is still active as pastor emeritus. The present pastor is Rev. P. Gerald Leaf, and Rev. Raymond Mai has recently been added to the staff.

Westminster Presbyterian Church was launched in 1856. Rev. Morrison Huggins was the first minister of the congregation, which consisted of 22 charter members. The Westminster congregation erected a building on the northeast corner of South Second and Oak Streets, which was dedicated in 1858. It was completely remodeled and refurnished in 1911. In 1951, after having held services in the old First Congregational building at 607 Walnut Street since the disastrous fire of 1946, the present church building was built at 3000 Rural Street, and later a major addition was erected. Rev. Jerry W. Bohn is the present pastor with Rev. Bernard Johnson as the assistant pastor.

The Third Street Methodist Episcopal Church was the third of this denomination to be launched here (1858). Other war period houses of worship organized here included Disciple's Church (1858), having a membership of 45 in 1869; the Swedish Methodist (1861), which built between Kishwaukee and South Fourth Streets, and the South Rockford Methodist-Episcopal Church (1864). This was the forerunner of the late Winnebago Street Methodist Church.

The State Street Baptist Church was begun in 1858 by the Rev. E. C. Mitchell. During the Civil War period, two resignations took place, but the Baptists called Rev. S. F. Holt to the pulpit. Through his aggressive leadership, the membership voted to erect the most elaborate church on the east side in 1868. Located at East State and North Third Streets (northeast corner), it was occupied until 1949, when it was severely damaged by fire. In 1951 a new building at the corner of East State and Barker Place was completed. The present pastor is Rev. E. K. Wylie.

In 1870, the federal population listed Rockford with 11,000 residents. Of these, the church population was estimated to be 4,173.

In 1882, the Emmanuel Lutheran Church was organized to accommodate the English-speaking Lutherans in our city. A building was erected at the corner of Sixth Street and Third Avenue. Rev. C. Anderson was the first minister. The church membership increased, and in 1922 the structure was moved to the west and a new church was built. The old building continued to be used as a parish hall for many years, but has now been torn down and replaced by a chapel and new educational wing. Rev. Robert H. Engen is the pastor, and Rev. James A. Roberts is the associate pastor.

A group of Pietists belonging to the Lutheran faith left the First Lutheran Church and formed the Zion Lutheran Church in 1883. At first lay preachers conducted the services, but in 1884 Pastor C. J. Lundell arrived to head the



A Group of Some of Rockford's Many Churches

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|------------------------|----------------------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------|-------------------------|
| 1. SWEDISH FREE CHURCH | 2. FIRST CONGREGATIONAL | 3. SWEDISH BAPTIST | 4. STATE STREET BAPTIST | 5. ST. ANTHONY CATHOLIC |
| 6. COURT STREET M. E. | 7. EMANUEL EPISCOPAL | 8. STATE ST. U. EVANGELICAL | 9. WINNEBAGO ST. METHODIST | 10. THIRD PRESBYTERIAN |
| 11. ZION, SWEDISH | 12. FIRST LUTHERAN SWEDISH | 13. ST. JAMES CATHOLIC | 14. SECOND CONGREGATIONAL | |

congregation of eighty-four members. A lot was purchased at the corner of Sixth Street and Fifth Avenue, the present church site. Ground was broken and a basement built which housed the church until the building could be completed. Since that time improvements and additions have been accomplished. The present ministers are Rev. Ralph Leonard and Rev. Arthur Chell.

In 1893 another group of Lutherans felt the need for an English-speaking Lutheran Church. They met in the home of A. J. Harter and pledged their support. In 1895 the congregation was organized by Rev. W. H. Manss, and in 1896

they invited Rev. H. M. Bannen of Princeton, Illinois, to become their pastor. Property was bought on North First Street near the present site between Market and Jefferson Streets, and the new church home was occupied on December 16, 1900. The Trinity Lutheran Church has contributed greatly to foreign missions; in the establishment and support of neighborhood churches; and by gifts to Carthage College. In 1919, Rev. O. Garfield Beckstrand, Sr., became Dr. Bannen's assistant. When Dr. Bannen became pastor emeritus in 1943, Dr. Beckstrand became pastor. In 1947 O. Garfield Beckstrand, Jr., became an associate to his fath-



Trinity Lutheran Church, 218 North First Street, in the 1930s. Photograph provided by Hazel A. Kluck, Secretary of the Rockford Historical Society

er. and when his father became pastor emeritus, O. Garfield II became pastor. In 1954 a new church was built, and in 1957 a chapel and education wing was added. Rev. John R. Spangler serves as associate pastor.

St. Mary's Catholic Church, the second of this faith organized in Rockford, was launched in 1885. This was during the period when the A. P. A. Society stirred up local feeling against followers of the Roman Catholic Church. The Bishop of the Chicago diocese sent a young priest by the name of Flaherty here, ostensibly to be an assistant at St. James. Because of the anti-Catholic feeling in a section of the west side, two lots were acquired by individuals and later sold to the church. These were on the site of the present St. Mary's Church on the northeast corner of South Winnebago and Elm Streets. Its first pastor was Rev. Fr. E. A. Murphy. Other St. Mary's spiritual leaders have been Rev. M. McLaughlin, P. A. McMahon, Rev. Fr. Reedy, a World War I chaplain and second chaplain of Walter R. Craig Post of the American Legion.

