

THE WELS HISTORICAL INSTITUTE: A "NEW AND IMPROVED" HISTORICAL RESOURCE

By Martin O. Westerhaus

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Westerhaus, Martin O  
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11831 W. Seminary Drive, 65W  
Mequon, Wisconsin

My subject as announced in our program reads: "The WELS Historical Institute: A New Research Collection." I have taken the liberty of changing that somewhat to read: "A New and Improved Historical Resource." We are all familiar with the old advertizing slogan: "new and improved." It informs us that a product has undergone a change, a change which the seller considers an improvement.

The archival institution that today bears the name WELS Historical Institute, while not entirely new has undergone change, change which we who are connected to it feel is a great improvement. The history of the archives of the Wisconsin Ev. Luth. Synod goes back to the beginning of the synod in 1850. But just in the past few years there have been rather dramatic changes, significant improvements. Four years ago an historical society of the Wisconsin Synod was organized. Two and one half years ago publication of a journal was begun. Six months ago a museum building was dedicated. To all of these the name WELS Historical Institute was attached. If there is a certain familiarity to that name and the nature of the organization it denotes, if there is a striking similarity to another historical organization that is rather prominent hereabouts, let me say frankly at the outset, this is no accident or mere coincidence. Let me also remind you members of the CHI of the old adage that: "Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery."

In accordance with Dr. Suelflow's request I wish this afternoon to bring you some information on the historical background, the nature of the collection, and the operation and services of our archives, and some information, too, about the fledgling historical society, journal and museum which share the name WELS HISTORICAL INSTITUTE.

The Wisconsin Synod was organized in 1850 by three pastors and two candidates. The pastors were graduates of the mission school at Langenberg in Germany. One of the candidates had washed out of the Langenberg mission school, the other had had a similar experience at the school at Basel.

The curriculum of these mission schools covered three years. Thus none of the men involved in the organization of the Wisconsin Synod had a standard theological education at a German university. And yet, in spite of the weaknesses of their training, these men recognized the need for historical records and archives. The first constitution of the "German Ev. Luth. Synod of Wisconsin and other States" as the synod was originally known, provided for synodical archives:

(Ch. 10, par. 2) "The Ministerium has its own archives, in which all letters, requests, and complaints, etc., which belong to the Ministerium are preserved.

Par. 3: Without the permission of an official the keeper of the archives may not lend out, much less destroy, any documents.

Par. 4: However, every member of the Ministerium and every delegate of a congregation who is a member of the synodical association, shall have access to the archives in the presence of the supervisor or a synodical official. 1)

One is curious as to why the archives were considered the property of the Ministerium, rather than the synod as a whole, but since lay delegates were granted access to the archives perhaps the distinction is not of great significance. We notice that nothing is said about the selection of an archivist, nor the term of service. Nor do the minutes of the first convention shed any light on the identity of the archivist, if one was appointed.

In view of the small size of the new church body it would appear to be a safe assumption that Pastor John Muehlhaeuser, who drafted this first constitution and was elected the first president of the Wisconsin Synod, himself saw to the archivist's duties and stored the slowly gathering number of archival documents of the little synod in his own study.

In 1975 the late Rev. Carl Goette, a retired pastor of the Missouri Synod presented to the Wisconsin Synod the desk of his grandfather, Pastor John Muehlhaeuser. The desk was prominently displayed at the 1975 WELS convention. Since then it has been on display in the library of our Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. I would like to think that that interesting old desk with its numerous cubbyholes served as the first archives of the Wisconsin Synod. 2)

Evidence that other pastors beside Muehlhaeuser in the young synod were actively concerned about the preservation of the Wisconsin Synod's history and the history of its congregations is found in a 1858 memorial of the Southern Pastoral Conference approved by the synod convention of that year resolving that:

"The honorable President be requested to prepare the history of the Synod from the beginning to now, which history shall be updated by the synodical secretary annually; and that it shall be the duty of all preachers of the synod to prepare a history of their respective congregations since their founding; that said histories shall be brought up to date every five years, and a copy shall be submitted to the synodical secretary." 3)

President Muehlhaeuser did prepare a history of the beginnings of the Wisconsin Synod he presented it as a sort of parting gift at the 1860 convention which saw him retire from the presidency. Long assumed lost, its content unknown for many a decade, that tenth anniversary history by Muehlhaeuser was discovered earlier this year.

