

THE LUTHERAN MISSION AT OAKS, OKLAHOMA

*By Jens Christian Kjaer**

Tucked neatly away in the northeast corner of Oklahoma, far from the hectic tempo of large cities and surrounded by stately sycamores, redbud, dogwood, persimmons, and a riot of oaks, lies an old mission whose existence is known to few people. It is known as the Lutheran Mission at Oaks.

The Moravian missionaries who travelled eight hundred miles over "The Trail of Tears," came here in 1842 and began their work on the banks of the silvery Spring Creek. They named their station New Springplace in honor of their Springplace Mission in Georgia, and for fifty-six years the Moravians labored among the Cherokees in what is now Delaware County, Oklahoma.

New Springplace is located half a mile from Oaks, a small community, seventy-two miles east of Tulsa and three miles south of Highway 33. When, in 1898, the Moravian work near Oaks was abandoned, a Danish Lutheran missionary, Niels Laurids Nielsen, who for six years had been living at Pumpkin Springs near Moody, about ten miles north of Tahlequah, was invited to minister to the remnants of the small congregation. Because of his long ministry among the Cherokees of Oklahoma, the main data of his life should be preserved.

Niels L. Nielsen, born on March 22, 1863, in Vorgod Parish, West Jutland, Denmark, had a bleak and poverty-ridden childhood. He was the son of Knud Nielsen, a school teacher who died when Niels was three years old. At the age of eight, he was hired by a farmer as a shepherd boy.¹ His mother, who had to rear five fatherless children, was a devout Christian, and the religious training she managed to give him was a determining factor in his life. When Niels was fourteen, he had a definite religious experience during which "it was as if I heard a voice calling me with Genesis 12:1."² This verse, in the King James Version, read: "Now the Lord had said unto Abraham, 'Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto a land that I will show thee.'"

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¹ N. L. Nielsen, "Our Mission Among the Cherokee Indians in Oklahoma," in G. B. Christiansen, *Recollections of Our Church Work* (Blair, Neb., 1930), p. 257.

² *Ibid.*, p. 257.

These words, which he kept to himself for four years, he understood as a command to him to serve as a foreign missionary. The above noted experience inspired him to seek an education which would help him to prepare for his calling. Working as a gardener for the Moravian Brotherhood at Christiansfeldt, South Jutland, his desire to bring Christianity to the heathen was further strengthened through fellowship "with both prospective and returned missionaries."³ He was admitted to the training school of the Danish Mission Society at Copenhagen, and it may have been at this institution, while he was considering a possible mission field, that one of his teachers said to him: "Perhaps God wants you to go to the red man in America."⁴

Lack of funds prevented Nielsen from finishing his studies in Copenhagen, and in August, 1888, he set out for America where he arrived at Menominee, Michigan, the following month. Laboring in a sawmill he somehow saved \$600.00 which enabled him to enter Trinity Lutheran Theological Seminary at Blair, Nebraska, where he remained for two years, or until the spring of 1892. At this time his attention had been called to the Indian Territory, now eastern Oklahoma. A Dane, Ditlev Nielsen Lerskov,⁵ who was living there, married to a Cherokee woman, wrote to the president of Trinity Seminary, Reverend G. B. Christiansen, suggesting the establishment of a Danish Lutheran mission among the Cherokees.

Nielsen had previously fallen in love with the Indians near Menominee, Michigan, and in June, 1892, we find him in Tahlequah where he spent the summer learning the Sequoyah syllabary and "getting acquainted with the natives in the surrounding wood."⁶ Though he could not speak their language and had to preach through an interpreter, Nielsen must have won the confidence of his listeners, for they wanted him to stay. Upon his return to Trinity Seminary, Cherokee friends petitioned the synodical board for permission to retain him, and in September, 1892, he opened his first school at Pumpkin Springs in a deserted house believed to be haunted by ghosts which were alleged to be particularly annoying at night. Anyone who might have chosen this house in the hope of scaring off the young missionary was destined to disappointment. The enrollment grew steadily from eight to about fifty.

