



*Nebraska History* posts materials online for your personal use. Please remember that the contents of *Nebraska History* are copyrighted by the Nebraska State Historical Society (except for materials credited to other institutions). The NSHS retains its copyrights even to materials it posts on the web.

For permission to re-use materials or for photo ordering information, please see:

<http://www.nebraskahistory.org/magazine/permission.htm>

Nebraska State Historical Society members receive four issues of *Nebraska History* and four issues of *Nebraska History News* annually. For membership information, see:

<http://nebraskahistory.org/admin/members/index.htm>

Article Title: Letters of Pastor Christian Helmreich: Establishing a Lutheran Congregation in Weyerts, Nebraska, 1887-1888

Full Citation: Ernst C Helmreich, "Letters of Pastor Christian Helmreich: Establishing a Lutheran Congregation in Weyerts, Nebraska, 1887-1888," *Nebraska History* 58 (1977): 175-192.

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1977Helmreich.pdf>

Date: 12/18/2013

Article Summary: The Reverend Christian Helmreich, born in Affalterthal, Bavaria, in 1866, was called to serve as a pastor for German emigrants to America. His letters describe his seminary experiences, his journey to Lodgepole, Nebraska, the congregation he served, and the development of the church and its cemetery, as well as the financial challenges of the church. One letter also provides a detailed description of the effect of the famous blizzard of January 12, 1888, on the parishioners.

#### Cataloging Information:

Names: Reverend Christian Helmreich, Pastor Volters, Friedrich Bauer, Reverend A Fleischmann, G Folkerts, T Wengerts, R Kahmann, John Kahmann, W Unger, Reverend E Wiederanders, August Bruckner, W Rohnert, Georg Boehme, Henriette David

Place Names: Lodgepole, Nebraska; Sidney, Nebraska; Crescent City, Illinois; Weyerts, Nebraska; Council Bluffs, Iowa

Keywords: Synod of Iowa [Lutheran]; East Friesian hymnal; sod houses; Union Pacific Railroad

Photographs / Images: The Reverend Christian Helmreich, taken in Sidney, 1888; the Reike Bolken family, homesteaders one mile south of Immanuel Lutheran Church; Mr and Mrs John Kahmann, homesteaders north of church, 1877

**LETTERS OF PASTOR CHRISTIAN HELMREICH:  
ESTABLISHING A LUTHERAN CONGREGATION  
IN WEYERTS, NEBRASKA, 1887-1888**

*Edited and Translated by Ernst C. Helmreich*

**INTRODUCTION**

The Reverend Christian Helmreich (April 10, 1866-April 13, 1945), my father and the writer of the following letters, was born in Affalterthal, Bavaria, a small village on the edge of "Franconian Switzerland." His father was pastor there, but a decade later changed pastorates, taking his family to Offenhausen, a village not far from Nurnberg. Young Christian attended the village school in Affalterthal but only briefly in Offenhausen, for in the spring of 1876 at the age of 10 he was sent to the preparatory school of the gymnasium in Bayreuth. This was the typical experience of children of ministers called to serve in rural hamlets where no higher schools were available. Here in the Bayreuth of Wagner's heyday he received a thorough grounding in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew, as well as in mathematics, literature, geography, history and religion. Yet he found time, probably during vacations, to read in German translation books from James Fenimore Cooper's *Leatherstocking Tales*. He often spoke of how he and his friends "played Indians" in the woods on the hill which overlooks Offenhausen. This was his early introduction to America and it aroused in him a desire to become a missionary to the Indians.

In an account of his life written for his children and grandchildren in 1941, he noted: "In the 1880s one read much in the church periodicals of Bavaria, that young men with gymnasium training were sought by the Theological Seminaries in

America, to be trained as pastors for the many German emigrants. These appeals made an impression on me, especially the appeal by Pastor Volters in Grossnigersheim in Wurttemberg. I expressed my desire to my parents who raised no objections, the preaching of God's word was needed everywhere, and everywhere is God's world." In October, 1884, he enrolled in an intensive ten-week theological course conducted by Pastor Volters, who was to send over many ministerial candidates, especially to the Lutheran Iowa Synod. On Christmas Eve, 1884, Christian set sail for the United States, and on January 8, 1885, reached Mendota, Illinois, where he was to attend the Wartburg Seminary of the Iowa Synod. The need for pastors was great and seminary training was more adapted to conditions in this country than the longer traditional theological training in German universities. Even so before he finished the normal three-year course, he was sent out to take charge of a newly organized congregation in western Nebraska.

