"Divine House Blessing.
Where there is Faith, there is Love.
Where there is Love, there is Peace.
Where there is Peace, there is Blessing.
Where there is Blessing, there is God.
Where there is God, there is no Hardship."
The house blessings prevalent before the 19th century were meant to protect the house and its inhabitants and exhort them to fear God. In earlier days they were either applied directly to the wall or carved into the frame. Later came signs or pictures of various sayings to hang on the wall. In the second half of the 19th century, thanks to the progress of the printing industry, house blessings, together with other wall decorations, were mass produced and sold as a commodity. Their popularity peaked around 1900.

This very familiar “Gottlicher Haussegen” hung in this editor’s grandmother’s home in Niagara Falls for many years. There is an identical one that hangs in Das Haus. The letters look almost like some variation of mother-of-pearl, however when the back is removed you will see that the effect is obtained by crinkled lead foil (not aluminum, as Wilma told me).

Found in the Files – 2018 marks the 175th anniversary of our ancestors migration to America and the establishment of St. Peters, St. Martin’s and “The German Evangelical Lutheran Church of Neu Bergholz in the Town of Wheatfield”, otherwise known as Holy Ghost Evangelical Lutheran Church. In honor of this event, Der Brief is reprinting selected pages of the 150th Holy Ghost anniversary booklet. Continued from last issue…….

Despite the crowded housing conditions, the first winter was apparently weathered quite well by the new settlers. Church records indicate only one death, that of Friedrich Wegener, six months old, who died of “cramps” on January 8, 1844. In the spring and summer of 1844 the men were very busy felling trees and squaring logs into posts and beams for building half-timbered, clay-filled houses to relieve the acute housing shortage.

Toward the end of 1844 there was great rejoicing in the village. Pastor Ehrenstroem had been released from prison and was on his way to their settlement. For his arrival the worship barn was especially outfitted for an evening service of welcome. Ehrenstroem’s message, however, was somewhat mystifying. He told them he would do miracles among them and under his direction even they could perform them. A strange mysterious air hung over the entire service, causing much sighing and meaning. As the bewildered worshipers returned home they could hardly believe that this was the same Ehrenstroem they had known and loved in Prussia.

On December 1, 1844 Ehrenstroem bought 72 acres of land on Ward Road and Niagara Road. Then he took over the pastorate of his three congregations, Bergholz, Wallnow and Martinsville. He preached mostly stern law sermons to awaken them out of the spiritual sleep into which he claimed Grabau had lulled them. He considered his members to be still unconverted and refused to serve them the Lord’s Supper until he had first brought them back to spiritual life. This he would do by a rigid schedule of prayer exercises. At such meetings he would require each one to shout his own made-up prayer for an hour or so. If this caused a strange vision to be imagined, Ehrenstroem would decide whether it was real or imagined. If real, he would declare that person to be fully converted. Because so few “visions” were judged real, however, most members continued unconverted and were deprived of all rights and privileges of church membership. Even the companionship of their families was denied them.

In Prussia the people had greatly admired and respected Pastor Ehrenstroem, but now especially the older members objected to his strange Pietistic practices but they were overruled. His Bible studies dealt mostly with miracles but he had not yet performed any. So now he brought a well known blind man before a large crowd and by intense prayer and stern command he attempted to make the blind man see. But he failed utterly! Shunned, many declared that God did not exist any more and that Luther’s Bible translation was not valid. But the eyes of many others were opened and they left Ehrenstroem.

Ehrenstroem rejected the German Bible as false and required his remaining followers to learn Greek so they could read the New Testament in its original language. All the men in his group let their hair and beards grow long as in ancient times. Then Ehrenstroem gathered all the German Bibles and religious books he could get his hands on, stacked them in a huge pile, and burned them. Finally in mid-1845 Ehrenstroem was excommunicated from the church for teaching false doctrine and refusing to repent. He left Wheatfield and went to Wisconsin with
about twenty people who were still following him. There he bought land, built one house where all lived in communal style for a short while until these followers also left him. He is reported to have gone to California looking for gold where he died in a poorhouse in San Francisco. Many other strange actions concerning attempted miracles are attributed to Ehrenstroem but since they cannot be verified, most are probably hearsay.

