Ivanhoe Church's History

Symbolic of its deep spiritual roots, there stands on the grounds of Ivanhoe a majestic oak tree. The outline of this tree has been embossed on pins many members wear because it stands though extraordinary, historic time with the oldest organized church in Lake County.

A Narrative History of Ivanhoe Congregational Church

The Beginning

The year was 1838. The broad grasslands of Northern Illinois were unchecked by fences. Herds of wild deer roamed freely. Packs of timber wolves prowled at night. Roads were little more than wagon wheel ruts following century-old buffalo trails; impassible in rainy weather; invisible in winter.. There were no bridges spanning streams or rivers.

The territory was young, as was the nation. Only two years earlier, the first white women had reached the west coast on an overland journey. The Alamo had fallen, its defenders massacred by Santa Anna's Mexican army.

But already frontiersmen with musket and beaver traps were giving way to settlers with seed and plow. Locally, the last Indian threat had ended six years earlier, when Black Hawk and five hundred Sauk families had been pursued by militia men (including Captain Abraham Lincoln) through northern Illinois into Wisconsin.

The era of the frontier stockade was passing. It was a time for building cabins, barns, schools, and churches. On February 20, 1838, Rev. John Blatchford … having left the comfort of his church in the newly incorporated city of Chicago travel for three days along the faint, snow-shadowed trail bordering the Des Plaines River … arrived at the cabin of Alfred Payne in Mechanic's Grove (later Ivanhoe). He met there with pioneers of New England stock, anxious to organize a Congregational Church.

Because of territorial agreements between the Presbyterian and Congregational denominations, it was necessary to charter the church as Presbyterian. By day's end, the charter had been drawn, :articles of faith had been signed and letters presented. Ivanhoe church–what was to be the first church in Lake County-was m . There was no land, no building, no minister, and very little

money. But the people who settled these plains were hungry for God's word and for the social order and strength that came with Christian fellowship.

For a number of years, parishioners met in private homes. They gave personal testament and read aloud from the Bible when a circuit minister couldn't be borrowed to conduct services.

Membership grew slowly at first, then burgeoned as new settlers swarmed in to stake land claims. It was not uncommon for some members to journey for half a day in order to attend these simple Sunday services. Families were piled in open carts drawn by oxen, and the huge, rough-cut log wheels creaked for hours on end over sharp ice or plowed troughs spring mud.

It was a hard, sometimes dangerous trek. But the price was worth it, for relatively few settlers in western America ever had opportunity to attend organized worship.

The Church is Built

The Erie Canal was a finger pointed straight at northern Illinois. Both American easterners and European immigrants followed its direction in search of rich green farmland and even richer freedom of opportunity. Once Ivanhoe's membership reached 30, the practice of holding services in private homes–cramped frontier cabins for the most part–proved awkward.

Money was scarce. For seven years, a church building was only a dream. In the spring of 1845, members rolled up their sleeves and began to "raise a church" in the same way they were accustomed to raising barns and cabins. The location picked was Libertyville (then ,Vardin's Grove). It was in the geographic center of church membership at that time. An offer of "free" timber was made by an owner of land on the east side of the Des Plaines River, though the man was convinced there was no way to float the logs across during spring flooding. The men of the church proved him wrong. Four yokes of oxen pulled the logs to the river, where they were lashed together as a raft and poled across–at some risk of life. Timbers were hewn as soon as the logs reached the western bank. Lumber for finish work was pulled by sledge through knee-deep mud all the way from McHenry.

Despite the effort in building, the church did not prosper in the Libertyville location. Within eighteen months it was sold and became the village hall. During this period the little church faltered and would have easily failed completely if it hadn't been for the tenacity and New England stubbornness of a faithful few. Transfers of membership came and went as new settlers shuffled about the territory. Ivanhoe served as a center for community worship until members from other denominations left to form their own congregations. Only a few families were able to offer pledges to sustain the progress of the church. But the idea of a permanent meetinghouse was a dream that wouldn't die.

The church was 18 years old before that dream was realized. In 1856 about $1,200 was raised from members' subscriptions. An auction was held to "sell" family space in the pews, raising an additional $700.. That $1,900 was enough to pay in I for labor and materials. In a few months the church was It and out of debt…an incredible achievement considering that in those years the

income for an average Illinois farm family was less than $200 a year. The building was formally dedicated December 10, 1856.

Youth of the church did extra chores throughout the community and raised enough to purchase a large bell. This bell sat on the front steps for a time before being lifted to its place in the belfry. Few youngsters resisted the temptation to give the clapper a pull as they walked by, providing an abrupt punctuation to many a sermon.

