

# Valley Grove Newsletter



Christmas 2007

by the Valley Grove Preservation Society

## Saga of the Stone Church Steeple

*The 1862 stone church is the crown jewel of the Valley Grove site. It was built by the pioneers under extremely arduous conditions. The workmanship was uneven, but considering it was built by volunteer labor using hand tools and local materials, it is a monument to ingenuity and hard work. Saving the stone church is nothing less than a tribute to the Norwegian immigrants who overcame incredible hardships. It was also in terrible shape.*



*The northeast corner supports of the steeple were completely rotted away.*

Because only fire can cause more damage than water, replacing the roof was priority one. But when we fixed the roof, we discovered that repairing the steeple was just as important, if not more so. The steeple had been leaking off and on since it was built 145 years ago. The rot was so extensive, it was obvious it had to be replaced (not just repaired) immediately. This could not wait!

Last April at our annual meeting, the board was instructed to start work on the 1862 steeple this winter. Knowing that we did not have the total funds to complete the work, it was decided that

we as an organization could borrow whatever funds we needed to get the steeple phase of the project completed.

Part of the reasoning was that because of the wonderful gifts to our endowment fund, the dividends and interest we earn from these funds would offset the interest we will need to pay on monies that will be borrowed. The second part of our reasoning, was that it was the responsibility of the board to use the donated monies in the general fund for restoration and maintenance in a timely fashion. ***The third part is you. We know from the past, we could count on your support.***

The steeple project started in October with measurements of the exterior and interior of the steeple. We also used an 1880's photo as a guide for construction. One of the problems of the original steeple design was that rain and snow would come in the open windows and have no way to get out. The solution they used to solve the problem sometime after the 1894 church was built was to remove the top, add more pitch to the roof and board up the windows. However by this time the rot damage had started.

Even though we now had 145 years of experience with the problems caused by the original steeple design, we were determined to recreate the original appearance. The guidelines for historical preservation tell us that we should be as faithful as possible to the things people see. The parts people cannot see can be constructed in any way that gets the job done.

We built the steeple off-site, removed the old steeple, corrected the structural problems, and craned in the new steeple. We kept the open window look of the original but redesigned the internal structure. The floor of the bell tower was raised three feet so the water and snow will now flow out of the "windows" instead of being trapped inside.

On November 6<sup>th</sup> the old steeple was taken off by a crane and was on the ground in seven minutes. The rotten beams that somehow supported the steeple were removed. The original steeple was supported on two 8 × 8 beams running into the stone wall on the west side of the church and then resting on two 8 × 8 columns holding both the steeple and balcony on the east. These were the two columns you would notice as you walk into the church. We had to put in proper footings and replace the two east columns, and add two more columns under the beams that were holding the steeple on the west.

*The major steeple elements ready to be craned into place*



November 16<sup>th</sup>: With proper footings, new columns, replaced and reinforced beams, the new steeple was craned into place with only 1½ inches clearance between the church roof and edges of the steeple. With little wind, the start to finish of the crane's time installing the steeple was two and a half hours.

Needless to say, we were *very* proud of how smoothly everything had gone. We had spent only half as much money as we had feared the project would cost. But this is historic preservation—nothing is *ever* simple. We had finally stopped the water from coming in the roof, but we soon discovered that our high-priority repairs were not done.

While opening the floor we noticed three things. First, the church's stone walls are resting on rock footings at least four feet deep — that's good. Second, the two columns were sitting on one or two rocks lying on bare ground. Below the rock on the southeast columns was a hole big enough for a woodchuck or raccoon home — not good! Third, the floor joists have added a new twist to the steeple project. With over 145 years of critters running back and forth under the floor and having lunch on the wood, not one of the floor joists has its original thickness. The stone church had a truly floating floor — much sitting on bare ground. For safety reasons we had to replace this floor.

The final touch on the steeple will be the finial. Judging from the exterior photo from the 1880s we could determine the height, diameter and shape. Like the Lutheran churches back in Norway, the finial was probably topped with a vaerhane



*The old steeple cap coming down*

— a rooster. It is traditional in much of Europe that Catholic churches have crosses atop their steeples while Protestants have roosters. However, the question as to its shape was not settled by the picture.

