

|. A History of Erwin Raymond Scharf

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Our story begins in Wisconsin along what is known as State Highway 175. Before that, it was called U.S. 41 and earlier still, about the turn of the century, it was spoken of as the "Yellowstone Trail". That is what travelers called the road which led from New York City westward by way of Chicago, Milwaukee, through the Fox River Valley, westward to the Twin Cities, and then Southwest to Yellowstone Park. They didn't have road signs back then. So in order to assist the travelers, farmers who lived along the road would paint a large rock near a fork in the road. Thus came the name "Yellowstone Trail".

This story was about to unfold almost 100 years ago in the last farmhouse at the left when traveling north out of Dodge County. It was the story of a young Erwin Scharf. His father, John William Scharf, like so many young men had been wrestling with the oft-given advice in those days: "Go west young man". Since he had relatives in Wisconsin, he decided to visit them

while he looked for employment. Shortly after following that impulse and arriving from Brooklyn, New York, he happened to become acquainted with BIRTHA PLANTIKOW. BIRTHA and her family had come some twenty years earlier from Pommerania in Germany and settled on a small farm near Lomira. Shortly thereafter, in 1888, they were married.

It was along Highway 175 that John and BIRTHA settled down to raise a family. Having already given birth to five boys and two girls, on April 8, 1907 they added one more boy to the family by the name of Erwin Raymond Scharf. Shortly after Erwin's birth, he was brought into the kingdom of God through Holy Baptism. One more child was born after Erwin giving the Scharf family a total of nine children. Of the nine children, three are still living: ERNA BIERWAGEN, MINNIE MAROSE, and ERWIN SCHARF.

While the First World War was raging in Europe, Erwin obtained his elementary education in one of those well-documented one-room school houses. While Erwin was in this one room school, he had the opportunity to move up twice. He had just turned twelve, when his teacher asked him to go to Mayville and take tests for eighth grade. He also began taking confirmation classes at an early age.

Bertha was a great help to her son in his confirmation instructions. Each evening she would sit down by the fireside and help her son with each preparation. Since the confirmation classes were in German, Bertha would help Erwin go through each lesson. Pastor Pietz allowed Erwin to be instructed at an early

age as long as he had intentions to study for the ministry. Then in the spring of 1920, Erwin along with four other classmates was confirmed at St Johns in Lomira.

That summer, Erwin made plans to attend Northwestern Prep School in Watertown, Wisconsin. It was late in the summer when Pastor Pietz came over to the house and informed Erwin that he should send in his application. A few days later Erwin received a letter of acceptance from President Kowalke. In his first year away from home, he met the challenges of a completely new environment. He had to study diligently even more so than some of the other students. It was because most classes were lectured in German even Latin class was to first be translated into German. Being one of the younger ones in his class, he was more reserved than the other students. He even had somewhat of an inferiority complex that would surface later in his ministry.

In his quinta (sophomore) year he was asked by Dr. Ott, the college librarian, to be his assistant. Erwin accepted the challenge to help in the bookstore and in the Library. During the six years that Scharf held the position, he became a close friend of the Doctor. They enjoyed swimming and canoeing together on the Rock river. Erwin received his first swimming lessons complements of Doctor Ott and a couple of friends when they capsized the canoe and left him to paddle for his life. Doctor Ott took the young Scharf on special book-buying excursions to Milwaukee and Chicago, where they always made a point to take in special events such as concerts, plays large

museums and libraries. In 1924, Erwin graduated from Northwestern Prep. Back then, there really wasn't a graduation service, it was simply a transition from the prep department to the college.

During his four years in college, he was not only a diligent student, but also enjoyed extracurriculars such as singing in choruses and participating in the Phi Gamma Rho Literary Society, predecessor of the Forum. In their senior year, Martin Franzmann and Erwin Scharf co-directed "She Stoops to Conquer". It was the first performance in Northwestern's history in which they opened up the doors to the public. Professor Kowalke even gave them permission to charge admission for the play.

Back in the late twenties, school was much different from what it is today. School went from Monday to Saturday noon. Since the students didn't have vehicles on campus, each student would remain on campus until there was an extended vacation. All this time together, allowed the students to make some very close friendships. During his years at Northwestern, Erwin made many friends. Many of these friendships lasted throughout his ministry. Special friends that came to mind were Martin Franzmann, Sieghard Westendorf, ROLLIE Hoenecke, Gerhardt Redlin, Heinz Bluhm and Heinrich Vogel. In 1928, Erwin Scharf graduated from Northwestern college.

