

Spring Garden 150th Anniversary Celebration

“If These Walls Could Talk”

By Pastor Nicholas A. Fisher-Broin

Play Synopsis

Setting: By the Log Cabin

Robin Magalis and Carrie Sauter, playing themselves come up to the cabin talking with each other. While talking about the cabin’s history, a pioneer woman (Patty Zimmerman) steps out and invites them to hear some stories that the cabin could tell them. As she shares stories from the cabin diary, groups of actors will emerge to act out the stories she tells.

Scene 1

(Robin and Carrie talking together about getting ready to go to college—what it’s going to be like, what they are going to pack, what they are going to miss from home, etc. They get to the cabin . . .)

Carrie: You know, I’m really going to miss the farm. The cows have always been such a part of our family’s life—the chores the, the milking, Grandpa and Grandma living just up the road . . . Something about home—the barns, the outbuildings. It’s all so familiar, I know I’ll miss it even though college will be exciting . . .

Robin: Yeah . . . my house isn’t as old as yours, but my Grandparents live just across the road and it’s like I imagine their home will always be there, no matter where I go after college.

Carrie: (touching the cabin) Even this old cabin—all the years I was growing up it sat over by the granary at my place. I can remember playing in it when I was really little—kind of like a club house. But then it started falling down and got kind of scary inside. The weeds were growing up all around it . . . and there were lots of bugs!

Robin: I know the story and all—it’s where our church first started—back when those old Swedes first came to America—it really is amazing that the cabin turned out so nice after it was restored—it was really falling down! I remember I was scared of it way back when I came to your 8th birthday party!

Carrie: Yeah! I remember that! But still—it sat on my place for at least 150 years—kinda makes me wonder about the people back then who used to call my farm their home. I wonder what it was like for them?

Robin: I know what you mean! The long winters really get to me but you wonder about how those people kept warm . . .

Carrie: . . . yeah and how they made their food, and what they did if they got sick. I know this cabin was called the Haggstrom cabin and that a family lived in it . . .

Robin: . . .and that it was kind of the first church where Spring Garden began . . .

Carrie: (after a thoughtful pause) I sometimes wonder what it would be like if these walls could talk—you know—what kinds of stories they'd tell.

Robin: Yeah! I bet this old cabin sure has seen a lot in the last 150 years . . .

(Backing out of the cabin door is a Pioneer Woman—she is sweeping and humming /singing “Hosianna” to herself. The girls are surprised and kind of dumbstruck to see her. She doesn't even turn to face the girls as she begins to speak to them.)

Woman: Ja, ja, ja—and don't forget to bring in the firewood if you expect to have anything for supper—now hurry along girls—the men will be back from Red Wing any day now with a barrel of flour and they will be so hungry they could eat a Norwegian . . .

(Robin and Carrie looking confused) Robin: Wait a minute—who are you and where did you come from!?

Woman: (she says with a laugh) Well, now girls—what did you expect—you asked if these walls could talk and so they do. There are indeed lots of stories to tell from the past 150 years—though I must admit, the last 100 or so have been rather dull. For a long time we were just a granary and then for awhile, a chicken coop . . . and we do remember your eighth birthday Miss Sauter . . . I suppose we were a little scary by then . . .

Carrie: Do you mean to tell us you . . .

Woman: Ja, Ja—I am the keeper of the story and what an interesting story the cabin tells. The walls do talk, you know—telling the story of a people and a time long gone. Do you have time to sit for awhile? The men won't be back for a few days and the firewood can wait—and heavens, the Norwegians are nowhere in sight! If you will give me a moment—I will bring out the cabin's diary and see if we can bring a few stories to life . . .

Scene 2

Pioneer woman brings out a rocking chair and a large book which is the cabin's diary. The girls sit down on the step while the Pioneer Woman opens the diary.

Robin: Wow! That looks like an ancient book!

