

## THE CENTRAL PENNSYLVANIA CONFERENCE OF THE EVANGELICAL CHURCH

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### Our Beginnings

Much of the early history of the Evangelical group took place on the virgin soil of the Central Pennsylvania territory. Therefore it is necessary in the preparation of this "Central Centennial" volume<sup>2</sup> to give the events leading up to the organization of the Central Pennsylvania Conference. This conference has had a continuous growth and strategic development from the very beginning of the Evangelical Church. If you would eliminate the events that took place in this section the whole framework and texture of the Evangelical denomination would be an ecclesiastical enigma. The days spent here by the fathers and founders of the Evangelical Church were all pioneer days filled with crusading events.

Our ecclesiastical cradle stood in the open. There was no so much as an Abrahamic tent with wind-swept curtains to afford shelter and protection. Jacob Albright, the heroic founder of the Evangelical Church, never saw an Evangelical church building. The first church edifice erected in the entire denomination was built in modest style on the banks of meandering Penns Creek in New Berlin, Union County, in 1816, eight years after Albright's death.

New Berlin is an inland town nestling at the foot of a mountain and located on the banks of a stream. The mountain speaks of solidity, strength and stability, and the stream speaks of freedom and fluency. This is very suggestive. The history of our church is New Berlin written large. New Berlin became the seat and center of many interests of the Evangelical *corpus*. Here the first publishing house with its modest equipment was located; here the first Evangelical church edifice was built of logs; here the first Evangelical graveyard was purchased; here Union Seminary, the first institution of higher learning, was established; here many annual and general conferences were held. Near this historic village the first German camp meeting in America was held in 1820; near this place the first General Conference was held in the farmhouse of Martin Dreisbach, the father of John Dreisbach, who took such a prominent part in

the foundation and groundwork of the Evangelical Church. Close by this historic spot stands the John S. Dunkel brick house where the parent missionary society was organized in March, 1839.

Our beginnings were small but they had life and potentiality. The personnel of the early pioneer days had conviction, dynamics, courage, aggressiveness, adventure, and a crusading purpose. Their ventures became thrilling adventures. Fiery trails are always attractive and easy to trace. The fathers and mothers of the early days of the Evangelical pathfinders were gifted in prayer and lived devout Christian lives.

Beginnings are always interesting. A cradle is suggestive and is made to rock to and fro with possibilities and potentialities. The acorn suggests the mighty oak. The *Mayflower* of German immigration was the British ship *Concord*. The first colony of Germans came to America in this ship in 1683, two hundred fifty-six years ago. The tide of immigration grew until more than 20,000 families settled in Pennsylvania, among whom was John Albright, the father of Jacob Albright. In the background of our history as a church we have religious intolerance caused by the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 which ended the Thirty Years War. Liberties were gone, lands had been devastated by cruel wars in Europe, the provinces along the Rhine were woefully oppressed and America offered freedom to the Protestants of the Palatinate.

But in this new country these German people became worldly minded and piety was at a low ebb, Bible study was neglected, the Sabbath was desecrated, and having no spiritual shepherds the flocks were scattered and the churches were empty. To remedy this state of affairs, God raised up a Jacob Albright, an Otterbein, an Asbury, and a Winebrenner.<sup>3</sup> These men preached conversion and consecration. At the age of thirty-two, Jacob Albright was soundly converted, and his religious experience was so definite, so real, and so sweeping that he could not doubt it. His conversion had been the real key to the type of religion for which the Evangelical Church has always stood. The emotional element has been somewhat emphasized in our religious services, giving opportunities for lay members to exercise in public prayer and testimony. This distinctive feature has been maintained through the intervening years and the real genius of the Evangelical spirit has been handed down to our day and generation.

Jacob Albright would never have traveled as he did, would never have toiled as he did, would never have suffered persecution as he did, if all he had to give his fellow Germans were but

doubts, negations, and criticisms. But this man of God knew certain great, far-reaching Gospel truths which were vital to him and to his fellow countrymen. He knew he was saved through and through, and had a rich spiritual experience.

Albright became an open-air campaigner because he had an evangelistic urge and delighted to follow stream beds, climb hills, sweep through valleys and penetrate woodlands in search of the lost sheep of the house of Pennsylvania Germans.

