

Missionary to El Paso – Zion's First Pastor

Rev. Herman Andrew Huebotter

Autobiographical Notes by Herman Andrew Huebotter (1872–1966)

Being urged repeatedly by some to write of my experiences in my student days and also in my early ministry, I finally yielded. So here is my story.

I was born October 13, 1872 in the Bluff settlement about two miles southwest of LaGrange, Fayette County, Texas. My father's name was Frederick Huebotter. He immigrated with his parents in the fall of 1851 from Loburg, Saxony, Germany as a 17 year old youth. Mother's name was Anna, nee Windmeyer. She was 13 years old when her family landed in Galveston, Texas from Bielefeld, West Prussia, Germany in 1856. Both families landed in Galveston. Both families moved from Galveston Bay and the Buffalo Bayou to Houston, Texas, then called Harrisburg.

The Huebotter family lived here almost a year. Then Grandfather Huebotter established a store several miles west of Houston from which he supplied teamsters with groceries and their draft oxen with fodder, especially corn. The great amount of rainfall here made the ground too soft for Grandfather Huebotter, so he sold out and moved farther west. He had a few friends at LaGrange. Here he stayed for a few months, then went on the old Spanish Trail as far west as the German colony, New Braunfels. Here near Belmont, Texas he bought a 500 acre farm and settled down for good. It was some of the poorest soil in Texas—rocky, but wooded. Grandfather wanted firm ground under his feet.

One is inclined to ask how come that the early settlers always chose hilly, rocky and especially wooded areas in which to settle. At the same time the Wends settled in Serbin, Texas and a number of German families settled in the Bluff area, because of the springs with good water which were in the hilly country. Also the early settlers needed wood for cooking and heating as well as for logs with which to build cabins and from which to split rails for fencing.

The Windmeyer family moved at once to LaGrange, Texas. Grandfather Windmeyer bought a 100 acre farm about 3½ miles southwest of town. Here a number of German families had settled already by this time.

Our father often told us boys that both families, and others too, left Germany because war was threatening between France and Germany. After being in this country a few years the Civil War broke out. Texas belonged to the South, so father was drafted, but due to the loss of two toes he was not sent to the firing line but had to haul war material for the army. In 1863 father moved to Matamoros, Mexico where he made barrels used for shipping sugar from the refineries. Later he moved to Galveston again. There an epidemic of yellow fever broke out and they lost two little boys. Again they moved inland where he obtained work with the Southern Pacific Railroad as a carpenter building depots etc. When this work was ended father bought a 100 acre farm southwest of LaGrange and here settled down. Now it was 1871 and at this place it was that I was born on October 13, 1872.

In the year 1873 a number of families from the Wendish settlement of Serbin, Lee County, Texas organized Zion Lutheran congregation and built a small chapel, which later was called Zion Hill—about 1½ miles west of the post office, called Swiss Alps, Tex. This was the church of my parents' choice. But to attend services here a nine mile trip one way in a horse-drawn wagon was too far, so father bought 100 acres of new land near Swiss Alps where he

moved his family and established another farm. This place was only 2 miles from church. Here we lived and labored for a number of years.

The greatest drawback for small churches in those days were the frequent and long vacancies—sometimes for years. In the year 1884 the congregation got a pastor in the person of M. Leimer. He remained only a little over 4 years and then moved to Nebraska. The next pastor remained only 11 months. In 1889 the congregation got a pastor by the name of R. Seils. He stayed several years.

It was in the early part of 1891 that a friend of mine and I decided to go to the seminary in Springfield, Illinois to prepare for Lutheran ministry. Both pastors, Leimer and Seils, were graduates of that school. For this reason we too wanted to go there. In the early morning hours of the Saturday before the first Wednesday in September we boarded the train in LaGrange for Springfield, Ill. After two days and two nights of travel in a day coach we arrived in Springfield. Our home pastor had told us that, upon our arrival at the station, we were to walk back 2 blocks along the track, from which point we would be able to see the seminary. This we did, but after a walk of 2 blocks we could see no school. Seeing some workers we inquired of them where to find the seminary. They told us we had walked in the wrong direction. I remember well that, as we were walking from the tracks toward the seminary that the sun was rising. And now the long grind began.

