

## Lenora Methodist Church, Lenora (Fillmore County)



WITH THE SIGNING of the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux and the Treaty of Mendota in 1851, millions of acres in southern Minnesota were opened to white settlement. A steady stream of newcomers established communities in what would become Minnesota's southeastern corner.

One of these was Lenora, begun with a few scattered farm families brought together by religion. By 1854, Methodist circuit rider Reverend Benjamin Crist had added a stop in Lenora to his route between Chatfield and Brownsville, delivering sermons in rustic cabins. In late 1855, Reverend John Dyer arrived in Lenora and soon formed a congregation that gathered for weekly Sunday services in the schoolhouse. Envisioning a town with a large Methodist church at the center, Dyer donated 40 acres of his land claim to the cause. The land was divided into town lots and sold to fund the building of the church. Construction began in late 1856 on this and several other structures, including a post office, general store, sawmill, hotel, and opera house.

Just as prosperity seemed to be in Lenora's future, the Panic of 1857 brought everything to a crashing halt. Many families returned east. Dyer moved to Colorado, abandoning his dream of a town built upon Methodist principles. Church construction ceased, leaving only partially finished walls.

When prosperity returned after the Civil War, Reverend Moses Mapes, a Methodist circuit rider, and Lenora resident James Graham led the effort



*Lenora Methodist Church, about 1973. (MNHS COLLECTIONS)*

to finish constructing the church—this time on a smaller scale. They hired a skilled mason to salvage stone from the unfinished church and start anew on a smaller building. The new church opened in 1866; Reverend John Lamberson was its first official pastor. The congregation continued for the next several decades, but a steady decline in membership began when the 1879 railroad line was laid five miles southwest in Canton. The church closed its doors in the 1920s.

The current structure remains in its original location. The one-room rectangular building has a low-pitched gable roof, six windows, interior tongue-and-groove bead-board walls, and wooden floors and pews. Only the roof, now asphalt shingles instead of wood, and small front entry have been replaced. A 44-star US flag adorns the wall behind

the altar, and a pump organ with reed pipes is still operable. Electricity is nonexistent. A hurricane oil lamp sits in each window bay, and the sconces and chandeliers also have oil lamps. A wood stove provides heat.

When the church was added to the National Register of Historic Places in 1982, volunteers formed the Lenora Pioneer Church Society to preserve and care for the building. Through their efforts, visitors can enjoy the frontier church several times a year. In addition to Thanksgiving and Christmas services, the building provides a venue for concerts and weddings, and it is a popular stop on local tours.

—Amy Jo Hahn

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