

AN HISTORICAL PORTRAIT OF A LUTHERAN HIGH SCHOOL

FRIEDENS EVANGELICAL LUTHERAN

1921 - 1930

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During the past 30 years the Lord has showered his blessings upon the Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod through the numerous area Lutheran High Schools which have sprung up across our country. These schools survive through the support of individuals and federations of congregations who voluntarily and generously offer time, talent and treasure. Many of these schools continue to struggle while many also have thrived to produce quality Christian young men and women for the future of our church body.

This wasn't always the case. In rare situations during the history of the WELS individual congregations have accepted the challenge of educating on the secondary level only to have their dreams and efforts fail. One such church is the oldest WELS congregation in Kenosha, Wisconsin. This very German assembly of believers has borne the name Friedens well into a second century of effort for the Lord's kingdom. The name means "Peace". It's the "Peace of God" which the people of Friedens have desired to share with their city of industry through churches and schools since 1856.

Before beginning a profile of Friedens Lutheran High School it would be profitable to briefly peer into some of the history of this unique congregation. Originally organized on September 1, 1856 by some 16 families who had been worshipping in their homes for some time, it did not take long for Friedens to thrive under the blessing of God.

The first church building was completed in 1869 with a school addition added shortly after. The numbers of christians worshipping and studying grew rapidly and steadily. A second building became necessary and was built in 1883. Both church and school facilities of that era were said to have rivaled any in that area of the state.

From such a rapid beginning this congregation spawned a branch school on the south side of town. This school was eventually absorbed into the very large school building at the present location in 1909. However, this effort generated enough interest for another Lutheran congregation in town that Friedens began a mission on the south side a few years after the 1909 buildings were completed. By this time Pastor Carl Buenger stood at the helm of quite a large assembly of believers. During the next 70 years, under the his leadership and that of his son, Adolph Buenger, Friedens would undertake 3 other missions resulting in the 5 WELS congregations of Kenosha today. Obviously this congregation would extend themselves to great lengths bringing the message of Christ's love to a growing number of Kenoshans.

It is a unique experience for a congregation to have one father and son lead it as senior pastors for 76 years. The influence and ability of these two men were felt in the community and synod for two generations. Both served lengthy terms as Southeastern Wisconsin District President and both served on various boards and commissions in secular efforts around Kenosha as well. Some Kenosha historians see

this succession as a record for the county and state, and possibly the country as well.

It is the influence of these two men which also had a notable impact on lutheran-christian secondary education in that area of the Wisconsin. Friedens own high school was but a start. The second Pastor Buenger, being a graduate of Freidens, heavily involved himself in the formation of Racine's Lutheran High, a joint venture between WELS & LCMS. After the Synodical split he greatly influenced the founding and prospering of Shoreland Lutheran High School, now located in Somers, (Kenosha County) Wisconsin.

It is important to note at least that much of Friedens history to see the driving force of not just Pastor Carl Buenger, but the whole Buenger family behind the high school efforts of their congregation. As will be seen later in this brief historical portrait, on both sides of the classroom, in the desk and behind the lectern, the Buengers were well represented.

The senior Pastor Buenger had sent his three older children off for high school to the joint lutheran high school in Milwaukee. It was naturally an interest to see if his parish school, which in 1921 had an enrollment of 335, could support a secondary branch. In the fall of 1921 ninth grade was offered. The plan was to add an additional class each year until all four years were in place. Graduations were held starting in the Spring of 1922, since the first years dissapointingly saw many students choose to graduate

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after only ninth grade. In 1924 Friedens Lutheran High School did graduate a class from its "two-year course", but with only one graduate, Mr. Leo Sauer. There were 42 students enrolled that year.

Only a short time later the high school seemed finally to be taking off, yet the hesitancy of the Friedens parents was natural. At that time not everyone attended high school, in fact, not everyone completed grade school. The tuition, or Schulgeld, which was necessarily charged, pushed some prospective students away. The public high school in town offered a good education and was free. As always there were some who felt that christian secondary education was unnecessary, too sheltering or even too difficult.

Despite these problems a second short-course class was graduated in 1925 with three graduates, one being Getrude Buenger, the pastor's daughter. Finally, in June of 1926, the goal was realized in the graduation of six full four-year course students. Friedens Lutheran High School seemed to finally be running on all cylinders as an education source for Kenosha's Lutheran youth. Students were now coming on the milk train each day from almost twenty miles away. The dream could have rightfully been considered a success.