Nevertheless, if it hadn't been for Ehrenstroem's insistent urging for the Old Lutherans to emigrate from Prussia, the Bergholz congregation may never have come to America. The intense persecutions he had suffered in Prussia and his confinement in prison while his followers were leaving Prussia, probably caused Ehrenstroem's mind to become seriously distorted and accounted for his strange behavior in America. That, however, does not excuse the wrong he did and the demoralization his Pietistic ministrations caused among the members of his Wheatfield congregations.

After the traumatic existence they had experienced under Ehrenstroem, God provided the young congregation with a deeply committed Lutheran Christian pastor who led them for 22 years through a period of rapid growth and accomplishment. Heinrich von Rohr came from Humberstone, Ontario where he had served just over a year after his ordination. He had helped to free Pastor Grabau from his first imprisonment in Prussia and in 1839 had successfully carried out the first large-scale migration of Old Lutherans to America. He had lost his commission as a Captain in the Prussian Army because he refused to identify the Lutheran pastor who baptized his child.

In 1845 von Rohr had helped organize the "Synode der aus Preussen eingewanderten lutherischen Kirche", commonly referred to as the Buffalo Synod. The Bergholz congregation also joined this Synod. Already in 1846 a dissenting group of six Bergholz families openly opposed the Buffalo Synod and formed their own church unit under the Rev. E.M. Buerger of Buffalo. When they refused to repent, they were excommunicated from the Bergholz church and the Buffalo Synod. Also in 1846 a branch of the Bergholz school was established on Ward Road at Alder Creek Road (now Niagara Falls Boulevard). This served the families living in the Ward Road section then called "Little Bergholz", now St. Johnsburg.

The year 1847 marked a significant milestone in the history of the Bergholz congregation when the first permanent church building was constructed. It was named Holy Ghost Church probably after the stately Holy Ghost Church they had known in Prenzlau, Prussia. From this time forward the congregation also was known as Holy Ghost.

The Bergholz church building was the largest in Niagara County at the time it was built. It was a half-timbered structure 100 feet long and 50 feet wide which cost a little over $2000. The clay and timber exterior was left exposed for about five years before it was covered over with clapboards and painted white. The church was used for worship services as soon as the structure was built, but it was not dedicated until 1851 when all the interior appointments had been completed. The trim work and pews were done by Friedrich Hoffmeister and Heinrich Plaster. Hoffmeister also handcrafted the altar, pulpit and baptismal font. At the same time Johann Steinke did the interior finish work in the school building. Meanwhile, in 1850 after Teacher Stowasser moved to Wisconsin,
Teacher August Hoge came to serve in the Bergholz school.

"Das Gesetz ist durch Mosen Gegeben" (The Law was given through Moses). On the right side a corresponding hanging was inscribed, "Die Gnade und Wahrheit ist durch Jesus Christum geworden" (Grace and Truth came through Jesus Christ). The pulpit hanging bore the words "Selig sind die Gottes Wort Hoeren und Bewahren" (Blessed are they that hear the word of God and keep it).

First Holy Ghost Church (view from northwest)

Holy Ghost congregation embellished the interior of its new church with many worshipful inscriptions. Black velvet-covered kneeling benches on three sides of the altar had the following inscriptions embroidered in gold:

"Das ist Mein Leib" (That is My Body)
"Das ist Mein Blut" (That is My Blood)
"Opfere Gott Dank" (Offer thanks to God)

Christmas in First Holy Ghost Church

The many more Prussian Lutherans who had come to Bergholz since the original group of 500 came in 1843, raised Holy Ghost's membership to 1300 by 1852. In 1853 a number of families were released to organize a daughter congregation at "Little Bergholz" This became St. Johnsbury when St. John Lutheran church was built there in December of that year. Mr. Hoge became the teacher at St. John school and Teacher Gottfried Rehwald was called to become head teacher in Bergholz. A German Lutheran congregation was also established in Wolcottville in 1853. A number of Holy Ghost families moved there to become members of that congregation.

From July through November 1853 Pastor W. Wier of Martinsville temporarily served Holy Ghost while Pastor von Rohr accompanied Pastor Grabau on a trip to Europe. Their purpose was to solicit funds to pay off the debt on Martin Luther Seminary which Grabau had built. They also sought commitments from Lutheran leaders in Germany to support Buffalo Synod's doctrinal position against Missouri Synod. This controversy had been carried on by correspondence and through the official church papers of these two Synods since the early 1840s and was to continue for many years more.