The following summer, Nielsen was seriously ill with malaria. He recovered sufficiently, however, to make a trip to Blair, Nebraska,

³ Nana Nielsen, "Niels Laurids Nielsen," in *The Ansgar Lutheran* (Blair, Nebraska), March 10, 1941.

⁴ N. L. Nielsen, "Missionary Nielsen's Own Story," in *My Church* (Blair, Nebraska), January, 1945. This issue of *My Church* contains a number of fine pictures which illustrate the Lutheran mission work at Oaks.

⁵ A letter from Mrs. Paul Drumright, Tahlequah, January 3, 1947, on file in the office of Superintendent Vammen, indicates that Mr. Lerskov, her grandfather, changed the spelling of his name to *Detlev Nielson Leerskov*.

⁶ Nana Nielsen, "Niels Laurids Nielsen."

where on September 7, he was married to Miss Jensine Christensen, his fiancée, who had recently arrived from Denmark. In 1894 he was ordained.

We know very little of the young bride's first reaction to her new neighbors at Pumpkin Springs and to the new and bewildering life to which she was introduced shortly after the wedding. A primitive log cabin, some hickory chairs, a home-made table, odd pieces of china and crockery, and a few other bare necessities were not objects to arouse the enthusiasm of a woman from an old and settled country. She now had a husband and a home, however, and does not appear to have lost any time in meditation upon her strange honeymoon among the Cherokees. One of her friends claim that she immediately "scrubbed the rough walls and floor until they were white, then proceeded to partition the large room with print."⁷ She learned to make biscuits, cornbread, and a number of dishes she had never dreamed of in Denmark. There were plenty of vegetables, and the acquisition of a cow made her particularly happy. Fresh milk is very important to a person who has been born and reared in a dairy country.

Reverend N. L. Nielsen enjoyed walking and often covered from twenty-five to thirty miles a day. His wife, however, preferred other means of transportation. Yet, she did not show much enthusiasm for riding a mule which her husband had obtained for a trip across the Ozarks. It was with considerable reluctance that she consented to mount the animal to cross a small river. Some time later, Reverend Nielsen purchased a horse, "Maud," and Mrs. Nielsen enjoyed many pleasant hours in the side saddle riding that faithful carrier. In 1908, the missionary rode on horseback the twenty-five miles to Siloam where he became the proud owner of a brand new top buggy; and before the end of his ministry among the Cherokees, he had acquired an old Maxwell car which is recorded as having been somewhat less than mechanically perfect.

Missionary work among Indians, as many missionaries can testify, is a slow and trying process, and not until 1898 did Reverend Nielsen experience the joy of baptizing his first convert, Anna England. Her name and those of other members of her family are on record at the Oaks Mission.

The Danish missionary did not confine his activities to the immediate vicinity of Pumpkin Springs and Moody, but established a number of preaching stations and schools. One grammar school was operated in Kansas where Mr. Emil Hansen taught for sixty-three days in 1903. The same year, Miss Clara Soholm taught for ninety days at Pumpkin Springs, and Miss Dorothea Jensen conducted a third school at Oaks for sixty-eight days.⁸ This brings up

⁷ *Ibid.* Probably calico, sometimes referred to as "print," or "prints."

⁸ N. L. Nielsen, "Report on the Indian Mission," in the *Annual Report of the United Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church* (Blair, Nebraska), 1904.

the question of the Moravian Mission at Oaks. Says Muriel H. Wright:⁹

The Moravian Church continued its work until the passage of the Curtis Act by Congress, in 1898, which provided the first steps leading to the close of the Cherokee government. The village of Oaks having been established about a half mile from New Springplace, Reverend N. L. Nielson, a Lutheran missionary from Denmark, opened a mission school in the village, in 1902, mostly attended by Cherokees.

The invitation to take over the work at Oaks, according to Grant Foreman, had been given to Reverend N. L. Nielsen by the secretary of the Moravian missions at Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, Reverend Paul de Schweinitz.¹⁰ Nielsen gladly accepted. He had on previous occasions visited the place to collect some debts owed to transferred Moravian missionaries, and he had also preached there. Furthermore, the large number of whites at Pumpkin Springs and Moody made it desirable, from his point of view, to move the headquarters of the Lutheran Mission to Oaks.