My first summer vacation I spent in Nebraska with my former pastor, for to go home was too expensive. It would have cost over \$30.00. The second summer vacation we went home in spite of the high cost. On our way back to school in the Fall via New Orleans we observed that the train was overcrowded. This was due to the Columbian Exposition which was then in progress in Chicago. My third summer vacation I spent in Wisconsin. I was privileged to stay with a wonderful family near Watertown, Wis. One Saturday morning my host asked me whether I would like to go with him to Watertown. Of course this would please me very much. Upon arriving in town my host introduced me to some of his friends. Later, when alone with one of them he said, “So you are a student! And what are you studying for?” I told him I was studying to become a Lutheran pastor. “Oh,” he replied, “I would rather be a herder of swine than be a Lutheran pastor.” Well, I was very much surprised. On the way home I told my host about the remark of his friend. He replied, “Be not worried. That man had been living an immoral life (drunkard) and as he would not repent and amend his ways the congregation had excommunicated him and, since the pastor had to do all the talking, he had “it in” for pastors. Well, it helped me some, but I will never forget that remark. At the end of the vacation I returned to the seminary at Springfield.

Now homesickness bothered both of us. We wanted to go home. We asked the professor for a special week off to be added to our Christmas vacation which normally lasted two weeks, and he allowed it to us. So we went home for Christmas. The following summer vacation I was permitted to spend in Danville, Ill. with a friend of long standing. During this summer I was permitted to preach. This I did both in Danville and Terre Haute, Ind. Upon my return to the seminary in the Fall the professor needed two students to fill so many calls for vicars. In those days the vicarage year was optional. One of these calls came from Wisconsin. This one I took. Soon I was on my way to Westfield, Wis. The pastor had five small churches to serve. I taught school in three of them and prepared a small class for confirmation. I liked the people, also the country, except that the winters were too long. There they fed the stock seven months of the year whereas in Texas we did not feed our cattle, only the milk cows and the horses would get some feed in the winter months. Upon graduating from the seminary I hoped to be sent back to Texas.

Entering the seminary for my last year of study, my thoughts centered on the question, "To which section of the country will I be called?" The year before four young graduates from Texas had gotten calls back to Texas. Would a small parish be vacant at the end of this year? Yes, a month before the meeting of the board of allocation a small church became vacant in one of Texas' most beautiful cities and I was the only Texas boy graduating that summer. You can easily guess my aspiration. When the professor came back from the meeting of the board of allocation he carried with him the list of candidates and the places to which they were called. This list he would give to a student who in turn would inform the candidates of the results.

When this student entered my room he said with a loud voice that my call was to El Paso, Texas. I must have been signally disappointed, for one of my fellow students tried to console me by saying, "You need not accept that call; just wait a few weeks and you will get another which perhaps you will like better." But the student did not read my mind. My mind was like that of the railroad engineer who, one night, on a straight stretch of track had a head-on collision with another train, whose engineer had stopped his train and left his engine with its head light burning. When our engineer saw the light of the stopped train it was too late to do anything but to jump for his life, which he did, thus sustaining an injury. When the R.R. Co. wouldn't pay him any compensation he sued the Co. for damages. In the cross examination the judge asked him whether he had seen the light of the train. He replied that he did. "Why then didn't you stop?" the judge asked. The engineer became angry and replied, "I had the right of way to Sierra Blanca and to Sierra Blanca I was going." The judge then said, "Gentlemen, that sounds like committing suicide." and dismissed the case. What I wish to say is this: I had the call El Paso and to El Paso I would go. Oh, yes, I had heard of El Paso before though it was never mentioned in our Annual. A cousin of mine and my oldest brother before belonged to the R.R. bridge gang. Their duty at one time took them for two weeks to El Paso. Upon their return home they told us some hair raising stories of El Paso. It was a typical border town, a paradise for trigger happy cowboys.

There I should go and begin Lutheran church work. The question arose in my mind: Why did Synod want a congregation started here?

A Christian woman from Rev. Theo. Kohn's church in Chicago had come here in search of relief from the dreadful disease of Tuberculosis. When she came to El Paso with the three older of her four children she found that her church was not represented in the city. At this time she particularly felt her great need for the church and its ministry. In her trouble she wrote to her pastor back home—a fine gesture for a Christian at a time like that! Her pastor informed the president of the Southern District of the Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod. Texas at that time did not have its own district though it had its own board. This board delegated Rev. M. Waechter, pastor at Abilene, Texas to go to El Paso to investigate the possibility of opening a mission church. His report was: Two days canvass—one service—15 hearers (the four Bergmans included) and about 150 German people in El Paso. On the basis of this report the Texas mission board called me to go there and begin church work.