Shockingly, it was only four school years later, in Spring 1930, that Friedens Lutheran High School graduated its last class. Without doubt the great depression, which caused immediate financial distress, can be viewed as the

chief factor of the demise. The calling away of Frieden's principal to another school in Milwaukee in Spring 1930 also greatly contributed in sealing the fate of a valiant and faithful effort. The Lord had prospered that effort, seeing over 100 students attend during its short history. The hand of the Lord was also clear in ending the effort.

Although it experienced only a short history, Friedens Lutheran High School also experienced rich blessings from the Lord. The graduates produced by the small staff continued throughout their lifetimes to bring glory to their Lord and very notable services to their communities. While the list of graduates may be short, there were pastors and teachers among them, businessmen and entrepreneurs as well. Some pursued further education, while others prospered with only the tools they received during their 12 or so years at Friedens School and High School.

From the names of these graduates can be culled:

A woman who rose through the ranks to upper levels of management at what would become American Motors Corporation.

A man who started a foundry which eventually employed over 100 Kenoshans during the War and its aftermath.

A woman who would return to Friedens and educate another generation of Frieden's children.

A man who would lead a small, rural "Mom & Pop" style business into modern "incorporated" versatility.

A man who returned after college, seminary and other congregational experience to lead Friedens for 30 years.

Many of the men and women who carried a high school diploma through Friedens doors are now gone, but their lives are a legacy of God's abundant spiritual and material blessings. They helped build, operate and make successful such Kenosha businesses as Nash Motors, Simmons Mattress, Cooper (Jockey Corp.) and MacWhyte Wire Rope. Some made their mark in management, some on the factory floor. One has even been rumored to have died a millionaire, but most would acknowledge that the richest of them would be those who remained close to the Lord. The eternal Savior they learned to love and trust during the years they labored within the walls of Friedens Lutheran High School.

The curriculum, atmosphere and staff which surrounded these students also certainly deserves a portion of this historical portrait. The building, itself still stands as part of Friedens extensive complex. The church's community hall, which housed many a recreational and social activity for the high school, is now gone. The school building has seen numerous renovations, yet the halls and classrooms still echo the sound of typewriters and of teenage mischief.

The sounds of Latin vocables and passages from Shakespeare also might be discerned. This school was founded for the very purpose of Christian education. That purpose was well achieved. Classes were taught in English, much to the relief of the students who had memorized and performed all their past catechism lessons in German. The day centered in devotion and study of Scripture.

The remainder of the day was filled with the typical curriculum of a high school of that day. The physics tests and the speech assignments came too frequently, at least in the student's recollections. The method of teaching had to be modified to accomodate a number of class levels in a single room. One group studied while another was taught. But, when the bell rang at the end of a day, Friedens students had no reason to feel cheated as they may have walked home with a friend from the public high school.

School days ran from 8:15am to 3:00pm, from just after Labor Day well into June. Students had opportunity for special business classes as well as extra-curricular activities after the school day. There were less formal opportunities for sports than today's high schools offer, yet basketball and bowling were a special pursuit of many students. The "hall" was the location for band practice (together with grade school musicians), play rehearsal and other social activities. Regular concerts were performed during the school year. The plays were said to be frequent in number and admirable in quality.

An active Young People's Society, which included many of Frieden's youngsters not attending her high school, provided most of the social events. Hikes, meetings, small parties in homes, all reflect a much less affluent society than ours today. Having no bus system one family walked over an hour's distance to attend school, while some from the county congregations traveled the 20 or more miles by



morning milk train or Model T. Such circumstances made it difficult for many students to participate in anything more than purely educational pursuits.

The discipline was also necessarily quite different from today's. Physical enforcement was not just threatened but carried out. A rare spanking was viewed as the ultimate punishment. Having at times only one teacher or at the most two for a the whole school an "honor system" was necessary for control when the teacher was working with another class. Noting that the typing room, in which the students were to faithfully complete their assignments unattended, and the restrooms were two floors below the classrooms, it is easy to understand how high school shenanigans were also part of the Freidens experience.

The head of the staff was seen as a stern man by his students. W. H. A. Manthey was principal over the entire sizeable school, while in the early years teaching some high school classes as well. Later teamed with his brother Albert Manthey and Pastor Martin Buenger, as well as teacher Albert Mayer, Principal Manthey's involvement was oversight and not in the classroom.

It is of interest to note that Albert Manthey was also Pastor Carl Buenger's son-in-law. He had formerly been in management of the bookkeeping department at Nash Motors. It is said that through the influence of his brother and his wife's family he saw the need of his abilities in the teaching ministry. He taught many subjects well, but was

especially gifted in the area of business/bookkeeping, which he taught after school.