The student became Instructor Scharf after his graduation in 1928 when he accepted a two year assignment to Winnebago Lutheran Academy in Fond du Lac. Since his parents had already moved to

Fond du Lac, it was convenient for him to stay with his parents while teaching at the Academy. At first, he was reluctant to leave his classmates behind. But when he stepped into the classroom, he gained some worthwhile experience that would be valuable later on in his ministry. While at the Academy, he taught Latin, Greek, German, Religion and History. In those days Greek was started in the Quarta (Junior) year at Prep School. It was also required at the feeder schools. He also helped out with dramatics.

In 1930, he felt it was time to finish his studies at the Seminary. In his first year at the Seminary, his parents both passed away within five months of each other. This and also being in a new class made for somewhat of a quiet school year. It was that next summer that Erwin's talents were again put to use. All his library experiences from Northwestern were put to good use. He and two other students catalogued the entire Seminary Library. It was at this time that the numbering system was changed over from the German numbering system to the Dewey Decimal system.

In January, of his second year of school at the Seminary, Erwin was elected President of its first organized choir. He immediately began making plans for a tour that spring. The area to be toured turned out to be much of southern Wisconsin. Cities included, in order were, Beaver Dam, Waterloo, Kenosha, Racine, Milwaukee, Manitowoc, Green Bay, Appleton, Fond du Lac, Thiensville, and West Allis. The tour began April 29 and continued to May 14. That year the choir also for the first time

sang at the commencement exercises.

Since by now his old class had graduated from the Seminary, Erwin was happy to be invited by two Seniors to room with them, Hilton Oswald and Bill Schweppe. That same year he managed the Seminary Bookstore while Hilton joined him in taking care of the Seminary Canteen. Before the close of that school year the three of them began to plan a nine-week camping trip for the following summer. They toured to the west Coast by the North and returned by the South.

The friendship that was created during that school year and on this nine week camping trip was very special. Even after their Seminary days the three of them would get together whenever possible.

Erwin was busy with the choir in his last two years at the sem. A tour was once again planned for that spring. It was early in the fall of 1931 that Erwin was asked to sing in the quartet. The quartet was asked to take a tour in the summer of 1933 of churches in the outlying areas of the Synod which were losing contact with the Seminary. Even though this was during the depression, they were able to pay for the trip from door collections. The churches were very excited to see the four young men and also to hear their organist, Martin Albrecht.

Being in a new class at the Sem, because of having taught for two years, Scharf had the opportunity to make even more lasting friendships: Siegfried Fenske, Fred Bergfeld, Waldmar Pless, Otto Engel to name just a few.

In 1933 the Synod was feeling the burden of the depression, and only two calls were assigned, one of them to Erwin Scharf and the other to Waldemar Pless. They were both called to the Academy in Fond du Lac to teach. Call day was nothing like it is today. On the last day of classes, the entire student body would meet in the chapel for a closing service. Professor Pieper would give a devotion of encouragement before sending everyone home.

Scharf was excited to return to the Academy. His work had been appreciated by the students and he had enjoyed teaching. He had hoped to serve in a Parish soon after graduation, but the Lord had other plans.

Scharf taught for five years at the Academy this time. He was one of five professors which meant he had a very busy schedule. Each day he was to prepare for seven different courses. One week out of each month he was to conduct morning devotions. And in his first year he directed Shakespeare's "The Taming of the Shrew". Instructor Scharf had already acquired a love for History, and since it appeared that God planned to use his teaching abilities for a while, Scharf spent five summers working in a full schedule of History courses at the University of Wisconsin in Madison.

In 1937 Instructor Scharf became Pastor Scharf as he accepted the call to serve two congregations named St. Paul's, one in Slinger and the other near Cedar Lake.

Four years later a young woman by the name of Irene Zarling came into the life of Pastor Scharf. They met at an Easter



sunrise service. Irene was teaching in West Bend at the time where that service was being held. She accompanied the choir while the choir performed an Easter cantata. He was the guest-preacher. Irene had graduated from D.M.L.C. in 1930 and had by the time of this meeting taught in Hortonville, Wisconsin, and at Seberwaing, Michigan. Her father was the pastor in Iron Ridge. Since Irene had grown up in a parsonage she was well prepared to assist Erwin in his parsonage. They decided to be married on July 30, 1941.

The entrance of the United States into World War II would have a direct effect on Scharf's ministry. In October, 1942 the Spiritual Welfare Commission requested the Slinger parish to give Pastor Scharf a two-years' leave of absence to become our Synod's first full-time civilian chaplain in Louisiana. He was given permission to choose his own replacement from that years uncalled Seminary graduates. He chose Norbert Reim. Soon after that Erwin, Irene, and their four-months' old son Ralph were soon on their way to serve in the seven large encampments as well the large maneuver area in that state.

