



Top: Submitted photo of the outside of the Nora Unitarian Church in Hanska.

Below: Photos by Steve Muscatello

An inside view from the balcony of the church and the outside of the Ole Jorgensen Memorial Museum located on the church grounds.

Nora Unitarian Church in Hanska celebrates 125 years

The tall church spire looks beneficently down on all as it has now for these 100 years. It is a bright beacon of hope for those, who through searching or through tradition, enter the portal of Nora Church and call it their spiritual home.

— Nora Unitarian Universalist Church Centennial Anniversary

Story by Michael Gasset
Journal Sports Writer

Over the past 125 years, a lot has changed at the Nora Unitarian Universalist Church in Hanska. But the more things change, the more important it is that some things stay the same.

And one thing that has never changed with the Nora Church is its mission as being the liberal light on the prairie.

As that liberal light, members of Unitarian Universalism believe that: Personal experience, conscience and reason should be the final authorities in religion. In the end religious authority lies not in a book, person or institution but in ourselves.

"It is kind of a surprise," Pastor Don Rollins said, "given its rural setting and a liberal religion. It's really a tribute to the people of the church."

Belief in liberal ideals is what makes the Nora Church unique and that uniqueness is what brings people in that may not feel comfortable with a conventional church setting.

The fellowship doesn't follow a set creed, they strive to uphold the free search for truth and not be bound by statement of belief.

Lifelong church member, Lorraine Becken is quick to point out that not all Unitarians believe the same thing. Some are Humanists, some are Deists and others are Theists.

"If we tell you what Unitarians believe, some Unitarians won't believe it," she said.

That makes Unitarian Universalism a free faith and people have been traveling great distances to Nora for that reason. This is evident by distances some members travel for service each and every Sunday.

"Even though several different communities make up our church we have a common bond," Pastor Rollins said. "All of

the members of the church have the same beliefs and same life experiences."

Nora has officially 78 members, made up of 13 different communities across Southern Minnesota. It even has members from Fairmont and Worthington that travel each and every Sunday for service.

"We are a regional church," Becken said. "It used to be a local church and almost all Norwegian. But a lot has changed over the years."

The Nora Free Church will celebrate its 125 years today, with a regular service at 10:30 a.m. and a dinner immediately following. Several former ministers are expected to return to the church to take in the celebration.

The history

The name Nora comes from the three symbolic maidens representing the three sister Scandinavian countries of Norway, Sweden and Denmark; who were Nora, Svea and Dania. Nora means simply Norwegian.

The history of the church is a colorful one. A number of families had separated from the Lake Hanska Lutheran church because of dissatisfaction over the placement of the cemetery. These families still wanted to be Lutherans, but proceeded on their own. At the same time, a group of families had disbanded from the Linden Lutheran Church as well.

As fate would have it, poet and preacher Kristofer Janson had recently arrived to the United States from Norway. An ordained Unitarian Minister, he had been electrifying audiences of all faiths in his lectures.

Some of the families had heard him speak in Madelia and they invited Janson to come to Hanska. He did, and the group liked what they heard and felt it was time for a change. So at that point, with Janson as their leader they formed the Nora Free Church.

"He also had a church in Minneapolis," Becken said. "So there wasn't a service every Sunday, because at that time it was difficult to travel that far. But when he was here to lecture or preach, wagons would come from all over and stay all day."

The site chosen on which to build the church was

said to be the highest point in Brown County. The hill, according to legend was named by Jesuit missionaries as Mount Pisquah after a range in ancient Palestine.

The early constitution of the church called for the Bible to be the foundation of church law but it did not accept the word as infallible and Janson was given permission to use whatever ritual he chose in his ministerial functions.

Now that the church was formed, the next matter was a building to host Sunday worship. Much discussion was held on whether the building was to be made of stone or wood. Since time was of the essence, it was decided the church was to be made out of wood.

Perhaps, had the founders chosen stone, the church would still be in its original position on top of the hill.

The first church was constructed on top of Mount Pisquah, behind the present one. It was framed in the shape of a cross, with the wings being intended for the minister's residence. It was half finished when a tornado totally destroyed it in July 1883. Even the sills with the floor were removed from the foundation.

Sixteen people, including Janson, his family and the carpenters were in the building at the time and not one was seriously injured. The storm victims crawled through mud and fallen trees to a nearby farm, where they were given warm clothes.

On the following Sunday, church founders met at the site of the catastrophe and vowed to build a small meeting house using whatever material remained. But when funds from the American Unitarian Association began to pour in those plans changed and the erection of the present church was commenced in the fall and completed the following year.

The site of the first church is treated as hallowed ground, unused for cemetery plots or buildings. Today, the American Flag waves in the breeze.

Janson preached at Nora until September of 1893. At that point Dr. Amandus Norman was approached by a committee from Nora Church and he gave his first sermon on Sept. 4,

1893. Norman was the longest serving pastor of the church, serving from 1893 until his death on Nov. 14, 1931. It was under his guidance that the parsonage just below Nora was built in 1906.

After 125 years, what makes Nora stand out, is not only is it Unitarian, but also it is in rural Hanska. There are many Unitarian Universalist churches on the East Coast, and several in Minneapolis. In fact most are in metropolitan areas.

"Things have changed over the years," Rollins said. "People that belong to this church weren't necessarily born Unitarian. They have joined the church because their beliefs have changed and are looking for something different."



One of the most unique features of the Nora Church grounds is the Ole Jorgensen Memorial Museum. It stands south of the church near a spreading oak tree. The log house structure shows the way early pioneers struggled to build a church on the hill.

Their household artifacts, treasures they brought from Norway are there and the logs they cut from the wilderness built the walls.

The Jorgensen Memorial Museum was built out of logs in 1935, from the home of Ole Jorgensen. The sturdy door was built by John A. Johnson out of two inch redwood planks that were grooved together. The cross bars are dovetailed into the door and screwed on. The screw holes with wooden plugs to resemble wooden pegs.

To give the museum a Norwegian feel, Hans Jorgensen constructed a large display table using Norwegian architectural ideas.

Glass cases hold artifacts from early Hanska business establishments such as the Farmer Store, Ringnell Drug Store and others. The Hanska Telephone switchboard from the days of party lines, the first barber chair used in Hanska and the early post office used in the Farmer Store are there. The first wooden collection box used at Nora Church is also in the museum.

There are a number of smaller antiques there as well, like a Norwegian bowl circa 1539, silver spoons, Norwegian pins from 1665, a Lutheran hymn book from 1666, a dagger knife used by a Viking lord and a prehistoric animal tooth.

The Jorgensen Memorial Museum was dedicated Oct. 6, 1935. It is named for Ole Jorgensen, one of the most influential men in the early life of Nora Church. Jorgensen was a scholar, whose writings are contained in the church cornerstone.