Pioneer Woman: Oh Ja, it is! It is the cabin's diary—written in the walls by the people who lived here and made church here. As I said—very little has been written in the last hundred years or so, but now that the old cabin is here at Spring Garden, it is now where it should be—reunited with its people in your generation. I imagine this old book will be used once again now that the cabin here—to write stories from your generation.

Carrie: I'll never forget the day that it was taken down at my farm—all those men and women who came to help—and wash off 150 years of dust!

Pioneer Woman: Oh Ja! I must say—it felt pretty good to have a bath after all that time! The day the people took the cabin apart is the first chapter in the cabin’s new life. So—where shall we start? How about near the beginning—I don’t imagine you want to go way back to ‘de Ice Age. (the girls nod “No.” Let’s see . . . (she flips through pages—how about we begin here—she points emphatically at the page. The girls nod in agreement—sounds good to us they nod and say).

Scene 3

Pioneer Woman: Well, it’s over 150 years ago when those first Swedes came this way. They left the old country for many reasons—hardships, religious freedom, the promise of land in America. They came by “segal-fartyg”—a sailing ship to you. They said farewell to family in the old country whom they would never see again. But to America they came and they made their way west to Illinois and Iowa when word came about a fair and beautiful land in Minnesota territory.

They came upriver to Red Wing and camped there for a time with other settlers and the Indians. Leaving the women and children at Red Wing, Magnus Edstrom, John Wanberg and Carl Haggstrom followed buffalo trails west looking for the place of springs and good soil. When they found the place, they set up claims and began the work of making a “Koja”—or log cabin to you. Little by little, through sweat and toil, they hewed a space out of the wilderness to make a life for themselves in the new land.

The first Kojas were pretty small and cramped, but after a time, logs were reused and the cabins were made bigger to fit a growing family.

Well, in time, the men returned to Red Wing to bring their families and belongings to their new cabin homes. By screech cart called a skrikkara, they came over the buffalo trails—the oxcart pulling the load where there was no road. Over bumps and logs, whipped by underbrush, Mrs. Haggstrom wondered aloud, “How far are we going to travel like this?” to which Mr. Edstrom replied, “We have to keep going until we find some little koja.” Then, in the clearing, they were home—standing there, the little cabin built by Carl Haggstrom.

They pulled their few belongings from the oxcart and began to make a home. Opening the trunk, they pulled out their few treasured items that sustained them since the old country—items for body and soul. For the body—a cooking pot, sewing tools and a few utensils for cooking, some simple furnishings and some tools for the men to build a trade. And for soul—a Bible, a Psalmbook, a Postilla, and Luther’s Small Catechism.

Each of these treasures found a place inside the cabin’s walls—hanging from a hook, or set carefully by the table. The cabin’s walls tasted the scrape of axe and adze as corners were notched; the cabin’s walls hold the memory of roasted venison and cornmeal mush, of Indian visits and four day blizzards and cabin fever; in these walls still live the laughter of children, the pangs of childbirth and the hushed breath of the dying. So it was 150 years ago when our forefathers and mothers first came to this land.

Scene 4

Carrie: It makes you wonder how those first settlers ever survived! It had to have been incredibly hard.

Pioneer Woman: Ja, it was! But life goes on—for a hundred generations people made the best of it—tasted joys and sorrows alike, trusting all their cares to the Lord.

Robin: I like to think I'm pretty strong—I've taken loads of animals to the fair and stuff and I grew up on a farm—but I don't know if I could have, or any of us could have survived those old times—life must have been tough!

Pioneer Woman: Tough! The people were tough! You're right, though—its hard to say whether today's people could have survived. That's what made the pioneer's faith so important to them—so many didn't survive hardship, hunger or disease, that the next life was always closer than you realized.

Let me tell you of when it first became clear that it was time for church to come. Let me see if I can find the diary entry . . . (she flips a page or two and then says) Aha! Here it is!

