

The Beginnings of Northwestern Lutheran Academy:
Founding a School on the Lone Prairie

by

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When I was 7 years old, my family moved to Mobridge, SD. It was 1974. My dad had been called to be a professor at Northwestern Lutheran Academy, known simply as NLA. The high school campus and the prairie town of Mobridge would be my home for the next 6 years. Looking back at my grade school years I remember seeing football and basketball games, countless faces of students who are now workers and lay people in our synod and the incredible view across Lake Oahe from the campus with the prairie lands stretching as far as the eye could see.

But back then I really didn't have any idea where all this had come from. I didn't realize the blood and sweat this school had been built with as it grew over the years. It was simply a great place for me to live.

As I began reading and researching this project, I was truly amazed at the story of how the Academy in Mobridge began. This paper will attempt to tell how the idea to start the Academy developed and what the first few years of school were like. If you never had the chance to visit the Academy or even go to the prairies of South Dakota, you also might be surprised by this

story. But if you have had any ties to NLA in the past, this story will have a special meaning for you, for I have found that anyone who has spent any amount of time in Mobridge, SD, cannot help but have vivid memories of the time they spent on the prairie at Northwestern Lutheran Academy.

Looking back at history it is evident that the founding of the Academy was the result of three movements culminating at one point in time. They were:

1. The formation of the Dakota-Montana District.
2. The general school situation in South Dakota.
3. The Synod's own demand for a study of its education system. 2

In 1920, the Synod gave the Dakota-Montana mission field permission to organize itself into a new district. It was made official at a conference in Mankato, MN. The growing, prosperous lands of the Dakotas were a great opportunity for the church. But a large problem greeted this new Synod district. Before 1920, when the Dakotas were part of the Minnesota District, youth education had been one of many problems. Now it was the main problem in this huge area. Because of the great distances between people and farms, organized Christian education was almost impossible. One pastor wrote, "The children of my parish at one time attended fourteen public schools." 2

In the fall of 1920, this problem was discussed at length in a meeting at Faith, SD. The following year a Christian Day School was started in Elgin, ND. A church member sponsored the project. After two years, however, the school was forced to close due to lack of funds. 4

The school idea was still talked about in the district. But the day school concept wasn't as popular anymore. In fact, even into the early 1930's when there were 60 congregations in the state of South Dakota, only one Christian Day School was operating. Instead, an idea for starting a secondary school was planted. At the very first meeting of the district in 1922, August Pieper read an essay which stated:

"Our church as a whole must not stop with the Christian elementary school. The need of higher education is growing among us from year to year. It is our public high schools that are at variance with that which is intrinsically Christian and become dangerous to our youth. Therefore we must also found Lutheran high schools for all Lutheran boys and girls; otherwise they will be lost to our church and to Christ." 2

This essay was so well liked that before the meeting was adjourned, it was decided to ask Professor E. Bliefernicht of Dr. Martin Luther College to deliver a paper on Christian education at the next district convention. When he did this at Zeeland, ND in 1924, Professor Bliefernicht delivered a searching and complete study of education at the present time. After showing how public schools were inadequate for Christian needs, he stated, "We Christians must more and more take the thought to heart that we establish Christian high schools for our Christian youth." 4

This really fueled the fire of discussion in the Dakotas. Formal and informal discussions were held where specific plans were aired. The Western Conference was especially concerned because of the great distance from the center of the Synod. In 1925, at Tolstoy, SD, Pastor I. Albrecht started a discussion about founding a high school. In 1926, at Faith, SD, Pastor F.

Traub initiated a discussion about these possibilities also. In 1927, in Grover, SD, the idea was discussed at extreme length. Pastor K.G. Sievert urged the Eastern Conference to support the Western Conference in the matter. The prosperous times of the 1920's had the entire district thinking big as the seeds for a school began to sprout. 2

This led to the Dakota-Montana District formally presenting a memorial to the Synod Convention of 1927, held at St Lucas Church in Milwaukee. They proposed:

1. We recognize the need of a synodical institution in our District.
2. We pray the Joint Synod to assist us in establishing such an institution, if possible west of Aberdeen, SD.
3. We have definite offers, which will reduce to a minimum the cost of building. 4

Meanwhile, the Lord's hand had been at work in other parts of the Synod also. During the 1920's, many articles had appeared in the Quartelschrift concerning youth education. This had laid the foundation for serious discussion that would also lead to the new Seminary building in 1929. At the Synod convention in 1925, a committee was appointed to consider the needs and requirements for wise planning in the Synod for Christian education. H. Koller Moussa, who was the committee secretary, commented,