Approval for the transfer was received from the synodical board after a visit to Oaks by Reverend G. B. Christiansen, president of the United Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church. The president's visit is recorded as follows:¹¹

February 9, 1902. S.S. opened 11 A.M. J. T. Carroll, Supt. presiding. The Lords prayer repeated by David Mann who heard the primary class and Mrs. Ella Rusk heard the infant class. Collection was 26¢ and 36 answered to their names. Services were announced and Rev. Nielsen occupied the pulpit, followed by Rev. Christiance (sic), president of the Lutheran Board who was visiting among the congregation. He stated that he would do his part to get a mission school started at New Spring Place. The time occupied by the two Revs. 1½ hours, very cold day, good attendance.

J. T. Carroll, acting Sec.

The promise given by Reverend G. B. Christiansen was kept, and the Mission School was started over sixty children in attendance. J. T. Carroll has this note on the sale of the building in which a public subscription school had been conducted for a few years:¹²

Sale of the Oaks public school house, Oct. 14, 1902 on the East side at 2 P.M. David Mann cried the house off, the highest bid was \$10.50. The proceeds went to the S. S.

J. T. Carroll, Acting Clerk.

Reverend and Mrs. N. L. Nielsen moved to Oaks in 1903, and the school near Moody was discontinued as a Mission School. The school

⁹ Muriel H. Wright, *Springplace Moravian Mission and the Ward Family*, (Guthrie, Oklahoma, 1940), p. 79.

¹⁰ Grant Foreman, "Moravian Influence Still Felt in State," *Tulsa Daily World*, June 3, 1934.

¹¹ Sunday School Record of New Springplace, Oaks, Oklahoma, p. 169.

¹² *Ibid.*

at Kansas was operated by Mr. Emil Hansen until his resignation on May 1, 1907, the year Oklahoma became a state.¹³

The reports of Reverend Nielsen indicate that there were other denominations which desired to enter the abandoned Moravian field at Oaks, and the old Sunday School records verify his statements. We quote from these reports:¹⁴

August 31, 1902. S. S. opened 10.A.M. J. T. Carroll presiding. Lords prayer led by Bro. John Smith. The day was threatening with rain, but good attendance. All the teachers were present except Mrs. Mann. Mrs. Jensine Nielsen heard the infant class. Rolls called and fiftytwo answered to their names. Collection was 39¢. Services announced for 11 o'clock, Rev. Crawford present. Text, Loyalty of a Christian, followed by a sermon at 3 o'clock P.M. "How a Christian becomes disloyal." There were 11 or 12 conversions during the 4 days meeting conducted by Rev. G.W. Crawford. Sunday School closed.

J. T. Carroll, Acting Sec.

June 1, 1902. Services were announced after S.S. Several present. Coll. 4¢. Rolled 26 present. Rev. Cummings Sixkiller, Adam Lacy and Hogshooter present.¹⁵

The small flock chose Reverend N. L. Nielsen as their pastor, however, and on June 28, 1903, the records of the Springplace Sunday School were placed in his hands:¹⁶

New Spring Place S.S. June 28, 1903. S.S. opened with all officers present except Bessie Smith. Scripture Lesson read by Supt. Prov. Chap. 15., with devotional prayer by Rev. N.L. Nielsen. It was suggested by the Supt. that the old record book of the New Spring Place S.S. be put in the hands of the Rev. Nielsen and that anyone wishing to look over same might call on him. Carried by the usual sign of voting. Collection by contribution and sale of chart \$1.35. Seventy responded to the roll call. Services were announced for 11 o'clock A.M. Rev. Nielsen present. S.S. closed by repeating the Lords prayer. . . .