Albright's evangelistic campaigns were intensive as well as extensive. He swept the outposts of Central Pennsylvania and was fearless in his proclamation of the truth. His messages were timely and suited the age in which he lived. He placed the emphasis where it belonged. He preached repentance as only he could preach it. The Bible was his textbook and he proclaimed the widening sovereignty of Jesus; for his goal was the evangelization of the German-speaking people of America and Europe.

Big meetings were held to promote the spiritual life and into these the fathers and mothers gathered for fasting, prayer and preaching. Such a meeting was held at Martin Dreisbach's in Buffalo Valley just a few miles west of Lewisburg, in the regions of the Central Pennsylvania Conference on October 25, 1806. Albright, John Alter, and George Miller, all colaborers of Jacob Albright, did the preaching. Their sermons were very powerful. So much so that many people fell on their knees and with penitential tears and earnest outcries besought the Lord to have mercy on them and save them from their sins. The Holy Spirit came upon them with great power. Albright's tours took in the Cumberland Valley, Penns Valley, Brush Valley, Sugar Valley, York County, Freysville, Seitz's appointment on the Loganville Charge, Glen Rock, Shrewsbury, York, down to Virginia, over into Cambria County in the region of Johnstown, Pa. He was a real itinerant. Cheerfulness, buoyancy, positiveness, and earnestness were blended in Albright's character.

### **Some Conference Landmarks**

**The Famous Eyer Barn.** This historic barn is a stone structure and is the center of historic interest in the village of Winfield, Pennsylvania.<sup>4</sup> It was erected by Abraham Eyer in 1805 and has a very substantial appearance, and is, in its stateliness and solid masonry, a type of the Evangelical fathers who worshiped in it.

Mr. Eyer migrated to this section from Lancaster County in 1773 in answer to prayer. His object was to better himself financially and spiritually. His family was large and he needed to improve himself in temporal economy; so he made an overland trip from Lancaster County to Dry Valley in Union County. He halted at a wayside oak, two miles inland from the Susquehanna River, at Winfield, towards New Berlin. Here he located and his pilgrimage ended. This oak was preserved as a landmark for many years.

The earthly possessions of Abraham Eyer at this time consisted of his two horses and a wagon with a few items of household goods and articles of furniture, and three dollars in money. Here this enterprising pioneer found a considerable tract of land unoccupied and took possession of it. The Lord blessed him and his household. Twenty-four years later, in May of 1797, Mr. Eyer bought the river farm at Winfield and erected the famous "Eyer Barn," which is still standing in its substantial beauty. Father Eyer opened his house and barn to Albright and his associates, and many general as well as important meetings were held in this barn. On Sabbath afternoons Father Eyer would call his large family together, and read to them out of his German Bible and explain portions of the same to them. A schoolteacher would sit in occasionally and listen to these expositions. His name was Henry Niebel, who later married one of Mr. Eyer's daughters and became an Evangelical preacher of note.

The ninth annual conference was held in this barn, June, 1816, and Rev. John Dreisbach, Eyer's son-in-law, was the chairman, while Rev. Henry Niebel, the scholar, another son-in-law, was the secretary. Some far-reaching items of business and legislation were considered and transacted in this barn upon this occasion. The publishing interests of our Church were launched here; the call was issued for the holding of the first General Conference; and twelve delegates were elected to constitute the first General Conference. Out of this barn, the first missionaries were sent to the state of Ohio, namely: Adam Hennig and Fred Showers. Adam Hennig, the writer's mother's uncle, was faithful in the discharge of his missionary duties in Ohio and accomplished a great work.

Adam Hennig was an expert as a missionary braving the dangers of the wilderness and the perils of wild beasts. This heroic preacher soon formed a circuit in Ohio, four hundred miles around, beginning at New Philadelphia and extending westward, including such points as Canton, New Lisbon, Wooster, and Mansfield. There was an Evangelical family who cherished the idea and nourished the wish that some day an itinerant preacher of the Evangelical Church would visit them in Ohio and preach a sermon.

This request was strangely granted. While this family was engaged in boiling apple butter, they saw a man on horseback coming down the road. They discovered it was an Evangelical preacher. They investigated and sure enough it was Rev. Adam Hennig from the Eyer barn in Pennsylvania. An appointment was made for the missionary and that evening a large audience came to hear the sermon. A revival broke out and an appointment was established at this point in Ohio.

