

THIS I RECALL

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BY JOHN W. BEHNKEN



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To my family and my Synod

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PREFACE

When Synod's Commission on Church Literature requested me to write my memoirs, a stream of reasons at once coursed through my mind urging me to decline.

No one realizes better than I do that I can lay no claim to the "pen of a ready writer." What literary skill and training I possess have been chiefly applied in the sermonic field. Some preachers, it is true, write sermons that are beautiful literary gems. Mine do not belong in that category. And if they did, this volume would have little relationship to a book of sermons. In revising and polishing the manuscript for publication I gratefully acknowledge the editorial assistance of Rev. Albert W. Galen, assistant editor of the *Lutheran Witness*.

Nor can I claim descent from a distinguished family. My father was a preacher whose very brief career was spent among the cotton patches of rural Texas. His father, I am told, was a teamster who drove the tow horses pulling barges up the Weser River in Germany. Mother's father was an immigrant farmer in Harris County, Tex. That is about as far as anyone has traced the family tree. Please understand me, however. I am both proud and grateful because of my family line. I can pay all my known forebears the very choicest tribute a child and heir can give — all were humble, God-fearing, and truly Christian people.

I am aware, furthermore, that ordinarily memoirs are penned by people of true stature. In that respect I do not qualify. I realize that the good people of our Synod have bestowed high honors on me. I acknowledge them most gratefully. But I know

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full well that I have not deserved them. If time should record any exceptional accomplishments to my name, it was not I, but the grace of God which was with me.

What reason, then, could I have had to accede to the commission request to write about myself? The answer lies in one word: "history." The span of years during which God permitted me to live and work was flooded with events of vast and far-reaching significance to our world, our nation, our church.

These were the years of catastrophic droughts, duststorms, and a nearly disastrous depression; the years of cataclysmic wars which consumed the flower of two generations of men and revolutionized the world's maps, manners, and morals. These were years which men came to measure as "ages" — automotive age, air age, electronics age, nuclear age, space age, the age of power ideologies, of nationalism, of urbanization, of breakthroughs heralding swift and sudden change.

These and the other developments which newsmen often refer to as "races" and as "explosions" have had and will continue to have telling effects on The Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod.

Though in a book of this nature my own person and experiences and activities will necessarily be given greater prominence than they deserve, THIS I RECALL is intended to reflect this historical context. One thing, above all, is important: that the reader recall and realize with a grateful heart how graciously and bountifully God has blessed our church during this period. To that end may He bestow His gracious blessing on these memoirs.

JOHN W. BEHNKEN

Reminiscere Sunday 1964

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CYPRESS, FEDOR, WINFIELD

FROM BIRTH I was a privileged child. Many today, I know, would think otherwise; yet as I look back, I have never thought it other than a privilege that the good Lord permitted me to be born in a lowly home — yes, doubly privileged, because that home was a parsonage.

It had but two rooms and stood on the prairie about two miles northwest of the village of Cypress, in Harris County, Tex. Born March 19, 1884, I was the first child of Pastor and Mrs. George W. Behnken. Father was then serving St. John's, Cypress, and Trinity, Neudorf, two small congregations planted by emigrants from Germany some eight years before.

My recollections of Father are all too few. He died when I was not quite four. A graduate of Northwestern College, the preparatory school of the Wisconsin Synod at Watertown, Wis., he had contracted tuberculosis while continuing his theological studies at the synod's seminary in Wauwatosa (since relocated to Mequon). Following the usual medical advice of those days, he sought the warmer, sunnier climate of southeast Texas, where he could lead a year-round outdoor life, ride, fish, hunt, and the like. A kind family at Rose Hill, Tex., opened their home to him.

With returning health he took a position teaching school and also preached occasionally. By continuing his studies pri-

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vately he was able to pass his ministerial colloquy in Synod's Southern District, of which Texas then formed a part. Shortly afterward he was called by the Cypress and Neudorf congregations.

