

Little White Church On The Prairie

— Monarch Reformed Church

by Frieda Dekker

"Lord, please take me home," Mother said, as we children sat by her hospital bed. Her body, and her mind were so very tired. A week later she left us to be with Him.

Amid the tears of parting as we sorted memories and pictures spanning eighty-six years, inevitably the stories turned to pioneer days, the spartan life style, the beginnings of this community and the organization of our church.

The first group of Dutch families (including Mother at four months of age) arrived in Monarch in April of 1904 and were soon followed by others. Father's family did not arrive until 1910. Fenceless and wind-washed, the lonely prairie nevertheless held great promise. The settlers brought with them another treasured promise — God's infinite care.

Together they began to hold Sunday services in homes and later in the school. Formal organization of the Monarch Reformed Church was held in August 1909 — in my grandfather's house as Mother was always proud to tell us.

The actual building of our "little white church on the prairie" she so loved began in 1910. We still worship within its walls today, though they are no longer panelled in dark brown V-joint, and inlaid has replaced the oiled wood floor boards. The vaulted ceiling has been lowered in the interests of conserving heat and the corpulent black stove, often only lit just before winter services (Mother's job for a time), no longer commands attention in the centre of the room, toasting those sitting nearby and ignoring others seated against then uninsulated walls. Benches have replaced oak chairs that sometimes made rising after a long service somewhat hazardous following slow-drying varnishings. Deacons today pass collection plates down the rows instead of the black velvet collection bag, complete with tassel, on the end of a long velvet covered stick. But perhaps the biggest change — ladies no longer have to sit to the left of the aisle and men to the right!

Then, as now, finances were of major concern. Coping with a new land meant not only learning how to use its strengths but to accept its disappointments brought by droughts, hail storms and grasshoppers. The budgets of that time looked somewhat different than today's however including such weighty expenses as:

Horse for pastor	\$37.00
Buggy shaft	\$ 8.50
Coal oil	\$ 0.30
Halter	\$ 1.50
Hay	\$ 3.00
Thread	\$ 0.25

In good times and in lean there was always a strong neighbourly kinship in those early years with the church at the centre of social life — programs, picnics at the river, weddings, skating parties, Christmas concerts with hot chocolate made in large wash boilers and band concerts. Music was always important. Sometimes too came the slow journey of a coffin on the back of a horse drawn wagon to the lonely new cemetery and hearts were joined in sorrow.

Some early services were led by ministers appointed by Classis or, in summer months, seminary students. New and dear friendships were formed. However, because of our somewhat isolated location, visiting ministers came only infrequently and for the most part elders read from Dutch sermon books, ordered by yearly subscription from the Netherlands. Mother admitted that, as children, they watched the turning of the pages, impatiently awaiting the appearance of a partially blank one that heralded the end of a usually lengthy sermon.

Our first regular pastor came in 1916 at a salary of \$800 — a year!

Then, as now, the younger people looked for change and in 1933, as a concession to them and to the evolving Canadian community, one English service was held each month.

Early organizations included Sunday School, Young People's Society, Girls League and Catechism classes. The one dearest to Mother's heart was the Dorcas Ladies Aid, begun in 1921 and of which she was a dedicated, creative and sometimes unconventional member for sixty-five years. The "Aid" met regularly for devotions, hosted special events and worked on handicrafts with proceeds divided equally between our own church needs and mission work. They continue to do so, always ready to provide nurturing support for our congregation. The day before Mother was taken to the hospital she still attended their meeting, slowly lifting swollen feet from step up to step, wanting as always to be with the friends she loved and yet, independent pioneer as ever, reluctant to accept help.

The organizations, the names, the stories change with the passing of the years — and sometimes with the telling. Not one is more important than the other. Each has its treasured place in our heritage and each in its own way forms a part of our present and our future.

What endures, unchanging, is God's love, ever merciful, generous and forgiving. For the pioneer, for us, and for our children.

"... they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint." Isaiah 40:31

Written by Frieda Dekker in memory of her mother, Jennie Hobbelink (Van Lohuisen) and the gifts of love, faith and courage she left with us. Mrs. Hobbelink, who passed away on June 9, 1990, was one of the last surviving original members of the Monarch Reformed Church, and was a member of the church for more and 80 years.