In 1863 a revised constitution was adopted. Again one is happy to note that the maintenance of synodical archives was provided for:

(Section XI, par. 71) "All the more important letters and documents are preserved in the archives of the synod.

Par. 72. "The archivist appointed for this purpose from among the number of the older preachers is responsible for the conscientious preservation of the archives. 4)

Again there is no record of who carried out the duties of archivist.

There were several changes in the presidency of the synod in the 1860's. John Bading served 1860 to 1863 when he resigned to spend a year in Europe collecting monies for the seminary-college building the synod hoped to erect. Gottlieb Reim served from 1863 to 1865, William Streissguth from '65 to '67. Bading again assumed the presidency in 1867, serving until 1889. In all these years there was no mention of synodical archives as far as we have been able to determine. Only within the past year has research revealed that some hitherto unexamined materials, in fact 7 linear feet of materials, in the archives of Northwestern College, the Wisconsin Synod's pre-theological school were in fact papers from the presidencies of John Muehlhaeuser and John Bading.

Bading's successor as president was Pastor Philip von Rohr, son of Captain Heinrich von Rohr right hand man of J. A. A. Grabau in the famed Old-Lutheran emigration from Prussia in 1838-1839. Von Rohr served until his death in 1908. <sup>Apparently</sup> no records of Von Rohr's administration have survived.

A number of major changes in the synod's schools together with administrative changes in the synod may have been responsible, at least in part, in the loss of some records. The Wisconsin Synod opened a theological seminar in Watertown, Wisconsin, in 1863. In 1865, after the completion of a suitable building, a college, Northwestern College, was conducted on the same campus. Northwestern College has remained on the same site to the present. Up to 1870 the combined Seminary - College at Watertown was the only educational institution operated by the synod, and thus the logical place to preserve historical records. In 1870 the seminary was closed and its students transferred to Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, while Missouri Synod college students were to attend Northwestern. In 1878 as a consequence of the state synod controversy with Missouri, Wisconsin again opened its own seminary, but now located in Milwaukee. The first year it was housed in two small houses, for the second and following years a remodeled hall in old park became the seminary building. In 1893 completely new quarters were provided in the western suburb of Wauwatosa. And by 1929 those quarters too were outgrown and the seminary moved to its present campus some 15 miles north of downtown Milwaukee in what is now the city of Mequon.

In addition there were organizational changes. In 1892 the Wisconsin Synod joined in a federation with the Minnesota Synod and the Michigan Synod. Both of these bodies, like the Wisconsin Synod had been founded by men trained in the German mission schools. The three synods shared in the support of and drew their ministerial candidates from the seminary at Wauwatosa. But the federation was not too stable from 1894 to 1904 almost two thirds of the Michigan Synod tried to maintain their own seminary and withdrew from the federation. That may explain why in the constitution which was the basis for the 1892

federation there is no mention of archives.

By 1917 the three partners in the 1892 federation had become comfortable enough with each other to agree to a merger in which the previously self-governing Synods of Minnesota and Michigan became districts in the Ev. Luth. Joint Synod of Wisconsin and other States. The considerably larger Wisconsin Synod was divided into three districts in the new body. There were also separate districts in Nebraska and the Dakotas. Again it must be reported concerning the 1917 constitution that there was no mention of archives. G. E. Bergemann served as Wisconsin Synod from 1908 to 1917 and as Joint Synod president until 1933. John Brenner served as president from 1933 until 1953. Not until 1949, almost the close of the Brenner years, did the subject of archives again appear in the synodical records. Just a year before the synod's centennial archives became a subject of synodical discussion and action. Near the end of his presidential message that year Brenner added the comment:

"Some of the valuable documents of our synod are stored in Watertown, others at Thiensville. They should be brought together and filed properly. A Committee composed of Prof. A. Schaller, and Pastors R. W. Huth and E. Tacke will make recommendations at a later time. 5)

In 1951 the Seminary Board reported to that year's convention:

"The room above the faculty room in the tower is being made ready to house the Synod's archives." 6)

Over the signature of R. W. Huth the January 10, 1954, issue of the Northwestern Lutheran carried an article reporting that the "room in the Seminary tower" had been fireproofed and provided with heat, light, shelving, and necessary office equipment. It was reported that congregational and biographical files had been developed as well as a holdings list of periodicals. The article concluded with an appeal for assistance in acquiring older synodical publications, church papers, congregational histories, and biographical materials.