We consulted via e-mail with Jens C. Eldal, a church historian in Norway that has used Valley Grove's 1894 church in his studies. He confirmed what we knew about roosters on churches in Norway. But what kind of rooster? He sent us several photos of Norwegian church roosters and we set about trying to figure the best design for our use. But several weeks ago, while the carpenters were cleaning out all sorts of nasty stuff from the old steeple, one found a piece of 1862 siding with a pencil drawing of the finial rooster and all with the words in Norwegian.

Eldal translates: *I read it like this:*

*"See her du Anton" (Look here you Anton [a common first name in Norway])*

*"Saa skal det være" (So shall it be) (The last word may perhaps not show properly on an American computer. It is spelled with a special Danish-Norwegian letter made from a+e added together to a single letter, and the whole word is spelled like this: v a+e r e)*

*There may be a signature/initials underneath to the right, above the rooster, which is not possible to read from the photographs. The second (or first?) letter seems to be a "J". Looking closer the first and second initials are "JJ". To me this seems to be a clear message from the designer or a decision maker to the craftsman named Anton.*

*I wonder if this was the one and only design drawing for the rooster, as it may well have been. In that case it is a nice piece of folk art illustrating what I mentioned earlier about the level of drawing professionalism. And it is also very possible that this Anton had another way in designing roosters and added his personal touch to it.*

*Ready to set the cap into place*



There will be a rooster!

Your help is needed. By the end of January 2008 we will have to determine how much money we will need to be borrowed to pay for this project. Hopefully the interest that we will need to pay will be at a minimum.

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### God Jul at Valley Grove

Our Christmas Eve service has drawn a full house seven years running, and we expect this year will meet or exceed expectations. As always, it begins with music at 9:30 p.m. and a service at 10 p.m. that features the Gospel of Matthew, read in part in English and in Norwegian.

We invite everyone to stay after the service to share news, glad tidings and history and, of course, cider, coffee and holiday treats. The heartfelt simplicity of Valley Grove, the historic connections to our immigrant and farming past and the high quality of the music add up to a powerful attraction to those who have roots here and those who just love and appreciate Valley Grove.



*The drawing found in the old steeple*

### Country Social

The annual Valley Grove fall country social is always blessed with perfect autumn weather and appreciative crowds. This year we enjoyed live music by the Northfield music group Nordic Jam out under the gigantic oak tree, along with song (sometimes in Norwegian). All afternoon the magnificent black percheron teams and wagons owned by Bob and Cheryl Mathies of Faribault gave rides across our prairie, which was blooming later than usual thanks to a summer drought. Chip DeMann of Dundas replete in cowboy regalia brought a small saddle horse that belongs to his daughter Molly and gave children rides on her.

### Valley Grove in the Long Run

Valley Grove's beauty and age remind us of many things — simplicity, peace and time, especially. In the long run, when we are not here to take care of the prairie and the churches, we want others to experience this place. Your contributions will insure that this happens. Tax-deductible gifts may be directed to the Valley Grove Preservation Society P.O. Box 75, Nerstrand MN 55053



*Between rot and critters, there wasn't much left of the floor structure.*



*A drawing of the new steeple topped off  
with a finial as authentic as we can make it*

### **Call for Wedding Photos**

We would like to have a collection of photographs of weddings held at Valley Grove over the years. We do have a few already spanning from May 13, 1885 to September 23, 2006. Please send us your photo, especially if it shows the setting. We may do a Web feature so everyone can see them!

And if you are making wedding plans and you'd like to reserve a date at Valley Grove for your own unforgettable ceremony, contact Ken Sahlin at (507) 645-8720.

### **New Hymnals**

This Spring St. John's Church in Northfield donated 275 green hymnals to VG, and we also received the organ hymnal. We were always short of red hymnals and now we have extras with the green. The red hymnals are stored in the stone church.

### **Gifts and Memorials**

Since our last newsletter, we have had additional memorial gifts to honor Richard Hougan, a past board member. These monetary and security gifts were directed toward the 1862 Fund as requested by the family.

Memorials were also given to honor the lives of May Okada, Gladys Hope Wallin, AAA Rowberg and son Leland, Marilyn Hope Lieb, and Barbara Hughes Truax

Contributions were given to honor Fred Boevers on his 80th birthday.

Contributions were given by siblings to celebrate William and Dorothy Jarvey (Severson) on their 60th wedding anniversary. The parents of Lauren Johnson celebrated their first.