

Exterior and interior views of the original building of the Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church, Goessel, Kan., as it appeared before being rebuilt in 1928.



## THE ALEXANDERWOHL CHURCH BUILDING

By ALVIN GOOSSEN



THE LOCATION of the original church building of the Alexanderwohl Mennonite congregation was at the same spot where the present building stands, one-half mile east and one mile north of Goessel, Kan. The original structure was built in 1886 at the cost of \$6,030.24, which was paid the first year.

The first 12 years in America, from 1874 to 1886, the worship services were held in the immigrant house which was located in the middle of the same section. When the church was built it was called "Neu-Alexanderwohl" Mennonite Church. The "Neu" (new), which was soon dropped, had been added because the congregation had adopted the name Alexanderwohl in Russia.

The main auditorium of this church was 40 by 70 ft., which was directly above the present basement (fellowship hall). The basement was made in 1922 under this building. This took much hard labor, because the ground was hard and dry. The remark was often made that it had not rained for a long time under this building.

Some of the old structure was still left when the building was rebuilt in 1928, such as the main floor and some walls.

Some of this lumber is still from the immigrant house. The pulpit is still at the same location as the first pulpit, except now the platform is lower and the present pulpit is not quite as large.

The church also had a front entry way to the east, 22 by 30 ft., with two stairways. On the first floor under the north stairway was the nursery and on the south under the stairway, the library. This room was also used for Sunday school.

Early in the 20th century, two entrances 12 by 24 ft. were added, one on each end of the building, which also were used for Sunday school. The little room on the south end was the minister's prayer room.

It was quite common to see three or four ministers and two deacons walk behind the other through the long aisle from the prayer room to take their places behind the pulpit. This was done while the congregation was singing the first song for the worship service. In those days all the people stayed seated while singing, even the song leaders. There usually were five or six song leaders; they announced the number and would sing out vigorously.

Alvin Goossen of Newton, Kan. views a replica of the original building of the Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church that he completed in 1973 as a centennial project. The Alexanderwohl congregation emigrated as a group from South Russia in 1874, settling about 15 miles north of Newton near what later became the town site of Gnessel. Built on a scale of one-half inch to the foot, the replica is a painstakingly accurate copy of the church as it appeared from 1886 to 1928. The miniature structure includes all 96 shutters—with 26 pieces in each—and about 4,000 shingles on the roof. A section of the roof can be removed to view the completely detailed interior with balcony on three sides, pulpit, railings, staircases, and 80 benches, each with a rack underneath. Goossen estimates he spent 1,000 hours on the project. The replica is on display in the museum at the Goessel historical complex.



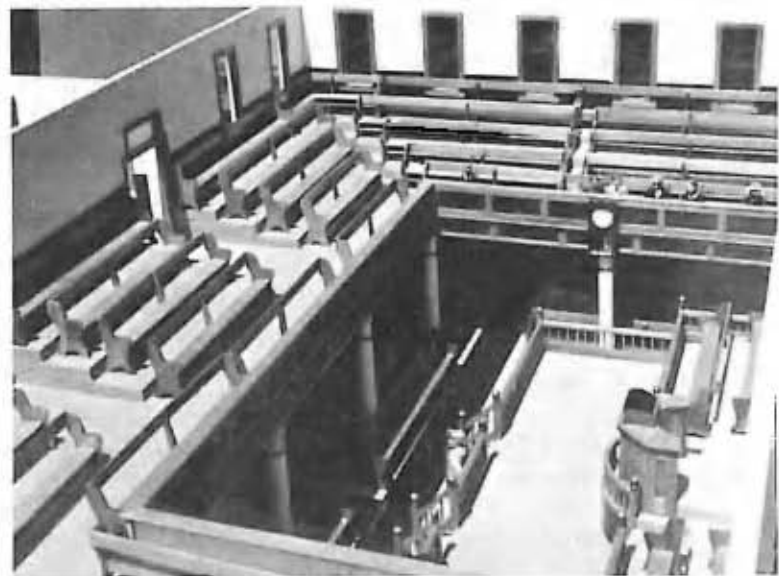
For all prayers everybody stood up, except for the pastoral prayer we knelt. In the early years there were two sermons on Sunday morning, and Sunday school was held in the afternoon in rural schools. Later, curtains were put up in the church to divide the Sunday school classes, making room for 21 classes. After Sunday school, the curtains were pushed back to the wall for the worship service.

In the fall of 1927 it was decided to rebuild the church. On the first Sunday morning in February of 1928, it was announced that help was needed Monday morning to start removing the additions from the main building. It felt rather strange to work with some 20 men using hammers and wrecking-bars.

On March 1, 1928, the church, 40 by 70 ft., was raised 39 inches. My father, F. M. Goossen, had the responsibility for the job. The church was raised with all the pews in it. Rev. C. C. Wedel stepped in about every hour and said that both clocks were still going.

At first the congregation intended to have worship services in the building after it was raised. But when people saw it so high above the foundation and the big basement under it, it was decided to have the services in five rural schools. This was done until Nov. 11, 1928 when the new church was dedicated.

I remember that Rev. P. H. Unruh and others who traveled in Holland, Germany and Russia shortly after World War I said that the Alexanderwohl Church inner architectural arrangement was similar to some of the old



*Interior of replica shows intricate details.*

church buildings in Holland. Rev. P. H. Unruh said that when he walked into the Alexanderwohl Church in Russia he felt that he was almost back home in America. So we see that the Mennonites not only carried their religious practices but also their Dutch style of architecture from Holland to Prussia, to Russia and then to America.



*In early 1928, the wings of the Alexanderwohl Church were removed and the structure raised 39 inches in preparation for remodeling.*



*Construction proceeds for the new church, which was dedicated Nov. 11, 1928. (Photos from the writer's collection)*