The letter of May 9, 1887, to his parents describes his final examination, his ordination, and his journey to Lodgepole, Nebraska. The questions asked in his final examination show that these young seminarians received a thorough grounding in church history and theology. It also reports his salary and tells of living conditions in his congregation. Another letter of June 5, 1888, to his uncle, his baptismal sponsor, provides more information and gives a description of the famous blizzard of January 12, 1888. The exposed sod houses then in use by most of Helmreich's parishioners were particularly vulnerable to the icy blasts of the famous storm. It crossed the midwestern states, moving from northwest to southeast, taking a heavy toll of both animal and human life. The area had known stronger winds, lower temperatures, and heavier snows, but in 1888 all these elements combined to produce a sudden, devastating attack upon unprepared settlers. The young pastor's letter describing the storm in the Lodgepole district is an attempt to make a German understand what a "blizzard from the west," a phrase he often used in later life, really was like. Both the letter of May 9 and that of June 5 were saved by relatives in Germany and given to me when I first visited that country as a graduate student in 1929.

The congregation my father was called to serve had been started by German settlers, who had migrated west from Golden, Adams County, Illinois, in 1885. They took homesteads centering about four miles west and twelve miles north of Lodgepole. These

Lutheran settlers soon began to meet in various homes for religious fellowship, and Friedrich Bauer, a former school teacher in Germany, conducted so-called reading services (*Lesegottesdienste*). This was a practice to which they were accustomed in Germany, where, when a minister was not available, the school teacher conducted the service, reading a sermon from a published volume. These settlers were mostly East Friesians; in fact their settlement was apparently known for a time as New East Friesland, for on the back of photographs sent to his parents, the Reverend Mr. Helmreich wrote the inscription "Pastor of the ev. luth. Immanuel Congregation at New East Friesland, Cheyenne County, Nebraska ( Pastor *der ev. luth. Immanuelsgemeinde zu Neu Ostfriesland*, Cheyenne County, Nebraska)." Early settler Cornelius Weyerts, with several of his brothers, built a store, and when he made application at nearby Lodgepole for a post office the settlement was designated as Weyerts.

According to Immanuel Church records<sup>1</sup> the parish had officially been organized at a congregational meeting held on August 2, 1886, with the Reverend A. Fleischmann of the Evangelical Lutheran Synod of Iowa and Other States and twenty-five voting members present. As officials of the congregation Friedrich Bauer was elected secretary and as deacons (*Vorsteher*) G. Folkerts, Friedrich Bauer, T. Wengerts, and R. Kahmann. Folkerts and Bauer were named as elders (*Altesten*), Wengerts and Kahmann as trustees. At a meeting held August 22 John Kahmann's offer to donate five acres of land for the church and parsonage was accepted by the parish. It was also decided at that time to lay out a plot for a cemetery. This was to be done on August 26 and all parishioners were asked to contribute four posts. At a special meeting on November 14, 1886, chaired by W. Unger, the construction of a church building was planned. It was to have inner dimensions of 28 x 16 feet, seven windows, a pulpit, benches with back rests, and a roof with rafters. John Kahmann was named building supervisor and the elders were to inquire in Lodgepole if the necessary lumber could be obtained on credit. If so construction was to begin on November 18. Apparently credit was not available for the church was not built. Another meeting called on March 7, 1887, presided over by a pastor from Gothenburg, the Reverend E. Wiederanders, decided on a church building 14 x 34, instead of the dimensions adopted

the previous November. It was to be a sod church and construction was to begin a week later on March 14. Since John Kahmann declined to accept responsibility, T. Weyerts, G. Hinrichs, and W. Unger were to supervise the work. Although the secretary reported that there was only \$3.20 in the treasury, the meeting voted to compensate John Kahmann for the five acres which he had set aside for church purposes. He was to receive \$32.50 under condition that he was not to be paid in cash but would instead be relieved of all church assessments until the said sum had been paid off.<sup>2</sup> Having decided these weighty matters the minutes state: "Hereupon the meeting proceeded to consider the calling of a minister, and after lengthy discussion it was voted that we call a candidate from the respected Synod of Iowa at a salary of \$150 under condition that the called pastor should also teach school."

Pastor Helmreich preached his initial sermon (*Antrittspredigt*) to the Immanuel congregation on his 21st birthday, April 10, 1887, and presided over his first parish meeting the next day. Here it was decided to build a sod parsonage 12 x 14 with three windows and a roof supported by one long beam. At a meeting in late May the congregation voted that all members should participate in working on the church building and parsonage. A member who did not show up and had no good excuse was to pay \$1.00. School was to start as soon as possible and was to be held in the church. The necessary lumber for school benches was to be bought from parish funds and the members who expected to send children to school were charged to do the work. The fee for non-parish children was set at 25 cents a month. School was not to begin, however, until the church was in apple-pie order (*fix und fertig*).

On September 18, 1887, the church building was ready to be dedicated and on the same day Pastor Helmreich was formally installed. Even then the church had no stove and in October a committee was appointed to see about getting one. Once the stove was secured, a new problem arose: who was to light and stoke the fire on a Sunday morning? Finally, a number of members volunteered their services. Eventually it was decided that all members should share in this chore in alphabetical order. Even before they had a stove it was voted that each member who had a wagon should get a load of wood for the church and parsonage within two months.