The creation of a public school system was disconcerting to the missionary who believed that his religious work should collapse without schools. In one of his reports, he flatly stated: "If the schools are to be closed, we might as well discontinue the mission."¹⁷ A public school was organized in the vicinity of the Mission School, but both were continued until 1932 "when by mutual consent and by an affirmative vote of fifty-seven to one negative, which later became positive, the two were joined by mutual love into one institution."¹⁸ These are the words of Superintendent C. A. Vammen who has been in charge of the Lutheran Mission at Oaks since 1924. This decision, however, was not made without considerable early

¹³ In 1907 the building used for school and church purposes at Kansas was burned.

¹⁴ Sunday School Record of New Springplace, p. 159.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 139.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 209-11.

¹⁷ N. L. Nielsen, "Report on the Indian Mission," in *Annual Report of the U.D.E.L. Church* (Blair, Nebraska, 1905), pp. 17-20.

¹⁸ C. A. Vammen, *Our Indian Mission*, an unpublished manuscript, p. 6.

friction. By the above vote, the Mission School became the public school of District No. 71, Delaware County.

Mrs. Florence Lamont, Postmaster of Oaks, who for many years has been a very valuable worker in the Mission, recently stated that the first Mission School at Oaks was housed in Israel's Store building, southwest of Ebenezer Lutheran Church. It was rebuilt in 1916. In the late 1920's, it became evident that a new building would have to take the place of the then dilapidated structure. Young trees were growing up through cracks in the floors, and there were other conditions which made it advisable to erect a modern, substantial plant. Such a project, however, called for large expenditures. The depression was emptying the synodical treasury, and the income of churches throughout the nation was declining.

Visitors to Oaks who meet the genial, unassuming Superintendent C. A. Vammen may not suspect him of tenacity and may fail to detect his quiet strength and deep devotion to the children of the forest. It was this Lutheran pastor who, through personal solicitation in the congregations of the United Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church, raised \$14,300.00 for the new building. Out of this amount, local gifts, and donated labor there grew a fine brick building with a present estimated value of \$40,000.00. It was dedicated in 1931. The High School, started in 1921, was fully accredited in 1928.

Classes in Domestic Science are conducted in a duplex, erected in 1936, which formerly served as living quarters for teachers. A very attractive gymnasium and art building, built of native rock, was dedicated in 1937. It was erected at a cost of \$20,000.00 plus donated labor. Of this sum, sponsors contributed \$5,500.00 and the Federal Government \$14,500.00. The school bus garage, which houses three district-owned busses, was constructed in 1939 as a W.P.A. project.

Prior to World War II, the Mission School had an enrollment of as high as 337 of which 125 were high school students. The exodus to the West Coast and to near-by industrial centers has reduced this number to 230 of which 85 attend the high school. The financial statements of the Mission School show the following expenditures (1946):

Educational Expenditures	\$17,069.39
Cost of Transportation	4,322.01
School Lunch Program	2,589.74
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Total Expenditures	\$23,981.14

Sources of income are state funds, tuition for Indian children, local revenue, and contributions to the school lunch program by the State Welfare Department and parents.

Prior to 1929, the following workers among the Cherokees had been employed by the United Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church:

Pastor and Mrs. N. L. Nielsen, Mr. and Mrs. Emil Hansen, Miss Marie Christensen, Miss Dorthea Jensen, Miss Emma Soeholm, Miss Clara Soeholm, Mrs. C. L. Lamont, Miss Nana Nielsen, Miss Julia Jensen, Miss Margaret Nielsen, Miss Anna Christiansen, Miss Agnes Petersen, Pastor and Mrs. C. A. Vammen, Miss Hannah Nyholm, Miss Tillie Dorffler, Miss Doris L. Welch, Miss Selma Ericksen, Pastor and Mrs. S. S. Kaldahl, Miss Abalone Nielsen, Miss Julia Bidstrup, Miss Else Petersen, Mr. and Mrs. A. E. Andreasen, and Miss Margaret Andersen.¹⁹

Many of these teachers and pastors have had rich and interesting careers, and their sacrifices and experiences deserve more attention than the scope of this article will allow. Because of their distinguished service among Oklahoma Cherokees, however, a few data on the C. A. Vammen family are in order.