Father chose this time to ask Helene Wunderlich to share his humble parsonage. Mother was a native Texan. Her mother, my wonderful Grandmother Wunderlich, had come to the Lone Star State as a youngster of 12 and after her marriage settled on a farm with Grandfather near Klein, a German community in Harris County. A brave pioneer soul, she was left widowed with six small children when Grandfather lost his life in a powder-mill explosion during the Civil War.

Texas Homestead

After only four years in the ministry Father's dreadful malady again flared up and forced him to resign. Our little family of four (Sister Meta was also born at Cypress) thereupon moved to Klein, where Grandmother Wunderlich had provided us with a parcel of land from the family homestead. She also assisted us to build a small home. One of my vivid early recollections is how one day Father was helping to shingle the roof of this home and how he came down the ladder with the carpenter to enjoy the lunch I had laboriously trudged over from Grandmother's, about a quarter mile away. I had gotten terribly thirsty on the way but simply couldn't uncork the water bottle I carried to take a drink.

I remember Father as one who "placed the apple beside the rod." He was strict but also kind and loving. I remember his hearty laugh and how he loved to sing. I remember, too, how kind he was to Mother, and she to him. Memories few, but to me very precious.

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For five years the little farmhouse at Klein was home for my widowed mother and her brood of three. Brother Will had followed Sister Meta into the family a month after Father's death. (Both brother and sister are still living — Will in Houston and Meta, who married J. G. Steglich, now deceased, in Austin.)

Such things as a synodical Board of Support and Pensions were unknown in those days. But God provided. Mother raised vegetables, chickens, and eggs for the market. A few cows supplied our milk and butter. Mother did her own sewing and also sewed some things for others. She helped Grandmother around the home and my uncles in the field, and they in turn helped us. Very early in life I learned to hoe corn, to "chop" cotton, and to keep up with the others in filling our long shoulder sacks at cotton-picking time. That we all should pitch in and help one another was simply taken for granted. All in all it was a wonderful relationship and proved to be a genuine blessing.

Like most young Texans I learned to ride horseback quite early. For my fourth birthday Jacob Zahn, my sponsor, gave me a little tame bronco with saddle to match. I would ride out to the open prairie each evening with Uncle Will to drive home and "pen up" the cattle. At six, when I started to go to school, Cousin Clara Wunderlich and I would ride horseback tandem style to and from the little one-room school of Trinity Congregation in Klein, about three miles from our home.

My teacher, John P. Daenzer, was a wonderful Christian gentleman. It so happened that with the exception of some two months he was my teacher throughout my elementary school years. For shortly after our family moved from Klein to Fedor, Teacher Daenzer followed a call to this Lee County parish, where I lived the remainder of my youth.

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Fedorensis

After five years of widowhood Mother was married to the Rev. Gotthilf Birkmann, pastor of Trinity Church, Fedor. Pastor Birkmann was a widower with three children. Overnight our family had doubled in size. In the course of time God blessed our household with seven more children, one of whom died in infancy. Thus we were a family of brothers and sisters, stepbrothers and stepsisters, half brothers and half sisters. A story sometimes related in Texas pastoral conference circles told how a fellow pastor, while visiting Father Birkmann one day, saw him jump up, run to the window, and call: "Mother, come quick! Your children and my children are beating up our children." The story is quite apocryphal, I can assure you; just a little joke to badger Father a bit. We were normal children, of course, and had our little tiffs and spats. But thanks especially to Mother's kind nature and her remarkable homemaking abilities, we became a closely welded family and seldom even thought of ourselves in any other way. Truthfully, the only time we spoke of one another as stepbrother or half brother was when we had to explain to someone why we had different names.

Father Birkmann was a man of prodigious learning, largely self-taught. He could handle a half dozen languages amazingly well and was especially well versed in the original Bible tongues. His brethren in the ministry often remarked of his prowess as an exegete, dogmatician, church historian, and homiletician. Yet he was always quiet and retiring. With the exception of two years in Dallas, he spent all his active ministry of more than 40 years in his beloved rural parish at Fedor. Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, awarded him the honorary Doctor of Divinity degree in 1936.

