The Montana Synod Bishop called me in Illinois. He asked me to consider Opheim and Richland for my first call. I had two questions: Were there bears? Did they have electricity? Rural electrification for fourteen years. No bears. I felt this was God's plan for me. This was confirmed when I first drove into Opheim to interview, past the sign that read "Home of the Vikings." My Swedish ancestors were cheering me on, and the Norwegian wheat and cattle ranchers were welcoming. I was the first woman pastor for both congregations, but the ranchers already valued greatly the contribution of women in the family business.

Church members were whole-hearted in worship. We continued their tradition of all standing to read the Gospel aloud together. People of all ages took part willingly in some special worship formats for the church year gifted to me from colleagues. Hymn singing from both the LBW and Gospel hymnal was enthusiastic. Including a children's song (first suggested by a mother) was as popular with the oldsters as with the youngsters. We did have to wait with hope each fall that among the new school teachers would be someone who could play the piano. God provided. Children's sermons at Richland were delightful. There were eleven kiddos under kindergarten age when I arrived. In particular I remember "We're trading in my sister for a new baby at our house."

I cannot say enough about the thoughtfulness and hospitality the church members and community showed me. I was a guest at countless wonderful meals. On every single holiday and many other occasions I was included in a family gathering. One father, as he regularly checked over his daughters' vehicles, would do the same for mine. I could borrow a vehicle when mine was in the shop--and even a bathtub when the town water tower was under repair. The Catholic women from their closest church invited me to all their get togethers.

The local Catholic priest was at Scobey 50 miles away. He served six congregations (Six!) spread over 90 miles. We agreed he would send his people at my end to me for counseling. He took time to educate me about winter travel in our area. He said, "The weather can kill you." Opheim and Richland are on the Canadian border in NE Montana. Many of the ranchers own land in both the U.S. and Canada. Opheim was called "the Siberia of eastern Montana." We were 50 miles and 1500 feet higher than Glasgow, with the nearest grocery, doctor, hospital or library. The scenery was gorgeous, but the winters were ferocious. During my first January the high temperature for the entire month was 40 below zero Fahrenheit. Peope hopped in their vehicles to drive from one side of our main street to the other. We had two TV channels (Canadian), and one radio station (Canadian.) Each day began and ended with "O Canada." we weren't without any culture though. Several of us carpooled one evening a week to practice with the Prairie symphonette at Scobey--a frigid 100 mile round trip.

During my last year the Richland congregation closed. A U.S. government program covered much of the parish area and paid farmers not to raise crops. In weeks people signed up, collected money, and moved where it was warm. The remaining few families divided along school district lines, some to the Opheim church and others to the next Lutheran congregation to the east. I was able to cover the lost income by working as chaplain in a Lutheran nursing hoe in Glasgow 50 miles south.

I remember my experiences at Opheim and Richland and the people there with gratitude! Thanks be to God!

Pastor Ann Baither

Opheim and Richland

September 1989 thru January 1994