Reverend and Mrs. C. A. Vammen, who since 1938 have lived in their exceptionally roomy and attractive home at Oaks, have raised seven children all of whom have been given an excellent education.²⁰ Prior to their arrival in Oklahoma, Reverend and Mrs. Vammen had served Lutheran churches in Osakis, Minnesota, and Staplehurst, Nebraska.

Christian Adolph Vammen, born May 2, 1891, at Snaebum per Hobro, Denmark, emigrated to the United States in 1909. In addition to his theological seminary diploma, he holds the degree of Master of Education from the University of Oklahoma.

Mrs. C. A. Vammen, *nee* Tomine Marie Neve, is a native of Ringsted, Iowa. She is the mother of three handsome sons and four beautiful daughters, a devout Christian, a remarkably able cook, and an intelligent lady who more than once during my visit to Oaks in January, 1947, had to serve as the efficient "memory" of the good superintendent.

While the Mission School is an important branch of the Lutheran Mission at Oaks, it is by no means the only notable one. Ebenezer Lutheran Church, and the Children's Home are two other institutions which deserve our attention.

¹⁹ Church Council of the U.D.E.L. Church, *25th Anniversary of Our Indian Mission at Oaks, Oklahoma, 1903-1928* (Blair, Nebraska, 1928), p. 35.

²⁰ Adolph N. Vammen, M.D., Oklahoma University School of Medicine, 1944. Priscilla A. M. Vammen, A.B., Northeastern State College, 1942. Warren L. Vammen, D.D.S., Washington University, St. Louis, Mo., 1947. Ruel E. Vammen, B.S., Northeastern State College, Rachel A. Vammen, R.N., Oklahoma School of Nursing, Alta Katherine Vammen, student at the Oklahoma School of Nursing, and Dorcas Jane Vammen, student at Dana College, Blair, Nebraska. Of these, Adolph and Priscilla Vammen have taught at the Mission School at Oaks, and Ruel Vammen is on the present (1947) teaching staff.

The Ebenezer Lutheran Church, built by Mr. Lars Eskildsen of Hampton, Nebraska, was dedicated in 1913, and Reverend N. L. Nielsen served as the pastor until, in 1924, his wife's health necessitated a change of climate.²¹ The chapels at Bull Hollow and Flint were erected in 1929 and 1930 through the generosity of Emmaus Lutheran Church, Racine, Wisconsin, where Mr. C. A. Vammen had taught in the parochial school and interested this Danish-American congregation in the project. Other things which made these chapels possible were a handsome gift by Mr. A. P. Heide of Kenosha, Wisconsin, lumber from Dave Israel's sawmill, and local labor donations.

The pastor of Ebenezer Church (1946) Reverend John C. Romer, was born in Skjoerping, Jutland, Denmark, on February 9, 1886, and at the age of three was brought to America by his parents. For the past eight years, he had served Ebenezer, the chapels, and preaching stations on the Dave Russell farm, about ten miles northwest of Oaks, the Stell Crittendon home, and the Holland School in Adair County.²² Reverend and Mrs. Romer lived in the new parsonage, rebuilt in 1938, near the home of the Vammens. Mrs. Romer is a teacher in the Mission School where she has served for more than nineteen years.

When I had the privilege of visiting the Romer family, including their twin sons who recently were graduated from the Mission High School, I was particularly interested in the fact that a number of the young people, who have benefitted from the educational and religious program of the Mission, prefer to exchange their marriage vows in the humble church of their childhood, though some of them have to travel from distant cities where they have secured good positions.

The religious work of the Mission is not self-supporting, and the pastor's salary is still provided by the United Evangelical Lutheran Church which before 1946 was known as the United Danish Evangelical Lutheran Church. It was the hope of the pastor and the membership, however, that the congregation eventually will become independent of outside assistance. Considerable progress has been experienced, and the Oaks Women's Sewing Society, which in 1918 had an income of \$36.69, in 1946 raised the sum of \$461.71, a real achievement where money is scarce and incomes small. Mrs. C. A. Vammen is the president of this group, and Mrs. Florence Lamont the secretary.

