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Concordia Comes To Springfield: 100 Years—1874-1974

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THE LORD TEACHES us to remember His gracious guidance and His faithfulness in His covenant with men. Much history was recorded by inspiration for our learning, both in the Old Testament and in the New. It is a natural consequence that the people who confess His Name should continue to identify the guidance of God in the history of the church. With the Psalms we praise God for His gracious providence (Ps. 105), and we are reminded of our murmurings and rebellions—and God's mercy (Ps. 106).

This year we recall the arrival of Concordia in Springfield one hundred years ago. The transfer from St. Louis was made in two installments, first the Pre-Seminary Department, thereafter the Seminary. The first moving day was January 4, 1874, bringing 29 Pre-seminarians. A lively young clergyman, Bensen, the assistant pastor at Trinity received the students at the station, accompanied by several elders of Trinity Lutheran Church. Pastor Bensen is described as a man with sparkling eyes and golden spectacles. After the greetings, the company marched two by two with bag and baggage, plus violin cases, through the frozen and lightly snow covered streets, Pastor Bensen in the vanguard. At the "College," so the seminary was called for years, the students were received by Mr. Pfau, the house father already installed, and soon they sat at a well decked table.

The capital of Illinois was a city of about 9,000 inhabitants with some impressive residences and many small homes. The streets were in poor condition, and the College, while within the city limits, was an isolated building. Soon the students would discover that the rain would make the streets filthy and adhesive and that it was difficult to separate from Mother Earth. The view was bleak and forlorn toward the east; in the north the furnaces of the Illinois Steel Works polluted the humid and odor laden air. In the west the old Wabash Railroad rattled past, and on the south the view was bounded by the barracks of the Negro settlement. As the year progressed, the students would find themselves surrounded by grain fields and sizeable ponds, from which the frogs issued their nocturnal pronouncements.

The seminary building measured 65 by 70 feet, four stories high, and offered space for 110 students, an assembly hall, and caretaker's quarters. It had been built at a cost of \$25,000 but was purchased for the low figure of \$6,500, including the 8½ acres.

The students felt lonesome and forsaken. Everything was different from St. Louis. They had taken heartrending leave from their friends in St. Louis in the collegiate style of the nineteenth century. Sad songs of parting were among the popular songs, and the young ties of friendship were fast. Tears flowed as they pledged to write to each other while they sang:

It is determined in the counsels of God
 That from the dearest that one has
 One must part.

Or to the music of Mendelssohn:

When two hearts must part
 Which deeply are attached
 The suffering is extreme
 And none could be more painful.
 So sad the very sound:
 Farewell, goodbye, farewell.

The students were not happy about the Synodical resolution to establish the Springfield Seminary. With some anguish at the lack of sound reasons they report that in 1861, Dr. Sihler had had seven reasons for moving from Ft. Wayne to St. Louis, but now, 14 years later, there were only two: 1) To make room in St. Louis for "theoretical" students; 2) To establish a seminary, where in a shorter course more pastors could be supplied to the burgeoning churches in their crying need. Synod had resolved to effect an "organic" separation between the two seminaries, but the students comforted themselves that in heaven the "practical" would be reunited with the "theoretical." The wisdom of the step was to appear, when in 1922 the 50th anniversary book could report that 1540 pastors had gone forth from Springfield while 2651 pastors had come from St. Louis. The majority of ministerial students still came from Germany.

The year 1874 was significant for the seminary. The convention of the General Synod was held in Ft. Wayne in October of that year. The pros and cons were discussed with warmth when it was debated whether a new building should be erected in St. Louis or whether the two seminaries should be separated. After several days the resolution was in favor of accepting the Springfield offer. The Pre-seminary Dept. had already been transferred in January.