Although the fact was not stated, one of the members of that committee of three appointed in 1949 had become the de facto archivist.

6.

Through a recent telephone conversation with a son of Pastor Raymond W. Huth it was learned that this man had loved archival work and had without compensation worked several afternoons a week at filing and indexing materials in the archives in the seminary tower from 1951 until his retirement in 1967 or 1968.

The son also mentioned on his own that the father had on numerous occasions requested and received valuable assistance in the form of advice or instructions from a "fellow named Suelflow in St. Louis." It was not until 1961 that the Wisconsin Synod gave official recognition to the valuable and faithful service Huth provided. That year for the first time he was listed in the Wisconsin Synod Yearbook as Archivist.

In 1964 the Wisconsin Synod acquired what had previously been a bank building on North Avenue to house its administrative offices. By this time the "room in the tower" at the seminary was pretty well filled with archival materials. Some time between 1964 and Pastor Huth's retirement the archives were moved to the basement of the synod office building on North Avenue. That retirement occurred in 1967 or 1968.

Pastor William F. Schink, at the time serving St. John's Church at Woodland, Wisconsin, was appointed as Huth's successor. Like Huth he donated his services. His skills as archivist were self-taught. Pastor Schink served faithfully through 1982 driving some 35 miles once a week to work in the archives. Upon Pastor Schink's retirement your essayist was asked to assume the duties of archivist, adding them to his regular duties as seminary librarian.

Late in 1983, because of rapid change in the neighborhood the North Avenue synod office building was sold. A replacement building was purchased located at 2929 N. Mayfair Rd. in Wauwatosa. The newly acquired building did not have space adequate for the archives, however. Not long before this plans had been made to move the archives back out to the Seminary at Mequon. The place to be occupied by the archives would not be available until some time in 1986. So on short notice all the materials in the archives were packed in boxes and moved to a vacant classroom in the school of old Salem Luth. Church.

where the first Wisconsin Synod convention once had been held. Plans already were underway to make the old Salem Church into a museum for the Wisconsin Synod. More will be aid aboaut this a bit later. Since the materials in the archives would have to be moved again in one and one half years were to a considerable extent left in the boxes in which they were moved.

At present a new gymnasium is being built at Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. When it is completed the old gymnasium will be divided into three classrooms. And about one third of the gymnasium will be set aside to house the synod's archives. It is hoped the archives can be moved in the summer or fall of 1986. For the present our archives can provide only limited service. We answer those requests for information which can be filled from the resources in the seminary library. In other instances we must inform the inquirers that they will have to await the time when our archives are again shleved and in functioning order.

Dr. Suelflow has asked that some information be given on the scope of our collection. We have at best a basic synodical archival collection. There are complete runs of synodical and district proceedings, the Gemeindeblatt and Northwestern Lutheran, our seminary's theological journal, the Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly, our teachers' journal, the Lutheran Educator.

We have incomplete runs of catalogs, yearbooks, school papers, and alumni newsletters of our synodical schools and area Lutheran high schools.

The presidential papers of former Presidents Bergemann, Brenner, and Naumann are preserved prettywell intact. Only a few of the papers of district presidents have come to us. We have 6drawers of congregational materials and two of biographical materials on pastors and teachers. The papers of the LCMS, ALC, and LCA of recent decades are in the collection plus a scattering of other periodicals which came to the president's office in recent years.

No count was kept in the past of the number of items received in the archives. By way of statistics we can only offer some rough measurements.