"If Christian high schools are so little available to the greater part of Synod's congregations, then our well-meant efforts to establish grade schools and eventually colleges will come to little good, because in the public high schools much of the work done in our Christian grade schools is being undone. Furthermore, if we were able to stock our congregations with members who have attended our own academies, we could be sure of more understanding and zeal in behalf of all our schools." 9

In this light, at that same Synodical convention at St Lucas

in 1927 the committee brought these recommendations:

1. Every parish in our Synod should have a day school with the aim of providing 8 years of instruction.
2. Our college at Watertown and our Teachers' college at New Ulm should not continue as preparatory schools.
3. The Synod should authorize and subsidize the establishment of preparatory schools, or academies, in many different parts of its territory, preferably according to conferences. 9

So at this pivotal convention of 1927, two totally different groups of the Synod met each other at exactly the same point. Surely the Lord was at work. It is no wonder that the Synod immediately responded to the Dakota-Montana memorial as follows:

1. Synod authorizes the founding of an academy in the Dakota-Montana District.
2. Synod appoints the members of the district to select the place at which this academy is to be established.
3. Synod elects the Board of Regents for the academy.
4. Synod allows the sum of \$5000 for maintenance. 9

Basically the Synod was saying, "Go with it! We'll support you." It would have been hard for them to say anything else after hearing their own committee's report. There was even a bit of prophecy in all this, for the name signed at the bottom of the Dakota-Montana memorial was none other than: K.G. Sievert. 9

The Synod convention of 1927 had made the vision a reality. Now came the hard part: making it happen. It was fall of the year and the district wanted to open the Academy by the next fall, in 1928. So much needed to be done! The first meeting of the Board of Control (as approved by Synod) met in Aberdeen, SD, on Nov. 11, 1927. The first question asked was, "Where should the school be located?"

The board had four offers in front of them from different towns:

- 1) Bowdle, SD - 30 acres of land and \$3000.
- 2) Elgin, ND - 40 acres of land, free light and water for 5 years and \$10,000.
- 3) Roscoe, SD - Free use of school building and \$31,500.
- 4) Mobridge, SD - No less than 28 acres and a school house moved to the selected site. 4

At first the board discussed the possibilities of having the school at Aberdeen, a larger city. They decided, however, to select one of the four choices at a later district meeting. Aims and objectives for the school were also discussed. No official decisions were made, though. 1

The board requested a special district meeting to iron out these details. This was held at Watertown, SD, on Jan. 11-12, 1928. The four locations were discussed and an official vote taken. The result was: Mobridge 51, Roscoe 7, Bowdle 4 and Elgin 2. 2

While still in Watertown, the board met in a meeting to call the first professor of the Academy. A list of nominations had been requested in the Northwestern Lutheran (NL) after the November meeting in Aberdeen. The board had 22 names to work with from this list. They were all discussed in the order they had been published. The board narrowed the list to 8 candidates and adjourned until the next day.

Voting began immediately on Jan. 12. After 3 ballots, K.G. Sievert of Grover, SD was called to be the first professor. He would accept the huge responsibility before April arrived.

September 1928 now seemed like a real possibility for opening the Academy. 1

The responsibilities were now divided up clearly. A local board of the Academy was selected who could meet at various times during the school year to act on pressing matters. There were five pastors on this board along with E. Gamm, the minister at Zion Lutheran Church in Mobridge. This local board would be responsible for the physical needs of the school. The academic needs would be served by K.G. Sievert along with his two advisors from Dr. Martin Luther College: H. Klatt and E. Bliefertnicht.

The Board of Control met again on March 5, 1928 to iron out more details. This was the first meeting held at Mobridge. A board of school visitors was selected. Also, the curriculum was thoroughly discussed and it was decided to have a six-day week. The president of the district, J. Scherf, was at the meeting and he suggested a name for the new school: Northwestern Lutheran Academy. The board passed the motion. 1

One more major decision had to be made about the Academy: Where in Mobridge do we locate it? The original offer from the city stated that they would give the Synod "not less than 28 acres and a good price on the overcrowded schoolhouse," which could be moved to the chosen plot. It was too late to get the building moved and readied for the first year of classes, but the board wanted the school to be on the permanent site for the second year.

