

## Baptism in Pioneer Days.

For my ancestors, infant baptism was of paramount importance. So, what were the different practices in the homesteading days of nineteenth century and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

First of babies were born at home with or without a midwife. If a newborn was not expected to live, baptism had to be done quickly. On our homestead, the nearest pastor was almost 40 miles away. Consequently, a local parishioner was designated to perform the baptism.

There was a ritual that took place even with the baptism at home. The big Bible in which the new name was to be added along side all the ancestors, lay open on a table, stool, or chair. Just the presence of an open Bible created the atmosphere needed to sanctify and make the house holy. If lay neighbor who was to perform the baptism was wearing bib overalls, he would, if possible, down a white shirt and keep the bib of the overalls down. After reading scripture the baptismal vows were said. In the Lutheran Church, baptism is a sacrament so care was taken to do it properly. If the baby was very very small, an eyedropper was used to place the water on the baby's head. Otherwise the nicest porcelain wash bowl was cleaned and specially filled with warm water. Then the officiant would scope water from the bowl (3 times) to baptize the baby. The officiant as well as the parents and sometimes family members present would sign the baptismal certificate. Entering the babies name in the big Bible, along with signatures of baptism and parents would be the same as a birth certificate. For instance, when my grandmother born on December 1860 in Rock County Wisconsin, the county was not issuing and recording birth certificates.

Blessings said and baptism completed then, of course, it was time to eat rømmegrøt for boy babies or fruit soup for girl babies.

I understand when an emergency baptism were performed, there was no time for special baby gowns. However, the baby was wrapped in white towels or white blankets if possible.

When a pastor did home baptisms, he always wore his clerics. Many pastors including my pastor relatives on my Swedish side, used the same special baptismal porcelain bowl which had gold edges on the top for all home baptisms. They carried this with them at all times. This bowl was passed down to the next generation of family pastors. (See picture)

Now let us go to church baptisms. The parents were seldom the sponsors. It was also common to do baptism on high church days. My older sister was baptized in church on Christmas Day as part of the regular service. My twin

sister and I were baptism during Easter Sunday morning service. Our baptism was Easter, April 25, 1943 at the 11 AM service. That is the latest day Easter can fall. It happened only once in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It will not happen again until April 25, 2038.

After the service, all 8 sponsors plus other relatives came to our house for Sunday noon dinner. Can you imagine getting 2 twins that were 2 months old getting ready for baptism at church and then having a meal at the house afterwards for probably 12 adults plus kids. Good thing my mother was strong.

The front at church was very ornate. It had a huge top on it which was removed to exposed the baptismal bowl in the middle. That bowl was always specially washed before a baptism. Also, the church had no electricity, so my Dad or Uncle would also bring a quart each of warm and cold water from our house for the baptism. Incidentally, mother's with small babies were seated closest to the pot bellied stove in the middle of the church.

Babies did not get cold going to church by horse and sled on Christmas Day. Pictured is the very large blanket made of woven wool on one side and horse hide with the horse's hair still on the hide on the other side. Later as kids we would keep warm with this blanket in the back seat of our 1935 Ford Deluxe 4 door car. There was only one heater and that was on the passenger side in the front seat.

How important were baptisms. "Paramount above all", I would say as even evidenced from above. Also, every obituary of my pioneer ancestors always included the sentence "Baptized in the Christian faith in Norway". In my book, it does not get much more important than that.