

A PLACE THAT REFLECTS THE PEOPLE INSIDE

Emily Gibson, April 13, 2010

Back in the early days of Whatcom County, the little church on Wisner Lake had been constructed through “contributions of the people” in a rural neighborhood only a few miles from where we now live. \$600 in lumber was provided by a local farmer whose trees were cut and milled and brought by horse drawn wagon to a building site adjacent to a one room school house along a corrugated plank road. The total property was “valued at \$1800, but of even more value to the community.” The dedication ceremony was held on Sunday, August 27, 1916 followed by “a basket dinner—come with well filled baskets for a common table, under the direction of the Ladies Aid”. This was to be followed by a “Fellowship Meeting, special music and fraternal addresses” and the day ended at 8 PM with a Young People’s Meeting. So began the long history of the “Wisner Lake Church”.

For reasons unrecorded in the history of the church, the original denomination closed the doors thirty years later, and for awhile the building was empty and in need of a congregation. By the fifties, it became a mission church of the local Christian Reformed Churches and launched a Sunday School program for migrant farm and Native American children in the surrounding rural neighborhood. No formal church services started until the sixties. By the time the building was sixty years old, so many children were arriving for Sunday School, there was not enough room so the building was hoisted up on jacks to allow a hole to be dug underneath for a basement full of classrooms. Over the course of a summer, the floor space doubled, and the church settled back into place, allowed to rest again on its foundation.

Over seventy years after its dedication ceremony, our family drove past the boxy building countless times hurrying on our way to other places, barely giving it a second glance. It had a classic design, but showed its age with peeling paint, a few missing shingles, an old fashioned square flat roofed belfry, and arched windows. The hand lettered sign spelling out “Wisner Lake Chapel” by the road constituted a humble invitation of sorts, simply by listing the times of the services.

On a blustery December Sunday evening, we had no place else to be for a change. Instead of driving past, we stopped, welcomed by the yellow glow pouring from the windows and an almost full parking lot. Our young family climbed the steps to the big double doors, and inside were immediately greeted by a large balding man with a huge grin and encompassing handshake. He asked our names and pointed us to one of the few open spots still available in the old wooden pews.

The sanctuary was a warm and open space with a high lofted ceiling, dark wood trim accents matching the ancient pews, and a plain wooden cross above the pulpit in front. There was a pungent smell from fir bough garlands strung along high wainscoting, and a circle of candles standing lit on a small altar table. Apple pie was baking in the kitchen oven, blending with the aroma of good coffee and hot cocoa.

The service was a Sunday School Christmas program, with thirty some children of all ages and skin colors standing up front in bathrobes and white sheet angel gowns, wearing gold foil halos, tinfoil crowns and dish towels wrapped with string around their heads. They were prompted by their teachers through carols and readings of the Christmas story. The final song was Silent Night, sung by candle light, with each child and member of the congregation holding a lit candle. There was a moment of excitement when one girl's long hair briefly caught fire, but after that was quickly extinguished, the evening ended in darkness, with the soft glow of candlelight illuminating faces of the young and old, some in tears streaming over their smiles.

It felt like home. We had found our church. We've never left. Over two decades it has had peeling paint and missing shingles, a basement that floods when the rain comes down hard, toilets that don't always flush, and though it smells heavenly on potluck days, there are times when it can be just a bit out of sorts and musty. It also has a warmth and character and uniqueness that is unforgettable.

It's really not so different from the folks who gather there. We know we belong.