In 1854 a private "Witwe Haus" (widow's house) was established in Bergholz by Holy Ghost Church to care for its widows who had no other means of support. Congregation members provided meals for the 5 or 6 occupants in the house, and the widows did the darning and mending for them. In 1856 a $40 contribution was received from the former Governor Washington Hunt toward constructing a church steeple. The church had originally been built without a steeple which was added later, but just when cannot be determined from existing

Interior of First Holy Ghost Church

To the left of the altar was a wall hanging inscribed,
When Teacher Rehwald entered Martin Luther Seminary in 1857 to prepare for the preaching ministry, Teacher Christoph Camann was given responsibility for both classes at Holy Ghost School. He had formerly been teaching just the lower class for a number of years. He had taught the two classes for less than a year, when he died at age 50 after a brief illness. His eldest son, 18-year old Friedrich Camann, a student at Martin Luther Seminary, was given his deceased father’s teaching responsibilities. When he entered the Union Army at the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, Teacher Christian Goers was called to take over the teaching duties.

In 1859 Pastor Grabau as head of the Buffalo Synod suggested that his pastors collect a cent-a-month from each of their members. This was to help pay off the debt on the Martin Luther Seminary building. The Bergholz congregation doesn’t seem to have been seriously disrupted by this requirement. However, almost the entire St. Johnsburg congregation left the Buffalo Synod to join the Missouri Synod because of what they considered a church tax. The churches in Martinsville and Wolcottsville also each lost a significant portion of their members to Missouri.

Pastor Grabau became increasingly autocratic in managing the Buffalo Synod. At their convention in 1866 he actually left his own Synod along with several other pastors because his synodical Council members would not agree with his views. Pastor Hochstetter now assumed leadership of the Synod. In the past, Grabau had never consented to meet directly with the head of Missouri Synod. However, now a meeting of the two Synods’ representatives was arranged to be held in Buffalo late in 1866. This was commonly called the Buffalo Colloquy at which the doctrines that separated the two Synods were thoroughly debated.

At the conclusion of these debates all but one of the Buffalo Synod debaters expressed agreement with the Missouri position. This resulted in 12 Buffalo Synod pastors and their congregations switching to the Missouri Synod. Pastor von Rohr was the lone debater who could not agree with Missouri. Upon returning to his Holy Ghost congregation, he discovered that two-thirds of his own members also favored Missouri and so the Bergholz church split in 1867. While all the elders supported von Rohr, all the trustees, who were the official custodians of the church property, favored Missouri. Therefore, according to New York State law, the property and name of Holy Ghost went to the Missouri Synod group, even though the church constitution required that the property should belong to the group which remained loyal to the doctrines of the Buffalo Synod.

Von Rohr’s group was given a proportional monetary settlement and in 1868 they built Trinity church on Cayuga Street near Rohr. This was a sturdy brick church with a bell in the steeple and was commonly called “Rohr Church”. After Pastor von Rohr’s death in 1874, a large portion of his congregation left Trinity Church to form the congregation now known as St. James. In 1876 this group built a frame church on Rohr Street near Niagara. This was the third Lutheran church in Bergholz until 1889 when the Trinity congregation merged with St. James. Thus Trinity’s remaining members were reunited with their former fellow-members in St. James Lutheran Church.

Meanwhile, in 1867 Holy Ghost congregation called the Rev. John William Weinbach from Walmore as its pastor. He had also left the Buffalo Synod to join Missouri. Holy Ghost membership at this time was 326. Weinbach served during a 20-year period of relative progress within the congregation. However, during this time the church split generated the most intensely bitter feelings and hateful relations imaginable between the Lutheran churches in Bergholz. Even members within family groups were sharply divided over the Grabau-Missouri issue. In Holy Ghost’s written records, Trinity Church, instead of being identified by name, is referred to as that “Opposition Church”. Trinity congregation, in the preamble to its constitution, stated that they had been robbed of their rightful property by that “Heteric Church”. These feelings subsided only very gradually during the 110 years that elapsed before altar and pulpit fellowship were again restored.