Four specific sites were offered to the Synod by the city. The board engaged the services of an architect from Minneapolis to study the sites. These are his findings:

- 1) The Grand Crossing Land Company Tract northeast of town is the least desirable. It slopes away from town and is also far removed from town. It is very bleak and exposed to the winds of winter. This site should receive little consideration.
- 2) The acreage lots known as Thompson Outlots are located at the end of Main Park Ave. The view is high and commanding in all directions, but it has no direct view of the Missouri River. A school on this site would rise above the city high school and the residences. Sewer and water connections run to the south line of these lots.
- 3) The tract west of the city above the railroad has everything in its favor except the railroad along its southern edge and a probable airfield to the north. The view from the site is especially fine; the Missouri River is beautiful. At present the Milwaukee Railroad carries 24 to 30 trains a day past the site. The summer wind would carry the smoke and cinders up the hill and over the site. Sewer connections are ten blocks away, and water passes the site. The land drains well both to the south and northeast. The whole question as to the site is the desirability of a trunk railroad on the south and an airfield on the north.
- 4) An unplatted tract west of Thompson Outlots has neither the commanding view nor position as to city, river, or railroad transportation. It is very convenient to sewer and water. It is monotonous in its flatness, but easy to build on.

Order of recommendation: #2, #3, #4, #1. 4

This report of the architect came in June of 1928. On Sept 2, the board decided on the site with the nice view, #3. The railroad never really became a problem on the site, because the tracks were actually a few hundred yards south of the campus and didn't disturb anyone.

At this point, it might be good to look more closely at Mobridge, the town selected by the district to have the new Academy. If you look at a South Dakota map, you can see that Mobridge is located in a very strategic spot in the north-central

part of the state. Its place on the Missouri River gives it many advantages on the prairie. Looking at the map, you may also be struck by the fact that there are not really any towns of any size around Mobridge. To this day Mobridge is the largest town for 100 miles in every direction, with a population of about 4500. That makes it an important gathering place as many people come to this "city" to shop or visit.

The town itself sprung up as a result of the bridge that was built across the Missouri River. This gave Mobridge potential to grow into a city because even today there is no bridge that crosses the river for 100 miles north or south. The river forms a formidable barrier, dividing what people out there call "east river" and "west river." The name "Mobridge" came as a result of this bridge. People would address their mail to the "Mo-bridge", or "Missouri Bridge", which was then coined by the small community there.

The town was basically a railroad hub. This happened because there was no place else to make a real stop out on the prairie. Mobridge could boast of a roundhouse, which permitted the engineers to drive onto a circular length of track which could rotate, turning the engines around to go the other direction. Also, all major repairs were made on the engines at Mobridge. Engineers were changed when they got to the town, giving them a while to rest before heading out on another train.

When the city learned that a prospective Academy was planned for the Dakotas, they were very interested. They wanted an institution to add to their city, so they made a very good offer to the Synod. Pastor E. Gamm of Zion in Mobridge approached

William Mailand, a prominent citizen, about the availability of a building. Mr. Mailand then went to A.H. Brown, a county commissioner and member of the Commercial Club executive board, to see what was available. Mailand and Brown persuaded the executive committee of the Commercial Club to offer four possible sites of no less than 28 acres along with the overcrowded school building. This was very exciting to the members of the district, because by its location and size, Mobridge had much more to offer than the other three towns that made offers. All this happened with no solicitation by anyone from the local congregation. 4

This was the background on which the new Academy was to be established. The first professor had been called, the town and site had been established - now the specific plans for the first year of classes had to be carried out. As the set-up for classes began, it was clear what a large role the building the city offered would play. The original offer included the old West Side School, which would be moved out to the new Academy site. It was a 48' by 50' white structure of two stories. It was only 17 years old and had been built to hold the 200 elementary students in Mobridge. The elementary enrollment had reached 500 by the time the Academy was starting, far exceeding the building's capacity. Therefore it became available to the new Synod school. 4

Zion Lutheran Church purchased the building for \$500. It was too late to move it before the fall of 1928, so classes would simply be at its present location the first year. The board

wanted to hire a nightwatchman since it was still in town, so they instructed E. Gamm to hire one for \$.50 per night. 1

Another important task, finalizing the purpose of the school, had to be done also. The Board of Control came up with three aims. The institution was to offer:

1. A four year high school course for young men preparing for the ministry and desiring to enter the college freshman class at Northwestern College, Watertown, WI.
2. A four year high school course for young men and women who desire to enter the Normal Department (or Teaching Department) at Dr. Martin Luther College, New Ulm, MN.
3. A four year high school course for young men and women that desire a general high school education under distinctly Christian influence. These scholars can choose subjects from the courses of #1 and #2, according to rules laid down by the Board and Faculty. 7

All throughout the summer of 1928, K.G. Sievert kept an ad in the NL that "students who plan to enter the institution this fall should be announced as early as possible, so that the necessary arrangements can be made." 6

Along with the Academy's objectives, the prices also had to be set for the 1928-29 school year. The student catalogue states that,

"each male student residing in the dormitory pays to the director for board, fuel, light, etc., \$120 per year; girls pay \$180 annually. One half of each of these amounts is to be paid at the beginning of the first semester; the other, at the beginning of the second semester. In case of absence or discontinuance no refund of board money or tuition will be made unless the amount so due is at least \$6.

