

Church Completes Mariadahl as a Whole: Mariadahl, Kansas, Pottawatomie County, 1855-1960

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Church Completes Mariadahl as a Whole

Picture open land for miles, nothing more than a blank canvas on which you and your family will draw a lifetime of memories, the way you envision it. Now there are only a couple of obstacles in your way: getting to this land, claiming this land, and leaving everything and everyone you knew and were comfortable with behind you - never to be seen again. This is the exact track that John A. Johnson and his brother Nels Peter took when leaving Sweden for the long road to America, where they hoped to seek work. John and Nels migrated towards Kansas, where they first found the rich, lavish soil of the Blue Valley as well as a pure river on the beautiful day of [June 20, 1855](#). Here in what would become Pottawatomie County, they could grow plentiful food crops. With rich, fertile soil and open, flat land up for grabs these men could make no arguments so they decided to stay. In Figure

one, the photo shows what John and Nels had seen: blue water, land for miles. They were now the first Swedes to migrate to Kansas. Once they opted to make the Blue Valley their home and also after hearing about their father's death, they sent a letter home



Figure 1: Here is the open fertile land of the Blue Valley that extends for miles. This is what John and Nels Johnson would have seen when settling in the area. This photo was taken in the fall of 2010 by Ursula Butler

telling their family about the abundant land that they had been able to find and settle on, asking them to make the long hard journey from Sweden to Kansas. They wanted the family to be together once again.¹ John's family received the letter and decided to also settle in Kansas. John and Nels's mother, Maria Johnson, came to Kansas on [September 30, 1859](#) but tragically, less than a year later, Maria passed away on [August 18, 1860](#). John and his family then got the idea to name the community they had established after their dear mother.² The town was now named Mariadahl after Maria Johnson and was also named with the Swedish word, "dahl," (English: dell) meaning "Valley of Mary"³ due to all of the open valleys in the area.

Maria dying was an awful day, and as they had no church or cemetery to hold services for her, they decided something must be done about this. Up until they knew what to do, the sons buried their mother on Peter Johnson's (Maria's son's) land. This moment was the determining factor that made up the community's minds that something must be done in order to obtain a church and



Figure 2: Here is a sky view of the Mariadahl Lutheran church circa 1950. This photo shows how people filled the parking lots every Sunday for church. SOURCE: Deanna Barnes private collection.

¹ "Mariadahl Lutheran Church" page 11 Book from Edna Barrett's personal collection

² "Mariadahl Lutheran Church" page 12 Book from Edna Barrett's personal collection

³ "Celebrate at Mariadahl" article from Edna Barrett's personal collection

cemetery. A town just isn't a town without a congregation. In the meantime, traveling ministers would stop through Mariadahl and hold group ceremonies at different locations. This idea brought Reverend John Johnson to holding weekly congregations at Peter Johnson's home in 1863. Here they would have Holy Communion, confirmation classes, and Bible readings as a community; and therefore, this location was shortly turned into the Swedish Evangelical Lutheran Congregation on [October 14, 1863](#).⁴

After [October 14, 1863](#), the Mariadahl Lutheran Church became the first and last thing anyone spoke of; this church held the word of God, held dinners and programs, and held the heart of Mariadahl as a community of loved ones. It's hard to believe that the Mariadahl Church was the reason the town was able to continue for many years. Here I will prove that the community's passion was for their church and God. This is why Mariadahls' Lutheran Church was the blood that kept the town's heart beating on.

Although the Mariadahl settlers were from Sweden, they still carried their values with them close to their hearts. They followed their instincts to worship God the only way they knew how so they began the construction of a church outside of Peter's home in 1868, now the oldest Swedish Lutheran Church west of the Missouri River.⁵ The Mariadahl Lutheran Church took eight long months of labor in order to build.⁶ In eight months the basic church rose out of the prairie, but it took years in order to finish it. In the end, the community raised four thousand dollars to build their now historical place of

⁴ "Mariadahl Lutheran Church" page 13 Book from Edna Barrett's personal collection

⁵ Deanna Barnes Personal Family Scrapbook

⁶ "Celebrate Mariadahl" Edna Barrett's personal collection

worship.⁷ After putting in an immense amount of work and money, the townspeople had anxieties in the back of their minds of the church diminishing; but it didn't. The church continued to grow in inner strength and outward sacrifice. The townspeople continued to make their church the best they saw fit; in 1906 they continued the construction with a veranda for \$300 and a windmill and water system for \$150. In 1911 the church was repainted and refurnished inside for \$800 and finally, the following year, residents reconstructed the parsonage for \$600.⁸ Although it took years for the church to reach their standards, the townspeople never missed a [Sunday](#) service no matter what construction was being done at the time. This truly shows the religious dedication of the congregation.

Every [Sunday](#) the long-remembered church bell would ring as people would meet and greet before entering the church for service; to this day, this ringing of this bell was many people's most cherished memory. Deanna Barnes remembers the ringing of the bell every single Sunday before church: "The bell never missed a Sunday. It was a beautiful sound of loved loves coming together to worship."⁹ Mariadahl as a town was very small but with the outside communities driving in to attend church, attendance averaged about sixty people, mostly farmers, every single [Sunday](#). In figure two you are able to see the beautiful church as well as the full parking lot due to all the dedicated Christians. A former member of the church, Ardie Holt, was quoted talking about the church's attendance as, "It was one of those churches that you go to every [Sunday](#). If you weren't

⁷ "Memories of Mariadahl" page 1. Edna Barrett's personal collection

⁸ "Memories of Mariadahl" page 11. Edna Barrett's personal collection

⁹ Deanna Barnes. Personal Interview. Olsburg, Ks. November 17, 2010.

there, people tried to find out why, because everybody knew everybody.”¹⁰ Along those lines, Mrs. Deanna Barnes revealed also that, “everyone knew everyone, if a complete stranger was to walk in it was normal for a regular at the church to walk up to the new comer and ask where they came from. Most of the time the person would reply by saying they were interested in the country church and the family-like congregation; we always welcomed everyone.”¹¹ That all being said; the Mariadahl Lutheran Church was not only a structure that people congregated in, but a warm, loving congregation that reached out to every person they were able to and treated them as a family in and out of church service hours. The church’s tendency of warm-heartedness toward insiders and outsiders was what held the community together until, in the end, tragedy would strike fiercely.