During Rev. Weinbach's 20-year pastorate a succession of teachers answered the call to teach at Holy Ghost school. Pastor Weinbach, himself, taught school from 1867 to 1869. Then Friedrich Rother served from 1869 to 1872. Albert Utpatel taught briefly in 1872, Christian Krull from 1873 to 1875, and Bernhardt Bruning in 1875-76. Friedrich Rother taught again from 1876 to 1881 and Herman Richert from 1881 to 1883. Rev. Weinbach taught again in 1883 and 1884 while the original parsonage was being replaced by a much larger frame structure.
The old bob-sleigh shown in the above picture was in continuous service in the village of Bergholtz every winter for almost 80 years. It may still be seen "at rest" on the farm of Hugo Devantier, Niagara street, Bergholtz. Fred Hoffmeister, builder of the sleigh, was one of the early carpenters in the Bergholtz vicinity. Karl Hoffmeister, his father, was the first carpenter to settle in that community.
Ancient Sleigh Recalls Pioneer Days in Bergholtz and Vicinity

March 24, 1939

BERGHOFFTZ, March 24 — A sleigh? Yes, one that looks like many others in Niagara county, at a first glance, is at rest today on the farm of Hugo Devantier, in Niagara street.

The bobs, rebuilt here and there, have been in active service every winter for nearly 80 years. True, not all the wood in the old vehicle is the same, but is Old Ironsides the same ship now that won glory for the American navy? The sleigh is a Hoffmeister product and sentiment hangs on the hard work of the master craftsmen who founded this Wheatfield community.

A century ago critical times were afoot in the Kingdom of Prussia, for King Frederick Wilhelm III was determined to prescribe just how his subjects were to worship in the Christian church, what their tenets and mode of worship should be. Any who disagreed with the doughty monarch were cast into chains.

To America and religious freedom came dissenters from the rule of Frederick Wilhelm in 1843. There was a rule followed by these pioneers in locating good grain lands in virgin country, that of seeking out lands where hard wood grows, and that the immigrants from Walmow and Bergholtz, Prussia, found in the mighty oaks and hickory that abounded in the present town of Wheatfield. The first wheat stalks were said to tower more than six feet in height in this area, so the advance agents for the fleeing Germans bought extensive tracts from the Holland land company on which to build a new Walmow and a New Bergholtz.

Weavers, tailors, carpenters, as well as farmers, made their home in Wheatfield. In actual cash, it did not cost much to live in pioneer Bergholtz, neither did it cost so much to die. The village carpenter, Karl Hoffmeister, made cradles for babes and caskets for the dead.

A complete burial in the finest bur- nished oak coffin cost $16, but a still stylish burial totalled $10 at most. A son, Fred, builder of the Devantier sleigh, continued wood- craft in other lines, nearly every family in the community treasuring some article, a churn, a clothes closet, or a wagon-box, evidencing the art of the Bergholtz man's craft. Fellow workers today aver that the only plans for the E. L. Haseley barn, on the Saunders Settlement road, Walmore, were Hoffmeister's pencillings on a single.

The pottery shop of Karl Meh wald in Niagara street, opposite the Camman mills, is recalled by John Moll. Time and again Moll stood in the Mehwald shop watching the craftman work his wheel with his foot and fashion clay into jugs, cups, plates, or saucers. Now that pieces by Mehwald are priceless museum rarities. Moll figures the young Bergholtz women of another generation wasted a fortune in broken pottery.

The noisemaking evening, or charivari, in ancient Germany was an occasion when friends of engaged couples scared evil spirits away with a wild disharmony of crashing cups, saucers, jugs, bottles, bells and anvils, on their wedding eve. The event has lost much of its hideousness in later years.

Yes, Bergholtz was a pioneer town. In March and April, the old mill on Cayuga creek, near the Walmow road, roared day and night as spring freshets turned the old waterwheel. Not far from the present Niagara municipal airport was an old pitfall, a bear and deer trap where the early settlers snared their meat. Bergholtz once boasted a postoffice, Supervisor August Sy points out. The old postoffice letter file is now a cabinet in the Sy home in the Sy road.

The German language is still taught in St. Jacobi and Holy Ghost church schools. Many of the Elders still speak the Plattdeutsch tongue of Walmow and Bergholtz. Many, however, cherish their halls of New Walmow and New Bergholtz, communities where the early craftsmen found a haven for religious freedom in Niagara county a century ago.
**Upcomming Events / Membership News**

August 26, 2018 – Town of Wheatfield Family Picnic. Please visit the Historical Society’s booth.