On October 23, 1887, it was voted to erect a fence around the church and parsonage using the remaining parish funds to pay for

the necessary wire. If the funds did not suffice each member was to contribute 10 cents. The parish indeed was short of money and the pastor was asked to write to the publishing house in Waverly, Iowa, to see if the payment date for the service book (*Agende*) and the church record book could be extended. It apparently was, for the minutes of the meeting on January 9, 1890, state that \$8.00 was to be paid on the debt for the church books.

It was customary for all congregation members to have their own songbooks and some had brought along their beloved East Friesian hymnals. These, however, were not available for purchase, and many who attended services had no song books. Pastor Helmreich raised the problem in parish meeting and it was decided by a vote of 15-9 that new Iowa Synod hymnals should be used along with the East Friesian ones, with the latter taking precedence in case of conflict. Actually when an organ was obtained there were no musical texts at hand, and the parishioners were called upon to learn the melodies used in the Bavarian chorale book which Pastor Helmreich had brought from Germany.

The cemetery was the subject for much discussion in parish meetings. As early as May 30, 1887, it was decided that all members should receive an entire lot and that settlers who arrived within the next two years and joined the congregation should also receive a free lot. However, persons who were already in residence and did not join within two months would have to pay \$2.00 for a lot. This time limit was later changed to six months. Non-members who wanted to bury their dead in the cemetery were to pay \$1.00 for a grave.

Constant concern about the minister's salary is also evident in the parish records. On May 30, 1887, the parish voted that if in collecting for the minister's salary they raised more than \$150 he should receive the additional sum. This never happened. Payments apparently were very irregular and in January, 1888, it was decided that the salary should be collected quarterly. Given the choice of a fixed salary or the proceeds from voluntary collections, Pastor Helmreich chose the latter. In April, 1888, when school matters were being considered it was voted that the pastor should receive 25 cents a month for each child in attendance at the school, a welcome addition to his income. At the following annual meeting in January, 1890, the pastor was assured a salary of \$250 and free firewood for the following year. To make it easier for the elders to collect the minister's salary, the

congregation was divided into four districts so that each elder had his own district. But these were years of poor crops, money was scarce indeed, and payments were often in arrears.<sup>3</sup>

The interest payments on a note held by Caldwell and Wedder of Lodgepole was another source of concern. In April, 1888, after brief consideration in parish meeting, it was voted that Pastor Helmreich should make an announcement on two Sundays that all who held themselves to the parish, whether members or not, should try to raise a payment of 50 cents toward these interest charges. There were many special financial appeals to members and constant work projects. The minutes of July 2, 1888, reveal a decision that August 17 should be a work day at the church, when, among other things, two sod privies should be built. On August 31 work was to be done on the cemetery. A year later on September 30, 1889, it was decided that each member was to contribute 15 cents for tar paper to cover the church roof; the money could be paid to the pastor. On February 19, 1890, they fenced the church and parsonage. Then in August, 1890, it was decided to fence in the cemetery and each parishioner who wished could bring along fence posts, which would be counted at 5 cents apiece, or he could make a cash payment of 25 cents. September 23 of that year was set aside as the day for the congregation to get wood for the church and parsonage.

In spite of the parishioners' willingness to work and contribute, the congregation remained in difficulty. At a congregational meeting on February 16, 1890, it was voted to ask various friendly Lutheran congregations to raise a collection in their behalf so that their debts could be paid off. This call for aid was heeded and by August of that year the congregation had received gifts amounting to \$101.00. At that time the congregation voted to have a special collection themselves to pay off their remaining debts. Some people apparently had started to move away because of crop failures and those who were leaving that year were asked to make a payment of \$3.00 as their part of the debt. Further gifts were forthcoming for on June 29, 1891, there is a notation in the minutes that the money which they had been given and which had not been used, should be used to purchase a communion service, baptismal font, pulpit Bible, and an organ stool.

On January 6, 1890, Pastor Helmreich requested permission of the congregation to make a trip to Germany. Both his parents had died the previous year. Permission was "gladly granted," and it



*The Rev. Christian Helmreich.  
Taken in Sidney, 1888.*

was voted that in his absence the congregation would content itself with reading services. Should an emergency occur, or if there were four or five children to be baptized, they would summon a minister and pay his travel costs. From March 9 to August 10, 1890, Pastor Helmreich was absent from his congregation. He had hardly returned when on October 9, he received a call to the Crescent City, Illinois, church, composed largely of low-German speaking members. On November 9 by a vote of 13-1 the congregation accepted his request to resign and voted to call immediately another pastor from the Iowa Synod. No candidate was available. Friedrich Bauer's subsequent offer to hold reading services on Sundays and holidays, and also light the stove for 25 cents a time, was accepted.

