

Saint Andrew's Lutheran Church Congregation

I. Context

The congregation at Saint Andrew's Lutheran Church in Weesatche, Texas has been a center of the community from its organization in 1891 to this day. Throughout the years the church has experienced growth and decline in the town. Through it all the people at St. Andrew's changed as needed with the times to best serve the community and members of the church. From its beginning as a strictly German speaking congregation preaching the Word to the immigrant families and their descendants, to adapting to the changing times and speaking only English; the congregation over the years Americanized the church that now serves its community members of all races and backgrounds.

II. Overview

In the late 1840s or early 1850s the town of Middletown was formed. By 1884 it was a growing town of 100 with a Methodist and Christian church and many businesses that included a hotel, cotton gin, steam gristmill and a photographer.¹ The name of the town was changed from Middletown to Weesatche in 1860 to clear up confusion as there was another Texas town with the name of Middletown in Texas. Weesatche was phonetically derived from the Spanish word *huisache*, the name of the common, native plant. Most of the early residents were farmers, but there were also blacksmiths, ranchers, a teacher, doctor, stonemason, postmaster, and other laborers of many different occupations making up the town. By 1886 the Methodist church

¹ Roell, Craig H. "Weesatche, TX." *The Handbook of Texas Online* | Texas State Historical Association (TSHA),

moved to the South side of Coletto Creek.² By 1892 the town population was at 200 and many more businesses had formed. St. Andrew's Lutheran Church had been organized in 1891 by Reverend Theodore Ander.³ Gottlieb Friedrichs donated 3 acres of land to have the church, cemetery and pastor's house built on.⁴ The first meeting of the church was in early May in a school building and early meetings were held there until the first church was built.⁵ On May 3rd, 1893 the new church building was dedicated with an organ that cost forty dollars.⁶ The church building itself cost one thousand dollars to build. In 1897 a Sunday school under Henry Pfenniger was started.⁷ Rev. Ander had been the pastor at St. Peter's Lutheran Church in Ander, formerly known as Hanover but renamed after Rev. Ander in 1900, but he left there and became the regular pastor at St. Andrew's when they called for him in 1902. The old charter roll contains the names of 22 members, all German males. No women or children seem to be listed. The town formed a band and choir in 1906, made entirely of members of St. Andrew's. In 1907, a Ladies Aid Society was organized.⁸ The Ladies Aid Society was a nationwide organization formed after the Civil War to decrease mortality rates in wartime by improving sanitary conditions and provided supplies and necessities to soldiers. The organization worked to make sure that even soldiers that didn't have a family or had families that were too poor to send them supplies would still have the things they needed sent to them.⁹ The congregation formed their own chapter of Luther League in 1925. Luther Leagues of the Lutheran denomination were started in 1888.

² Pruett, Jackie L., and Everett B. Cole. "Weesatche." *The History and Heritage of Goliad County*, Eakin Publications, Inc., 1983, pp. 63–64.

³ Roell, Craig H. "Weesatche, TX."

⁴ Berger, Edgar, et al. *100th Anniversary - Saint Andrew's Evangelical Lutheran Church*. Standard Printing Co., 1991.

⁵ Pruett, Cole, *The History and Heritage*

⁶ Berger, *100th Anniversary*, pp. 64

⁷ Pruett, Cole, *The History and Heritage*

⁸ Berger, *100th Anniversary*, pp. 64

⁹ McGrath, Jane. "How Ladies' Aid Societies Worked." *HowStuffWorks*, HowStuffWorks, 4 June 2009, money.howstuffworks.com/economics/volunteer/organizations/ladies-aid-society.htm.

Churches saw the importance of the youth in the life of a church and to attract the young people as well as keep them involved in church they formed these youth groups.¹⁰ In 1929 the first cornerstone of the church that is still serving the congregation was laid and an additional acre of land was donated to St. Andrew's.