St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church was the first German language congregation to withstand the rigors of pioneer organization. It started with less than a score of families who withdrew from a society described as "maintained for the propagation of German culture, rather than for the teaching of Lutheran precepts." A Rev. L. Dorn was its first pastor, 1888-1895. He was followed by the Rev. Otto Gruner, 1895-1927; Rev. F. H. Brumm, 1927-1947; Rev.

E. V. Oelschlaeger, 1948-1952; and Rev. Marvin R. Fritz, 1953-present.

St. Anthony of Padua Roman Catholic Church was the first foreign language parish founded here, a few months after the creation of the Rockford Diocese. Bishop Peter J. Muldoon, first bishop of Rockford, appointed Rev. Fr. Anthony Marchesano as organizing officer and leader of the new parish. Organized Easter Sunday, 1909, the pioneer members worked so earnestly that ground was broken for a church edifice in September of that year. A year later, the membership worshipped in their new church at Kent and Ferguson Streets.

St. Stanislaus Catholic Church, 201 Buckbee Street, was the fifth Catholic parish founded in Rockford. Organized in 1912, it was composed of mostly immigrants from Poland. A Lithuanian parish, St. Peter and Paul's, had been formed in 1911, and was located at the corner of Lincoln Avenue and West Street. Other Catholic churches begun here since World War I have been St. Peter's, 1243 North Church Street; St. Patrick's, 2505 School Street; St. Edward's, 3002 Eleventh Street; St. Bridget's, in Loves Park; and St. Bernadette's, 2400 Bell Street.

A Jewish synagogue was built by remodeling an old building on North Fifth Street in 1900-01, through the generosity of Israel Rubin, pioneer scrap iron and junk dealer of Rockford. Services were conducted weekly, but not until 1911 was there a resident Rabbi to lead the congregation of Ohave Sholem synagogue. This building later became the location of St. Constantine Greek Orthodox Church. Sometime before 1920 the Ohave Sholem congregation purchased the building which had been erected by the Swedish Methodists at 728 First Avenue, which is now occupied by Charlotte's Web Coffee House. Ohave Sholem Synagogue is now located at 3730 Gulliford Road, and is led by Rabbi Sheldon M. Korn.

In 1914, twenty families of liberal views left the synagogue and launched a reformed Jewish unit. Services were conducted by students from Hebrew Union College in Chicago, and regular services were held Friday evenings and Saturday mornings in the Church of the Christian Union on the northeast corner of North Main and Mulberry Streets. Following World War I, Temple Beth-El occupied a modern edifice at the corner of North Main and Salem Streets. This congregation purchased a spacious tract on North Alpine Road in 1962, and constructed a modern new Temple on Comanche Drive. The 175 families of the congregation held dedicatory services in their new church in 1963-64. Their most recent leader has been Rabbi Lester Frazin.

Need of a community center prompted leaders of both the Temple and Synagogue to raise a building fund in the late 1940s. In June of 1950, the new Jewish Community Center, 1502 Parkview, was opened with dedicatory exercises. Since then, scores of non-sectarian civic ventures have launched important movements there, among them being the popular Center Players, a group of some fifty theater-minded folk.

The Swedish Methodist Church, now known as Bethany

Methodist, was organized on January 30, 1861, with twelve charter members. The congregation first purchased an old chapel and had it moved to First Avenue. In 1877 the building which now houses Charlotte's Web Coffee House was erected. The first pastor was Rev. V. Witting. Sometime during the pastorate of Rev. Olof Johnson, the congregation changed its name to Bethany Swedish Methodist Episcopal Church and built a new sanctuary at 402 Eighth Street, where it is still located.

Allen Chapel, A.M.E., was the first Negro congregation formed in Rockford. This came about when Peter T. Blakely called a meeting of seven friends at the home of Mrs. Blakely's mother, Mrs. Maria Donley. The date was December of 1891, and before a month had elapsed, regular services were scheduled. Through co-operation from members of the Court Street M. E. Church and a score of local citizenry, funds were raised for building the first unit of the chapel at South Winnebago and Elm Streets. The Rev. S. B. Jones was the first minister of the church. The present minister is the Rev. Joseph E. Gaylor. At last report, some members of Founder Blakely's family have remained faithful members since its organization.

St. Constantine Greek Orthodox Church was begun by a group of forty residents who had migrated to the midwest between 1901 and 1915. They purchased the Ohave Sholem Synagogue on North Fifth Street when the Ohave Sholem Congregation moved into the former Swedish Methodist Church on First Avenue. The old church has been recently razed, and a new place of worship has been erected on the old site at 108 North Fifth Street. The Rev. Fr. Theoharis Theoharis is the present pastor of St. Constantine's.

Pilgrim Baptist Church, now housed in a modern edifice at 1703 South Central Avenue, was our second Negro congregation to organize. It was during World War I days, in August of 1917, when Rev. T. P. McGee accepted a call to lead a small band of worshippers. Capt. James Walden, attached to the 92nd Division unit at Camp Grant, was the second minister of Pilgrim Rest Church, as it was called in early years. The present minister, Rev. Eldridge H. E. Gilbert, is a graduate of Beloit College. His energy and zeal soon cleared the financial clouds that had hovered over the congregation from 1918 until 1947. The church's members voted to build a new \$200,000 edifice in which they have worshipped since 1962.

Records of the Rockford Ministerial Association show that there were 145 separate Protestant congregations in Rockford and 23 church groups in neighboring Loves Park, as of April 1, 1963.

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