The General Conference delegates were elected in the Eyer barn, and there were twelve in number: John Dreisbach, John Walter, John Erb, John Stambach, John Kleinfelter, John Dehoff, John Frueh, Henry Niebel, Leonhart Zimmerman, Solomon Miller, David Thomas, Adam Ettinger. The John Walter listed here is not the one who was so richly gifted as a preacher.

**The Dreisbach Home.** The historic Martin Dreisbach home<sup>5</sup> is located in the beautiful Buffalo Valley approximately three miles west of Lewisburg, the Jerusalem of the Central Conference, and here the first General Conference met, October 14-17, 1816, with John Dreisbach as chairman, and Henry Niebel as secretary. Here the new name, "die Evangelische Gemeinschaft," -- The Evangelical Association -- was adopted. The triumvirate of heroes and evangelistic torchbearers, namely, Jacob Albright, George Miller and John Walter held some wonderful meetings in the Dreisbach home. The membership was doubled in 1806. Six classes were organized. The growth of the church went forward with leaps and bounds. Revival fires were burning brightly throughout this central territory. The oldest organization of Evangelicals west of the Susquehanna River was effected in Mifflin County near Lawver's church, and was called the Thomas class. The class leader of the Thomas class was Fred Harpster; the class leader of the Middleburg class in Snyder County was John Walter (not the Rev. John Walter); the class leader of the New Berlin class was Michael Maize; the class leader of the Winfield class was Abraham Eyer; the class leader of the Brush Valley class was Christopher Spangler; and of the Millheim class, George Swartz.

**The John S. Dunkel Home.** John S. Dunkel was married to Leah Dreisbach, a daughter of Martin Dreisbach, and a sister of John Dreisbach. He was a man of business abilities, good judgment, accuracy in his accounts, dependable, a tower of financial strength in those early days. He was favorably known throughout the denomination for his business integrity. His farm was near the Dreisbach farm. This substantial brick farm house was erected in 1834, and is in use today.<sup>6</sup> In this house in a room upstairs located in the southwest corner, on March 1, 1839, the General Missionary Society of the Evangelical Church was organized. The constitution for the same was drawn up and

adopted. The officers were duly elected as follows: president, John Seybert; first vice-president, James Barber; second vice-president, Daniel Berger; third vice president, George Brickley; secretary, Solomon G. Miller; corresponding secretary, W.W. Orwig; treasurer, John S. Dunkel.

John S. Dunkel retained the office of treasurer of the Missionary Society for twenty-five years, and in 1864 at the age of sixty-seven he died in the triumphs of faith. It is interesting to note that three of his accomplished daughters married Evangelical preachers, namely, Susan Dunkel was married to Charles Hammer, a prominent minister, serving as presiding elder, publisher, and superintendent of the Evangelical Orphan Home at Flat Rock, Ohio; Sophia was married to J.G. Miller; and Mary was married to Benjamin Hengst, who was a fluent writer and a spicy preacher, being versed in the Scriptures and able to speak both the German and the English language. He was blessed with the gift of using original and apt illustrations in his sermonic efforts. The Dunkel house is built of brick, is in good repair, and is the property of Isaac Dunkel, a grandson who resides in Lewisburg, Pennsylvania. The eldest granddaughter of John S. Dunkel, Jemima, was married to G.M. Swengel, a brother of Bishop U.F. Swengel. The name of the missionary organization was: "The Missionary Society of the Evangelical Association of North America."

**An Old-Time Camp Meeting.** In 1832, the first camp meeting was held in Brush Valley, Center County, Pennsylvania, on the farm of Christopher Spangler, who was a fine Christian gentleman and opened his house as a preaching place for Jacob Albright in 1805. This meeting among the stately trees was one of the most remarkable ever held in the Central Pennsylvania Conference territory because of its far-reaching consequences. Out of this camp meeting important results issued and the Evangelical work was established in Sugar Valley which became an Evangelical stronghold. Up to this time Evangelicals failed to get a foothold in Sugar Valley because of the antagonism of the people who were strenuously opposed to evangelistic and protracted meetings.