On November 16 Pastor Helmreich preached his farewell sermon (*Abschiedspredigt*) in the sod church at Weyerts. He left immediately, for in his diary he noted that on November 19 he stopped in Derinda Center, Illinois, where he became engaged to my mother, Augusta Bruckner. On November 2, 1892, the first Sunday in Advent, he preached his first sermon in the new congregation, which he served until his retirement in 1937.

When the Immanuel Lutheran Church at Weyerts celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of its founding on August 2, 1936, Pastor Helmreich was invited to give one of the festival sermons. Some of his old parishioners were still living, and he was delighted to see how they and the congregation had prospered. Despite crop failures and hard times in the 1890s, the sod parsonage and church were replaced by frame buildings respectively in 1893 and

1897. A new church was built in 1912, and the present Immanuel Church building replaced it in 1954. A handsome bell tower followed in 1966. The parsonage too has been updated and today the congregation has a fine modern plant.

In the cemetery nearby, close to the grave of a young man whose funeral was the first young Pastor Helmreich was called upon to conduct, is a tall evergreen. In 1936 he thought it to be the one surviving tree of the numerous ones he had planted. It stands today as a memorial to a young man who sorely missed the beautiful woods and hills of his homeland, and would have liked to transplant a bit of wooded Bavaria to the western plains of Nebraska.

## THE LETTERS

Address North America

Rev. Chr. Helmreich  
Lodge Pole, Cheyenne Co., Nebr.  
9 May 1887

Dearest beloved Parents!<sup>4</sup>

Where to begin and where to end, that is the question facing me at the beginning of this letter. So I begin with my praise to God who has led me safely through these recent very stirring days. To Him be praise, honor, and glory for His gracious care and for His protection, especially on my long journey.

Stirring indeed was the time through which I had to find my way in these past five weeks. In order to give you an overall view, I start once more from Mendota [Illinois], even though enough material has piled up during my short time of service in my congregation to fill several sheets.

Saturday the 2 April, I had to take my oral examination [*Colloquium*] before the two professors.<sup>5</sup> The first subject in which I was tested was Symbolics involving discussion of several articles of the Confession of Augsburg. Professor, junior [Gottfried Fritschel] examined me in the History of Dogma. He asked me to explain the Satisfaction Theory of Atonement [*Satisfaktionstheorie*] of Anselm of Canterbury, its emendation by Thomas Aquinas, and the theory of Acceptilation [*Acceptilitionstheorie*] of Duns Scotus. In Pastoral Care [*Pastorali*] I was examined by Professor, senior [Siegmond Fritschel] and the problem set was "The conduct of a pastor when the communi-

cants announce their intention to partake of the Lord's Supper" [*Verhalten eines Pastors bei der Beichtanmeldung*].<sup>6</sup> Most of the questions put to me I could answer, only in the History of Dogma some points had slipped my mind. After the examination both professors congratulated me and said they would end the examination early as they knew anyway what I had learned. To me the whole business was fun, and so far as I was concerned it could have continued longer.

On Sunday, 3 April, after receiving the Lord's Supper I was ordained by Professor, junior, and with the assistance of Professor, senior. Here at the altar of God I vowed to take upon me the holy office to which God has called me; I vowed and promised before God, according to the ability which God gives me, to perform and discharge my duties to the pleasure of the Lord, the Archshepherd and Bishop of Souls. Here at this holy place I acknowledged the three chief symbols of the church: the unchanged Augsburg Confession and its Apology, the Schmalkaldic Articles, Luther's two catechisms, and the Formula of Concord as the pure and true explanation and exposition of God's word and will. I accepted them as part of my own confessional beliefs, and promised to carry out my duties loyally and diligently in accordance with them until the end of my life.

Wednesday, 6 April, was set as the day of my departure. In the forenoon I made my farewell calls to the professors and to the other families that I knew well, who in motherly fashion gave me plentiful provision for my journey. I left the Seminary at 12 noon amid the sound of ringing bells with the students singing "Jesus Lead the Way" [*Jesu geh voran*]. They all accompanied me to the station in order to say a last farewell. At one o'clock I left Mendota aboard the Illinois Central Railroad, a railroad I had often used before. At Forreston I had to change to the Chicago, Milwaukee and St. Paul for Council Bluffs. Savanna, the station before crossing the Mississippi, is where I got off last year to go to Pastor Bruckner.<sup>7</sup> Many memories crossed my mind as I rode through this region, especially during the crossing of the majestic Mississippi River where I went swimming once during my stay at Derinda Center. Then we passed through Iowa, the state in which temperance and abstinence compete with each other.

On Thursday at 9 A.M. I arrived in Council Bluffs. Council Bluffs is the place where most immigrant trains meet, and from there the immigrants are transported west on several railroads.