Those students not intending to enter the service of the synod, must pay tuition at the rate of \$40.00 per year." 7

General fees were \$8. One thing is sure - with only \$5000

allotted to the new school, the founders had to be very creative in their use of money and the Dakota congregations had to be generous in their gifts of books, furniture and food.

September 5 had been set as the date for the school opening. The board set Sept. 2 as the date for Sievert's installation. This was held in a special service at Riverside Park in Mobridge. The service was conducted in both German and English. As the day came to a close, the school was ready to begin its ministry to the youth of the Dakotas. The reins lay firmly in the hands of this new professor, K.G. Sievert. 4

Before seeing how the first year of classes went, this might be a fitting place to take a look at the Academy's first professor and get a more personal glimpse of what he was like.

Karl G. Sievert was without doubt the key figure in NLA's history. It would be impossible not to mention his name when talking about the Academy in any detail. He was born in 1889 in Watertown, WI. He attended Michigan Lutheran Seminary and Northwestern College. ~~In his time,~~ Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary was still in Wauwautosa, WI when he received his education. Upon his graduation in 1921, he accepted the call to be the first pastor at Willow Lake, SD. In 1925, he accepted a call to serve in Grover, SD. Then at age 32, this youthful looking young pastor received the call to be the first professor at the new Dakota Academy. 6

K.G. had been a huge supporter of the Academy when it was still in the discussion stage. He was appointed to the original Board of Control by the Synod before the call for a professor was given. In actuality, he almost didn't receive the call to

professorship. In the second ballot taken in Watertown, SD, the vote was: K.G. Sievert 4, F. Brenner 3. At that point the board chose to unanimously call him, but the vote had been very close. 1

His duties were basically "everything," as a former student put it. As the first professor, he taught all the classes which would include everything from Latin and German to Math and Physics before he would leave. He had a reputation as an excellent teacher. One student recalled, "You learned from him whether you wanted to or not." Another student, a girl, remembered the big heart he had, although she was a little frightened of his gruffness. 4 The students affectionately called him "KG", and sometimes "King George" behind his back. He was the spiritual leader of the campus as well as the dorm patrol. Once the boys all got "KG" haircuts in an attempt to model their professor. He even played the hymn for chapel occasionally, showing some musical talent. One gal recalls the time he let a hymnal fly at a large mouse during the service, startling the group. He missed, unfortunately.

K.G. would labor tirelessly at Mobridge for many years. He even found time to tutor school kids in Mobridge and serve as vacancy pastor at nearby congregations at times. He also was a family man. He and his wife, Bertha, would raise four sons and a daughter. One son would become a parochial school teacher. K.G. would teach 43 years at the Academy until he retired in 1971. He remained a member of Zion Lutheran Church in Mobridge until his death in 1980 at the age of 91. He was survived by his wife, 3

brothers, 4 sisters, 5 children, 15 grandchildren and 1 great-grandchild. 6

He certainly had found his niche at this prairie town on the river. His love was teaching and leading young people to a greater appreciation of their Savior. He related this truth in such a practical way. One student remembered K.G.'s profound advice for life: "When you leave the Academy and go out to make your mark, no matter what you do always buy a pair of good shoes and a good bed because most of the rest of your life will be spent in one or the other." 4

So how did Year One go at the Academy? The year began on Sept 5, 1928, with 22 students. They were all freshmen, even though some were 16-18 years old. The West Side School (still at the original location) was the only "campus." The students quite profoundly coined it the "White Building." It served as the dining hall in the basement, the classroom building on the main floor and the boys dorm on the second level. The girls lived at a vacant hospital rented for them. There was an "inspector" for the boys quarters and a matron for the girls who also was the cook. 4

The curriculum included: Religion-History, English, German, Latin, Mathematics, Science, Geography and Music - 40 hours per week. K.G. must have had a fun time preparing all the new curriculum that year. It was a good year, however, even though supplies were meager. Six students would leave during the year due to home sickness, illness or disciplinary problems. 7

The district was very kind to them in supplying what they needed. In the Northwestern Lutheran was an official thank you

from the Academy for these gifts:

"From Athboy and Drew, SD one hog each; Paradise, ND one half-hog; Lemmon, SD 8 lb butter and some lard; Mrs F. Walz 4 qts jelly; Immanuel of Grover, SD 26 doz eggs and \$9; Ladies Aid of Faith, SD 1 rug, 30 hand towels, 22 dish cloths; A. Ottenbacher a set of boxing gloves;" and many more.