All this was changed by the following episode. A number of men agreed to cross the mountain to attend the Spangler camp meeting and investigate for themselves just what these evangelistic services were like. In the party, who were to make this expedition and scouting survey, were A.W. Berry, U.P. Dubs, and Jacob Kerstetter. They made this tour of inspection in their hunting outfits, armed with rifles and knives, taking with them a jug of whiskey. By the time they arrived at the Spangler residence they were under the influence of liquor and took things

in their own hands, which action terrorized the camp meeting people, as may be supposed. They spent the night on the ground, but the people avoided them and averted a collision with them.

The following morning the three men were discovered sitting on a log near the camp evidently planning their course of procedure for the day. They may have been discussing the merits and demerits of the camp meeting. Father Spangler was a diplomat as well as an adroit manager. He determined to conquer this trio in true Evangelical style. He did. He approached them and addressed them in a kind and gracious manner. This was just what they needed. He did not chide them or reproach them, but assumed that they were visitors and had come to get information and do good. This treatment captured them. Father Spangler said, "I want you to go with me to my tent for breakfast." This was more than they had bargained for when they set out for the camp. After much persuasion backed up by candor and sincerity, they were induced to come to the tent and partake of the tastily-prepared refreshments. Step by step, these men were disarmed of their weapons and their bitter hatred and prejudice. Their confidence was fully gained. They were in a submissive mood. Father Spangler was polite and gracious. In this atmosphere he disarmed them. He said, "As you have come to visit our camp meeting you do not want to be burdened with your guns, and although you mean no harm, yet timid people may think you have evil intentions; besides this, it does not look well to carry guns in a religious meeting; with your permission I will take you hunting outfits over to my house, and then, whenever you wish to go home you can get them." This statement had a warm and generous heart beat in it. The men made a complete surrender to Father Spangler. But a stupendous struggle was going on in their hearts. The powerful preaching of the evening previous, the singing of the German battle choruses and the powerful pleadings by the gifted Evangelicals made them think seriously of God.

Mr. Berry was deeply convicted of sin and began to seek the Lord in the pardon of his sins. He was soundly converted. He knelt at a mourner's bench. He became a potential agent for good in his own community, and a pillar in the Church. He lived an exemplary Christian life.

**Millheim and Musser's Church.** Millheim and vicinity must not be overlooked. Millheim has a splendid Evangelical history. It is a thriving village located in Center County, Pennsylvania. It is in the heart of the industrious farming life and commercial spirit of the valley. Into this section Jacob Albright and his colleagues came. As early as 1804 he found many open doors. The homes of the following were stopping places

for Albright: Paul Bachman, John Adam Hennig, John Wise, Henry Smith, and George Swartz. Here Albright found a warm reception. Among his converts were Matthias and John Betz, who became prominent ministers.

In 1839, at the General Conference held in the Musser church near Millheim, John Seybert was elected the first bishop of the Evangelical Church. This bachelor preacher enjoyed traveling and had the spirit of a pioneer. At this important General Conference a new epoch in the history of our beloved Zion began; 1839 is an outstanding date in the annals of our church. It is a date worthy of a centennial celebration. Thomas Buck was the president, and George Brickley the secretary, of this extraordinary convocation of Evangelicals. At this session the powers of the bishop were defined. Hitherto, the discipline had neither defined nor limited the powers of the General Conference; and its power to alter or to add to the articles of faith and discipline was practically unlimited. At this session these powers were defined. The delegated system was introduced. The delegates to General Conference were to be elected on the basis of one out of every four annual conference members. The German organ *Der Christliche Botschafter* was enlarged and the subscription price was raised to one dollar per annum. It was voted to publish a pocket edition of the German Bible. Six thousand copies of an elementary schoolbook were ordered to be printed. This textbook was prepared by W.W. Orwig. He also edited a number of Sunday-school books for the Evangelical press. Charles Hammer was elected publisher and book agent, and W.W. Orwig, editor of *Der Christliche Botschafter*. This German periodical had the largest circulation of any German paper in the United States. At this session the constitution of the General Missionary Society of the Evangelical Association of North America was approved and ultimately adopted. Bishop Seybert exerted a wholesome and beneficial influence in the missionary movement of our church, for he was the master spirit. Large sums were flowing into the missionary treasury. Missions were established in New York City, the Mohawk Mission, the Waterloo Mission and the Black Creek Mission. These were located in New York State and in Upper Canada. Bishop Seybert was identified with the early missionary enterprises of our church, for he was the first real missionary of the church. The work of the church was divided into three Annual Conferences by this General Conference, namely, "East Pennsylvania," "West or Central Pennsylvania," and "Ohio."

