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Looking back: The Rev. Christian Saugstad, Part 2

Sandra Lawrence WAHS member

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Bella Coola Valley, British Columbia, Canada, with Mount Saugstad in the background.

Angie Cina

Sandra Lawrence WAHS member

Continued from last week

The Rev. Saugstad's wife, Randine, died April 28, 1877. This left Rev. Saugstad with seven children to raise on his own while he tended to all the congregations under his care. We pick up his story in Holmes City, Douglas County, Minn., a year after Randine's death.

After his first wife's death, Christian married Marie Gunhild Myhr on May 1, 1878, in Trysil. Marie, the daughter of Ole Myhr and Julia Engebrigtsen, was born on May 18, 1858, in Stordolen, Norway. This marriage added six children to the family: Geraldine Randina, Gunner Osmund, Tollef Peder, Alf Gotfried, Camilla and Randolph.

In 1880, Christian moved his family to Sand Hill Church in Neby, Polk County, Minn. They lived on a farm that belonged to the congregation. Christian was assigned to pastor the northern part of the valley, having churches at Neby, Satterdalen, Crookston, Seons Church, Trinity Church, Grand Forks, Turtle River and Park River. Eventually this proved too great a burden for one pastor and the area was divided.

The family moved to Crookston in 1886, where Christian was in charge of the Norwegian Lutheran Church and three other congregations. During this time, he was vice president of the North Dakota Conference (1886–1890) and president of the Free Church (1893–1894). He also made time to author the book "Augsburgs Historie" in 1893.

Christian had read an article describing a valley in Bella Coola, British Columbia, Canada, that had been surveyed for future settlement. He was unhappy with prairie farming and especially the divide over church doctrine. After traveling to see the valley first hand, he and his friend, Jim Hill, returned and encouraged fellow Norwegians to join him and settle there. The group traveled across the Canadian prairies and Rocky Mountains, then by chartered steamship along the coast of British Columbia, and finally up the 120-mile-long Burke Channel to Bella Coola. On Oct. 31, 1894, they arrived in Bella Coola. Those who decided to settle had to give evidence of "good moral character and working ability."

Again, as pioneers they began clearing the land for farming and roads for their wagons. In addition, they needed to build their homes and a church. By 1896 there were 158 people living in Bella Coola. They built a salmon cannery, dairies, and a much needed sawmill. Today, descendants of these hardy pioneers continue to live in the valley.

In a letter from his granddaughter, Idella Bangen Morken, “When they moved to Bella Coola Valley in British Co.—Canada—my father, mother (Martha) & us seven children went also, but we came back to the states after grandfather passed away. We had a brother born after we returned—in all 6 girls & 2 boys. Grandfather's grave was the 2nd one there. It was a beautiful country, but not a very large piece of land. My mother was the only one of Randine's children who went out there. I was 5 years old when we left here. We were there only 2 years. I know we lived on a great deal of fish and beans. The men went out fishing for the big fish companies of course. The climate was wonderful but the only way to get in or out of there was by boats or stay put. My mother was so home sick for Red River Valley after grandfather died and my Dad would rather farm where there was land for farming so we came back.”

Christian died on March 18, 1897, at the age of 58 years 9 months 5 days. Marie died on Oct. 20, 1937. They are interred at Augsburg Cemetery in Bella Coola. The mountain that rises 10,000 feet from the base of the colony has been named Mount Saugstad in his memory.

Anyone with more information on the Saugstad family or photos, please contact us. Call Westby Area Historical Society at 608-634-4478 to leave a message or send an email to **westbywihistory@gmail.com**