The congregation has stood through the tests of time and stood fast through the many hard times that the tiny, rural community faced. The Great Depression hit America in 1929 and lasted until about 1939.¹¹ In 1929 Texans were majorly optimistic about the Great Depression, believing it wouldn't really affect them. Most of the residents were farmers, and in rural communities such as Weesatche, Texans felt that they could rely on the crops they produced to get them through the hard times. Many of the farmers and sharecroppers of rural Texas had already been living in a certain degree of poverty and didn't realize the severity of this national problem. The price of cotton drastically fell in 1931 and this would have affected some of the farmers of Weesatche.¹² USDA data shows the average price of cotton per pound in 1929-1930 at 16.80 cents with a fall over two years to 5.70 cents in 1931-1932.¹³

In 1934 Reverend F. Dodzuweit succeeded Rev. W.C. Wolfsdorff, and under him a new choir was formed. For the first time Church service and Sunday school classes were introduced in English. A Junior Luther League and a cradle roll, which involved even younger congregational youth than the Luther League itself were organized. The youth groups served as a place for the young people in the small community to gather and socialize. Rev. Dodzuweit later

¹⁰ ELCAArchives. "Luther League 90 Years Young." *YouTube*, YouTube, 25 Apr. 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=NOdUZVUJy-A.

¹¹ "Great Depression History." *History.com*, A&E Television Networks, 29 Oct. 2009, www.history.com/topics/great-depression/great-depression-history.

¹² Proctor, Ben H. "Great Depression." *The Handbook of Texas Online/ Texas State Historical Association (TSHA)*, Texas State Historical Association, 15 June 2010, www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/npg01.

¹³ United States, Department of Agriculture. "Agricultural Statistics 1937." *Agricultural Statistics 1937*, United States Printing Office, 1937, pp. 98-98.

accepted a call to Philadelphia and left in 1935.¹⁴ Then in 1941 America entered World War II and at least 14 members of the congregation served in the Armed Forces during this time. The Luther League did their part in the war effort by making donations to the Soldiers and Sailors Welfare, the War Relief and also by sending devotionals and New Testaments to servicemen overseas and later to discharged soldiers in 1945. The congregation and service members joyously came together and participated in a special thanksgiving service and barbeque which was held on June 23rd, 1946; V-J Day¹⁵.

The parish hall was built in 1948. Army barracks were purchased and brought in from nearby Cuero later to add to the parish hall which is still being used today. In 1949 a change came to the church to reflect the Americanization of the congregation; the service was held entirely in English. Up until that point the liturgy was all in German, and the Reverend at the time, George E. Perry would alternate each Sunday between English and German.¹⁶ From 1892 through the 1930s the town had kept it's numbers up at 200, however the late 1940s brought decline and it had dropped to 140 people.¹⁷ Possibly the farms were not profitable enough to support the children of the previous generations who had made their living in Weesatche and needed to move off to find their vocations. The subsequent years saw many pastors come and go to the "little white church on the hill", as it is affectionately called today.¹⁸ The Korean War, which lasted from 1950 to 1953, called family members and friends away from the people of the congregation, as did the following Vietnam War in 1959-1975. The town experienced a growth in the 1960s and 1970s. By 1970, although the population in town was at a new high of 516, the

¹⁴ Berger, 100th Anniversary

¹⁵ Ibid

¹⁶ Ibid

¹⁷ Roell, "Weesatche", TSHA

¹⁸ Berger, 100th Anniversary

church faced a financial crisis and a stewardship drive had to be organized. In 1977 the congregation had grown and there were 195 confirmed and 230 baptized members. The goodwill of the church expanded overseas by the 1980s when the congregation began to support mission work in places such as Hong Kong and Liberia.¹⁹ The town experienced its peak population number in the early 1990s at 525 before declining again²⁰. As of 1991, three members of the congregation have gone on to become ministers in the Lutheran denomination.²¹

Adjacent to the churchyard is the St. Andrew's Lutheran cemetery with over 500 buried within. The oldest recorded headstone in the cemetery is that of Regina Oehlke, who died in 1895. There are several more from the late 1800s and many more from 1900-1905.²² There are about 31 Veterans buried in the cemetery; from the Civil War to Vietnam and of nearly all branches of the military. There is a flag post outside the cemetery gates donated by the family of and dedicated to WWII veteran Harold A. Enke, who died in 2002. The cemetery is dutifully maintained by the congregation. In December of 2017, for the first time, the congregation honored the service members in their cemetery through the organization "Wreaths Across America". In June of 2018 the council members voted for the church to use its memorial funds to pay for markers with the names of the people in the 29 previously unmarked graves in the cemetery; church records have their identities but there have been no markers in the cemetery itself. It is important to the congregation that these people are remembered and not one of their names lost to time.

¹⁹ Berger, 100th Anniversary

²⁰ Roell, "Weesatche", TSHA

²¹ Berger, 100th Anniversary

²² "St. Andrew's Lutheran Church Cemetery Memorials." *Find A Grave*, 8 Aug. 2008, www.findagrave.com/cemetery/2271615/memorial-search?page=26#sr-48337660.