Here one can meet people from all the countries of Europe. After a short wait I went on with the Union Pacific Railroad to Omaha, the most important city of Nebraska. I stayed twelve hours in Omaha and had ample time to observe the bustle of this city. Omaha is the point of transit for trade between East and West. But if I wanted to write everything I saw in Omaha, this alone would take several sheets of paper.

In the evening at 8 o'clock my journey continued with the Union Pacific railroad toward the endless steppes of Nebraska. Everywhere nothing else but prairie and sky, except here and there a small town which still showed clearly the traces of new settlement. I arrived in Lodge Pole at 12 noon on Friday, 8 April. Four parishioners awaited me and received me very cordially. I had barely left the train when a strong wind hit the area with such force that the four parishioners and I had all we could do to reach the shelter of a house opposite the station. At 3 P.M. we started out in order to reach the parish, 14-16 miles to the north, before dark. The road went over endless prairie (broad grasslands) where for hours there was no trace of human settlement. After ten to twelve miles we reached the first little houses. I say little houses because they look more like baking ovens in size, than like a regular dwelling.<sup>8</sup> These little houses are built of pieces of sod which are placed upon one another in layers. The walls are three to four feet thick. These little houses suit me much better than the flimsy wooden houses in the East. These sod houses are much warmer in winter and much cooler in summer than the wooden houses. Yes, they are sod houses, I did not make a mistake. For the first years of settlement anything is good enough.

A year and a half ago in this expanse of prairie where now the houses of the parishioners are scattered about there was no settlement visible at all. How will it look in three or four years? Everything today is still very primitive. Each of my parishioners, of whom I have twenty-five to date, has 160 acres of government land. After cultivating it for five years he gets this land as his own private property from the state. [Inserted as a footnote on the number of parishioners is the statement: Many more people come to church, also help carry the burden of the parish, but have not as yet joined the congregation. New settlers arrive from day to day. The soil is very good here, this area has a great future.]

During the first days after my arrival I visited each one of my parishioners; all of them made a good impression upon me. I

found them devout, God-fearing, and with a Christian attitude. And that is after all the main thing for the well-being of the parish. Many, even if not all, are so poor as to have barely their daily bread. I met a few who had barely the necessary clothes to come to church. The church is a simple sod structure, only somewhat longer and wider than the customary houses. There can naturally be no idea of decorating it, since there is no money at all in the parish. If, with God's help a good harvest comes along, things will soon change and a new church will soon take the place of the present one. Right now we are all poverty stricken together, but I rejoice that I must share the trials of my parish with the others. I realize fully what a pastor, a *servant* of God is. He who wants to have happy days only should stay away from the ministry. I would not have had to take this position if I had not wanted to. I knew the situation very well, yet conditions are better than I had envisioned.

Here on the wide prairie I can do more for the Kingdom of God than in the most beautiful parish in the East. Here a pastor can truly fulfil his office as shepherd. Happy, in good spirits, and singing religious hymns, I sometimes walk across the prairie to visit one or the other of my parishioners. May need in the beginning come to me as much as it will, may the waves of the suffering and the cross mount ever so high, may there be more stormy and rough days ahead, I am nevertheless in good spirits and praise with the Apostle: "Like the sorrowful ones who yet are always happy, a Christian's heart walks on roses, even if he stands beneath the cross. Even if I have to weep with the tears of my time, my Jesus and His glory sweetens all suffering." See the Gospel for the Sunday, Jubilate!

And already I have cause to rejoice. I live in a little house beside the church, alone. I have started a vegetable garden and am entitled to the proceeds of the five acres which surround the church. And something else—I have taken up 160 acres of land, unfortunately it is four and one-half miles distant from the church. I must live on it for five full years and then it is mine. How I will do that I do not know at the moment. But I will go out as often as possible and live in a little house which is to be built there. Maybe there will be an opportunity to sell my rights to somebody else. The land of course does not yet belong to me. Taking up the land costs \$20, which I have to pay within two years. Should I lose the land I would also lose the \$20. But I will see that this does not happen so easily. Within five years an acre here will surely cost \$10-\$12.<sup>9</sup>