The congregation needs a new church building and for the past three years an annual contribution of \$500.00 has been raised locally

²¹ N. L. Nielsen, "Report on the Indian Mission," in *Annual Report of the U.D.E.L. Church* (Blair, Nebraska, 1914), pp. 34-35.

²² John C. Romer, "Sketch of Oaks Indian Mission," in *Oaks Warrior*, 1945 (n.d., n.p.).

for the church building fund. Contributions to the synodical budget amount to about \$200.00 a year.

A mission pastor's work may seem discouraging to those of us who look for speedy and conspicuous progress, and Reverend John C. Romer did not have the spotlight of large city churches nor the headlines of metropolitan newspapers. He had to content himself with the slow but steady growth of Christianity among the inhabitants of the forest. A few hours with the tall, kindly pastor gave me a new appreciation of the problems, methods, and rewards of a missionary to the Cherokees. Pastor Romer died in 1947.

Visitors to Oaks will observe a large frame building across the road from the Mission School. It is the Children's Home where Mr. and Mrs. Christian Gregersen and Miss Jessie Wolf take care of forty-five children and young people whose ages range from three to eighteen years. Originally designed as a home for teachers and as a dormitory for pupils from outlying districts, this structure, which was dedicated in 1921, gradually became a home for orphans, children from broken homes, and a few boarders. In the fiscal year of 1945-46, the cost of maintaining this institution amounted to \$7,994.04 of which the Oklahoma State Board of Affairs, under the provisions of H. B. 509, contributed \$2,444.16 or \$5.22 per month per child for about forty children. The Board of Charities of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church made provisions for \$4,837.84, and guardians and others paid \$712.04. The cost of maintaining one child is \$15.00 per month. Some produce is received from a small farm which is owned by the Mission.

The present facilities of the Children's Home are definitely inadequate, and plans are ready for the construction of a modern stone or brick building. Members of the United Evangelical Lutheran Church have contributed \$41,000.00 toward a new home, and citizens of Oklahoma have made gifts which total \$5,000.00. To carry out the original plans for the new Children's Home and to provide a structure according to modern standards and the needs of the work would call for an expenditure of \$75,000.00. If no unexpectedly large contributions are received in the near future, however, Superintendent C. A. Vammen will make contracts for construction within the means of the Mission.

Reverend and Mrs. N. L. Nielsen who pioneered this noble and unselfish work terminated their labors at Oaks in 1924. Mrs. Nielsen sobbed all through the night before their departure, and as long as they lived, the hearts of these two missionaries remained with their Cherokee friends. For five years, Reverend Nielsen served the Ebenzer Lutheran Church at Audubon, Iowa, until he retired from the active ministry. Mrs. Nielsen passed away at Elkhorn, Iowa, in 1934, and Reverend Nielsen finished his long and eventful life in

New Brunswick, Canada, on February 9, 1941. They were both buried in the Danish Lutheran Cemetery at Elkhorn, Iowa.

Reverend N. L. Nielsen's time at Oaks was a period of pioneering, and Reverend C. A. Vammen's has been one of expansion. At the present, the Lutheran Mission at Oaks has eighteen people on its payroll: nine teachers, one pastor, three social workers, one janitor, and four bus drivers. The total expenditures for the fiscal year of 1945-46 amounted to \$35,904.83, divided among the three branches of the Mission in the following manner:

Total Educational Program	\$23,981.14
Children's Home	7,991.04
Indian Mission	3,929.65
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Grand Total	\$35,904.83

The records and results of fifty-four years of Danish Lutheran missionary and educational endeavors in Delaware County speak their own eloquent language.²³ It seems certain that the documents and the life of the Mission at Oaks, the lore and traditions of the region, and the poetry of the somber forest and its inhabitants could furnish more than sufficient material for a fascinating volume on life and achievements among the Cherokees of Oklahoma.

²³ The above article was completed after two visits to the Lutheran Mission at Oaks where the author was permitted to examine all the records of the mission. He wishes to express his appreciation to Dr. E. E. Dale, Research Professor in the History Department of the University of Oklahoma, for valuable suggestions and generous assistance in the preparation of the manuscript.