



# **THE SPRINGFIELDER**

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# Springfield Revisited

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IT WAS A HOT DAY in Springfield almost fifty years ago. I was wandering up Enos Avenue, past the shoe factory and the little houses huddled along the way up to the big building which dominated the end of the street. It was just 2:00 p.m. and I was overdue at my first meeting of the faculty of Concordia Seminary, Springfield, Illinois.

Up the old creaky stairs to the second floor of the ancient "Kaffee Mühle" I found the faculty assembled. Let their names be immortalized here since none of them is any longer in the land of the living. There was "Daddy" Klein, the president, known to generations of students as a kindly and generous man—"Pat" Wessel, professor of Exegesis, whitehaired and a great raconteur—"Doc" Engelder, professor of Dogmatics, as keen a mind as ever studied a Scripture text—"Pop" Behrens, professor of Isagogics, a cultured gentleman—"Doc" Wenger, professor of German and Exegesis, the incarnation of Melancthon—"Fred" Mayer, professor of New Testament, who later became famous—"Tubby" Hoffmann, professor of English and Science, known for his iron discipline—"Prof" Neitzel, professor of Homiletics, known as the best preacher in the Missouri Synod—"Mart" Coyner, professor of Mathematics and Science, a first-rate teacher. There they were—the men destined by a curious combination of circumstances to take hold of a small group of young men and to shift them from one area of life to another. They knew, that afternoon marking the beginning of a new school year, that this task would not be easy; there would be rough spots and some bad going. But the goal was clear and beckoning; to make out of this haphazard collection of men from the middleclass of America a group of soldiers of the King who set their faces toward new horizons and their hands to new tasks.

Their task was great, and the material not too promising. I did not know them then, but gradually the students came into focus. There was a farm boy from North Dakota who had found an answer to his problems in the books and halls of the Seminary. There was a boy from Detroit who had learned something greater than the noise of the assembly line. They were a strange lot, held together by a common goal and a common desire to give their lives to a God Who had drawn them from the wayside to the center of service to Him. I remember H, a brilliant student—N, who would have made

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a first-rate sergeant in the Marine Corps—G, who would have been a success anywhere. All different, all individuals, all dedicated!

However, let no one misunderstand! These recruits from the world around us had not left all evidence of their background behind them. In protest against some ill-considered action of the faculty they regularly rose in protest. They wanted us to remember that we were serving in the Protestant Tradition. These periodic protests were normally directed against a physical condition; as for example, the presence or absence of telephones in the dormitories. To restore the telephones was great crusade, aided and abetted by all who had an axe to grind.

But beyond the telephones there was little to disturb the way of our daily existence. Classes for me began at 7:00 a.m. with a special group who had decided to study Greek. Twenty-four showed up for this excursion into something so removed from their previous experience. May I say here and now that it was a very good class—ideal, in fact. The boys really wanted to study and it was a joy to help along. Not all classes were like this, but the majority were. It was like Wittenberg at the time of Melancthon's greatest teaching power.

In fact, this was my warmest and greatest memory of Springfield in those days. Many of the boys felt that somebody had gotten ahead of them and they were anxious to catch up. A good example was Neitzel's class in Homiletics. I have already referred to the fact that Neitzel was beyond doubt the best teacher of sermonizing in the Missouri Synod—sharp, eloquent, always to the point. Students studied for him as they did for no one else. The *fundamentum dividendi* had to be sound and logical. No romantic mish-mash. The result was good sermons, logically divided and easily followed. Above all, Gesetz and Evangelium were always there. Students sometimes complained that while his results were good, they were often reached the wrong way. Never mind, said Neitzel in word and deed, this is the result I want, and through hard work, and more hard work, I propose to get it. And he did.

One of the most remarkable things about the student-body was its vivid memory of key Bible passages which applied to a given situation. Their elementary and secondary training in Synod's schools had been accurate and good. They knew what Scripture meant and what they were trying to say. It was this humility before God's Word which made the Seminary unique. It was the time of Wellhausen and Harnack, but few were the students who followed their theories. Neitzel, or Wessel, or Behrens thundering away were sufficient provokers against them. Granted, this was a simple way of handling these messengers of darkness. We knew exactly where they stood and why we opposed them. Granted, too, that occasionally our warfare was oversimplified and irrelevant. A simple "Thus saith the Lord" may have been too simple, but it had power and might. It enabled us to walk serenely between the voices of the day clamor-

ing for our attention and threatening to destroy the magnificent simplicity of "Thus saith the Lord." This was good.

So in the long history of our Seminary these were quiet years. I remember very little of the meeting that September afternoon. Only that a few men—and an assistant—were concerned about the future. About the men who would carry on when the going got rough. Little did we know that September day that we would see evil days, both in the world and in the Church. A month later the world would collapse and we would see days of hunger on the streets of Springfield and Chicago and starvation would walk on our highways and in our streets. It was quiet in the room in the old "Kaffee Mühle"—quiet with the strange quietness of children waiting for a storm. But it was also the quietness of children who knew that they were doing a good thing for Him Who began it on a raging sea.

This was the strength of the old Springfield. It always had a sense of continuity about it, an awareness of the great fact that the lasting, eternal things were here and not out in the world. To these things we were dedicated and committed and from them nothing and nobody could separate us.