A hearty thank you was given to all. 6

During the summer before Year Two, much needed to be done. The White Building had to be moved a half-mile to the chosen Academy site. St. Jacoby congregation of nearby Glenham dug the new basement. A concrete basement was poured for the cost of \$1300. The building was then moved by Hand's Moving for a fee of \$1750. Unfortunately, during the move the building sustained extensive damage. Repair and replastering would cost \$495. Members of Zion congregation would personally sign promissory notes for all this and had it paid off within the next 10 years.

Another need was perceived by the board: a new dormitory would desperately be needed to house the students for the growing school and to hold a boiler to heat the facilities. In the July, 1929 NL, K.G. would write,

"In view of Synod's financial situation we debated the building of such a dormitory for a long time. We hardly found courage to come before Synod for an allowance to carry out the project. But necessity is a hard master. We must ask. We trust that the Lord will take care of our needs. We feel that he will make you willing to do his work. And so we shall present our plans to General Synod, requesting it to erect this dormitory." 6

There was really no way around it. The new site would be too far from the janitor and cook's house and from the girls temporary dorm in the vacant hospital. The board drew up their request for the new dorm in April of 1929, and the Synod ratified

it at the convention that summer in August. Also a professorage was to be built for the Sieverts. The house would cost a total of \$5706, with Synod paying \$3500 and the district \$2206. 4

Finally, a new professor was needed as the sophomore class was added. Pastor F. Traub of Morgan, MN was called. Thus ended a wild summer of changes to the Academy's facilities.

As Year Two began in September, 1929, a word describing how school started might be: chaos. Fall of the year had come all too soon. With 22 students to begin the year, the White Building was not ready for occupancy. It was being refurbished and the heating plant would be in the new dormitory, so it was without heat. Where would they have school?

The students would stay in the homes of members from Zion and classes would be held in the basement of the small church. But the business of getting a new professor hadn't been finished yet. Mr L. Sievert, K.G.'s retired father, would fill in teaching until Professor Traub would be installed in November.

The situation was not good. K.G. would later write in his annual report,

"Naturally the conditions of the first half of the school year were not conducive to excellent work on the part of the students. We were scattered about the city and supervision was at best faulty. But it was the best we could do at the time." 8

Even in the NL he would write,

"The institution was scattered all over town. The boys lived ten blocks from the kitchen and six from the church, which furnished us inadequate classrooms until we moved out here. Due to the impossibility of proper supervision the work of the scholars in the first semester was not what it might have been." 6

Fortunately on Thanksgiving Day, the cornerstone was laid

for the new dorm. The professorage had been started in October. Work on both progressed rapidly. The brick dormitory would be ready for occupancy in March, not a minute too soon. The second story was not finished off because the money ran out. Bare rafters had to remain. In the professorage the two upstairs bedrooms would have to wait, too.

A mass exodus took place on March 1, 1930. The boys immediately occupied the dormitory, which would also serve as the cafeteria. The girls were put in the White Building with their matron. Professor Sievert and family moved into their new home. The property value of the new site now rose dramatically. It was appraised at \$50,000, even though the Synod had only invested \$28,000 in it. 4

The year progressed much better. With some semblance of order classes could be conducted more efficiently and everything was more organized. Sadly, though, there were almost no furnishings for the new dorm. In the NL, K.G. reported,

"We could not find courage to spend any money for interior furnishings in view of the fact that the building cost us slightly more than Synod had appropriated. We are still without shades, curtains and furniture in the reception room. A few friends have remembered us with gifts for the dormitory, as is recorded elsewhere in this issue." 6

Oh well, all in good time.

Year Three began with a new tutor added to the staff and 30 students in three classes. It seems that the Academy was taking some heat for getting yet another instructor. K.G. felt it necessary to explain this in the NL, where he said,

"Grade and high school work differ. The latter must be done much more intensively. Each subject taught requires

much more time and work from teacher and scholar. Each period lasts 50 minutes and each class has at least 6 periods per day. Therefore the time of one man is devoted entirely to the work of each grade, although the work itself is done according to departments instead of grades. And if we were to meet the requirements of the state high schools our teachers would not be permitted even to teach 30 periods per week, as we do, since the state has limited each teacher to 16 periods per week." 6

It's incredible to think that people complained about adding an instructor to help teach the 109 hours per week!

