

Winona Memorables: St. Martin's, von Rohr, and Sauer

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Many things become of interest as one studies American Lutheranism. Especially interesting to me is the founding, growth, and development of some of the first churches in the United States, especially in the Upper Midwest. One such church is St. Martin's Lutheran Church of Winona, Minnesota, my wife's hometown. So come along as we journey through the details of the beginning and subsequent growth of St. Martin's Lutheran Church.

As one looks at a congregation, he can't really appreciate what the founding people had to go through. It was not always a bed of roses. Such is the case with St. Martin's early history. They endured a painfully difficult beginning. The first decade of this congregation was a struggle for survival, not of the faith of the small band of people who gathered to hear the Word, but of the congregation itself.

As is frequently the case, little is known of the beginning years of the congregation. We do know that the congregation was founded in the year 1856 by the three pioneer members Tobias Leeb, Nicolaus, and John Bartels.<sup>1</sup> After about six families had joined the new organization, the Rev. L.F. Krause, one of the founders of the Buffalo Synod, became its first pastor. The members purchased property on Fifth Street, between Liberty and Chestnut, and erected an 18 by 30 foot structure at a cost of \$130.00.<sup>2</sup> They named their congregation St. Martin's in honor of Martin Luther.<sup>3</sup> This structure was dedicated shortly before Christmas in this same year (1856).

Pastor Krause served the infant congregation for only a year. Where he went and what he did is not clear. We do know that while he was gone Pastor A. Brandt from Hart and other pastors of the Buffalo Synod served the congregation. Pastor Krause was absent from 1857-61. He returned in 1861 only to leave again in 1864.<sup>4</sup> Again the congregation was without a pastor, a bad situation to be in when first starting out.

During this two year vacancy, Tobias Leeb, dean of the church, carried his small organ to church every Sunday morning and preached and lead the hymn singing.<sup>5</sup> The Rev. Philip von Rohr, who became pastor years later, said of these early days, "We must mention Mr. Tobias Leeb to whose untiring fidelity it is due that the congregation remained in existence. Even if no minister was here he would go to church with his family and read a sermon to them and a few others who also remained."<sup>6</sup> The few facts just mentioned are all that is really known of the first ten years of St. Martin's history.

In 1886 Philip von Rohr, about whom more will be said later, of Toledo, Ohio, was called to fill the vacancy. Under his direction the congregation quickly grew. During his first week as pastor, he established a parochial school and a branch congregation in Wilson.<sup>7</sup> Six students started out in this school. Several months later over eighty were enrolled. From this time on, not only did St. Martin's abound in faith, but in numbers and material growth.

By June 1867 it was obvious that more room was needed, and it was decided to purchase property at Broadway and Liberty Street for \$275.00.<sup>8</sup> The first church was moved to this site

and an 18 or 20 foot addition was added. Rapid growth made it necessary to expand again, and in 1870 a new church, 36 by 80 feet, was erected at a cost of \$5000.00.<sup>9</sup> At this time the congregation numbered about 60 families. Seven years later in 1877 St. Martin's joined the Evangelical Lutheran joint Synod of Wisc. and other states.<sup>10</sup>

The attendance in the school was so large that the congregation was compelled to erect a new school building in 1880. Two lots on the corner of Fifth and Chestnut Street were bought for \$800.00 and a building was erected for the sum of \$3200.00.<sup>11</sup> Before the school building was constructed, the students met in the old church using the pews as benches on which to study. In 1883 St. Martin's was filled with more and better music when a pipe organ, valued at \$1300.00, was secured by Teacher Walz.

By 1885 the growing congregation needed more room. The old church was sold for \$75.00 and moved away, but during the construction of the basic building in which they still worship today, located at Broadway and Liberty, services were held in the old structure. Plans for this were drawn by C.G. Naybury and Son, and in early 1886 the contract was let to Munck and Lohse for \$14,600.00. The total cost was somewhat above \$19,000.<sup>12</sup> It was dedicated December 12, 1886, with Professor Ernst of Watertown, Wisc., preaching the sermon in the morning, Rev. Babenroth in the afternoon, and Prof. Grabner of Milwaukee in the evening in English.<sup>13</sup>

The church and school seemed to just keep on growing. Improvements continued. To accomodate the needs of the families

on the West End, a branch school was established on the corner of King and Minnesota Streets in 1890. This school operated until 1921 when it was closed. The lot that they bought cost \$800.00 and the building \$1200.00.<sup>14</sup> The classes at this school were conducted by the assistant pastor. It wasn't long after this and a second story had to be added to the school at 5th and Chestnut Streets.