We have somewhat over 500 linear feet of shelving with close to 500 filled. We have about 50 drawers of materials in filing cabinets.

Once the materials presently in the archives have been moved to their new home in the old gymnasium and been properly arranged and organized there we hope to fill in and build our collection more rapidly and thoroughly. Since the seminary library and the synodical archives will be in close proximity to each other there will be no need for duplication of non-synodical materials. Some materials of an archival nature presently in the seminary library will be transferred to the archives.

Concerning the current operations of the archives, requests for information from congregations are filled as I am able to get at them in my spare time with about four hours per week of student assistance. Publicity concerning the WELS Historical Institute has brought a noticeable increase in requests in the past year or two. Increased staffing is our most pressing need. But I imagine ours is by no means a unique situation.

I have spent somewhat more time on the history of our Wisconsin Synod archives than I had intended. Permit me to tell you something too about the organization of our WELS Historical Institute and of the historical society, historical journal, and museum which have come into being in the last few years.

In October 1978 the librarians of all synodical schools, representatives of synodical faculties, area high school faculties, and editors of our church paper and the Northwestern Publishing House met at Dr. Martin Luther College for what was described as a Bibliographic conference. The purpose, simply put, was to explore the possibility of producing on a regular on-going basis some sort of cumulative index to WELS periodicals and other theological publications. There was general agreement on the desirability and need for such information. In the course

In the course of discussions someone voiced the opinion that more complete archives, better access to them, and perhaps some sort of organization such as the Concordia Historical Institute would be highly desirable. This comment brought numerous echoes of agreement. AS a result the conference appointed a committee of three to investigate not only the possibility of producing some comprehensive indexing system for synodical publications, but also to study the possibility of establishing a historical institute of our own. The proposal for a pilot project indexing system was in due time drawn up, forwarded to the synod, and given synodical approval. But it failed to get off the ground because hoped for funding never materialized.

However, the question of organizing an historical society was placed before a representative sampling of WELS pastors by means of a questionnaire. Those questioned gave their enthusiastic support.

The committee then, with the approval and support of the synod Commission on Higher Education, which had authorized the bibliographic conference, a resolution to the 1979 WELS convention authorizing the formation of an historical institute. The synod passed the resolution and also approved the appointing of a committee of six to draw up plans and make necessary preparations for the organization of such a historical institute.

That committee of six placed before the 1981 WELS convention a resolution authorizing the organization of the WELS Historical Institute to support and encourage archival and historical work in WELS. The enabling resolutions also called for the new organization to be included in the bylaws of the WELS constitution as an authorized synodical agency and provided for the appointment by the WELS praesidium of five of the members of the Board of Directors. This resolution also passed.

ON Oct. 28, 1981, over 70 people assembled in the chapel of Wis. Lutheran College in Milwaukee for the organizational meeting of the WELS Historical Institute. A constitution drawn up by the planning committee

was read, discussed and given preliminary approval. Five additional positions on the Board of Directors were filled by ballot.

Those in attendance also heard a memorable address by Edward C. Fredrich, chairman of the Church History Department of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. Fredrich stated that the ultimate aim of all church history endeavors is an appreciation of the working of the Holy Spirit through the Gospel to save sinners for eternity. He also sketched the scope of the work of a church historical society by quoting a remark made earlier by Conrad Bergendoff to the effect that "Whoever and whatever is used in Gospel proclamation is worthy of attention, not as an isolated fragment of information, but as a part of the total picture of the work of the church."

Since then meetings have been held twice a year in May and October. To make the meetings of the WELS H. I. accessible to more people the place of the meetings has been moved about to various centers of larger WELS population: Milwaukee, Watertown, Fond du Lac, New Ulm, MN, and Saginaw. Attendance has varied from a low of 42 to a high of 270. Membership dues are \$10 for an individual, \$15 for husband and wife, \$25 for a sponsor, \$50 for a congregation. Memberships have risen to over 800. When planning began not even the most optimistic would have predicted such a response.