Now I will answer your letters. The one, written on March 18, reached me while I was still in Mendota. What is the situation in regard to the young scholar from Neuendettelsau<sup>10</sup> and the woman from Altdorf<sup>11</sup> who have thoughts of bringing something along for me. I, and also my friends whom I have consulted, advise the son of Linder absolutely not to come to America. Here he would need just about as much money as over there. If he wants to come anyway, he should wait another four to five years. At the Seminary he would need \$80-100 (equals 300-400 Marks) annually, no matter how much he skimps. What is the cost of the book "The Doctrine of the Means of Grace" [*Die Lehre von den Gnadenmitteln*] by W. Rohnert, Lutheran pastor at Waldenburg in Silesia, published by Georg Boehme in Leipzig? I would like to ask you also for a good and comprehensive catechism. Could Heinrich not send me at his convenience some ink powder (black), since ink is enormously expensive here? One little bottle containing one-twelfth of a Seidel costs 25 cents (equals 1 Mark) here.<sup>12</sup> The girls could send me some of the pictures which they have in the secretary. At present I am eating with one of the farmers and have to pay 10 cents per meal. Next week I want to cook my own breakfast and supper!! I believe I would need Henriette David's cookbook to learn how to make barley coffee and pancakes!!! Later on I will get many different food stuffs, but not now, since the people have hardly any flour to bake bread with. I receive yearly \$150 from the parish and \$50 from the Mission Committee. I expect to get along very well on this beginning salary. I am not yet teaching school, maybe it will begin next month. I will drink barley coffee since neither regular coffee or tea, which is drunk very much by the East Friesians, is to my taste.

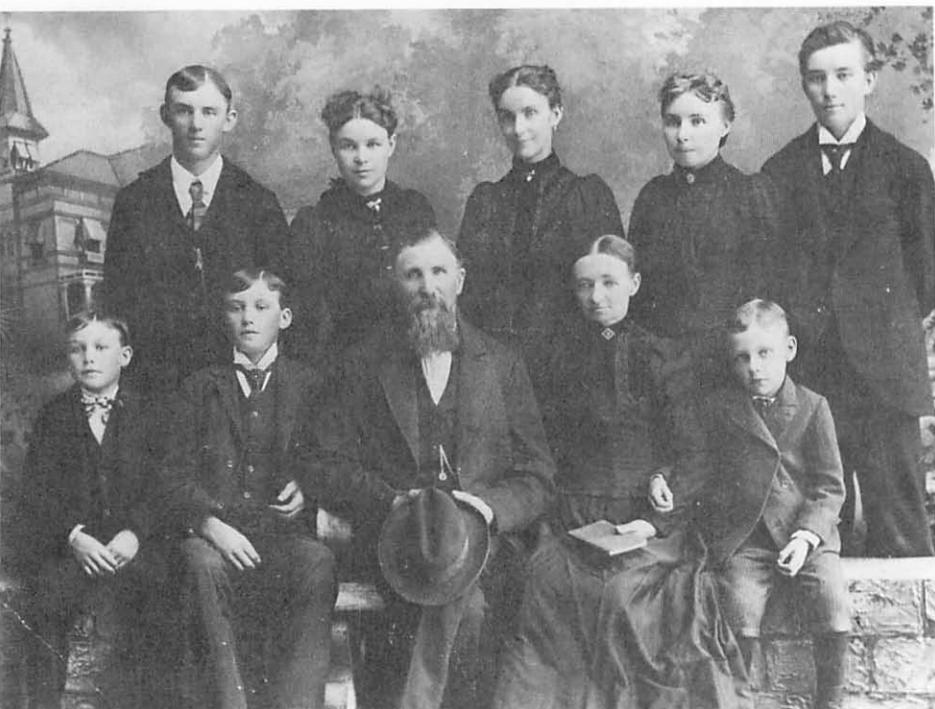
Loving greetings to all of you

from your  
Christian

Affectionate greetings to Stich.<sup>13</sup>

Dear Father. Would you not have a little book for ministry to the sick?

P.S. Varia! For five pence all sorts of things. A year ago the town of Lodge Pole had 50 inhabitants now it has 200. There is a Methodist Episcopal pastor (English) in Lodge Pole whom I know personally; a fine gentleman who kindly invited me to call on him



*The Reike Bolken family. Homesteaders one mile south of Immanuel Lutheran Church, they helped organize it.*



*Mr. and Mrs. John Kahmann, who homesteaded north of church, 1887.*

whenever I was in town. A land agent sends me the English Lodge Pole newspaper free of charge. I cannot understand the East Friesian [Low German] language; that will be a pretty story when it comes to teaching school. The adults, however, all understand [High] German. When I have the money, I will buy myself a horse. I have not yet received the \$47; maybe it is in Mendota. As of now we have no postoffice, which accounts for the bad postal service.<sup>14</sup> In the near future we are to get a post office. No letter from Ernst yet.<sup>15</sup> The cost of the trip here was paid by the Mission Committee.

To be continued.

Address: Rev. Chr. Helmreich  
Weyerts, Cheyenne Co., Nebr.  
5/VI/'88

My dear Godfather!<sup>16</sup>

I may not put off answering your letter any longer. It came into my hands on 10 January, just at a time when terrible snow storms raged through this area. The hardest snowstorm which has hit the United States was the terrible "blizzard" which began its fury on 10 January and continued three days, mainly over Dakota, Minnesota, Wisconsin, Iowa, and less furiously over Nebraska. All traffic and travel became impossible for an entire week and the storm brought the most horrible disaster. Thousands of people lost their lives in this catastrophe and everywhere the bodies of those frozen or freezing were found. Of the last mentioned only a few could still be saved.

