

Elk Creek Lutheran Church--Our Altar

I am reprinting part of the story written by Phillip Odden and Darrell D. Henning which highlights our unique church altar:

“Situated in the rolling hills of Trempealeau County in west central Wisconsin between Osseo and Pleasantville, is the Elk Creek Evangelical Lutheran Church. Approaching the church from the east via County Road OO, one sees the cemetery laid out behind a fieldstone retaining wall on the south side of the road, directly across from the church and parking lot. Headstones in the cemetery bear many Norwegian surnames, mostly immigrants from Hedmark and Oppland Counties of Norway. The setting is bucolic and pastoral, reminiscent of many rural churches in Norway.

When one looks from the back of the church down the carpeted aisle lined with solid oak pews, the altar, at first glance, appears to be quite traditional in shape and form. It is placed at the front of the church together with the pulpit, plant stands, and other usual furnishings found in many rural Lutheran churches throughout Wisconsin and the Midwest. Its painting of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, framed by the Gothic arch overstory of the altar, is common as well. The carved altar, however, is quite special because it is carved in the ornate dragon style of the Norwegian national romantic movement—the only such example known to exist in the United States.

Why is this altar in a rural church in Wisconsin? Can other pieces in a similar vein be found in America? If so, who made them, what inspired them, and what social, political, and artistic movements informed them? These and other related questions set us on a quest that begins early in the nineteenth century.

In Quest of Drakestil

The War of 1812 in Europe was over, and the seeds of nationalism were planted in the soils of Europe and Scandinavia. In 1814, Norway had its own constitution and a plan for complete independence after nearly 400 years of Sweden, and a host of European principalities and nations including England were all engaged in creating for themselves a national identity through their arts and industry.

Early efforts at creating such a national identity centered on architecture, architectural design, and furnishings for designed buildings. A major influence toward this goal occurred in England with the arts and crafts movement of the late nineteenth century. . . . The aim of the Arts and Crafts movement was to re-establish a harmony between architect, designer and craftsman and to bring handcraftsmanship to the production of well-designed, affordable, everyday objects. In Norway, the proponents looked to their own history and the bonder, or farmer class, for their model and inspiration, including Viking and post-Viking motifs. In this new style, called *drakestil* or “dragon style”, as much of the carving included fantastic animals, dragons, and serpents with interlacing, fine-line tendrils derived for the pagan Viking period. The *drakestil* era lasted only a short time. By about 1915 the style was no longer popular.

In 1914, while the controversy regarding *drakestil* in the national romantic movement was in its final throes in Norway (it effectively finished in 1915), the first Elk Creek Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church, built in 1892 burned to the ground. From the ashes a new church arose and was dedicated in 1916. The present church was constructed between 1914 and 1916, first under the direction of the interim pastor, Matias Flekke, and completed upon the return of the permanent pastor, Reverend Sigurd Folkestad. It was most likely Reverend Folkestad who secured the services of those responsible for designing and constructing the altar.

Sigurd Folkestad was not your typical rural Norwegian Lutheran church pastor of the period. Born in England, he received a classical and business education in Norway. He emigrated in 1902, after serving as editor of *Vaarsol* and *Signal* in Oslo. In America, he served as an editor before attending Luther Seminary (1907-1909) and beginning his pastorate at Strum and Elk

Creek. This was a man very much involved in the political and secular life of both Norway and the Norwegian-American community and surely was aware of the nationalistic movement leading up to and following independence from Sweden in 1905. It is also likely that he was aware of the arts and crafts movement in Norway because much of the related activity centered around Oslo and nearby Drammen.

A closer analysis of the structure and ornamentation of the Elk Creek altar reveals a base featuring six panels with traditional Gothic arches and simple acanthus-leaf ornamentation. Rising from the altar's base are two sets of pillars that frame the painting on each side. Topping the pillars are capitals supporting the classic Gothic arch. This arch is richly decorated by a series of carved designs much like the arch found on a central interior structure from the Hopperstad stave church of the Sogn region of Norway. Positioned at the top of the altar one finds an intricate and seemingly unrelated yet profound carved ornamentation that appears to take the form of a mask. Directly under the upper lip of the mouth of the mask is a cross, carved and painted in contrasting white. The cross overlays a round shield decorated with relief carvings. Above the horizontal arms of the cross and on either side of the vertical are two halves of a sun motif, with sunbeams radiating from the two centers. Under the horizontal arms of the cross are two dragon images carved in relief, with their toothed mouths firmly gripping the lower section of the cross.

The altar carving was attributed to Jacob Espedal. There is, however, evidence to indicate that Jacob and his brother Torgeir worked together on its creation. The Espedal brothers were from Forsand, Ryfylke, Rogaland, near Stavanger, on the west coast of Norway. Jacob trained as a woodcarver at a school located in Sand in Rogaland. Jacob looked to the carvings found on the ancient stave churches for inspiration and particularly at the ciborium in the Hopperstad stave church from Vik in Sogn, Norway. A ciborium is a framed arch with a roof constructed over an altar within the church building. The ciborium in the Hopperstad church has a carved arch that rests on the two carved posts. In addition to vegetative ornamentation, the posts are outfitted with the heads of a king and a queen just under the arch. Lower down under the queen's head is the head of a monk. Situated on the top of the arch is Christ's head, and under the head of Christ is a raised rosette of Gothic-influenced vegetative carving. The Gothic-style arch is ornamented with pierced Romanesque palmate-style carving.

At Elk Creek, Espedal created Viking dragons and an ornamental, humanlike mask on top of a Lutheran church altar, with the mask looming over the less prominent cross. Furthermore, the cross is placed on a round shield featuring the sun symbol and paired dragons with their teeth firmly set into the base of the cross. Although seemingly incongruous, the mixing of pagan and Christian symbols most likely had more to do with Norwegian nationalism and the prevailing art milieu at the time Espedal was studying woodcarving than with paganism or even Christianity. The same may be said with regard to the churches built in Norway during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The same may be said with regard to the churches built in Norway during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, where we find a number of church altars that include elements of drakestil. None, however, exhibit the complex symbolism of the combined mask and dragons found in the Elk Creek Church Altar. “