One of his students tells of how she graduated from Friedens on a Friday in June and went to work in the bookkeeping department of a sizeable Kenosha factory on the following Monday. Her knowledge of bookkeeping practice and machinery was so complete she was through with her training session and on her own very shortly, set for a lifetime of work she thoroughly enjoyed.

After his brother accepted the call in 1930, Albert Manthey accepted the principalship of a much smaller Freidens school in the fall of that year. He held that position only until 1932 when the Lord decided to take Albert Manthey from Friedens to his eternal home.

The other staff member of much interest is Pastor Martin L. Buenger, an older son of the Buenger family. After completing his seminary training in Wauwatosa in 1924, he served a congregation in Florence, Wisconsin until accepting a call to his home congregation in 1927 to teach in its high school. During the '29-30 school year he moved on to Trinity Lutheran Church, a WELS church only a short distance north in Caledonia, (Racine County) Wisconsin. A Pastor Hillmer of another Kenosha WELS congregation helped finish out that last, difficult year.

The senior Pastor Buenger was not involved in the day to day operations of the school to the extent that might be expected. He wore the mantle of Pastor of a large urban

congregation, with nearly 2000 baptized members and a school well over 300 students. He was also serving as a Wisconsin synod district president, with a difficult period in the synod brewing. Being also a father of a large family (and grandfather by this time) it is easy to see how the senior Pastor Buenger did not have time to be actively involved in the daily instructions of the high school.

The men running the high school were closely involved with "Papa" Buenger from a number of angles. He could trust implicitly that his wishes would be carried out. So while it was to a great extent his forethought, strategy and charisma which gave birth and success to the school, it was the men who stood in the classroom each day which must be credited with the effort and success that Friedens high school was.

The general atmosphere at the school is reflected in the relationships its alumnae carried on for years after graduation. The climate is easy to view in the stories they tell and the love for church, school, classmates and staff their stories reveal. Stories of sisters who first formed a bowling team while attending the school and kept that tradition alive for their lifetimes. Stories of the typical high school pranks, the times they were caught and the times they were almost caught. Often the stories that brighten faces most vividly revolve around the man they kindly refer to as "old Papa Buenger".

One story is told of how he called the driver of the old Model T which carried a number of students from the county in to classes was called into his office. This wasn't a highly common occurrence so naturally the young man was nervously scouring his memory of the last few days to recall why he might now be in this position. Much to his surprise this teenage chauffeur was requested to subsequently park his jalopy around the block and out of sight, for the school had an image in the neighborhood to maintain.

Stories are told of taking time out of class to put the principal's car up on blocks for the winter, being cleverly caught by the principal after taking time out to go downtown to the 1 cent cigarette sale, and of a rivalry for the class valedictorianship with the principal's son which carries on almost sixty years later. These all reveal the small, yet formal high school was not much different from its counter-parts then or now. While it was indeed focused on the mission of further educating young Christians in love and devotion to their Lord it was a place of enjoyment, life experiences and room to mature. It was obviously a place which prospers in the memory of its offspring.

It would be a happier conclusion to state that this brief snapshot of a high school of the 1920' is but a single chapter in a long and glorious history. As it is, it is the only chapter in a history seemingly too short. Yet, as the last days of this school are viewed, clearly the Lord's hand is seen in the events that brought the school's end.

The stock market crash of October 1929 made a high school education a luxury, placing a "parochial" secondary education far beyond the reach of most of the students enrolled at the time. Coupled with the congregational side of the economics which made it much easier to reduce staff when W. H. A. Manthey accepted the Lord's calling elsewhere, it was a natural time and place to end the dream. The following school year at Friedens saw only six total staff and 235 pupils return, reflecting the difficulty of the times.

The dream, however, didn't die with Friedens Lutheran High School. A man who knew that school well, learned well from that school's hardships, Pastor Adolph C. Buenger, was a vital influence on the beginnings of a number of high schools. Finally, in the last years of his life, he watched as a new dream, sponsored mainly by Friedens, was blessed by the Lord. A high school supported by a vast number of Kenosha area Christians, built and finished with their love, rose to rekindle and continue the effort of preparing generations of young Lutheran Christians to glorify their Lord and serve their communities.

Looking at the past may not always seem as important, for some, as looking to the future. But, only in our looking back are we enabled to so clearly see God's blessings as he carried out his plan for Christians of the past. We live their legacy. We enjoy their heritage every day. Only with a knowledge of God's promises fulfilled can we be fully

aware of the promise that surrounds us for the future. May God continue to send us people and places such as those involved in Friedens Lutheran High School. Whether he allows them centuries or less than a decade of history, through his grace their contribution for furthering Christ's kingdom will be as immeasurable as the one recorded here.

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