I hear you ask "what is a blizzard?" Think of a dry and cold winter day. The smoke climbs straight as a candle from the sod covered earthen huts of the settlers up into the blue sky from which the sun sends friendly, if not warming, rays down upon the congealed earth. A magnificent sight, the snow sparkling in the sunlight; deep silence round about. Then suddenly a glittering white wall appears on the northwestern horizon. It seems to come nearer. The sun pales, breaks through momentarily again, but then wraps itself deeper and deeper into a pale misty veil, soon to disappear entirely. More and more threatening the eerie white ghost approaches in the northwest and finally the weather breaks. It comes on the wings of a hurricane, moaning, howling, screaming. Snow mixed with hail batters the traveler. Closer and

closer the raging icy turbulence envelops him, blacked out are all landmarks, roads and paths are drifted over, and woe to the unlucky one who cannot in time save himself under a sheltering roof. Meanwhile the cold gets fiercer and fiercer. It penetrates the thickest clothing and the heaviest fur. Only the nearness of a shelter if it can be seen by the blinded eyes through the darkness of the whirling snow, can bring deliverance. No horse, no cattle, no dog, is able to fight the hurricane power of the wind. It drags them away with its might. There you have a short description of a blizzard. Our state, Nebraska, is very seldom plagued by blizzards. Sometimes it happens, but the storm is then not nearly as devastating as in the more northern states, for example Dakota and Montana. There are snowstorms in Germany too, but the fact that here they are always accompanied by a very strong wind which sweeps unhindered across the treeless steppes makes these storms so much more dangerous. In many areas the loss of lives and cattle was high, but we here did not have any losses to complain about.

In the period after Christmas I had lots of things to do. The confirmation instruction took most of my time, as the teaching of the Word of God to the children had been completely neglected. The holy Lenten season with the many sermons to prepare also kept me very busy. A month ago my school started again.<sup>17</sup> I teach school three days a week. At present I have only fifteen pupils; if all the children could come—which is impossible because of the distance—I might well have fifty to sixty. Last year I was paid no school money. This year, according to a parish decision, I will be paid 25 cents per month for each child in school. A small income, but better than nothing. This year my salary will amount to more than \$200, with which sum I as a bachelor get along splendidly. I use the money mostly for acquisition of useful items; for luxury items, things for a more comfortable and easy way of life, I do not spend a cent. With the money left over after the daily necessities are paid for, I buy worthwhile theological works. Of course with this salary I naturally have to forego the purchase of larger and therefore more expensive studies. The incidental fees will also bring in a few dollars,<sup>18</sup> as will the produce from a few acres which I had planted to corn. The purchase of land in this area I have at the moment again dismissed from my mind completely. I thank you for your kind offer to lend me a few hundred Marks for several years without interest. Maybe I will make use of this offer at some other time.

About five weeks ago I suffered for a fortnight from a severe eye infection which made reading and studying impossible. I must have contracted this infection while working outside in a strong wind which carried a lot of dust with it. Now my eyesight is fully restored again.

Since January we also have an organ in the church which I have to play at worship services. Pastor, cantor, organist, teacher, are all combined in my person. Despite the poverty which prevails in this parish I was able to obtain the money for the organ by collecting from house to house. I use the Bavarian chorale book and my good East Friesians must, willy-nilly, learn those melodies. I lack any other musical notes, but my dear father has promised to send me some.

I will perhaps have to make two mission trips to the northern part of our state in the near future where, as I have heard, some Lutherans have settled. In a later letter I will write you more definitely about this.

Four weeks ago we had a hard rain through which our otherwise first-rate sod houses suffered much damage. There was hardly a house in the parish where it did not rain in. One always expected that it could not really rain in Nebraska. Because of this rain and the almost weekly gentle showers the prospects for a good harvest are excellent. May God give us further rain and protect us from hail and bad storms.

In closing, answers to your questions. The climatic conditions here are very good. Since Nebraska lies at a fairly high altitude the air is very pure and healthy. The great Rocky Mountains are not far from us. The heat of the summer and the cold of the winter are bearable. Somewhat unpleasant is the wind which blows over the prairie, stronger in spring and autumn than at other times of the year. Woods, which will be planted as time goes on, will break the force of the wind somewhat.

The farmers prefer to plant maize (English, corn). Oats and wheat also grow well. Since the land so far is only in small part cultivated, the farmers have to find out first for which crop it is best suited.

In the hope that you enjoy the best of health and with the most heartfelt greetings I will close my letter.

Your grateful Godson,  
Chr. Helmreich

## NOTES

1. I would like to thank the Reverend Robert I. Cox, present pastor of the Immanuel Lutheran Church, who provided me with historical materials dealing with the church, and Herbert Thomas of the Nebraska State Historical Society, who made a preliminary translation of the letters.