It seems that the only major problem left was learning how to handle discipline. It's interesting that the school catalog for 1930-31 adds some new rules concerning student conduct that weren't there previously. Strict rules were enforced on changing dorm rooms, Christian conduct and church attendance. 7 In the board minutes the recommendation was made,

"The Board was agreed and advised the faculty to revoke the Saturday night 'free privelege' of students and suggested that all permissions be granted only on recommendation of the faculty for the sake of discipline." 1

The girls were moved to the profs' homes to live and things now became stable. It seems that during this year many details were ironed out in the way things were done and it actually turned out to be the best year yet, even with the need for discipline. K.G. called it the "most successful" year and even the board said it was "most satisfactory."

Year Four and beyond were now set in the way things were done. The 2nd floor of the dorm still was not finished off yet. That would have to wait. The professorage, however, had been completed to house female students. The highlight of that year was the first graduation, held on June 9, 1932. Seven members of

the senior class graduated in a service at Zion Lutheran Church. The school was on its way.

What were these first few years like from the student's perspective? Sometimes you lose a little flavor of it all just looking at the history. Student life, to say the least, was very different from student life in the 90's.

To attend Northwestern Lutheran Academy you needed two things: an 8th grade diploma and the proper supplies. The catalog stated that each student must bring bedding (including a mattress), comb, shoebrush, towels and a trunk. Also needed were good clothes, because K.G. had a dress code requiring a shirt and tie or a sweater in class. When the students arrived, they really had to be ready to study, considering the difficult curriculum.

But the student's life was not all work. There were opportunities for sports too, although limited. They had a basketball team, even in the early days. Since they were no match for the Mobridge High team, or even the Mobridge JV's, they played in the intramural league at the high school. The public high school felt sorry for these kids at the Academy going to school with such meager resources and gladly let them play. Games were held at 4 PM at the local gym in the basement of Mobridge High School building. Academy students had to wrap their trunks and shoes in a towel and make the trek across almost a mile of frozen prairie tundra. The highlight of Academy basketball came in the mid-1930's when the boys captured the intramural championship. Another thrill was seeing the Harlem Globe-trotters who came to the Mobridge High gym in the 30's.

The Academy actually had a basketball court, but we might call it an "open air" gymnasium. There were two basketball goals stuck into the prairie where the students could play outside. Of course it needed to be shoveled first in winter. One student recalls that judging the prairie winds was a real trick. At one goal you had to give the ball a mighty toss into the prevailing winds. At the other end a light throw might send the ball whipping over the backboard. One of the goals permanently leaned because of the strong winds. 10 K.G. even mentioned the "Big Sky" gym in the NL, where he said, "Our gymnasium with its roof of blue sky and floor of terra firma, whose only janitor is old King Aeolus of northwest fame, has left no unpleasant memories but brought us much joy." 6

A memorable trip to Pollack, SD, was taken by the basketball team. The gym in Pollack had a 20-foot high ceiling, so the Academy boys were constantly hitting it on their shots because they were used to the sky as their ceiling. Also, a large space heater jutted out a few feet onto the playing surface at half court. Running into it not only meant a few bruises, but also a good burn, because the metal was red hot. 10

The only other sport available was the baseball-catching game of "500." With the prevailing winds the boys became quite skilled at judging and grabbing pop flies. A baseball team was organized a few years, but against the stiff town competition there wasn't much success.

Music was also available. A choir was formed each year which would try to sing 4-part music. They had two main

performances - at Christmas and at the end of the year. Piano lessons were offered at \$.50 a lesson. No band was formed, however, until Prof. Henry Meyer would arrive in 1939.

Overall, it was a unique time in these students' lives that they would never forget. The faculty allowed some things that never would happen today. Once the Sieverts had the students over to their house for a beer tasting party to show them that beer didn't taste all bad. Another time one of the students ran out of tobacco, which cost a nickel a sack. No problem, because one of the tutors lent him a nickel so he could continue the habit. 4

Of course many pranks were played because of all the young people around. One night some boys sneaked into K.G.'s science lab and accidentally exploded some sodium in water - no injuries, though. Once the boys put hydrochloric acid in one of the tubas and returned it to the lab. Prof. Sievert could never figure out why he got a copper reaction with that bottle. Pins were occasionally placed on the instructor's chair.