Most candidates would enter upon their field of work in the first days of August. Not I. The reason was this: I wanted to be ordained before I would go to El Paso. This would not be done before the middle of August. Also I had no means to go to El Paso. My father had seen my through school and would not pay my way to El Paso, a trip by rail of 740 miles. He said that I now belonged under the mission board. On the last Sunday in August the congregation of one of the mission board members held its mission rally. A part of its collection was sent to me for my trip. On the first Monday in September 1897 I boarded the train in Shulenburg for El Paso.

I arrived in El Paso the next day at 2pm. While observing the people at the depot, a young man approached me with the questions, "Are you the new Lutheran priest?" Before I had my answer ready he took my grip and asked me to follow him. At the edge of the platform he placed my grip into a coffee & tea delivery wagon and asked me to be seated next to him and off we went to 404 S. Campbell St. Here Mrs. Bergman lived. She had prepared a fine meal, after which she showed me a furnished room in her home which I could rent. The room suited me. When I asked how much the rent would be, she told me that ordinarily she could get \$10.00 per month for it, but she would let me have it for seven. It was a deal. Across the street lived a young family where I could get my meals for \$1.00 a day. All was well for me. Now it was 4pm and I was advised to rest. Next I would have to find a place where we could worship.

The next morning I went to the Methodist Episcopal Church at Myrtle and Ohio Sts. and asked the pastor, who lived next door, for permission to use his church for our services. He directed me to a doctor, a trustee of that church, who gladly gave me permission to use the church on Sunday afternoons. Now came the task of looking up and giving every prospect a special invitation to attend our services. Oh, the lack of interest which was present! Well, now it was Friday morning. I still had the name of one more prospect. I thought to myself, "I'll call on him and then go to my room and work on my sermon for Sunday as best I can." This prospect's name was Mr. Krahmer. His address was South El Paso St. Finding his place of business (a barber-shop) I entered the place. Just then the first chair became vacant and the barber nodded to indicate that I was next; but I told him that I didn't want a haircut or shave, but was looking for a man by the name of Krahmer. When Mr. Krahmer, who was tending the rear chair heard this he came forward and asked me what I wanted of him. I asked him whether he spoke German. When he replied, "Yes," I told him in German who I was and what my purpose was in looking him up. He then took my right hand in both of his and exclaimed, "Fifteen years I have waited for this moment and now it is here!" Yes, he would join us in establishing a Lutheran church in El Paso. Oh, what a reception! It seemed we trusted each other at once. I say now that in the ten years I was in El Paso, Mr. Krahmer missed only one church service and that was on the Sunday after Christmas when he had to bury his little two-year old daughter who had died of diphtheria the night before and, according to a city ordinance, had to be buried the same night. On his way home from the cemetery Mr. Krahmer stopped at our place about 7am and told us the sad news and asked me to excuse him for not coming to the service that day. Humanly speaking, but for Mr. and Mrs. Krahmer there would have been no Zion Lutheran Church in El Paso. She was a true helpmate to her husband.

There are also others whom I will not forget. There was Mrs. Bergman, who one day, after I had been in El Paso for about a year, came to me and said, "My health is not improving but rather wasting away, so I am going home to my mother and then to my Savior." About three months after she had left for Chicago, word came that she had passed on. Nothing more was heard of the Bergmans. In 1907 when I had moved to Illinois I had the opportunity to attend the Illinois District convention in Chicago. It happened that my host knew of the Bergmans and their relatives and offered to take me there. By this time the mother, Mr. Bergman, and the two little girls also had passed on from the same disease—Tuberculosis. I heard nothing more of the Bergman family until the middle forties, when a Mrs. O. Schmidt, whose son was my pastor, told me that as a young girl she recalls that also the sister of Mrs. Bergman, her small daughter and son had passed on—all victims of Tuberculosis. All this happened after the time that the Bergmans helped establish the Lutheran church in El Paso. Yes, the Lord's ways are past finding out.

But let us not forget other persons so important for our cause. There was also George Deterding, originally from Indiana, then from St. Louis. He also came to El Paso for his health. Here he met a friend from Venedy, Ill., who later settled in Cisco, Tex. It was at this friend's home that Mr. Deterding passed on. By all means let us not overlook Mrs. Dora Ogden. One day in 1899 as I was teaching school in a store building at 115 N. Staunton Str. a sharp knock came on the door. Investigating I saw a well-dressed man who handed me an envelope and said that a Mrs. Dora Ogden had sent it. Upon opening it I found a deed to a lot. After school I hurried to the Ogden home to thank her for her generous gift. Her husband, a member of the Episcopal church, was there too. Both assured me that if the lot was not well located for a Lutheran chapel, it should be sold and a more favorable one bought. Within two weeks this lot was sold and another one on East Antonio St. bought in its place. By the middle of August 1900 we dedicated our new chapel. It also served as a school building. Later on Mrs. Ogden also donated the church bell which is in use to this day.

