

VALLEY GROVE NEWSLETTER

Spring 2005

By the Valley Grove

Preservation Society



NOTHING BUT GOOD NEWS!!!

Our New Foundation

Several grants from Ken and Sylvia Nelson of Arlington, Virginia have been put to use to create the Elthon-Nelson Endowment Fund.

"I want to preserve and maintain Valley Grove because it brings back a lot of happy memories," Ken explains. "Uncle Albert Elthon had a farm not far from Nerstrand, and when I was a child, we used to go to Valley Grove in summertime and at Christmas. We drove horses and a sleigh to the church in the winter; we'd put on the lap robes of horse hair and were warm as warm as toast. And we drove home afterward and had a Christmas lutefisk and lefse dinner."

"Ben Elthon and Edward Elthon and another fella got together at harvest time and threshed their grain and did their corn silage, helping each other, and I used to get paid 25 cents a day to shovel the grain from the front of the wagon to the

back when it came out of the threshing machines. All the housewives would feed 'em, and each tried to outdo the other ones," he recalls.

Ken has also made numerous dedications of trees on the Valley Grove prairie in memory of the veterans and civilians of each world war and of his family members.

After he was graduated from the University of Minnesota, Ken worked for the government Accounting Office (GAO) as an accountant/CPA in Arlington beginning in 1963. The GAO is a congressional agency that audits other governmental agencies; Ken's specialty was keeping an eye on the defense contractors.

Ken's sister Ragna Nelson lives in St. Paul and his sister Bonna Paulson lives in Hackensack. Uncle Albert and his wife Inga are buried at Valley Grove.

A Finial Tops It Off

You, the friends of Valley Grove, responded to the call last winter and donated a total of \$9,190 in gifts to be used for Valley Grove. Your gifts were augmented by Andrea Een's generous donation of 20% of the revenues from her hardanger fiddle CD "From the Valley" - partly recorded at Valley Grove. These funds went directly into the purchase and installation of a spanking new copper finial - a replica of the

galvanized 19th century original. The finial was hoisted atop the Valley Grove steeple on Thursday, February 24th. It is topped by a red glass ball on the lightning rod. The finial was created by the Lockerby Sheet Metal Company of Faribault, MN. A thank you for all of you that made this project possible. If you haven't driven by to see it, you can view the whole installation process on our website (see below).

Almost Final Touches

The church is ready for the wedding season - there are seven bookings already. Thanks to the excellent work of the Wetzel Organ Company of Morristown, which made final repairs on the organ, the blower hose is direct to the bellows and it is tuned up for a season of celebrations. And that water stain

on the ceiling has been removed. A rubber waterproof lining will be applied on the bell tower floor and the back doors will be repaired, and that will just about do it for the renovation of the white church.

Annual Meeting

At the annual meeting April 23, the board voted on several things: bylaws were changed to accommodate the new foundation. The wedding fee was changed to a non-refundable \$200 deposit and a total fee of \$400. And new board member Richard Hougen of Minneapolis agreed to serve "as long as my wife Jan can help me, too."

Cheers for the Archivist!

Former Valley Grove Preservation Society board member Mary Jones finished archiving Valley Grove materials from 1972 to 2004. We all wish to thank Mary for a taxing and detailed job well done.

Special thanks to Rev. Owen Gaasdalen for leading last year's Christmas celebration.

About Valley Grove

Valley Grove consists of two historic Norwegian-immigrant churches set on a hilltop in the rolling fields near Nerstrand, Minnesota.

The stone church building dating to 1862 and a wooden church building from 1894 and their surrounding pioneer cemetery are on the National Register of Historic Sites.

Norwegian settlers built both churches amid the prairie and bur oaks; Rev. Berndt Julius Muus of Norway, one of the first pastors, went on to help found St. Olaf College, and the cemetery is the resting place of members of the family of the internationally-known economist Thorstein Veblen who wrote *Theory of the Leisure Class* and coined the phrase “conspicuous consumption.” The cemetery is also the site of graves for the Kvi family, ancestors of former Minnesota state governor Al Quie.

The bell in the white church is said to be the second oldest church bell still ringing west of the Mississippi. The cost of the bell was \$568.38 and warranted not to break for one year. The pipe organ dates from 1911, built in St. Louis, shipped by rail to Nerstrand and hauled in on a sleigh to Valley Grove.

The dwindling church congregation moved away as the farm economy changed and in the early 1970s, Valley Grove Churches were decommissioned. In 2001, the 111.5 acres of farmland that surrounds Valley Grove were put up for sale. After a close call with development, they were rescued and the church and fields revitalized by the Valley Grove Preservation Society. Today the refurbished church is the site for concerts, art shows, weddings, carriage club meets, and visiting church services, and is cherished by photographers and artists. A scientific and natural area portion of the Valley Grove land is enjoyed by local college students and used in field studies by Carleton and St. Olaf Colleges.

Events and Notices

In Passing

Memorials were received to honor Allen Hope, one of the founding members of our society and Elmer Vesledahl, a VPGS supporter and member of the Valley Grove Grace Cemetery Association.

Summer Solstice Art Show

The annual art show and sale at Valley Grove will take place this year with a wine and cheese reception on Friday evening, June 17 and continue on Saturday, June 18. In keeping with our tradition of honoring the treasures of the prairie and our region, our perennial theme is “Earthly Beauty.” We welcome artists to submit pieces in all media – painting, prints, sculpture, glass, fiber, photography, etc. Pieces that celebrate the land and southern Minnesota in particular are especially welcome. Contact show organizer Linda Schneewind at (507) 645-9141.

Country Social

The annual Country Social is scheduled for Sunday, September 18. There will be live music and wagon rides with the handsome Percheron team of Bob and Cheryl Matthies, so bring the kids, bring the grandparents, bring the cameras. And, this time, bring your good luck charms: in past years, we have exhibited Amish quilts and held Jell-O contests. This year there may see the debut of our unique form of wholesome gambling: bur oak bingo! A Valley Grove version of the popular small town fundraiser will feature acorns from our stately and historic oak.

Project Wish List

We can always use more volunteers. Come out for church cleanups, holiday decorating, country social set ups – we get a lot done in a little time amid great beauty and the food isn’t bad, either. To help with work such as prairie burns, weed spraying, gopher control, re-planting our prairie oaks, please contact Ken or Peter at (507) 645-0551.

Trees are waiting for adoption. A way to honor a friend or loved one is to donate a tree to one of our seven groves. This will help keep our oak savanna healthy while displaying on our website your thoughts for that person. Check our website for more details or write to us.

And from our retail division:

Valley Grove refrigerator magnets are just the thing for small, memorable gifts, thank yous, souvenirs, etc. Think of them as miniature artwork: a color image of autumn at Valley Grove by photographer Bob Firth of Carver, Minnesota and a four-panel image of Valley Grove in four seasons by artist Shawn Olson of Minneapolis. Each image is mounted in a tiny black picture frame. Magnets are \$5 plus postage and shipping at Digs in Northfield. Call (507) 645-9141 to order yours.

Call for Artifacts

As always, we need your help to keep the past alive. Valley Grove history is perishable without memories and records. If you have any photos, furnishings, documents, or mementoes of Valley Grove that you would like to contribute to the archives, please let us know.

Please Stay in Touch!

Contributions are always very welcome and put to good use. Write us with your Valley Grove Church reminiscences, your fundraising suggestions, your recollections of people and events past at Valley Grove and your ideas for its future.