The 40th anniversary of the congregation was quite a celebration, because along with it, they celebrated the 10th year of the dedication of the building, and the 30th anniversary of the ministry of Pastor von Rohr. The pastor could report, "Thus we see that the blessing of the Lord has been with us all these years. The congregation now (1896) numbers at least 500 families and nearly 1,400 communicants. We may well give thanks to the Lord..."<sup>15</sup>

The church continued to grow for the next ten years. Just before the Golden Jubilee, a new altar and pulpit were installed in the church, and side galleries were added to make the seating capacity about 1,200.<sup>16</sup>

Great preparations were made for the 50th anniversary, including those mentioned above. Many were the speakers they had on this festive day; Pastors Koch, Ziegler, Gausewitz, and others.

The church was indeed healthy, but its beloved pastor was not. In the summer of 1905 he had vacationed in the West because of his health, and not long after the 50th anniversary, had sailed to Europe to consult specialists.<sup>17</sup> He came back almost immediately. A few weeks after his return, Dr. Will

Mayo operated on him on the table in the parsonage in an emergency situation. This prolonged the old pastor's life for three years. He died Dec. 22, 1908 of cancer at the age of 65.

He had served the congregation for 42 years. There was no doubt that his loss would be felt for he "had become a national character in the work of the Lutheran church."<sup>18</sup> He had been president of the Wisconsin Synod for nearly 20 years, and his presence there would indeed be missed. He would also be missed by his own congregation whom he had served so faithfully for so many years, the congregation which he had built from almost nothing with the help of the Holy Spirit.

Though the congregation lost an excellent pastor, they had few worries for they had called an able assistant three years earlier. In 1905 Pastor Alfred Sauer was called from Wauwatosa to assist President and Pastor von Rohr who was already at this time quite ill. Pastor Sauer was 23 when he received his call, and one year later was left by himself to tend the congregation while Pastor von Rohr was in Europe. Not long before Pastor von Rohr died, Pastor Sauer married Elfrieda, Pastor von Rohr's daughter, at the encouragement of the old pastor.

A month later, on Jan. 17, 1909, Pastor Sauer was installed as Pastor of St. Martin's. It was a tremendous opportunity for the young pastor for the fields were ripe and the harvest was waiting. There was at this time a large influx of German immigrants into the Winona area. Pastor Sauer often remarked, "The pastor didn't have to look for members in those days. The immigrants, coming from pious backgrounds, came to town and looked for the minister."<sup>19</sup>

Pastor Sauer had a great interest in the educational needs of his members, and did all he could to see that those needs were fulfilled. In 1911 a 20- by 50- foot addition was built to the West End school at a cost of \$1800.00.<sup>20</sup>

On the 10th anniversary of his installation in 1915, the congregation numbered nearly 900 families. The last debt of the congregation had been paid in 1912, and a fund had been started for a new organ.

Pastor Sauer was not only kept busy with this large church, but also served at Minnesota City, and once said that it is not advisable to take over a large congregation alone. At this time St. Martin's congregation was described as the city's largest Protestant congregation and Pastor Sauer as "dean of the Protestant clergy." Incidentally, at this time he was earning \$100.00 a month.

On the 60th anniversary of the congregation, a new Austin organ was dedicated. This organ, still the musical instrument of the church, has 1,757 pipes, 30 stops and a console of three keyboards.<sup>21</sup>

Growth of a congregation is indeed great, but it has its advantages and disadvantages. For example, as early as 1914 there was mention of the need for a new congregation at the West End and for this reason a fund was started. It was some years before the movement culminated. Peaceful release of about 165 families to the new congregation of St. Matthew's was given in 1920.<sup>22</sup> In June 1921, St. Matthew's was permitted to collect for its new church as soon as St. Martin's had paid its debt on its new parsonage. St. Matthew's church building was finally completed in 1925, and it is still used today and is

a member of our Synod to this day.<sup>23</sup>

On the congregation's 75th anniversary, June 1931, the present St. Martin's school structure, which had been erected at a cost of \$75,000.00, was dedicated.<sup>24</sup> In addition to classrooms for children, it contains a kitchen, auditorium-gymnasium, and four bowling alleys.