The leading merchant of Millheim was John Hammer, the father of Charles Hammer who was born December 7, 1809, and became one of the distinguished leaders and pioneers of the church. He served as Book Agent both in New Berlin and at Cleveland, was superintendent of the Orphan Home at Flat Rock, Ohio, from 1868 to

1876.

**Lewisburg.** In 1806, Evangelical preachers came to Lewisburg to preach. This collegiate inland city is now an Evangelical stronghold.<sup>7</sup> It has been spoken of as the "Jerusalem" of the Central Pennsylvania Conference. Important events took place in this Evangelical center. Christian Wolfe was the class leader of the Lewisburg class. He was a hat maker, and his wife was an aunt of John Dreisbach, the first presiding elder of our church, and the first missionary to New York State. Evangelical families from Lewisburg migrated into New York State and Canada, and Joseph Harlacher rendered faithful services as a missionary in Canada. He was born near Lewisburg in 1812. He was the founder of the work in Buffalo, New York, and Berlin, now Kitchener, Canada.

**York County.** In 1808, Jacob Frey was appointed by Albright to preach at Freysville, Pennsylvania. A new circuit was organized. John Frey was the class leader and this stronghold became the center of far-reaching activities. All the prosperous Evangelical churches in York County came out of this early and thriving appointment. It became a swarming beehive. God blessed and prospered the Evangelicals in this section. Not so far from this point the Mt. Zion church on the Loganville charge was erected and holds the honor and distinction of being the second church edifice ever built in the denomination. It was a substantial stone building. From this center the work spread with rapidity and prosperity to Shrewsbury, Loganville, Glen Rock, Yorkana, East Prospect, York and Red Lion. At one time, Shrewsbury was an Evangelical stronghold, and some of the leading preachers came from this appointment.

Red Lion was a small village in those days, for it had only three houses at first, but now it is a progressive little city set on a hill that cannot so easily be hidden, radiating life in its enterprising ventures. It has a Sunday-school enrollment of 2,150 and a church membership of 1,128, being one of the largest, if not the largest Sunday school in York County and in the denomination. What an honor! Despise not the day of small things. When Red Lion wanted to build a church, there were not enough qualified laymen to serve as trustees, and Freysville furnished the men. There is only a short distance between Red Lion and Freysville. Again and again, during the years, revival fires broke out throughout the county, and today the Evangelical Church stands second in numerical and spiritual strength in the county, and third in the flourishing manufacturing city of York. What an achievement! More than thirty-five Evangelical preachers came from York County, some of whom became prominent in the Evangelical Church.

Bishop J.F. Dunlap, D.D., comes from the Freysville class, and Bishop H.B. Hartzler, D.D., editor and author, the devotional hymn writer and poet of our church, and his brother Jacob Hartzler, at one time editor of the *Evangelical-Messenger* and missionary to Japan, came from this neighborhood, as also E. Kohr, a gifted preacher and leader in the conference, and Thomas Buck, the first publisher. Freysville has a continuous history of one hundred twenty-nine years and was served in these years by one hundred forty-four senior and junior preachers.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Rev. Andrew David Gramley's biographical sketch appears on page 3.

2. This article is taken from the 1939 Centennial Edition of the History of the Central Pennsylvania Conference of the Evangelical Church.

3. Gramley was quite prophetic here. By listing Albright, Otterbein and Asbury in the same sentence, he includes the strands of American Protestantism that were to come together in 1946 to form the Evangelical United Brethren Church and in 1968 to form the United Methodist Church. John Winebrenner was a like-minded Reformed preacher who left his denomination to found the Churches of God.

4. Unfortunately, the Eyer barn is no longer standing. It stood just south of PA route 304 at its intersection with US route 15 and was torn down, apparently unnecessarily, when route 15 was widened in the 1960's.

5. This home still stands, immediately north of the Dreisbach United Church of Christ.

6. This home still stands, between New Berlin and the Dreisbach United Church of Christ, on the northeast corner of the intersection with Furnace Road.

7. The writer assumed that Lewisburg would be well-known to 1939 readers as the location of the conference's orphanage, old folks' home, hospital and camp (just a few miles north, at Central Oak Heights). Of these, only the Lewisburg United Methodist Home remains an active part of the conference.