The Spiritual Welfare Commission (now known as the Special Ministries Board) furnished Scharf with lists of the servicemen in his area. During the week he would look up as many of these men as he could. On Sundays he would hold services twice, once in De Ridder in the morning and again in Alexandria in the evening. After the morning service the De Ridder people quite frequently served a pot-luck dinner to the service men present

and to the Scharfs ala "Southern Hospitality". Irene always accompanied the pastor on these trips as organist and Ralph was willingly attended by military baby-sitters.

In 1944, while the Nazis were going down to defeat and the U.S. did not need any longer to train such large units of new troops Scharf completed his assignment in Louisiana and returned to Slinger. Soon after their return to Slinger, their second child was born, a daughter, Charlotte. On November 1 of 1944 they were busy moving to Rhineland. Their stay in Rhineland lasted for 12 years. These were 12 years of some of the busiest times and fondest memories of his career. One of the major projects that was to be undertaken upon his arrival was the building of a new grade school. Seven years after his arrival the school was completed and dedicated on December 10, 1951. During his tenure in Rhineland he and his wife were blessed with two more children, giving them a total of four: Ralph, Charlotte, Helen, and Madeline.

During the summer of 1956 Pastor Scharf received a Call to teach at Northwestern. This called for a difficult decision. While he did not completely like the idea of leaving the parish ministry, he did have to admit that his twelve years in Rhineland were too often disturbed by calls. There had been ten of them, of which seven were for returning to teach. It was fortunate that this call came during the summer, in early July. There was time for deliberation and then some preparation. Arrangements were made for moving in August.

In those days the separation between the College and Prep Departments had not been really given serious thought as yet. He taught some courses in each - largely History and Religion with occasional courses in German and Latin. During his years at Northwestern, Professor Scharf has served on a number of committees on campus, also retaining his love for drama by serving as advisor to the Rostra and Forum for a number of years.

In speaking with several former students of Professor Scharf, there was a great amount of respect and admiration for the man by all the students. It was very evident that he conducted himself in and out of the classroom to the best interest of the students. There wasn't an activity at school that he would be absent from. Sections of each class would be invited over to the Scharf residence for a dinner or snacks. Perhaps it was the relationship he had had with Dr. Ott that convinced him it was important to have a good relationship with the students. When Students had problems, they could be found walking to the doorstep of Professor Scharf. Helen, the daughter of Professor Scharf, recalls many students coming over to speak with her father.

In addition to his work on campus, Scharf has served our Synod through membership on the Synod Board for Parish Education, the Synod Educational Upgrading Committee, the Synod Interchurch Relations Commission, known then as the Doctrinal Commission, and during the 50's and 60's, when a split with Missouri was inevitable, he was asked to serve as secretary of the Synod's

Protest Committee. Of all the boards he was on, the one he enjoyed most was the Synod's Doctrinal Commission. It was very challenging especially when meeting with the theologians from Germany. He was also made chairman of the Synod Committee for planning the 500th anniversary of Luther's birthday. This was a varied and lasting assignment. For one thing it meant preaching the opening sermon for the 1983 convention of Synod in New Ulm, as well as an opening sermon for the State Teachers' Convention in October of the same year in Milwaukee. It called also for an assignment to prepare five essays on the theme: "Martin Luther, Reformer in the Making". These were to be delivered at the five Monday afternoon sessions of the Milwaukee area Pastor's Institute at the Seminary. During the following seasons there were invitations for the reading of these essays or major parts of them for six different districts of the Synod. By the time that was done, there was a request from the Northwestern Publishing House that the five essays be recast into the form of a book by the same title. It was published in 1987 and is still being sold by the Publishing House.

For many teachers, the summer is a time to relax and prepare oneself for the upcoming school year, not so for Professor Scharf. Since 1960 he spent thirteen summers as a visiting professor for summer sessions at DMLC. The classes he taught there include Comparative Religions, the Lutheran Confessions, the Life of Christ, and the Epistle to the Romans.

In 1967, a war had once again affected Scharf's ministry.

In the summer of that year, at the age of 60 when most men are planning how they should soon spend their retirement, Scharf was again asked to take a leave of absence for a civilian chaplaincy. This time he was to go halfway around the world to Vietnam, to serve our Synod's lists of servicemen in that war-torn country. He stayed there from the summer of 1967 to the winter of 1968 and returned with a treasury of war stories to tell. As one might well expect, such an adventure had a profound effect on the professor, accentuating for him the blessings we enjoy as Americans. Such an impression is reflected in a letter he wrote while in Vietnam, part of which was published in a 1967 edition of the Black and Red. In it he wrote, *"Working with the servicemen has been most rewarding, in spite of the fact that the conditions of war make it very trying to get to them and they to me. One thing I can say in all honesty without being a bit paternal, thank God everyday for the privilege you have of staying at school and preparing for the high calling of bringing God's voice and truth to a world sick enough to have caused what I see here in Vietnam. Thank Him, too, that you have been born an American and under the grace of the Gospel. Over here one really sees what those things should mean to us."*

(Slide show of Vietnam experience)

One of the highlights of this interview was speaking with Professor Scharf about his Vietnam experience. Even though many friends and colleagues tried to talk him out of going because of the danger involved, there was never a hesitation on his part.