Later, the toll of this same church bell served in more somber fashion to signal the death of a parishioner–nine strokes for a man, six for a woman, and three for a child. Then, as members of the community paused in their work to listen, its pealing slowly counted out the age of the departed.

The Great Slavery Debate

It is hard to conceive in today's world the full extent of the influence Ivanhoe Church had on its early members.

Even in the years before a permanent building was built, the little church took responsibility for schooling the children of the community. Church meetings were a sounding board for local and national issues.

The work of lay leaders did not end with Sunday services. The minister and the board of deacons kept order throughout the neighborhood, and guided members of their flock with a firm hand. When a sharp-dealing parishioner wronged someone in a business deal, a committee called upon him to "assist" him in making restitution and public confession.

Against this backdrop of social conscience and community action, it is not hard to see how the ongoing debate over slavery ignited the passions of Ivanhoe Congregationalists.

The State of Illinois itself had strong ties to slavery and came within 2,000 votes of becoming a slave state in 1824. Cairo, Illinois is farther south than Richmond, Virginia, and many of downstate settlers came from the South. Illinois river towns were maintained largely by commerce from southern states. The highly profitable salt mines of Shawneetown employed thousands of Negro slaves leased from owners in Kentucky and Tennessee. Three of Illinois' first four governors kept "registered servants"–a social status not distinct from outright slavery.

Until the Civil War, even "free" Negroes in Illinois were not wed to vote, sue, testify in court, or serve in the militia. Laws effectively prevented them from formal education and land ownership and offered little protection for their safety.

It was not uncommon for free Negroes in Illinois to be kidnapped and sold into bondage in the South.

Whatever the uncertain state of Negroes in the North, the slave conditions in the South were clearly more intolerable. Southern Negroes sought freedom by fleeing north on the "underground

railway." This escape route was financed and operated by White sympathizers. Runaway slaves were hidden during the day, then moved along to the next station under cover of darkness. One of the principal railway routes was by way of the upper Illinois River, Chicago, and the nearby Des Plaines River Valley into Canada. A number of people in this area secretly abetted the escape of slaves. Because it was an offense punishable by flogging and long terms of imprisonment, there were few records kept that might incriminate those involved in the railway. Because of the number of abolitionists in Ivanhoe Church, it is not reasonable to assume some early members were so involved.

Before 1850, abolitionists were considered to be radicals, and)m the beginning Ivanhoe Church was strongly abolitionist in sentiment. Among Protestant denominations, Congregationalists were the most outspoken against slavery, and their "incessant preachings" on the subject stuck in the craw of many the more "pragmatic" citizens.

Rev. J. H. Payne, Ivanhoe pastor and son of a charter member spoke out against slavery in meetings throughout the territory. At a church meeting held in 1845, the membership passed and published a strong resolution that read, in part, "we cannot but look upon slavery as a most daring sin against God, and as inflicting a perpetual torture and living death upon man."

On one occasion a visiting minister asked those in favor of slavery to meet with him afterwards to form another church. The deacons leapt to close the meeting at once.

Slowly at first, then with more dramatic and rapid motion, the slavery issue began to tear apart the fragile fabric of the young nation. Illinois itself was very nearly torn in half as downstate forces agitated to declare themselves a separate state.

The Slavery Issue Draws Blood

At the outbreak of the Civil War, a war meeting was held in the church sanctuary, and scores of men signed the muster role immediately. In Illinois about one man in every four went to war. The death toll exacted by battle, imprisonment, and from disease was terrifying. Of every ten who saw action, two died and four were wounded.

As the war dragged on, the Union cause and Lincoln's competence were challenged by hundreds of thousands of voters right here in his home state. But members of Ivanhoe Church were among his staunchest supporters. A secret patriotic organization was formed within the church to aid the government "in any emergency" stemming from the Confederates' or Copperheads' action. In case of alarm, the church bell was to be sounded.

Locally, the primary threat came from Camp Douglas in Chicago, where upwards to 30,000 Confederate prisoners were kept in stockade. Several plots were uncovered to liberate the Camp Douglas prisoners, arm them, and scatter them into rural neighborhoods about Chicago, constituting an enormous and desperate army of raiders and foragers. No wonder that Ivanhoe families kept a rifle handy, and a wary ear tuned to the church bell.

Many Ivanhoe veterans hobbled home from Shiloh and Vicksburg to die from wounds in their own beds. Others were left to work their fields without an arm or leg. In some families neither father nor son returned at all.

In this little country church, strong beliefs of members in the cause of the Union, in Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation, and in universal brotherhood were put to the cruelest possible test. But their convictions were never qualified; their faith in God's justice did not fail.

Reconstruction and Revivals

The scars of war afflicting both body and mind were deep and long to heal.