Two men deserving mention at this point are Oscar Gebler and Otto Hintze. Oscar Gebler is still a faithful member of Zion congregation, and Otto Hintze, a later son of the congregation is a missionary in New Guinea. The two Pieper brothers might also be mentioned, though they later left the congregation.

A few tragedies also come to mind. One concerns a young family which had come from Hamburg, Germany. The oldest child, a boy, had been gained for my school. One day the news reached our school that his father had killed his wife, two daughters, and himself. The boy was taken back to Germany by close relatives.

Another tragedy concerns a famous professor's son. One day, late in the afternoon, a young man knocked at our door. Who should it be but a son of Dr. Pieper of the St. Louis seminary. He explained that he had been sent to Montana there to serve his year of vicarage, but without saying a word to anyone he had left his post. He had gone to old Mexico and was now on his way home to St. Louis for his mother's birthday. In Juarez, Mexico he came upon one of my school boys who told him of my whereabouts, so he had come to see me. When my wife and I invited him to stay for the night he protested, saying that he would leave yet that night. When I told him that there would be no passenger train out that night, he explained that there would be a cattle train leaving the yards at 10pm. As an employee on that train he would go to Kansas City and from there he would find another way to St. Louis. He left, but within a week he was back again saying that the train hadn't gone to Kansas City, but to Cheyenne, Wyo. He thought that maybe the next train would go through Kansas City. He left our house at 9 o'clock. Nothing more was ever seen or heard of him. A similar thing happened to a Mr. Depping from Edwardsville, Ill.

Once we had a lot, we needed funds to build a chapel. Since we were serving people from many different states, we were encouraged to seek donations from congregations throughout Synod. When in August, 1900 we dedicated our little chapel we had only a \$100 debt. Oh, how thankful we were to worship in our own building on Sunday mornings! Grateful too, to have a better place in which to teach school.

In the Fall of 1906 it became apparent that my work in El Paso was done. Also our family doctor urged a change of climate for my wife. But where should we go? The doctor suggested western Tennessee or southern Illinois. On Easter Sunday 1907 I preached my farewell sermon. My call was to Olmsted, Ill. Here we were to live til 1933, at which time I retired from the active ministry. As I write this in 1961 there is but one wish that I have. It is given so beautifully in the first verse of the German song: I Would Like To Go Home.

Ich möchte heim; mich zieht's zum Vaterhause,
Dem Vaterherzen zu.
Fort aus dem Welt verworrenem Getümmel
Hin zur süßen, stolzen Ruh.
Mit tausend Wünschen bin ich ausgegangen
Heim kehr ich mit bescheidenen Verlangen,
Noch hegt mein Herz nur einen Hoffnungskeim;
Ich möchte heim, ich möchte heim.

I am well aware of the Lord's word in Psalm 46:10: "Be still and know that I am God."
Therefore

1. Still, nur Still, wie Gott will
Treibt es dich mächtig zu fragen
Kann so viel Leid ich ertragen
Still, nur still, wie Gott will.
2. Still, nur still, wie Gott will.
Ob manche Blume verblühet
Sehnsucht im Herzen erglühet
Still, nur still, wie Gott will.
3. Still, nur still, wie Gott will
Gott ist die ewige Liebe,
Thöricht, wenn ich mich betrüge.
Still, nur still, wie Gott will.

Truly, as God is the eternal Love, it certainly would be foolish for me to worry.

H. Huebotter

This document was provided to Zion Lutheran Church by Rev. Nathaniel Jensen on September 4, 2023 whose email note included this explanation about its origin: "...the reason I'm writing is to share a document I found in my grandmother's basement years ago. I've been meaning to do something with it for years but other things always came up. It's a first-hand account of the founding of Zion from Pastor Huebotter. Do you already have this in your records? Huebotter later became pastor in Olmstead, IL and eventually retired there when one of my great grandfathers, Arno Meyer, was serving the congregation. From what I can, tell my great-grandfather edited the document, but I'm not sure how widely it was distributed, if at all. I'm sending it to you in a word document." The heading; "Missionary to El Paso – Zion's First Pastor Rev. Herman Andrew Huebotter" was added by Rev. Stephen Heimer in preparation for publication on Zion's website.