The previous history of the institution and its campus reveals that the Enos family had granted the land for Illinois State University, which would revert to the family if it should fail to be used for education for more than a year. Abraham Lincoln had spoken at the dedication of the first school on the Springfield site. The Norwegians, Swedes, and Danes attempted to establish a joint Lutheran college, which was to be moved from Hillsboro to Springfield. When the united support of the General Synod and the Pennsylvania Synod failed, Dr. Passavant then offered the college to the Missouri Synod. Pastor Buenger, who founded the orphanage and the old folks home in St. Louis, tried to persuade St. Louis leaders to establish "The Ev. Lutheran Female College and Normal School Association" on the Springfield property. When this failed for lack of students and faculty, the plan evolved to move the Pre-seminary from St. Louis, since payments had been made. Unless the property was used for educational purposes it would revert to the Enos family, as the original gift of the deed required.

The Lord moves in mysterious ways His wonders to perform.

Prof. August Craemer, not wanting to leave St. Louis for Springfield, begged to be allowed to resign because his strength was waning (age 62), but Synod resolved unanimously that he could not be spared and that it would hear no contrary proposal. Prof. Craemer indeed knew the institution well both at its Ft. Wayne and St. Louis locations and was able to guide it through this crucial period into Springfield. Synod granted another professorship and advanced Instructor Kroening of the Pre-seminary Dept. to the rank of "Collaborator," extending his appointment by one year. The seminary was moved to Springfield in August, 1875, and the following spring Prof. Wyneken was added.

The student organization, "Kollegium Fratrum," moved a second time; they had moved from Ft. Wayne to St. Louis also. This association of brethren had developed an active program of field work in St. Louis and now looked for opportunities in Springfield. The prison would not let them in, and the poor house was almost as inhospitable. They tried the hospital but without success. In the orphanage heretics barred the way. In the Home of the Friendless they could not find entrance at first, but finally the supervisor regarded it as "good politics" to let the Lutherans enter. A controversy developed immediately on the doctrine of justification which the students taught. The home belonged to the Presbyterians, and some of the residents did not think it sufficient to be saved by faith alone. But the Kollegium established a firm footing and thereafter restricted themselves to Catechism instruction. However, the Bible stories were interpreted in a "Lutheran" manner.

Inquiry was made in the neighboring villages, and soon mission fields ripe unto harvest were found. The Kollegium evangelized in Chatham, Petersburg, Athens, Tallula, Pleasant Plains, Taylorville, Riverton, and other places, where now there are established churches.

The campus "organizers" were soon founding various new societies. A singing circle ("Liederkrantz") was formed, a male choir called Constantia, but which was not constant. A gymnastic club ("Turnverein") was founded "on sound Christian ideals." An English club called itself "Dr. Martin Luther Society," whose tutor was Prof. Wyneken. A Germania society, soon called Concordia, cultivated the English language among those not ready for "Dr. Martin Luther." This welter of organizations was soon to create many conflicts with resultant excuses and recriminations for failure to attend. Prof. Craemer had to step in, and the former military officer was equal to the task of regulating such legalistic competition.

Pastor Alfred Grimm, pen name "Alfred Ira," wrote the history of Kollegium Fratrum at its 50th anniversary. He reports the names of the student members who moved to Springfield from St. Louis: Nommensen, L. Krause, C. Brauer, Gehrman, Mende, Ponitz, Bader, Blanken, Kowert, H. Albrecht, Haendschke, Dittmer, Baier, Theissen, Aaron, Grumm. Among the new members who joined in Springfield were Ph. Wambsganss, J. Kamin, J. Heinen, S. Niemeier, C. Wenzel, Gerken, R. Hueschen, C. Gutknecht, A. Alexander, Feddersen, L. Zahn, O. Koch, Lauer, A. Baumann.

When Prof. Craemer moved with the seminarians in 1875, the total number of students rose to 113, including the 29 from the previous year. Of these 53 were from the Missouri Synod, 3 from the Wisconsin Synod, 3 from the Minnesota Synod, 3 from the Illinois Synod, 19 from the Norwegian Synod, and 2 from the English Conference. Prof. Aspersheim was called from the Norwegian Synod.

Some sources for this story are:

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