



Ruthenian Greek church fifty miles east of Edmonton



One of the early thatched houses of the Ruthenian colony; built of spruce logs and rough plaster

## A RUTHENIAN DAY OF DAYS

*When the Albertan Colony, who ten years ago were known as "Sifton's Sheepskins," Consecrated a Greek Church in the Name of Civilization*

By MIRIAM ELSTON



The altar of the Greek church on the prairie



Gathered in the dooryard for discussion

**D**AWN, dim and weird, was creeping in over the Albertan prairie; a faint, narrow rim of light. Close to the eastern horizon clouds hung heavy, a mass of sombre greyness. Although it was little more than three hours past midnight many a grey column of smoke arose from the thatched houses of the Ruthenian colony, fifty miles east of Edmonton.

Many a man, as he turned in his oxen or horses from the pasture, watched the sky, but not with the eagerness one might if he knew that weather conditions *could* change his plans. Many a family gathered in the dooryard, and discussed cheerfully the probabilities. If the skies had opened in a downpour that had threatened a deluge they would still have gone forward in stolid indifference.

But only scattering rain-drops fell. At some of the Ruthenian open-air inns, camp fires began to send up their tale of smoke. People who had come for very long distances, and had to accept the pace of the oxen, and some who had to tramp on foot for many a weary mile, had covered part of the journey on the previous evening.

By six o'clock the trails for many miles around were alive with people. From every point of the compass there came heavy wagons drawn by horses, or in many cases by oxen, some wagons filled almost to overflowing, some holding just two or three people. On foot they were coming, too, groups of people in brilliant-coloured clothing, looking in the distance, against the dark green of the grass and willow scrub, like immense animated blossoms.

For many miles some of them had been able to catch a glimpse of the white church with its one large and two small tin domes glittering in the occasional ray of sunshine. The people who made their way towards it felt in it the joy of possession. Many days of labour, when conditions for labour were hard, had some of them contributed towards the erection of their new church. To-day they were proud of their church, as it stood in its position of eminence on the top of a hill, visible for many miles across the prairie. To-day it was to be dedicated to its holy uses.

Standing in the gallery I looked down on the moving mass of people. It was a quaint scene. Beneath an azure tinted dome, spangled with silver stars, a priest in robe of rich purple, almost covered with cape and stole of yellow and gold, was leading in worship. Around him gathered devout and reverent people. Many candles burned on the brackets before the sacred picture, and often one of the worshippers would press through the crowd of standing people to the desk at the back of the church, and, buying one from the man in charge, would light it, and stand it among the ones already burning.

Presently priest and people left the church. From opposite directions came two bands of people, each headed by a priest in gorgeous robes, and by a number of men, each bearing brilliant banners of crimson and yellow, blue and gold, showing vividly against the green grass, and the now blue sky. And from the church a procession of people, headed also by a priest, and by many banners, went down to meet and to welcome them. A united throng, they made their way back to the church.

In a Ruthenian Orthodox Greek church there are

no seats. The men stood on the right hand side of the church, the women on the left. Close to the walls the women had laid down their infants. The scene was full of intensely human touches. A bashful maiden glanced shyly at an amorous youth, whose eyes rested in admiration on her comely face. Unconsciously her hand stole up, and smoothed back a wayward tress that had escaped from beneath her head-shawl. A young matron examined her neighbour's new apron with an open admiration untrammelled by any law of etiquette. An aged woman, with dreary, hopeless face, smiled back in toothless pleasantry to the younger women who pressed forward to kiss her hand in greeting.

Looking towards the alcove in front of the church, the priest, in broken English, asked that the strangers, if they wished to see the dedication of the altar, would come to the alcove. The altar stood before the people; a frame of white wood, about four feet square and the height of an ordinary table. Against the wall nearby was the top, ready to be fitted on. From a large bowl of holy water a priest lifted a silver-handled brush, and sprinkled each part of it. At the top of each leg was a hole, ready for a peg to be driven in, and into this hole the priest, using a gold spoon, dipped melted wax from a small silver dish. Then the top of the altar was sprinkled with holy water, and put in position. Four common spike nails, and four stones, were placed on the altar, sprinkled with holy water, and the priests, using the stones, drove the nails into the waxed holes.

The part of the ceremony following this is significant to the Orthodox Greek of the preparation of Christ's body for burial. A small pitcher of warm water, three cakes of soap, and three towels were placed on the table, and the priests carefully washed, and then wiped the table. Afterwards it was anointed with a mixture of perfume and wine.

The priest then opened a tiny metal box, and took from it a bottle containing a dark liquid, and with a brush the cross of the Orthodox Greek church was marked several times on the washed and anointed altar.

The altar, washed and anointed, was covered by the priests with a fitted covering of white linen. This covering signifies the burial clothes. Then the altar was enveloped in a covering of yellow and gold, and overspread by a tablecloth of fine linen. A large golden book, a golden crucifix, a folded crimson cloth, and a silver candle-stick, holding three candles, was placed on it.

At the priest's request, the people left the alcove. I was the last to leave it, and then I stood outside the door, and watched the priests as they lit the three candles, and swung around the altar the smoking-silver censer. Never again would anyone enter the alcove but the priests, and those set aside to aid the priests in their work.

The scene changed again. The people gathered in the main body of the church, and the banners that had been standing against the walls were borne by young men, who formed an avenue through which the priests passed as they sprinkled, first with water, and marked afterwards with the sign of the cross the door posts and side-walls of the church. This done, a procession was formed,