

It Was A 'Perfect' Day

First Lady Pays A Visit To Sims

If there was ever a perfect fall day in North Dakota, last Thursday was it—blue sky with an occasional fluffy white cloud and the sun shining bright, temperatures in the mid 70s, and nothing more than an occasional light breeze to rustle leaves on the giant cottonwood tree in the Sims Church yard. It was a great day to be outside, an even better day to welcome the country's First Lady to this little prairie church, nestled beside the creek in the valley that was once the bustling town of Sims.

Sims, for the better part of the day, came alive again with people and traffic. The Sunday before had been the church's Fall Festival, which, along with the Sims' well-known Christmas program, is one of the biggest days of the year for the church and its congregants. If the Harvest Festival and Christmas program are "big" days for the church, then Thursday was a "huge" day for this little country church, and will definitely go down as a highlight of the church's 124 years. The days leading up to the first lady's visit were also a flurry of activity as the church and parsonage were gone over with a fine-tooth comb by members of the parish. It wasn't just members of the parish and Sims church in particular, who were busy,

members of the first lady's entourage were busy going over the site as well, days before the event. The route to the church had to be planned, as well as items like where the church members would park their vehicles, where they would meet with Mrs. Bush and where the media would be allowed photo opportunities, who would greet the first lady, and of course, security measures were all carefully planned.

A select group of people, numbering around 40, representing the Sims Church, as well as Preservation North Dakota, and the news media, were allowed to join together to welcome First Lady Laura Bush. The first lady is honorary chairwoman of the Save America's Treasures program which helps provide grant funds for restoration of historic sites around the country, including the Sims Lutheran Church, the oldest Lutheran Church west of the Missouri River. The Sims Lutheran Church, which received a \$5,000 grant for restoration, is a demonstration project of Preservation North Dakota's effort to restore prairie churches.

When the day arrived, those people who were on the attendance list, were asked to stay inside the church upon arrival. They gathered in the church awaiting their esteemed guest. Those who had brought along their cameras were asked to give them up until after the first lady left, and cell phones had to be turned off. While they waited in the church sanctuary many folks shared some interesting stories and fond memories of the Sims church.

Carol Nelson Samuelson, Bismarck, the daughter of one of Sims' pastors, shared about her family's time at Sims. Her father, Carl Nelson, pastored the church from 1931 to 1936 and, though she was not born yet when her family lived in the parsonage, from all the stories her family had told about living in Sims, it had always felt like home to her. She recalled that her family had spoken often of the Gray Lady's presence in the parsonage, and how they were not afraid of the gentle spirit, in fact, Carol said that when her father was away her mother had said she had a sense of comfort, knowing the spirit was there. Her family had often told of hearing noise upstairs in the parsonage, doors opening and closing, windows opening and closing and furniture moving, they would even hear the water pump handle moving by itself, and at times see water being

pumped out. There were also stories of baptisms and the very first wedding held in the Sims Lutheran Church back in October 1884, uniting John Olin and Tobine Jacobson, who had helped organize the church in September 1884.

A nervous excitement was evident as folks waited for the arrival of the motorcade carrying their esteemed guest on her first visit to North Dakota. Sims pastor Van Vechten Crane, standing in the doorway of the church waiting to greet the honored guest,

joked that the flurry of preparation reminded him much of when his mother-in-law comes to visit at his house.

A lone horseback rider, a.k.a. Darrel Jacobson, whose family's ranch is situated on a bend of the

Sims Road not far from the church, viewed the activity from the hills overlooking the church, and, riding up to the fence line, quipped, "I just came down to see what all the excitement was." At the turn-off to Sims on County Road 86 a group of school age students waited to see the First Lady's motorcade. Outside the church members of the Secret Service, dressed in black suits and white shirts, milled about, checking, then double-checking security of the area.

When the first lady arrived, along with North Dakota first lady Mikey Hoeven, they were greeted by Joel and Donna Johnson, members of the Sims church and also two of the folks who spearheaded the plan to restore the original Sims church and parsonage. First stop was a tour of the restored church/parsonage which is furnished with items of the era from the church's early years, some of them original to the house. A table was arranged inside with photos and various other memorabilia depicting Sims and the church in its early years, when the town was bustling with folks and business as the coal mine and brick plant flourished and the railroad wound through the little valley. The Johnsons shared interesting stories and a history of the area with Mrs. Bush and Mrs. Hoeven.

Jane Melchior, president of the Sims Church board, along with Pastor Van Vechten Crane, met Mrs. Bush in the present church and provided a little background on interesting items in the church sanctuary before they proceeded to the basement for refreshments.

A highlight of the first lady's visit was when she joined the folks who were enjoying a hearty potluck meal in the church basement. Mrs. Bush made a point to shake everyone's hand and greet them, and also took a few minutes to sit down with the group and share some small talk over coffee and pie.

She noted that places like the Sims church are "America's story," and represent "the values that make America strong." She praised the work of Preservation North Dakota as well, as they work to preserve prairie churches like Sims Lutheran.

More than once she thanked those gathered for welcoming her so warmly to their church and to visit the historic restoration site. To which Grant Johnson answered, "Anytime," which most found quite amusing.

The First Lady departed to applause. Long after the motorcade had driven away, whisking Mrs. Bush back to Bismarck for an afternoon visit at Riverside Elementary School, the basement of the Sims church was still filled with lively chatter, recounting this once-in-a-lifetime event.



Joel Johnson gives special guests ND First Lady Mikey Hoeven and First Lady Laura Bush a little history of the Sims Lutheran Church outside the old church and parsonage last Thursday. Also pictured at right is Joel's wife Donna.



When they arrived at Sims, Mrs. Bush and Mrs. Hoeven, along with Dale Bentley, executive director of Preservation North Dakota, the organization overseeing the "prairie churches" project, were welcomed into the original Sims Lutheran church and parsonage.



A table in the restored Sims church and parsonage displayed pictures and other memorabilia about Sims and the Sims Lutheran Church in particular.



Pastor Crane and Jane Melchior, visit with the ladies in the present church and point out unique fixtures in the church sanctuary.



Pastor Crane visited with First Lady Laura Bush and ND First Lady Mikey Hoeven in the Sims church, answering their questions and sharing about present-day church services there.



The first lady, pictured above with Sims and Almont pastor Van Vechten Crane, joined folks who had gathered in the Sims church basement for a potluck lunch.



The first lady made a special point to shake hands with, and greet, everyone who was able to attend the special event. Here she greets LaVonne Hunter and Garret Larson.



To the delight of those attending this special occasion, the first lady took time out to visit over pie and a cup of coffee. Pictured clockwise from left, Tracy Larson, Sheri Johnson, Rodney Nelson, and Carole Olin beside Mrs. Bush.

Dale Bentley, Preservation North Dakota, flatters Vicki Olson, seated, by letting First Lady Laura Bush and ND First Lady Mikey Hoeven in on Vicki's great cooking skills.





Members of the Secret Service make sure the area is secure during the first lady's visit.