

HENRY RUDISILL - FOUNDER OF FORT WAYNE LUTHERANISM

By Cameron A. MacKenzie

On Sunday, October 16, two Fort Wayne Lutheran churches will dedicate a memorial to Henry Rudisill at Lindenwood Cemetery. Beginning at 12:30 p.m. with a luncheon at Trinity English Lutheran Church, the festivities will also include a presentation of Rudisill's life by Greg Manifol at Trinity Church and a ceremony of dedication at the cemetery by members of Trinity and of St. Paul's Lutheran Church.

But who was Henry Rudisill, and why are two of the city's oldest churches - one from the Lutheran Church Missouri Synod and the other from the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America - combining to commemorate the same man? Because Rudisill was the founder of both! In fact, probably more than anyone else, Henry Rudisill was responsible for establishing Lutheranism in Fort Wayne in the first place.

Rudisill was born in 1801 in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where his great grandfather had settled in the first decades of the eighteenth century. With his father, however, Henry moved to Franklin, Pennsylvania, where at age fourteen, he began to work for one of the area's merchants. Three years later, attracted by opportunities in the developing America west, he moved to Chillicothe, Ohio, and worked as a clerk in the business firm of Barr and Campbell; and in 1824 he went into business for himself in Lancaster, Ohio, and married Elizabeth Johns, whose family relations included the Henkels, one of the most prominent clergy families in early Lutheranism.

Rudisill made one more move in his life. In 1829, going even further west, he and his wife settled in the newly incorporated town of Fort Wayne, Indiana, then numbering only about 150 people, mostly French and Indians. Rudisill had been hired by U. S. land agents, John Barr and John McCorkle, to develop the area; and that he did. Besides helping to clear and cultivate the land, Rudisill's activities also included the establishment of a grist mill, a steam-powered sawmill, a tannery, and a woolen mill.

Besides his business interests, however, Rudisill was also deeply concerned that religion flourish in the new community. As early as 1832, he and other civic leaders combined to guarantee a yearly salary for the pastor of the Presbyterian church, Fort Wayne's first organized congregation. But Rudisill and his family were not Presbyterians; they were Lutherans and they wanted to remain so. At first Rudisill and his wife were the only settlers of German descent in Fort Wayne, but Rudisill wrote to mission societies in the east and recommended Fort Wayne as a good place for new Lutheran immigrants to settle. Soon such settlers were coming into the area; and Rudisill welcomed them with open hand and heart. Concerned for both their temporal and spiritual well-being, he not only gave them work and so the means to support themselves but also stood ready with advice and counsel, for which he was uniquely suited as the only man in the city able to speak both German and English.

With the German community ever increasing, Rudisill became convinced that the Germans needed pastoral care. Therefore, he requested Lutheran church bodies in the east to send a clergyman to Fort Wayne. When Rudisill's petition was printed in a German language newspaper, the one who read it and responded favorably was the Rev. Jesse Hoover (Huber), then serving a small flock in

Woodstock, Virginia. After corresponding with Rudisill, Hoover accepted the latter's invitation to visit and in July, 1836, spent ten days in Fort Wayne preaching and investigating the prospects for starting a church. Impressed by his reception, Hoover decided to undertake the spiritual care of the Lutheran community and, after briefly returning to the east, he assumed his new responsibilities in the fall of 1836. In January of 1837, he administered communion to 63 people; and in the fall of that year he organized die erste evangelisch-lutherische Gemeinde zu Fort Wayne (the First Evangelical Lutheran Church in Fort Wayne), now known as St. Paul's.

Henry Rudisill was a charter member of this first congregation, in fact, one of its first two deacons. He provided lodging for Hoover and his successor, the Rev. F. C. D. Wyneken, in his own home until the early 1840's when he built a one room parsonage next to the church. Rudisill also had made or helped to make the church's first pews - blocks of wood on which rough boards were laid! He also made his horse available to the pastor for his extensive missionary travels.

Unfortunately, however, tensions within the congregation arose soon after its founding. When Hoover died suddenly in May of 1838, the congregation was fortunate in finding a replacement by the fall of that year, F. C. D. Wyneken. Commissioned by the Pennsylvania Ministerium to serve the Lutherans of Indiana, Wyneken combined his pastorate at St. Paul's with extensive travels to reach as many Germans as possible; but he soon realized that more missionaries were needed. Therefore, in 1841 he returned to Germany where for two years he sought to stir up the German Lutherans to greater support of their co-religionists across the ocean. But while he was gone, dissension arose within the church when one faction wanted to call the Rev. G. Jensen, who had been preaching in Wyneken's absence as their pastor. The congregational meeting that discussed this issue was a stormy one but Rudisill's intervention along with that of the Christian day school teacher, F. W. Husmann, kept the congregation united behind Wyneken.

A more basic problem facing the young church was one of identity. Were they a German church or a Lutheran one - and, if Lutheran, what kind of Lutheran? In his first years at St. Paul's Wyneken had communed non-Lutherans and had even welcomed clergy of other denominations into his pulpit; but while back in Germany, he had come to a clearer understanding of Lutheranism not just as German Protestantism but as faithfulness to the Lutheran Confessions of the sixteenth century. Upon his return to Fort Wayne, therefore, in 1843, he began to stress the distinctive doctrine of the Lutheran church and to point out the errors of other churches. Subsequently, the German Reformed members left and formed their own congregation.

Even so, however, some of those who stayed, including Rudisill, were dissatisfied with this change of direction. Although Wyneken worked diligently to convince his church that his point of view was correct, not everyone concurred. Furthermore, when Wyneken left Fort Wayne in 1845 to accept a position in Baltimore, his successor, Dr. Wilhelm Sihler, was firmly committed not only to Confessional Lutheran theology but also to the German language, primarily because he believed that Lutherans who used English also were more open to the influences of American Protestantism (e.g., revivalism, camp meetings, and emotionalism). It is not surprising, therefore, that some members of St. Paul's

should have separated from the church in these years to establish a new congregation committed to another kind of Lutheranism and to using the English language. Among those who left and founded Trinity English Lutheran Church in 1846 was Henry Rudisill.

At this late date, it is impossible to say precisely what theological or cultural factors influenced Rudisill to make this move. It is perhaps significant that Rudisill was also a lifelong member of the Masonic Lodge, something that Confessional Lutherans generally held to be inconsistent with the Christian faith. This too might have been a point of friction between him and Wyneken or Sihler. In any case, Rudisill was active in the new church and served it also as one of its first deacons. In 1858, Rudisill died from an injury received in a fall while supervising some work at one of his mills.

Today, 130 years after Rudisill's death, Fort Wayne Lutheranism still moves in two different channels. In one of the ironies of history, both branches can look to the same man, Henry Rudisill, as their source. Although not a clergyman but a layman, Rudisill was dedicated to his faith and therefore worked diligently to found a church. When for whatever reason the first proved unsatisfactory, he founded a second; and so today, both pay him tribute and honor his memory.