St. Matthew's is not the only child of St. Martin's. In 1936 a group of Lutheran families at Pickwick, some of whom belonged to St. Martin's, were organized and formed a new congregation.<sup>25</sup> They, along with Minnesota City's congregation, called a pastor.

In 1943 Pastor Sauer finally got some help, his first in 35 years. It was his son, the Rev. Alfred von Rohr Sauer, a grandson of Pastor von Rohr. Alfred's son got this name because he was christened with it by his grandfather when he baptized him, and this event not too long before he died. It was also about this time when Pastor Sauer's wife, Elfrieda, died.

Alfred's son served with his father for about five years, from 1943-1948, when he accepted a Professorship in O.T. Theology at Concordia Seminary in St. Louis where he still is today, if memory serves me correctly.<sup>26</sup>

Rev. Wilmer Hoffmann became assistant when Alfred's son left. These were the autumn years of Pastor Sauer. He was in excellent health until shortly before his death. He was always an active man, in the church as well as in the community.

In 1943 a memorial fund was made to start a remodeling fund. It was not until five years later that, under the leadership of Pastor Sauer, a plan was made to raise \$30,000.00. In 1951 the congregation began its renovation plans. There was



three phases to this plan: 1. heating and providing a church basement; 2. redecorating and renovating the interior of the church; 3. renovating the exterior.<sup>27</sup> On March 21, 1954, a rededication was held following the completion of the first two phases at a cost of about \$83,000.00.<sup>28</sup> Our own Professor Habeck, who was Vice President of the Synod, was the speaker.<sup>29</sup>

It was not long after this rededication that Pastor Sauer died. He died May 17, 1955, at the age of 73, not long before the 50th anniversary of his installation as assistant pastor.<sup>30</sup> As was mentioned before, Pastor Hoffmann served with Pastor Sauer. St. Martin's also had three vicars: Mr. George Luecke, Mr. Donald Sellnow (now Prof. at NWC), and Mr. Robert Carter.

The Rev. Harold Backer was called to fill Pastor Sauer's position. Rev. Geistfeld became associate pastor in 1958 to fill the vacancy left by Hoffmann. In 1959 Pastor Backer died of a heart attack, and Pastor Korn assisted Pastor Geistfeld.

In 1961 St. Martin's withdrew from the Wisconsin Synod and joined the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod with whom it retains its fellowship today. Would have it been different if Rohr or Sauer had still been around? Would St. Martin's still be a member of our Synod? Who can tell? What we do know is that we lost a big, influential congregation when they split. Though it has split, it has left its mark in our Synod. This congregation was served by two very great men, men who also left their mark. This congregation also started a couple of congregations that still are members of the WELS, namely, St. Matthew's of Winona, and St. Lukes of Pickwick.

In 1961 the Rev. A.U. Deye became associate pastor and served until 1967. Geistfeld left in 1963 and the Rev. Merlen Wagner

became assistant pastor and served until 1966. Also in 1963 St. Martin's established the Sauer Memorial Home which still functions to this day. In 1967 the Rev. Ronald Jansen became assistant pastor and left in 1970 when he took a call to Albert Lea, Minn. The Rev. Louis Bittner then served as assistant pastor. In 1971 Pastor Kenneth Krueger accepted the call and served as assistant pastor until 1976. Pastor Richard Krenske took over in 1978 and is presently serving.

These last facts and dates were taken from a pictorial directory that was borrowed from St. Martin's. As one may notice not much information is given concerning the last 20 years. And it seems to me that this is usually the case when dealing with the history of a congregation. Much attention is given to the early years because it is in the early years where most of the groundwork is established concerning the congregation. It is in the early years which tells whether a congregation will make it or fold. It is also true that St. Martin's has not had a major anniversary for some years so new information is not available. But if my calculations are correct, they should be observing their 125th this year sometime when more information will be available.

One cannot look at St. Martin's congregation without looking at two of its best known and best loved pastors. Those two, of course, would be Pastors von Rohr and Sauer, both of whom we have briefly looked at. Between the two they served approximately 93 years. It was these two men who served at the vital times of the congregation, when it was beginning and getting its footholds. It is only proper when talking of St. Martin's to also talk of these two men. And in order to do this, it is necessary

to give a brief life's history of each of these men.

