Land and Sunday School Needs Influence Birth of Prairie Society

As its name indicates, the Prairie Unitarian Universalist Society of Madison is associated with land.

A 16-acre site next to the University of Wisconsin Arboretum Prairie at the south end of Gammon Road at the intersection of Raymond Road south-west of Madison in the town of Verona has been set aside for the construction of a Unitarian meeting house.

The land is jointly owned by members of Prairie Society and Madison's First Unitarian Society. The group has invested $14,944 in the land, with the stipulation "not to sell any part of this land to any purchaser other than a liberal-religious group for use as a church building site."

The bylaws of the Prairie Society, written in 1968, define the group as "a religious organization which shall make integrity of life its first aim and leave thought free."

The members and friends of Prairie Society associate together "to help each other practice liberal religion, to grow in understanding of ourselves and of our brothers, and to serve our fellowmen throughout the world."

Since 1964, the First Unitarian Society concerned itself with providing the Madison community a second Unitarian group. In 1966, it purchased the prairie site.

With 600 active members and more than 600 children enrolled in its Sunday School program, "We had to turn away an average of a family a week in 1967," said Roland Parrish, then president of the First Society.

Charles Davidson headed a First Society steering committee to establish a "branch" Sunday School and adult service in southwest Madison.

"The branch," as the emerging Prairie Society was called then, met for two years at the Holy Name Seminary. In the 1967-68 period, approximately 30 adults attended Sunday morning sessions, and 12 teachers taught 75 children.

In February, 1968, 17 "branch members" of the First Society voted unanimously to move as rapidly as possible to establish a new, independent Unitarian society.

On the basis of bylaws adopted in April, 1968, 38 persons became members of the Prairie Unitarian Universalist Society on June 1, 1968 and elected Bob Koehl the first president.

Initially, the Prairie Society was financially dependent on the First Society. In the fall of 1968, a joint canvass of members was conducted; however, contributions from Prairie Society members were earmarked for their own operations. The First Society also underwrote the Prairie Society search for a minister, which began in 1968.

During the 1968-69 period, membership rose to 65, while Sunday School attendance dropped to approximately 55 children, with 12 teachers.

(Continued on page 2)
During the spring of 1969, the Prairie Society participated in a minister-on-loan program of the Unitarian Universalist Association. A resolve and challenging young man by the name of R. Lanier Clance, from The Fellowship For Existential And Phenomenological Studies in North Olmsted, Ohio, visited Prairie Society for six weeks.

Writing to Clance, Bob Koehl described Prairie Society as "three groupings of individuals and families, who do not form factions, and indeed overlap considerably."

"One element might be termed the First Society people. For these people, many of whom are officers of the First Society, it is a matter of course that we should become a 'broad church,' I call a minister and build on the far west site as soon as we can. They are largely over 40, self-assured professionals, with important positions on the executive board."

"The second group is just as vigorous, dates back just as far in the founding of the group, but it is generally younger, with a little bit less voice. These are the church school parents and teachers."

"The third group is the most heterogeneous, most inclined to protest, but very hard working and committed. It tends to be persons who do not originate from the First Society. It is younger than the first group, but not all under 40. It is much less interested in the Church School, and probably, in a church building. Two themes reappear in its spokesmen: social action and personal warmth. For this group a minister needs to be a personal leader, a facilitator, or a group therapist. They reject a preacher, a figure-head, or a manager," Koehl said.

After five weeks with the group, Clance wrote in an open letter to individuals in Prairie Society, dated April 23, 1969:

"The Prairie Society is a unique group, as any group which includes persons seeking to work out their own faith. You still have a degree of freedom and a desire to be an effective group relating to individual and community needs.

"If you succeed in creating a group which is as effective and directed as the individuals within this group, then the community of Madison and Prairie certainly will be fortunate."

"I still say you need a vision for the present and future. A vision which can be stated, as simply as the following:

A REFUGE FOR REBELS
A HAVEN FOR HERETICS
A SHELTER FOR SKEPTICS
A FELLOWSHIP OF INDIVIDUALS.

"People are searching, searching for a fellowship of free persons. Searching for a society which does not de-humanize us into giving units, tax units, social units, etc.

"You all have caught a glimpse of this search," Clance wrote. "You know well what you don't want, simply to create just another institution. Now if you can move to create what you do want, the world, the community of Madison, and you will be well rewarded."
Boris Frank was elected president of Prairie Society for the 1969–70 period. The group now met at Madison’s YWCA, across from the state capitol.

At a series of small group meetings, Prairie Society members discussed the prospect of hiring a minister. There seemed to be a consensus that the new minister be a "non-striker, non-manipulator, leader or coordinator."