The slavery issue had been resolved but at a terrible price. With conscience salved by war's sacrifice, most Yankees turned their full attention to rebuilding the economy. Hundreds of thousands of freed slaves were left to feed, clothe, and govern themselves, though they were ill equipped to do so.

Continuing in its abolitionist traditions, the little Ivanhoe parish contributed its meager resources to aid blacks in the South and Southwest.. Ivanhoe missionary societies flourished during the 1860's and 1870's, with most of the funds going to missions in this country. It wasn't until the turn of the century that the majority of mission collections were directed overseas.

Raising missionary money especially taxed the ingenuity of church youths and women's groups. If someone acquired fresh maple syrup from relatives in New England, it prompted a pancake social. When the women of the church had accumulated enough multicolored patches and batting, a quilting bee was held.

It is interesting to note that Reverend Payne, who had kept abolitionism well kindled during his twelve years as Ivanhoe's pastor, went on to become a missionary to black families in Lawrence, Kansas.

There was continual movement in and out of the county. Families migrated westward from Illinois and new emigrants from Europe arrived to take their place. In both instances, the trip took courage. The American West was still wild and oily. Skirmishes with Indians were not uncommon along Dakota and Nebraska trails. It wasn't until well after the destruction of Custer and the 7th Cavalry in 1876 that the nation's fear of Indians began to subside.

Closer to home, the Chicago fire of 1871 destroyed the business heart of the great city and killed 300 people. Men throughout Lake County suspended their own labor and traveled to the city help in the cleanup.

The church was generally at the center of social life. On the Sabbath, families hitched their teams for the long drive to the meeting house, and once there, stayed for both morning and afternoon services…each approximately two hours in length.

Between services, men gathered in the yard, fed their horses, discussed crop conditions and business and argued politics. Women spread out the lunches they had packed for their families or took tea at the nearby parsonage. Bible school kept the youngsters occupied.

From the 1860's to the 1880's, the little meetinghouse in Ivanhoe underwent a number of changes, mostly designed to make worship more comfortable. The hard backless slips on which pioneer worshipers sat were replaced by comfortable pews. The smoky wood fireplace was replaced by a coal stove with Eisen glass doors.

Until about 1880, the church choir occupied the galleries. It was the custom of the congregation to turn about in the pews with their back to the minister and watch the singers as hymns were sung.

Of all church events, it was the revivals that stoked the energy and enthusiasm of pastor and congregation. There were over a dozen great revivals held at Ivanhoe during the late 1860's and 1870's. Each was approached and planned as a general staff might draw up strategy for a major battle.

A revival would last from two to four months, with meetings held two or three evenings a week and sometimes in the afternoon. Speakers and pastors from other churches were brought in to "supply the pulpit."

Emotions ran high. The church was filed, say records, "even when the weather was strong, and the mud ran deep." Invalid women "walked two and three miles over hard ice" to attend. During 1865, forty-two new members joined the church on confession of faith during one evening communion service. "Harvest seasons" in the next dozen years brought over one hundred converts to Christ. But converts were not the only objectives. Writes an early Ivanhoe pastor, "We cannot truly measure a revival by the number of names added to the Church rolIs …the fruits of revival are largely to be found in the quickened lives of those already members of the church."

Temperance and Revolution

The temperance cause obsessed Congregationalists in the 1880's, as it did most other Protestant churches. Temperance societies, the W.C.T.U., and a youthful corps of pledged abstainers called "The Loyal Look-Up Legion" preached against the evils of demon rum and, on occasion, joined other chapters to surround saloons in Rockefeller (Mundelein) and Vardin's Grove with picket lines.

For that generation, alcohol posed a threat more insidious than social threat posed by the drug counterculture today. At stake was the survival of the family as a close-knit economic and social unit.

In a rural society, success…even survival…depended in large measure on children's obedience to the work ethic as well their willingness to follow in their parents' footsteps as farmers or tradesmen. It was clear that in crowded cities like Chicago, family relationships were breaking

down.. It is no wonder that popular writers and poets of the day idealized rural, Midwestern family life, and underscored the value of good Christian upbringing.

In a larger sense, temperance preached moderation in all things, not just abstinence from drink. Alcohol, tobacco, failure to attend Church …. these were all described as "the seeds of self-destruction." Let them take root, and the family would surely crumble and the nation itself could fail! And whatever merits women's suffrage might hold, many good Congregationalists viewed it as a sin because it "set self above the family."

If a member of the Church succumbed to any of these temptations, it was an occasion for public prayer and fasting on the part of the deacons and congregation.

The Ivanhoe Church, with its almost Christmas-card quaintness, pastoral setting, and hardworking, God-fearing membership, must have seemed to exemplify America's best values. It is hard to imagine how the economic and social upheaval that began in the 1880's and snowballed through the turn of the century must have threatened its conservative traditions. But threaten it surely did.