It was the spring of 1856 and the winter was hard. The flour had given out even though they had put in ground tree bark to make it stretch further—they had done this in the old country. Carl Haggstrom began to walk to Red Wing for a new supply. Maybe it was there in Red Wing that Haggstrom first heard of a young pastor named Norelius at the Vasa settlement. Haggstrom's journey for flour was ever so important. There would be new mouths to feed and Mother needed supplies to care for everyone's hunger. Some time after Haggstrom returned with the barrel of flour, a baby boy was born to the Haggstroms and a baby boy was born to the Edstroms.

So on July 6 of 1856, they loaded the oxcart and went east and north, through brush and over hills and creeks until they came upon the settlement at Vasa. As Pastor Norelius was beginning services, he spied the oxcart coming, filled with people. In their midst were two babies and they desired baptism for them. It was agreed that Pastor Eric Norelieus would come to the new settlement as soon as possible. And so on July 17, 1856, Pastor Norleius made his first visit to Spring Garden.

It was a difficult journey on foot for Norelius—nine miles through thorny brush and thicket. Once, Norelius arrived with his clothes in such tatters that many a pin was needed to fasten his clothes together so he could lead services.

One summer, Norelius had come to lead worship in the cabin and bring the Holy Sacrament for the little settlement. Now each cabin had a little window to let in some air . . .

Robin: OOOH! I love this story!

Carrie: Yay! It's the "Chicken Window Story!"

Pioneer Woman: Ja, Ja! You are right!! Well—Pastor Norelius was about to give his communion address when . . .

Robin and Carrie (excitedly, together break in. . .): when all of a sudden a chicken burst through the window and knocked the communion bread all over the floor-- it was cackling and flapping like it was possessed by the evil one . . . and the chicken was thrown outside!

Pioneer Woman: Ja, Ja! Very good! I can see you do know this story! Well, there was more—Pastor Norelius began again with his message—when all of a sudden, the cackling hen flew once again through the window and this time knocked over the communion wine down to the floor, though the bottle did not break. After this, a guard was stationed by the window to keep the chicken from disrupting the sacrament anymore.

Scene 5

Robin: Wow—it really did happen that way—and right here! That is such a neat story—you can almost see it happening . . .

Carrie: Yeah! It's like the people just took life in stride—I'm sure the pioneers faced all kinds of surprises.

Pioneer Woman: Oh Ja! Frontier life was full of surprises. Usually the settlers and the Indians got along ok—sometimes the Indians came and took grain, just like they owned it. But then, when food was scarce, the Indians would come with game to trade for other goods we had. At least some of us understood that the Indian lived here first and we were grateful they seemed to allow some space for our Swedish settlement.

Carrie: So, how is it that Spring Garden got its name?

Pioneer Woman: Well, that is a good story, too. When the Swedish settlers first came, they were taken by the rich soil and the springs and streams that seemed to water the earth right into a beautiful garden. In 1856, the Eugene Stone family came by way of Illinois, by way of Pennsylvania. Stone's wife Ellen, perhaps remembering places back in Pennsylvania that were named "Spring Garden" saw the verdant land here and the name just struck a chord in her, "Kallornas Lustgard," in Swedish, it seemed a fine name for this settlement—and from then on, that is how it was known.

Robin: So how does this little settlement of Swedes become Spring Garden Church? Do they just decide, "Well, we're a church now—and poof, its done?"

Pioneer Woman: Well, no—it's not magic or anything. With Norelius leading services, it became clear that a community of faith was being born—and a pastor of their own was needed to baptize, marry and bury the people of the settlement—and teach them God's Word and bring the sacrament. But no Pastor would come if there was not an organized church. So, on July 19 of 1858, an organizational meeting was held in the Carl Haggstrom log cabin. It was a rather formal affair for these pioneers on the frontier—but their faith was serious business to them.

You see, the church was not just an organization like it is to some people in your time—to them, the church was like bread when you are hungry. And they knew hunger. The church was comfort in sorrow, community in a land where they were often alone in the wilderness. They needed each other in ways you can't imagine in your time. And the church was the very assurance that God was present in their very difficult lives. Sometimes it seemed that the world had forgotten them, but because they had church, they knew that heaven had not forgotten them. Remember those first two babies that were born and baptized by Pastor Norelius? By September, one of them had died—the first Spring Garden death, and it was just a baby. Life was fragile then and death was always near. To know the Lord is with you was life itself for those pioneers—and the church was one way they could see that the Lord was with them.