As talk of the installation of the Tuttle Creek Dam came to the forefront of Mariadahl’s community in 1955, people began to gather in groups and discuss how to keep the Tuttle Creek Dam out of their home. “Valley people gathered in silent groups too stunned to speak, too heartsick to



Figure 3: Here is the Mariadahl Lutheran Church Steeple which was preserved and relocated to Olsburg Kansas. In this picture you can really see how well the townspeople have cared for it. This picture was taken in the fall of 2010 by Ursula Butler

¹⁰ *Riley Countian* 2003. Edna Barrett’s personal collection

¹¹ Personal Interview with Deanna Barnes. Olsburg, Ks. November 16, 2010

work. The news that they would have to leave their homes was overwhelming”¹² The townspeople of Mariadahl didn’t give up easily; they were determined to keep their community and church together. For months the community worked to save their town by writing letters to the congressmen, to the President, to the newspapers, and to other threatened communities. Some even took the trip to Washington D.C. to fight the dam, including Deanna Barnes who reacted with disgust and hatred when speaking about the dam. Deanna says, “We were all against it, we would hold Sunday night services to pray as a community that it didn’t happen. But it did.”¹³ With nothing more they could do to fight the dam, they had to move. But most felt very strongly about not leaving their beautiful stone church, as this was the center of their worship and fun. Although many moved to the surrounding areas, the congregation came back, every Sunday, to worship God in Mariadahl. Before the church services ceased altogether, most of the town had already moved. This shows how dedicated the people were to their church.¹⁴ Deanna Barnes also declared that “everyone would come to church even after they had moved. People would drive hours through snow and rain in order to make it to church.”¹⁵

Inevitably the Tuttle Creek Dam was built, the community unable to stop its construction no matter what they tried to do. Although the church services continued after everyone had left the area, that too had to come to an end. Mariadahl Lutheran Church’s last Sunday service was held on the gray, chilly day of February 7, 1960.¹⁶ A final service

¹² “The Valley that Was,” clipping, n.d., Edna Barrett’s personal collection.

¹³ Personal Interview with Deanna Barnes. Olsburg, Ks. November 16, 2010

¹⁴ “The Valley That Was”

¹⁵ Personal Interview from Deanna Barnes. Olsburg, Ks. November 16, 2010

¹⁶ Article in Edna Barrett’s personal collection.

didn't seem real, but the service was very uplifting and inspirational. There was strength and comfort in the hymns and the special music. ¹⁷With the inspiration of their church behind them, the people left with tears straining down their faces and hearts that were broken. They had to move on and spread the word of God, for which they had been given strength through the Mariadahl Church. Later, the church was torn down. Although that is a devastating action on its own, locals eased their pain by saving cherished artifacts from the church. The biggest save made was the entire steeple. The Mariadahl Lutheran Church steeple is now in the Mariadahl Cemetery that was also moved to Olsburg, Kansas. The steeple is magnificent, tall and majestic. You are able to see the love and faith put into the building and restoring of this landmark, as seen in Figure 3 above. The steeple wasn't the only thing saved as an artifact to remember the church by; the alter rail was also saved and is being used in a church in Junction City, Kansas. The pews were also saved and are used in another Lutheran Church in Palmer, Kansas, and lastly, the famous bell was revived as well. Mariadahl's church bell can still be heard ringing at the First Lutheran Church in Manhattan, Kansas. Saving parts of the church was a very important and tender part in the healing process for the Mariadahl natives. Edna Barrett, who was the daughter of Reverend Otto O. Oleen who kept the church up and running for 14 years, states that "preserving the parts of the church is wonderful! It preserves our history. I am so happy that they were able to move the bell from a simple pasture to a site in which it can be used. Everything that has been saved has an immense amount of sentimental value to me and many others."¹⁸

¹⁷ Article "The Blue Valley," n.d., Edna Barrett's personal collection.

¹⁸ Personal Interview with Edna Barrett. Randolph, Ks. November 21, 2010

It may be difficult for people who are not directly related to the area to comprehend the heartbreak of such a disturbing event. Who can really analyze the emotional experience of the people who were faced with abandonment of childhood homes and their loving environment, their cultural roots, parting with their long lost friends and family, and most importantly, the tragic end of a cohesive congregation? The fate of the Mariadahl congregation should be an object lesson to congregations everywhere. It should bring alive the true meaning of their Church and how intimately their lives are bound in many ways with the church. They may learn how empty and meaningless life would be if their church would be taken away, just as the people of Mariadahl learned the hard way so many years ago.¹⁹

Deanna Barnes ended by saying, “It was one of the oldest churches. It was like a family. We worked hard and cared about that church. As a community we still get together and celebrate Mariadahl Day on the third Sunday in October as well as having a Swedish dinner annually the first week in December. The church kept us together as a family, but you don’t just stop loving your family when things go bad. You truck on and stick together.”²⁰

¹⁹ “The Valley That Was”

²⁰ Personal Interview with Deanna Barnes. Olsburg, Ks. November 16, 2010

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