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Father was also a recognized naturalist. Evidence of his accomplishments in this area may be seen from an item appearing in the May 20, 1944, *Houston Chronicle*, written by O. E. Connor, which states: "Two groups of insects are known as the *Birkmanii* and the *fedorensis*. . . . Harvard University's entomology department years ago obtained from Pastor Birkmann some of his bee and wasp collections, containing some 20 varieties unknown to American entomologists until described by the Fedor pastor."

For us youngsters bug hunting for Papa was a favorite pastime. We chased down hundreds of butterflies, beetles, bees, and wasps, and soon were able to distinguish the more common varieties from the rarer specimens Father was interested in.

Life in a country parsonage in a large family circle was always interesting and enjoyable. Certainly it brought us advantages and blessings which could not be had elsewhere. Time and again, as my brothers and sisters and I reviewed the "life in Fedor" chapter of our lives, we agreed that we would not want to trade it for any other and voiced thankfulness to God for leading us as He did. We may not have had all the cultural advantages which many city children enjoyed in that Gay Nineties era, but Father did try to provide some of them. We, for instance, had an Edison phonograph, the model which used the cylindrical records and had a large trumpetlike amplifier perched over the sound box — one of the true marvels of the day.

Parsonage Sorcery

One day I remember Mrs. M., one of the good old ladies of the congregation, happened to call when we had the phonograph going full blast. She rigidly refused to go near the contraption but stood off in the doorway muttering darkly:

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“Das geht nicht mit rechten Dingen zu.” (Something mighty suspicious going on here.) She thought it was some kind of sorcery.

My thoughts returned to good Sister M. and the old Edison when I returned to Fedor a few years ago to preach in the old church for the first time in 50 years. We had whizzed the 13 miles from Giddings to Fedor—once a three-hour horse-and-buggy trip—in just 15 minutes. Part of the overflow congregation could not get into the church. Nevertheless it participated in the entire service while seated in the schoolhouse—by means of a loudspeaker system. Dropping in later to visit a daughter of the country storekeeper of my childhood days, I saw the men in the living room watch the New York Giants–Baltimore Colts world championship football game direct from Yankee Stadium, 1,800 miles away in New York City. If our raucous, crank-handled Edison aroused dire suspicions of black magic, what good Mrs. M. would have called such goings on in Fedor was simply beyond my imagination.

Our parents also saw to it that we were plentifully supplied with good reading material. We loved Margareta Lenk’s stories and the ever-fascinating volumes of *Blätter und Blüten*, issued by the Louis Lange Publishing Co. in St. Louis. We also looked forward eagerly to the arrival of such a family magazine as *Die Abendschule* and such a paper as *Die Rundschau*.

Though practically all our reading material was in the German language and stories and accounts of the old fatherland predominated in it, we were proud to be Americans. I recall how incensed I became when as a lad of 10 I heard one of the older men, who had been a drill sergeant during his compulsory service in the German army, brag to a group down at the store about the German soldier and poking fun at the

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American soldier. Only the fact that I had been repeatedly warned that children must not be disrespectful to old people kept me from stepping up and saying: "If you think it's so much better in your old Germany, why don't you go back there?"

Just when I first entertained the desire to enter the holy ministry I do not remember. God apparently implanted that desire into my heart very early. As I look back, it seems that both my parents and I simply took for granted I would become a pastor. Evidently my younger brothers and sisters felt likewise, for whenever we played church, I was the one who had to take the part of the preacher.

"Johnnies"

In September 1897, when I was 13, Oscar Ernst, the son of a neighboring pastor, and I started out for St. John's College, Winfield, Kans. The Missouri Synod was 50 years old that year and during the previous decade had experienced its sharpest rate of growth, from 350,000 to nearly 700,000 members. By today's standards the trek of a day and a night to Winfield would, I am sure, be called a terrible trip, but we somehow didn't seem to mind it too much. To make the trip we had to ride the old San Antonio-Aransas Pass Line to Cameron, where we made connection with the Santa Fe.

St. John's had been built just four years previously by a Lutheran businessman, John P. Baden, and presented to the English Synod of Missouri and Other States. The English Synod in 1908 transferred the property to the Missouri Synod. In 1911 the English Synod joined Synod as the English District.

Just why my parents decided that I should attend this school,