Aside from changing times and wars, St. Andrew's has weathered several storms mother nature has thrown its way as well; such as the 1942 Hurricane which damaged the Goliad County Courthouse. Major storms in more recent past to cross the Weesatche area include Hurricane Carla on September 11th, 1961, Hurricane Beulah in September of 1967, Hurricane Celia in August of 1970, to the more recent Hurricane Harvey in August of 2017.²³ All of these storms were either category 3 or 4 and each time the church itself sustained minimal, or at least not devastating damage. The congregation members pitched in to make sure any damage and mess made by the storms were assessed and promptly taken care of.

St. Andrew's Church is an example of the German vernacular style architect that is seen commonly in different parts of Texas.²⁴ Some of the prominent architectural features of the church include the beautiful steeple which holds two bells that have a dedication written on them in German to Pastor W.G. Wolfsdorff in 1929. Inside the church there are twelve streaky stained-glass windows installed, presumably in 1963, and dedicated by congregation members to various loved ones and one dedicated to "The Glory of God".²⁵ Above the altar is a round stained glass window made up of triangles in alternating green and purple.

The church was affiliated with the Lutheran Church of America (LCA) until 1987 when the LCA changed to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA).²⁶ St. Andrew's was then affiliated with the ELCA until 2010 when the congregation made the decision to join the Lutheran Congregations in Mission for Christ (LCMC). The congregation of St. Andrew's

²³ Roth, David. "Texas Hurricane History ." Weather.gov, 6 Jan. 2010.

²⁴ Jordan, Terry G. "German Vernacular Architecture." *The Handbook of Texas Online*| Texas State Historical Association (TSHA), Texas State Historical Association, 15 June 2010, tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/cbg01.

²⁵ Berger, 100th Anniversary

²⁶ Ibid

remains a center of goodwill and strength in the small community of Weesatche. It is the only church remaining in the town which has a population now of about one hundred and forty-eight people.²⁷ The town has no gas station or grocery stores. Services are still held at St. Andrew's every Sunday and the church is defying all odds and instead of shrinking it is not only maintaining its membership but it is also growing. Every September since 2014 the community remembers the events of September 11th, 2001 and honors and celebrates veterans and service members with "Weesatche 4 Warriors" day, an event largely started and supported by St. Andrew's members. On this day, current and former service members and their families along with people from the town and surrounding towns get together for a day of fun, fellowship and honor in the country. In 2018 alone, the event raised over 20,000 dollars to donate to veterans and their supporting organizations. Every Christmas the congregation comes together and selects families in need in the community and delivers a full turkey dinner with food and extra gifts. The congregation of St. Andrew's continues to bless and teach their members for the future of their community, they also take great pride in their history and heritage, working hard to preserve their historic church and take care of its cemetery.

III. Significance

Caring for its congregation past and present is very important to the members of St. Andrew's Church. Growing to meet and exceed the needs of its current congregation and to honor and memorialize the congregation of yesteryear, is a top priority. The congregation still maintains an youth program, Bible studies, men's group, women's group, and senior citizen's group and ministry. Meeting the needs of the community both local and extended, honoring their

²⁷ "ZIP Code 77993." *ZIP Code 19125 Stats and Demographics for the 77993 ZIP Code*, Unitedstateszipcodes.org, 2018, www.unitedstateszipcodes.org/77993/.

American heroes and teaching the gospel through the lens of the Lutheran beliefs are ideals that the congregation of St. Andrew's has stood for since its humble beginnings until now and beyond.

IV. Documentation

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Figure 1: Early 1900s, Weesatche, TX band consisting of members of St. Andrew's
Lutheran Church²⁸

²⁸ Weesatche band photograph, St. Andrew's Lutheran Church private collection.



Figure 2: 1952 about half of the Bible study group²⁹

²⁹ Group photograph, 1952, Saint Andrew's Lutheran Church private collection.



Figure 3: Bell with dedication to Pastor Wolfsdorff written in German, installed in 1929.

It also says in German, “Come for it, every ring is ready.”³⁰

³⁰ Kelley, Vaughn. 2017, Bell photograph, personal collection



Figure 4: Front of St. Andrew's Lutheran Church³¹

³¹ Karnei, Kevin. 6 October, 2018. St. Andrew's Lutheran Church, personal collection.



