

Valley Grove Preservation Society

When Linda Rossi first asked me to write a small piece about the churches at Valley Grove,¹ It was to help her develop a sense of the place where she was having an exhibition of her work. Linda asked me what my impressions of the property were and what memories I held of it that I found meaningful. This is it.

I'm not a religious man, so I find it ironic that I'm on a board in charge of a site with two churches on it. I do have a sense of history, however, and when I think of what this place is and was, my mind flips through the pages of my own family history and the country churches where my Norwegian sodbuster ancestors worshiped and were buried.

Of the two churches at Valley Grove, I'm drawn to the sturdy little stone church with its unpretentious plaster façade and its inscribed block lines, the lines simulating finely cleaved stone, the plaster hiding and protecting the rudely stacked rough limestone within. They could have built it larger and faster of wood, as they did with the second structure, but they chose the permanence and security of thick stone walls for the first church. I don't know how or why this decision was made, but the church was completed in 1862. These were capable and intelligent young immigrants, with a newly minted pastor from Norway, living on the frontier with little or no English-language skills. I like to think that a group like that, with their new country fighting a civil war and the concomitant Sioux uprising occurring only a few counties away, they spent some time discussing building materials.

The second church was completed only thirty-two years later to accommodate the expanding congregation, the older building relegated to the women's auxiliary and other social functions. The stone church is where the board meets. Valley Grove Church was decommissioned in April 1973, the victim of urbanization and competing congregations elsewhere in the area..

Recently, on a walk in the Valley Grove prairie, I discovered the nest of a northern harrier, an uncommon, ground-nesting grassland hawk. It was the first nest of this kind I had ever found. Built of grasses in a slight depression, it contained five chicks of various sizes and one unhatched egg.² The young in this nest were all seemingly well fed and plump, but all were freshly dead, killed within hours of my discovery.

¹ Linda and I talked about collaboration for this book sometime after I wrote this short piece for her. I was, and am, greatly flattered by the prospect of combining our work.

² Harrier eggs are laid one a day and incubation begins at once, so the eggs hatch one at a time over a period of days. The dead chicks were all of various sizes, showing their differences in age. First born always have the advantage in growth and development; last born are lucky to survive the competition with their larger, stronger siblings.

They all had small wounds consistent with the pellet size of a BB gun, and no apparent exit wounds. I found the half-eaten remains of a meadow vole and a thirteen-lined ground squirrel next to the nest, both of which were very freshly killed. I think the mother was feeding these kills to her young nestlings when the killer scared her off the nest. The motive for this killing is incomprehensible to me, and possibly the intent was irrational to the perpetrator as well. The sadness I felt for the loss was even greater when I considered the dark nature of the act by some of those who walk among us.

She returned to the nest and called loudly, several times, while I was there. I don't believe grief is only a human emotion, just because we are the only creatures who can put a name to it. This is a memory of a shared grief I will always carry with me.

The second memory of Valley Grove, which I hold closely and poignantly, was not a wildlife sign, but a human sign. While leading a walk on the prairie during our annual Country Social event, I spotted several small shards of bone beneath the thatch of prairie grass near the top of a hill. Looking around in the immediate vicinity I found an additional number of them, none larger than my smallest fingernail. I recognized the sign as the washed-out and scattered remains of cremation ashes. This is the second such sign, of this type, I have found through the years. As a tracker I was, of course, interested and self-satisfied by being able to find and interpret an unusual sign. I'm not sure if anyone else on the walk found it as satisfying, but for me it was a reminder that not only was the cemetery a place where people visit their lost family member or friend, but so was our reconstructed prairie. There are no headstones, and no records are kept of where or whose ashes were scattered. Nor, I think, should there be one. The small shards are only a temporary sign, lasting on the surface of the ground for only a season or two, and are soon buried by the activities of earthworms or degraded by other organisms in the quest for a calcium source. Those involved in the spreading of the ashes carry the exact site of the deposition as a memory for only a short time. But for them, the prairie now has a deeper meaning. It becomes a place of reflection, a place forever tied to their personal history. I respectfully put the shards back where I found them. While I likely had never met the person in life, they are now part of my personal history and my sense of this place. It is a memory I will always carry with fond regard.

When I think of the 111 years the two churches housed the small close-knit congregation, with all its devotions, christenings, weddings, church suppers, and funerals, it's hard not to also imagine it as a place of spirituality, joy, hope, fellowship, and grief. The congregation is gone—well, at least those still aboveground. And yet, these are not ghost churches with a sad little cemetery falling into disrepair and abandonment. It may no longer have a congregation, but it does have advocates and a constituency. There are still weddings, funerals, meetings, dog walkers, birdwatchers, country socials, and now, an art show.