Cars were always a target. One time the spark plug wires were switched around on the professor's car. Another time potatoes were pushed up the tutor's tail pipe. Dead animals were often seen, too. More than once a dead skunk could be spotted hanging from the profs' clotheslines. Dead mice were used imaginatively. And many times the boys would delight in the screams of the girls as they found the cow that was tied to their front door. But it was all done in fun. The friendships these students and professors would find here would last a lifetime. Looking back on them would bring a happy feeling when they were

reminded of the times they spent at the Academy. 4

But not all was fun. In fact, the school had just gotten its feet under it when the Depression of the 1930's hit. This left the school struggling to exist as unforeseen bad times brought low attendance and little money.

Already in 1930 a business depression was felt. In January of 1931 the Mobridge bank closed right after the school had deposited its monthly Synod subsidy. Fortunately the bank reopened soon with little loss to the school.

Coupled with this business depression came the terrible drought. During the years 1934-37 almost no rain fell. One year of drought might cause huge problems for the Dakota farmer, but four years is disastrous. Even the Russian thistles, a common weed, would not grow. The prairie became bare and rock hard. The price of food went up 400%. Farmers began selling off their steer for \$5-\$10 a head (today they're sold for \$15 a pound). 4

All this had an ill effect on the enrollment at NLA. Here's how the students numbered in those years:

1931 - 32 students
1932 - 19 (big drop!)
1933 - 16
1934 - 23
1935 - 17
1936 - 23 6

Certainly these were much lower numbers than had been hoped for. In 1933², after the drop to 19 students, K.G. said in his annual report to the board, "If we were to measure the result of our past year's work in terms of dollars and cents, or even in numbers of scholars instructed, we would have to declare our entire work a failure." 8

That summer K.G. gave this impassioned plea in the NL,

"In times like the present, parents often times can not see their way clear to spend any money for the Christian education of their children. Nevertheless the very greatest treasure that they and their children possess, the soul life of their children, is often at stake when these children enter the advanced stages of education. Therefore parents ought to think twice before sending their children into any school. Will the chosen school nourish and develop the faith of the child or will it tear off the tender roots by which the child is grounded in Christ? Any parent who knows the dangers of the public school will not hesitate to educate his child in schools of which he knows that Christ is the center of its educational program. Northwestern Lutheran Academy is such a school. Will you not prepare to send your child to us this fall to receive a Christian education?

And think of the glorious opportunity offered the child, to prepare for the work of the ministry, the most glorious work it could possibly choose. There can be no such thing as overproduction in the supply of men, available for the ministry. The Lord needs every child that can possibly be gained for His work. Will you not give him your child for His work? Send your child to Northwestern Lutheran Academy this fall!" 6

The result of K.G's plea? 16 students.

In 1934, tragedy almost hit the campus. The coal that was stored in the basement of the boys dorm caught fire. All the coal had to be shoveled out the bin through the loading chute in order to extinguish it. Luckily, the building did not burn. A coal bin was then built, completely outside the dorm, to insure that it would not happen again. Meanwhile the drought continued. Even the home gardens around town were simply bare dirt because they were hard as concrete.

1935 started out looking very promising. A heavy rainfall came in early summer and a big crop was expected. But when the crops were just starting to produce their kernals, they were hit by several days of extremely hot weather along with strong south

winds. The crops were destroyed. Also the early rain caused a fungus which broke off the heads of the grain stalks before they were ripe. Conditions became worse. 4

The winter had been a hard one, with huge amounts of snow. But the prairie winds had whipped the snow into huge drifts in the low-lying areas, out of the fields, so it did the farmers no good. K.G. tried to make the best of the meager times. In the NL that summer, he thanked the district members for the few gifts from the surrounding area:

"I wish to acknowledge the following gifts, received on behalf of Northwestern Lutheran Academy with a hearty "thank you": Ladies' Aid, Grover, SD, \$5; W. Merriman, Lemmon, SD, foodstuffs; Peter Green, Mobridge, SD, a sturgeon weighing 21 pounds." 6

The budget crunch can even be seen looking at the student catalogs that came out during those years. The attractive pamphlet of 1931-32 was replaced by a paper booklet in 1932-33. In the next year the same cover was re-used and the 1932-33 was crossed out and 1933-34 was hand-written beneath it. The following year the booklet was only a couple typed sheets stapled together. The money was simply needed in other areas. 7

Over and over in the NL there was thanks to God for the students that were attending, along with explanations why the school was struggling. There was always hope expressed that conditions would improve in both the economy and the weather. But people were beginning to move out of the Dakotas because it was so bad. In fact, there were more people living out there in the 1920's than there are now in 1993. Another plea came in the NL the summer of 1936. K.G. said,