He shared with me some of his first impressions of that trip. It happened that his first time in an airplane was the trip to Vietnam. This first time flying experience seemed minor compared to the culture shock he was about to encounter. There were people everywhere. Over three million people lived in the city of Saigon. People from the countryside moved to the city to avoid the war. The streets were cluttered with people walking, riding, selling, and even living. Fire hydrants were frequently opened so people could wash their clothes and dishes. Living space was scarce. People would build their homes over the rivers and up to the railroad tracks. The river was used for everything; toilet, laundry, and even swimming.

There was a certain odor that was unavoidable. Perhaps it was from the unsanitary conditions or the garbage dumped in the streets. It could have been from the "Nuc-mom" that was used for cooking. Nuc-mom was the sauce made by filling huge vats with raw fish and burying them with onions, letting the whole mixture rot until it ran off in a juice. That juice was the nuc-mom which they poured over their hot dishes.

Men left most of the work for women, even the hard work, like fixing the streets. Women did whatever they could to get by. Some would cook a meal and then carry it in a harness on their shoulders until they found a vacant spot on some filthy street corner. Then they would set up their portable restaurant. Some women went in for prostitution, others would sell themselves as slaves. There was certainly a culture shock for one coming

from foreign shores.

Buddha played a significant role in the Vietnamese culture. Big statues, Buddhist shrines, temples, and parks were every where. Funeral processions seemed to be present on a daily basis. Buddha seemed to be present in every aspect of the culture. It made evangelizing difficult.

Once over in Vietnam, Professor Scharf's task was outlined as follows. The Spiritual Welfare Commission would send him a list of names at each camp from the WELS churches. He would then send a letter to these gentlemen informing them that he would be coming to the camp to see them. He would ask them to reply if possible. The difficult part came in trying to reach each camp. A person took their own life in their hands when going on the streets of Saigon. Professor Scharf was in three transportation accidents during his stay in Saigon.

There were several different types of transportation. The most common means was by bicycle or motor-cycle. Many people would place a carriage in front of the bicycle and taxi people around. Cars and buses jammed the streets. Occasionally, Professor Scharf would take a helicopter from one camp to another. These different trips to the various camps would bring out a plethora of stories which unfortunately are not in the scope of this assignment. The Professor would do whatever he possibly could to see the men on his lists. We'll let a number of the pictures which will be shown in the adjoining video to illustrate the truth of that statement. Most of his contacts for

Communion were with one man at a time. On Sundays anyone who chose to look for Pastor Scharf knew that he stayed at his room in his hotel in Saigon. There he would have a service for six or seven men twice or three times a day. These were not large groups, but his consolation was always this that these contacts with men of his own faith and confession were encouragingly more than the military chaplains dared hope to serve in their gatherings where they had to accept any and all Protestants. Even after the Vietnam war ended there were servicemen or their parents who contacted Pastor Scharf to thank him for his efforts to serve their spiritual welfare.

The end of the first semester would in those days come at the end of January. In 1968, that meant that Pastor Scharf's leave of absence would end at that time. Since the Spiritual Welfare Commission hoped he might visit smaller groups of men either serving or training in a variety of bases in peaceful surroundings in the Pacific, they sent him lists of such men and suggested that he spend January looking them up. Leaving as soon as he could meet his successor and show him around a bit he flew from Saigon to make stops at the following areas: Bangkok in Thailand, Hong Kong in China, Taipei in Taiwan, Tokyo in Japan, and, finally, Hawaii. With the help of a couple stationed there, Col. and Mrs. Karl Kuckhahn, it was possible to end the whole tour with a gathering of 44 people in the chapel at Fort Shafter. This may have been the beginning of our mission in Honolulu.

In 1981, after twenty-five years at Northwestern and 51



years in the ministry, professor Scharf decided to retire. He taught one more year to allow his replacement to better prepare himself for such a large assignment. By that time it had become an eventful and multifaceted 52 year ministry. He served as Pastor in three different congregations, as a teacher on three different campuses, as chaplain for troops in two different wars, as the preacher of the Gospel on two continents, and has toured a third to better teach its history. He had to struggle 36 times with calls throughout his ministry. Few ministers experience such adventures, and Professor Scharf points to such variety as a characteristic in his ministry for which he is very thankful.

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