At one small group meeting, it was argued "that the right man might be able to provide more continuity to the overall program and some stability to the group. Nearly everyone agreed that if a man could be found who was willing to adapt to the group and establish his role within our framework and objectives, rather than one with pre-conceived ideas of what this group would be or become, the Prairie Society likely would benefit in a number of ways."

The Prairie Society search for a minister ended when Dave Meyer, attending the Headville Theological School of Lombard College, accepted the group's offer. He began his official duties with the group in September, 1970.

Dave and Pat Meyer, who have been married seven years, this December, came to Madison after being active in the Unitarian Universalist Society of Black Hawk County, Iowa. In November of 1968 the Iowa Unitarians published descriptions of their members; the following short paragraph described Dave and Pat Meyer:

"MEYER, Mrs. Patricia A. Graduate student in English. Interests are cooking, creative writing, reading. Born in Fort Dodge, Iowa, has lived in Evanston, Ill., where she became UU in 1966. ACLU, AAUW. Causes: peace, race relations, women's rights."

Joan Burns was elected president of Prairie Society for the 1970–71 period. Membership was now leveling off, with approximately 65 active members and 50 children in Sunday School. Marvin Voepel was elected president for the 1971–72 period.

The Prairie Unitarian Universalist Society of Madison is now a very-viable organization. Its first three years of formal existence attest to the ability of a group of Madison-area religious liberals to provide:

- A REFUGE FOR REBELS
- A HAVEN FOR HERETICS
- A SHELTER FOR SKEPTICS
- A FELLOWSHIP OF INDIVIDUALS

The history of the Prairie group begins almost a decade ago. In his report to the First Society Parish Meeting of November, 1964, Max Gaebler said:

"Speaking for myself, I have long felt that no church should wish to grow simply for the sake of growth, that beyond a certain point larger numbers become destructive of the very informality and openness of relationships which are the heart of the church, as a religious community, that the optimum size should be a group large enough to sustain the varied program and staff members to feel genuinely at home within its fellowship. We have, it seems to me, already reached this point. The further extension of religious liberalism in the Madison area now requires a second Society--and perhaps before too many years a third and a fourth.

"MEYER, Mr. David C. College teacher. Interests include poetry, playwriting, theater, fishing, reading, theology. Born in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, has lived in Evanston, Illinois and Chicago, Ill. UU since Jan., 1966. Important causes are race relations, peace, ACLU, Summerhillian education, economic reform.
AN INTERVIEW WITH BOB SIEGFRIED

When man propelled himself from Earth and landed on the moon, some observers equated that moment in history with the moment fish climbed out of the waters onto land.

"That's ridiculous," said Bob Siegfried.

A professor of the history of science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Siegfried considers it "unlikely that the current space program will have any evolutionary significance, because there is an air of artificiality about it...there is very little flexibility to the artificial environment the spacemen take with them, and it is doubtful if our current space systems could survive a disaster.

"If ever man does become an interbreeding population adapted to outerspace, they won't be of the human species," he said.

"I would favor the curtailment of the current space program. That's the hurry? Hurry means money...money that could be spent learning how to live on this planet."

Bob focuses his academic energies on the history of science, particularly chemistry.

A Prairie Society member since its beginning in the mid '60's, Bob is writing a paper this summer about the 18th century French chemist Lavoisier. The paper describes the intellectual foundation on which Lavoisier developed his views about the nature of heat and air.

"Lavoisier is sometimes credited with being the father of the chemical revolution," Siegfried explained. "But, I must admit, it is a very ascetic paper. I can count on my fingers the number of people who will be truly interested in the publication of this paper."

Siegfried earned his Ph.D. in chemistry and the history of science from the University of Wisconsin in 1952. He explained the function of the historian of science:

"Intellectual history is unlike the physical sciences; the parts alone do not nearly determine the conclusions; the rationale behind the parts has to be invented. It is the function of the historian of science to research and identify the rationale."

"A tall 50-year-old man with friendly eyes magnified by thick glasses, Bob is hesitant to describe himself. Asked to do so for the readers of this interview, Bob said "That is an unfair and uncomfortable question."

"I am not sufficiently a public figure to know how to quickly answer such a question. Although I do admit that it would be a good piece of psychological insight for a person's self description to personal observations. Nevertheless, I think you can better describe me than I can," he said.

Bob was once described as "that tall fellow over there with the beautiful wife." Rachael and Bob met in the fall of 1945 in Stillwater, Oklahoma, and married May 26, 1946. They have four children; Margaret, 23; Jean, 22; John, 17; and David, 9.

Bob was born to Ernest and Mary Siegfried January 16, 1921, in Columbus, Ohio. Soon the family moved to Marietta, a small Ohio community of about 20,000. Ernest Siegfried taught English in a Marietta high school. Bob graduated in 1942 from Marietta College.