Figure 5: St. Andrew's Lutheran Church Cemetery³²

³² Karnei, Kevin. 6 October, 2018. St. Andrew's Lutheran Church Cemetery, person collection.

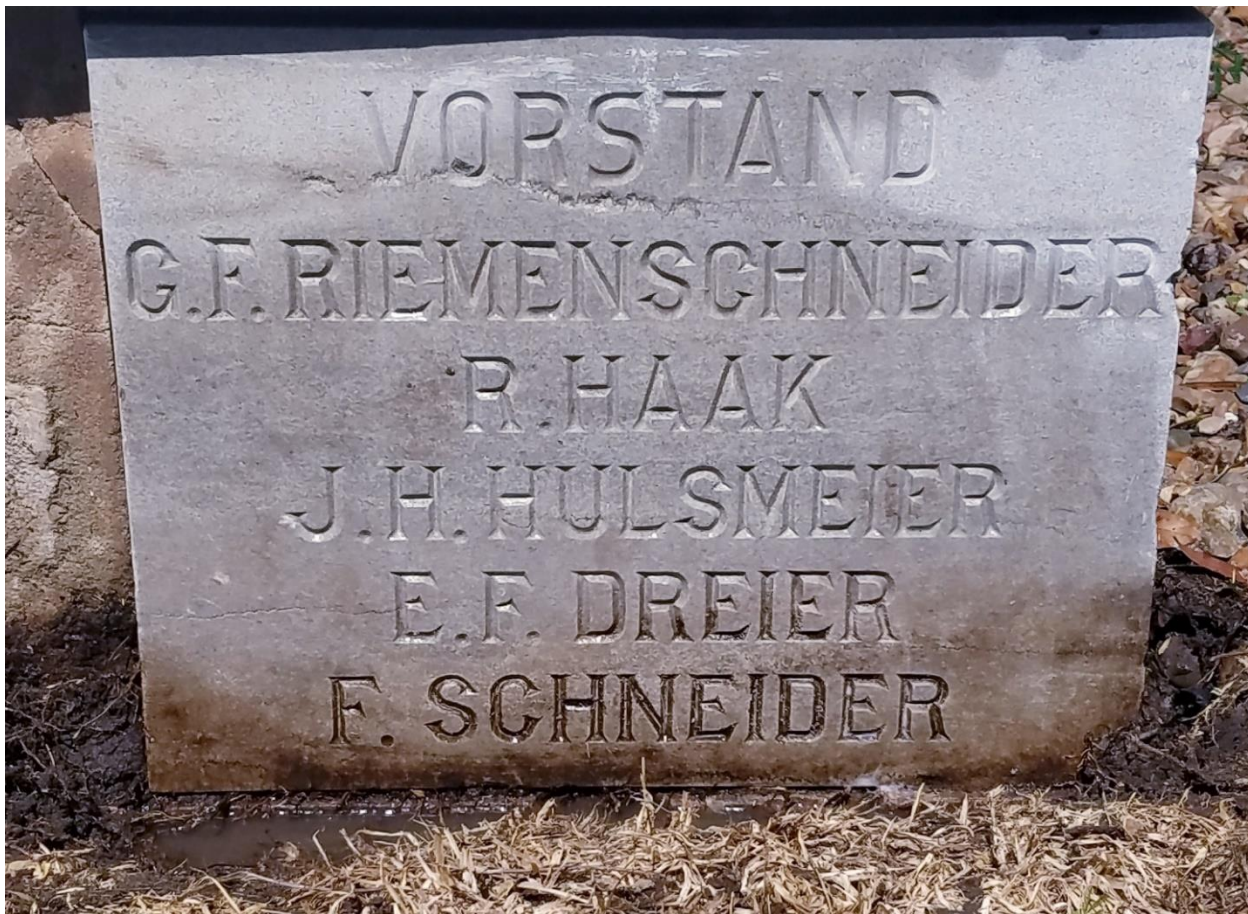


Figure 6: One side of the cornerstone. “Vorstand” is a German word meaning “board”.

These were the board members of the day, with G.F. Riemnschneider, who was also a member in the 1891 “old charter log”, being the president.³³

³³ Karnei, Kevin. 10 October, 2018. Cornerstone, personal collection.



Figure 7: Other side of the cornerstone.³⁴

³⁴ Karnei, Kevin. 10 October, 2018. Cornerstone, personal collection.