September General Meeting – 9/20/18, Wheatfield Community Center, 7:00 PM, Topic, TBD

Saturday, Oct. 27th – 5:00 PM, **ANNUAL HARVEST DINNER**, St. James Fellowship Hall. Celebrating the 175th anniversary of our ancestor’s migration to America and the formation of Holy Ghost, St. Peter’s and St. Martins Lutheran churches.

November General Meeting – 11/15/18, Wheatfield Community Center, 7:00 PM, Topic, TBD

Thanks to Robert and Marilyn Winter for their donation in memory of Victor Jagow. Also thanks to many of our members who added additional contributions to their suggested donation. We really appreciate it!!!

Welcome to new members Deena Chaffee, Susan Price and Lisa Dumke

**Miscellaneous**

One of the most popular displays at our German Heritage Museum is the black wedding dress that is on display. While doing some research for another story, this editor came across this little article from the Concordia Historical Institute.

**Black Wedding Dresses**

**Date:**

1877

**Significance:** This dress was worn by Charlotte (Welpmann) Grimm on her wedding day more than 135 years ago. It was common in the late nineteenth century for women to wear their “best” dress, often black, to their weddings. White dresses began gaining popularity following Queen Victoria’s wedding in 1840, but as with most trends, it took quite a while for the custom to become popular in the middle and lower classes.

**More on Black Wedding Dresses:** Concordia Historical Institute’s collection includes additional photographic and written evidence of the prevalence of black wedding dresses in the nineteenth century. In the photograph to the right, the bride, Marie Salomon, is in a black wedding dress. She married Rev. Edward L. Arndt on 1 May 1887 in Fort Wayne, Indiana.

A collection of letters written by Emilie (Lohmann) Koenig, a Lutheran pastor’s wife in Indiana in the 1850s, sheds more light onto this matter. In a letter dated 11 September 1853 written to her family in Germany, a newly immigrated Emilie wrote about her upcoming nuptials:

*We will have a very quiet evening together tomorrow. I am happy we will not have the usual riotous nuptial eve which is celebrated here by noisy rites at the brides’ home the evening before the wedding. Our wedding day will also be a very quiet one. . . . I will wear my black dress and the veil and, I hope, the wreath you braided for me.*

Emilie’s letter describes what can be seen in the Arndt wedding photograph: a bride in black with a veil. The wedding dress, photograph and letter together demonstrate the commonness of black wedding dresses more than a century ago.

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1 This passage was quoted from a two-part article in the Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly (vol. 28, no. 4; vol. 29, no. 1) titled “As Thou Leadest Me,” which used excerpts from the collection of Emilie Koenig letters to tell her story. A reprint of the article was published by the Auxiliary of Concordia Historical Institute and is available in the CHI Lobby Shop.
Seeing as it is still the 100th anniversary of the US participation in WWI the editor thought that it would be appropriate to include some postcards sent by Rudolf Schultz from Fort Dix, NJ to his brother John (my grandfather) in Niagara Falls. Rudolf did serve in combat in France and returned home at the war’s end. Below is a sample of a typical brother’s postcard note sent home.

Dear Brother,

Received your letter the 20th with the news and wish you all the best. And the watches and cigars were glad to hear you bought a wheel, and the watch appreciates the watch. I wish the one you got is good enough for you and you are all well and happy. From your brother,

Rudolf

Rudolf Schultz

1824 Westminster Ave

Niagara Falls
New York
Join our Historical Society and receive Der Brief every quarter!

The Historical Society welcomes new members! If you find our newsletter and our mission interesting we hope that you will make a membership contribution and join us. Our mission is to educate adults and children concerning the heritage of the nineteenth century settlements of North Germans in western New York, and thus to preserve that heritage. We do this by preserving the history, artifacts, documents, manuscripts, publications, photographs, Plattdeutsch anecdotes, crafts and customs of these hearty immigrants, their descendants and the communities in which they lived.

We maintain Das Haus und Der Stall German Heritage Museum, sponsor an annual dinner, hold informative monthly meetings with special speakers, offer for sale books and other items published by the Society, and distribute Der Brief, our quarterly publication to 29 States and 3 foreign countries.

If you would like to become a member of our society, please fill out this form and send it to the address indicated.

________________________________________
_________________________________________________________
Membership Chairman
Historical Society of North German Settlements in WNY
2549 Niagara Rd., Niagara Falls, NY 14304 – 2020

Enclosed is a membership donation of $20 (additional donations are very much appreciated)

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