The linking up of rural communities by railroad created new export opportunities. It also effectively destroyed each communities' sense of self-sufficiency. Shoes were purchased from a store rather than a neighborhood bootmaker; wheels were factory made rather than locally forged. Lake County farmers shipped out grain and produce and became dependent on unknown workers in distant cities for goods.

As mechanical farming reduced the need for field labor, small farms merged to become big ones and small-plot farmers were forced to seek work elsewhere. Some, especially the young, drifted to Chicago to work in the factories and mills. In 1850, 15% of the population lived in cities. Just 40 years later that percentage was close to 40%. As use of the McCormick reaper displaced field hands, that company also offered opportunities to thousands for employment in its Chicago works.

Local newspapers gave more coverage to Chicago news. The psychic distance between the factories of Chicago and the fields of Ivanhoe began to shrink.

In 1880, conditions in the cities were becoming intolerable. Without regulation, industry "sweat shops" flourished, characterized by long hours, low pay, unhealthful, unsafe conditions. The European immigration gates were open and blacks streamed up from the South creating a huge available workforce willing to work 60 hours a week for $10 in wages.

Themselves victims of profiteering by the railroads and business barons, farmers paid higher and higher prices for equipment, supplies, and shipping costs. Yet food prices were at an all-time low.

The gunpowder was in place and the match was lit. The explosion took place in Chicago in 1886 in Haymarket Square. A long bitter strike at the McCormick-Harvester plant had begun to attract union support from Chicago and from farmers throughout northern Illinois.

After a day of hand-to-hand combat between strikers and sympathizers on one side and police and paid strike breakers the other, a bomb was thrown, killing 10 people. Eight anarchists were convicted (later pardoned) and the union movement discredited.

The "war between capital and labor" is referred to several times in the semi-centennial church report published in 1888, usually to urge moderation or both sides. But the bitterness small local farmers evidently was deep.

The Century Turns

The Church at its semi-centennial in 1888 had 136 active members. Fifty years later there were about 100 actives on the rolls. As church families moved on to find farmland in Iowa, Nebraska, and the Dakotas, freshly emigrated families took their place…many of them Catholics and Lutherans.

Writes one of the Church historians in 1888, "This Church has passed through many trying periods and must yet be subjected to a crucial test. Can it reach out and successfully grapple with the new German-American families certain to occupy the old homes where but yesterday dwelt the New Englanders in whom Christianity and Congregationalism seemed almost inherent….?" Judging from the number of Germanic names added to the rolls in the 1900's, that "crucial test" was evidently met.

Formation of a new Congregational church in Rockefeller (Mundelein) in 1889 siphoned off some of the Ivanhoe members. Around 1920, when dwindling membership made it difficult to afford a capable, full-time pastor, the sister churches worked out an arrangement to share one pastor between them.. It proved to be a good solution for both congregations. Regular services were maintained at both Mundelein and Ivanhoe, and special services were combined. The shared pastor arrangement continued until 1940.

After the turn of the century, a great many attractive, larger-capacity churches were built in the Ivanhoe-Mundelein-Libertyville neighborhood.. But the little clapboard meeting house on the hill remained virtually unchanged. After 1880, the choir sang from a raised platform behind the pulpit.. Primary Sunday school was held in the old choir gallery.

In 1915, on the eve of the automobile era, a long black multi-stalled buggy shed was completed behind the church. At that same time, members undertook the formidable task of jacking up the church and digging a new basement. When completed, a neat little blue and white kitchen was installed by the churchwomen, complete with sink and gas plates.

World War I brought with it a killing flu epidemic and a major fuel shortage. Without coal for the new furnace, formal services were suspended during the winter of 1918–the only worship interruption ever experienced in the long history of Ivanhoe Church.

During the 1920's, the interior of the church underwent extensive remodeling. The last major work done on the church was the construction of the education wing in 1957. Workers on that

project discovered supporting timbers that had been hewn by ax and shaped by awl a century earlier. The present parsonage was finished in 1952.

The centennial of the church was celebrated for three days in July 1938. About 450 people attended the events. On the final day, a homecoming picnic was held at Gages Lake in which the entire Ivanhoe community participated. Past members of the church returned from all parts of the compass to sit in the shade, sip lemonade, and reminisce with old friends.

Reading accounts and reviewing pictures of the celebration gives new meaning to the word "homecoming." Young and old, famous and ordinary, they came back to the little hilltop meeting house, tracing roots deeply embedded in old traditions and unyielding, uncomplicated faith.

At the day's end, there was a community sing. The most requested songs, of course, were old hymns. But for many standing in at sunset, their hearts and throats and eyes were too filled to sing.