"The faculty looks forward to the return of all scholars and hopes that each will bring one new scholar with him. If our alumni will actively work for the interests of their Alma Mater, and if every parent in our district becomes mindful of the sacred duty which he has toward his children, the next year will be the brightest in the history of our Academy. See your pastor and discuss the education of your children with him; let him explain to you the advantages of a Christian education, and send us your child. May God give us the will and the courage to labor for our Academy and its growth." 6

Finally in 1937 the drought ended. It happened to end just before Graduation Day on June 4. Due to the great rains that came, many of the families and friends were unable to attend the ceremony because the roads were so bad. But there was no sadness for this - in fact K.G. reported, "These rains were a far greater blessing for our people - we had more rain in the forepart of June than in the past three years - than the loss of their attendance at the commencement exercises." 6

The drought had taken its toll. Even K.G. felt this profoundly. He had to buy a cow to keep the school in dairy products and took care of it himself. Patches were noticed on his suit that he taught in. Things had been rough for everyone. 10

But through the grace of God, the school had survived. His hand of blessing had not deserted NLA. After those hard years the blessings began to pour in. By 1940 the enrollment stood at 28. By 1944 it had increased to 49. By 1946 it was an incredible 75. The Academy was on its way again.

As the Academy begins its upward climb in the 1940's, this paper must end. The scope of this report is complete. It is tempting to write further, for the Academy would continue to have a successful history under the guiding hand of God. He had

brought them back from the terrible effects of the Depression days.

There would be more adversity to come. NLA would last through a World War, conflict with the Missouri Synod and even a scarlet fever quarantine. But it would survive. Its enrollment would swell to 133 in 1973. It would one day boast of eight full time professors and a full campus with six buildings. There would be athletic championships and inspiring music concerts. The school would celebrate its 50th anniversary in a special service on July 1, 1978. K.G. Sievert would even be present to offer the Anniversary Prayer. The Academy would close in 1979 due to Synod cutbacks, but it had been successful in completing its purpose.

It would graduate about 700 students, with about 55 becoming pastors in our Synod. Approximately 65 students would go on to be teachers. That was the original purpose of the Academy - to supply workers for the church who could serve God's people with a solid Christian education base. In that purpose, the Academy was a large success. 3

But the beginnings were quite humble in Mobridge. Names like E. Gamm, who provided invaluable service along with Zion Lutheran Church in Mobridge; F. Traub, the second professor and Academy leader; and of course K.G. Sievert, ought to stand out forever in our Synod's history as pioneers in Dakota education. God surely was using his people to work for his purposes in his church.

No matter where those early students would go in their

lives, they would take a part of the Academy with them. The memories might only be simple ones, perhaps the walks along the Missouri River or Prof. and Mrs. Oswalds' piano duets in the lobby of the newly built dorm. But whether they knew it or not, their professors had led them in the direction the Apostle Peter gives us in his second epistle:

"Grow in the grace and knowledge of our Lord Jesus
Christ. To him be the glory both now and forever."
(2 Pet 3:18)

Dateline to Opening of NLA

- 1920 - Formation of Dakota-Montana District
- Fall, 1920 - Idea for Christian Day School fully aired at Faith, SD
- 1921-23 - Christian Day School operated at Elgin, ND - Closed due to lack of funds
- 1922 - August Pieper encourages high school education in the district
- 1924 - E. Bliefert of DMLC delivers essay in the district encouraging high school education
- 1925 - Pastor I. Albrecht initiates discussion at Tolstoy, SD about starting an Academy
- 1926 - Pastor F. Traub initiates more discussion at Faith, SD
- 1927 - Pastor K.G. Sievert, at a long discussion in Grover, SD, urges the Eastern Conference to support an Academy in the Western Conference
- Aug, 1927 - Moussa Report to Synod recommending academies be at opened in Synod's districts
Synod convention - Dakota-Montana offers memorial to Synod requesting in help in founding an academy
Milwaukee - Synod pledges its support
- Nov, 1927 - Academy Board of Control meets in Aberdeen, SD
- Jan, 1928 - District meeting at Watertown, SD - District chooses Mobridge, SD as location - Board calls K.G. Sievert as first professor
- Mar, 1928 - Board meets at Mobridge, SD to discuss curriculum and aims of school - Named Northwestern Lutheran Academy
- June, 1928 - Board meets at Zeeland, ND to iron out last details
- Sept 2, 1928 - Sievert installed
- Sept 5, 1928 - First day of classes with 22 students

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