2. Since the donated land was part of a new homestead, getting a legal title for the congregation was a long process. On October 23, 1887, the congregation voted to ask Notary Carry in Lodgepole to draw up (at the cost of the congregation) the agreement with John Kahmann on the transfer of the five acres of land. No specific mention of the results of this initiative appear in the minutes, but at the parish meeting on January 2, 1889, it was requested that the deed from John Kahmann be read. Many must have considered themselves qualified legal experts, for a lengthy debate ensued. As no decision could be reached, a committee was appointed to consult with Kahmann and report at the next meeting. At an "extra" meeting on January 9 the deed was again read, whereupon Kahmann declared he would provide a clear deed to said five acres on condition that the congregation pay him \$25.00 on the delivery of the deed. His proposal was unanimously accepted. It was not, however, until June 29, 1891, that the deed was read to the congregational meeting and there recognized as being satisfactorily drawn.

3. *Immanuel Church Records*, pp. 23, 26, 28, 30, 34, 36. Nebraska State Historical Society Microfilm Library, Lincoln; and Immanuel Lutheran Church, Lodgepole.

4. The following notation was made on the letter by his father, the Reverend Ludwig Helmreich in Offenhausen, Bavaria: "Received 26 May 1887. Answered by a card on 28 May and by a letter on 31 May 1887."

5. The two leading professors at the seminary were exceptional scholars: the Reverend Siegmund Fritschel (1833-1900), who is referred to in the letter as Professor, senior, and his brother the Reverend Gottfried Fritschel (1836-1889), Professor, junior.

6. It was the custom in Lutheran churches at that time, and it still prevails in some places today, for persons who intended to partake of the Lord's Supper to speak to the pastor beforehand. This gave the pastor an opportunity to offer words of commendation or admonition and, if necessary, exercise a certain amount of church discipline. It also helped the pastor in keeping church records, for the names of those partaking of communion were regularly entered in the church books. The communicants then attended a short service of confession (*Beichte*) usually held before the regular church service during which the sacrament of the Lord's Supper was celebrated. Members of the congregation who were not taking communion would not attend the special service of confession.

7. It was customary for the seminarians to spend their longer summer vacations working for farmers in different congregations. Helmreich spent the summer of 1885 in Ashton, Illinois, but his stay here was not very congenial. The following summer he was invited by one of his classmates to come home with him to Derinda Center, Illinois. The Reverend Hermann Bruckner, at whose home he made his headquarters that summer, was a pioneer pastor of the Iowa Synod who had emigrated to America in 1858. Here the seminarian met his future bride, Augusta Bruckner, and they were married in 1891, shortly after he left Nebraska.

8. The outdoor bake ovens, which were the feature of most Bavarian villages.

9. On November 5, 1890, when he was preparing to leave Lodgepole he sold his rights to his homestead for \$45.00.

10. At Neuendettelsau, near Ansbach in Bavaria, is located one of the great Protestant foreign and inner mission establishments of Germany. It was founded by the Reverend Wilhelm Lohe (1808-1872), who in 1841 started to train men as emergency aids (*Nothelfer*) to provide church services for the German emigrants in America. He adhered to the principle, "Bring the Gospel to those in foreign lands, and you will uphold it at home." (*Bringe das Evangelium den Fernen, so erhalst du es den Nahen.*) He later added other services, above all a center for the training of deaconesses. Both the Fritschel brothers and

Pastor Bruckner, referred to previously, studied at Neuendettelsau, the Fritschel brothers continuing their studies at the University of Erlangen.

11. Altdorf is located not far from Offenhausen; a university was located there 1623-1809.

12. Heinrich, an apothecary, was Christian's elder brother; a seidel is approximately .75 of a pint.

13. Stich was the family dog.

14. Actually the time required for delivery, a little over two weeks for a letter between Nebraska and Bavaria, compares most favorably with ordinary surface mail today. Postage for a letter to Germany was 5 cents at that time.

15. Ernst was Christian's younger brother.

16. The letter was to his uncle and godfather Christian Helmreich, a district surveyor (*Bezirksgeometer*) in Ochsenfurt, Bavaria.

17. This was a private congregational school (*Gemeindeschule*), and the congregation elected three directors (*Schulvorsteher*). The language of instruction was German and the emphasis was on Bible history and catechetical instruction, although reading, writing, arithmetic and some other subjects were also taught. It was modeled on the primary schools (*Volkschulen*) of Germany. Pastor Helmreich regularly conducted such a school five days a week in the summer months during his pastorate in Crescent City, Illinois.

18. It was the regular practice, often mentioned in the terms under which a pastor was called to a congregation, that he should receive incidental fees (*Accidentien*) for special services such as baptisms, confirmations, weddings, and funerals. These were voluntary but generally expected gifts, and the amounts varied greatly according to the capabilities and generosity of the individual parishioners.