

Scandal in the Graveyard

By Marilyn Erickson

While checking out cemeteries where various relatives are buried, my mother, sister and I traveled to Bethlehem Lutheran Church outside Ellsworth, Pierce County, Wisconsin. It is a small, white church building, surrounded by a cemetery and farm fields. As we wandered around, taking photos of each relative's headstone, my mother commented that a row of three markers had reportedly created a scandal among the members of the congregation. It sounded like another fun family story to investigate.



My grandmother's brother, Nels Nilsen Nesseth (born in 1878), married his sweetheart, Anna J. Korstad (born in 1881). The wedding occurred June 25, 1904 in Ellsworth and, looking at the wedding photo, they appeared to be very much in love. The couple established their household nearby and the family grew, starting in 1905, when their first daughter, Clara, was born. She was followed by a son, Kenneth, in 1907 and identical twin daughters, Vera and Verna, in 1909.

Then disaster struck. Nels was diagnosed with tuberculosis, a bacterial infection that was also called consumption. The most common symptoms included coughing, spitting up blood, and fatigue. Unfortunately, at that time in history, a cure was not available. The accepted treatment was fresh air and a healthy environment, but this was seldom effective. Consumption was fairly contagious and family members were most likely to become infected. So, in order to avoid infecting the young family, they built a small gazebo in the back yard that would allow Nels to quarantine at home. My mother said she was told that the small children would have to talk to their father through a screen window — social distancing with no hugging. But even though Nels had plenty of fresh air, healthy food, and the love and prayers of his family, he did not survive. At least his family members did not become actively infected. He died July 16, 1910 and was buried in the Bethlehem Church cemetery near his mother, Ragnhild Nesseth, who had died in 1886.

Annie was now a widow with four children — five years old and younger, including twin toddlers. Eventually, Annie remarried in 1913. Her new husband, Guttorm I. Kjelstad (born in 1874), was also part of their Norwegian immigrant community. They ended up adding five more children to their combined family. Guttorm died June 15, 1944 and was also buried in the Bethlehem Church cemetery.

Almost nine years later, Annie Kjelstad died (March 5, 1953) and was buried between both of her husbands - one on each side. Today, we would see that as a very romantic gesture, but apparently her wish to be laid to rest with the two husbands she loved and with whom she wanted to spend eternity was considered scandalous at the time.

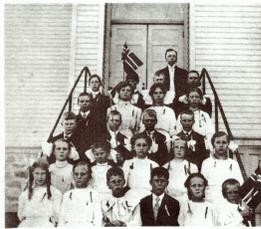


Another family story about Bethlehem Lutheran Church involves my great grandmother, Ragnhild J. Stenmoe Nesseth (1852-1886). She was an emigrant from

Norway, who married another emigrant from the same area in Trondelag, my great grandfather Nels Nilsen Nesseth (1844-1917). They married in 1875 in the Minneola Lutheran Church in Goodhue County, Minnesota and moved to a farm outside Ellsworth. A daughter was born in 1876, followed by two sons in 1878 and 1883. The fourth child was my grandmother, Ida Matilda Nesseth, who was born June 5, 1885, and was the first child baptized in the Bethlehem congregation on July 20, 1885. A year later, Ragnhild Nesseth died. The story my mother recalled being told was that the nearest Lutheran cemetery was associated with a Swedish church (probably Svea Lutheran Church, 3 miles down the road) and they refused to allow a Norwegian to be buried there. Whether this is true or not, the Norwegian immigrant community near Ellsworth decided to establish their own cemetery next to the newly built Bethlehem Norwegian Lutheran Church. According to the history of the church, "... the first grave was opened, that of Mrs. Ragnhild Neseth [sic]."



Bethlehem Evangelical Lutheran Church



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There are lots of family stories about tensions between the Swedish and Norwegian immigrants in the U.S. This is not too surprising when looking at the historical conflicts between the countries of Sweden and Norway. Ironically, my Norwegian American grandmother, Ida M. Nesseth, married a Swedish American man, Charles H. Pierson (1881-1945). His parents are buried in the Svea Lutheran Church cemetery.