The first major project to occupy the Board of Directors after initial organization and constitutional matters had been dealt with was the publication of a journal. Some of the more conservative members of the Board counselled caution and a wait and see attitude to determine how large the membership would become. But the more enthused carried the day in discussions. Approval of a grant in the amount of \$9,600 from the A.A.L. made the publication of several sample issues possible. It was decided to send free copies of the first two issues to all pastors, teachers, and congregations of the Wisconsin Synod. Rev. James Schaefer, editor of the Northwestern Lutheran, agreed to take on duties

of the editor for the historical journal as well. He has several capable and enthused younger people to assist with editorial chores and writing. Subscriptions to the WELS Historical Institute Journal, as our publication was named, are included in membership with the Institute. Five issues have appeared to date. The evidence suggests that the Journal gave a considerable push to our membership. The papers read at Institute meetings are printed along with other articles and materials. There have been articles on John Muehlhaeuser, founder and first president of WELS, on J.P. Koehler, noted church historian and seminary president who became involved in the "Protes'tant Controversy" of the late 20's and was suspended both as president and professor of our seminary. The Journal appears twice a year. An issue usually encompasses 48 pages. The most recent issue is an exception. It contains the fascinating account of explorations in Africa carried out by Pastors Edgar Hoenecke and Arthur Wacker in 1949 in search of a suitable site for the first WELS foreign mission. This issue runs to 72 pages. The next issue will carry a translation of John Muehlhaeuser's history of the first ten years of the Wisconsin Synod which was discovered in the archives of Northwestern College last year. We realize that maintaining the level of the first issues will be a challenge, but so far the WELS Historical Institute Journal has been interesting reading and a source of satisfaction to all involved.

Another challenging project undertaken by our fledgling group was the acquisition of the Salem Landmark Church on Milwaukee's far northwest side as a museum and meeting facility. Salem Ev. Lutheran Church was one of the charter members of the Wisconsin Synod. It was in the original log church that the first regular convention of the Wisconsin Synod was held in May, 1850. In 1863 a new church of cream city brick was built. In recent years (1949) a one story, two room school building was attached at the rear. The expanding city brought significant growth to what

was once a small rural congregation. A new school and church were built in 1977. In 1983 SAlem congregation offered to lease its old church and school to the WELS Historical Institute for use as a meeting place and a museum. The Board recommended that the offer be accepted. At its fall, 1983 meeting, the Institute voted to accept the offer. In spring of 1984 word came that an application for a grant of \$68,500 from the Aid Association of Lutherans in Appleton, Wisconsin has been approved. The grant made possible the installation of a new energy efficient heating system, lexon storm glass, a sprinkler system, an alarm system including smoke detectors, new roofing, gutters and downspouts, sewer and water hook-up to the city systems, and the painting of all the trim. On April 21 this past spring 275 people gathered at Salem Landmark Church to participate in the re-dedication of the restored facilities.

A lot has happened, a lot of things have been accomplished in the seven years since the desire for a WELS Historical Institute was first voiced and in the four years since the Institute was organized. We who have been involved can only express our joy and amazement and sense of deep gratitude to the Lord who has so richly blessed our imperfect efforts. There is also a sobering realization that the more difficult tasks of maintaining and enlarging the scope of our efforts at historical preservation lie ahead. William Corey's motto "Expect great things from God; Attempt great things for God" comes to mind. We certainly must and do look to our God to provide motivation, means and methods to advance our WELS Historical Institute. We are also grateful that there is here in St. Louis your Concordia Historical Institute and your August Suelflow. We will, I am sure, continue to gain instruction and encouragement from the "old pros" in this business.

End Notes.

- 1) This first constitution was drafted by John Muehlhaeuser and adopted at the first convention of the Wisconsin Synod. A copy was appended to the proceedings of the first convention. The paragraphs cited are on p. 12.
- 2) The Northwestern Lutheran of September 21, 1975, vol. 62, no. 19, an article about and a picture of the Muehlhaeuser desk.
- 3) 1858 Synodical Proceedings, p. 12.
- 4) This revised constitution was appended to the proceedings of the 1863 convention. The paragraphs quoted are on p. 12.
- 5) 1949 Wisconsin Synod Proceedings, p. 18.
- 6) 1951 Proceedings, p. 77.