Carrie: Wow . . . I guess I never realized how important church was to them—it's hard to imagine needing something so deeply that your survival depends on it.

Pioneer Woman: Oh, Ja . . . they had their meeting and they became “The Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Congregation of Spring Garden, Leon Township, Goodhue County, State of Minnesota.” They adopted a constitution, listed the founding members, elected deacons and trustees, decided the worship schedule, directed members to build a road for people to get to worship and even decided to set up a burial lot on land donated by Mr. Enberg. At the meeting, it was also decided a future church would be built on the land where this church actually sits today.

Robin: So that's it? They voted to become a church and it just all rolls on from there?

Pioneer Woman: Well—I wish it were that simple! Because church was so important to these early folks, they had plenty of strong feelings, too. They met quickly to make provision for building a parsonage for the first pastor, Rev. Peter Beckman. And they dreamed of building a larger church. But for quite a few years they met in the cabin and various other homes because they couldn't decide where to build the church.

Carrie: Couldn't decide? Well—what was so hard about that? They had already chosen a place—why not just build it!

Pioneer Woman: Oh. . . Ja, I wish it were that easy. You see, several members wanted to offer land to put the new church on and a disagreement arose among them about whose land should be used . . .

Robin: What ?! I'm shocked! There was disagreement in the church?! How can this be? I'm so disillusioned now . . .

Pioneer Woman: Oh dear . . . dear . . . Don't fret too much—the church was just as full of sinners then as it is now! I don't mean to shock you too much—but feelings and tempers got to running pretty strong at a meeting on February 7 of 1860. While some wanted to build on the proposed site, others wanted further west. Before long, tempers flared and some threatened to build a church of their own. Then they left the meeting in a huff! Heh . . .Heh . . . those words are recorded in these walls, too!

Carrie: Oh, that's so sad . . . and here I thought you said the pioneers really needed each other!

Pioneer Woman: Oh but they did! For several years, 1860, '61, and '62, things rolled by pretty much stuck as they were. But within those years, charter members Johannes Wanberg died in a well accident and Johannes Holm died, too, and they were buried in the cemetery. And to make matters even more serious, do you remember what was happening in 1861?

Robin: Yeah—the Civil War started, pitting North against South, neighbor against neighbor, brother against brother—

Carrie: Ohhh—I get it. As men were called off to fight and die, and some beloved members passed away, I guess it kind of made the church location dispute look, well, kind of small.

Pioneer Woman: Ja . . . Ja . . . that's it, for sure. The people were once again united by the need to face tragedy and hardship together. Somewhere back in their minds, they remembered the lessons of the frontier—that they were stronger together than apart. And before long, they all got together and voted to build a church on this site. And the rest as they say, is history.

The little log cabin, along with the Pastor Beckman's home and several others served as a place of worship until the new church was built. At 20' x 30' feet you would have thought it was a cathedral on the prairie compared to what we were used to! And by 1876, those pioneers really got to dreaming big and they built that church building over there—its steeple seemed to touch heaven itself! They must have had pretty grand plans for the future of this congregation—they certainly hope you're up to it!

Robin and Carrie: Oh, yes! I think we've come a long, long way and the future looks really exciting from here!

Pioneer Woman: Ja . . . that's so good to hear. It's true that the walls can talk and even tell a story or two. I know that it is kind of a miracle that this cabin still exists—that we weathered storms and centuries. But with God's Grace, perhaps we can stand here for a long, long time to come—a witness to what you people do with the gift of God's church in your generation.

Well girls, about that firewood—we want to keep those Swedish men happy—you know how they can be when they have cold feet and empty bellies! Heavens! They might even start getting interested in marryin' the Norwegian girls!