When you hear the name von Rohr, whom does it bring to mind? Does it bring to mind Heinrich, Philip's father, or does it bring to mind one of Philip's daughters who became very prominent citizens of Winona? Or does it bring to mind Philip's brother, John, who was a pharmacist? Or does it bring to mind Philip himself, the man with whom we are concerned, the man who was president of our Synod for 19 years, the man about whom little is known, the man who was pastor at St. Martin's for 42 years?

When we talk of Philip von Rohr, many people ask, "Who is he?" Not much is known about this man, but it is worthwhile to look briefly at his life and labors.

Philip was the son of Heinrich von Rohr about whom more is known. It was Heinrich and Graubau who founded the Buffalo Synod in 1845. It was not long before this that Heinrich established the congregation out in Freistadt. Because of these early trademarks Heinrich left behind, more is written and consequently known about him.

While more is known of Heinrich von Rohr, one should not take the accomplishments and activities of Philip von Rohr lightly. Philip was born Feb. 13, 1843, in New York.<sup>31</sup> He was educated in the Buffalo Synod, but under the influence of Walther joined the Synodical Conference. Before he joined, however, he had already taken a call to Wisconsin Synod parish.

It is while he is at Winona, his only parish, that it became very clear that this man was committed to Christian education. This becomes very evident when we learn that in the first or second week Philip started a parochial school. In a couple of

months this school swelled to around 100 students. Because the young congregation could not afford a teacher, Philip taught the students for close to four years.<sup>32</sup>

While he was concerned with Christian education in his own parish, it did not stop here. He was in the Synod for only a short time before he was elected to the board of control to the two colleges. Northwestern College was the apple of von Rohr's eye. He was constantly supporting it by sending it students and by helping to raise money for its different needs. Of course, most of his money raising efforts took place while he was president of the Synod. During his time as president, we hear that DMLC became a teacher school. He was committed to Christian Education, there is no doubt about that. His commitment was especially evident during his presidency, but was also evident during his whole lifetime and in his own household.

It has already been mentioned that von Rohr was a Synod president. A suitable title for this man would be "the Forgotten President." The only people, professors excluded, that probably remember von Rohr as a president are the people of Winona and the surrounding areas. But president he was from 1889-1908.<sup>33</sup>

Philip von Rohr was a natural leader. In 1886 he became Vice President, and served at that post until he became President. One only had to look at him to recognize him as a leader because he was a giant of a man. It is said of him that he stood above the crowd wherever he went in Winona, quite a feat when one considers that it was a city of loggers.

If someone ever doubts whether von Rohr was a leader or not,

all that person has to do is to look at his congregation. When he got there it was in its beginnings. After he had been there for only a short time, this congregation sprung up and grew quickly. St. Martin's became the largest congregation in the state on Minnesota.<sup>34</sup> His school also grew. Things grew so quickly at St. Martin's that it seems that they were constantly rebuilding. Indeed, an enviable position to be in.

A natural leader, not only of his congregation, but also of his adopted Synod. As leader of the Synod, he was faced with numerous difficulties. Most of them centered around NWC, and funds that were needed for new dorms, for the rebuilding of the administration building, and for the general upkeep of the school. If the school needed funds, more often than not, he would go and make the collection himself. A man who was dedicated to education and a man who was a natural leader is indeed found in the person of von Rohr.

While it is clear that Philip von Rohr was a natural leader, some may argue as to how good of a leader he was. I mention this, not because I think that he was not a good leader, but because of an event that took place during his presidency. I am referring to the date of 1892 when Minnesota and Michigan joined with Wisconsin to form the Joint Synod. The interesting thing, or should I say puzzling, is that President von Rohr was not present, though for a few years he was the man visiting the Minnesota Synod. Why he was not there no one can say. What we can say is that things may have gone more smoothly if he had been there. There may not have been the problems over making the Seminary in Michigan a preparatory school, and doing the same with the school in New Ulm. Why was he gone? Was he in

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Winona shepherding his flock as a good pastor? Did he feel there was no need for him to attend? These are questions no one can answer, but in spite of this one episode, I don't think we can call him any less of a great leader, though often forgotten.

While Philip von Rohr was president, and even before, it was clear that he was an effective administrator. During the years von Rohr was president, the Synod operated on a meager budget, yet with von Rohr at the helm they made it year after year. It was during his time that the procedure for nominating professors, publishing the nominee's name, and allowing time for support or protests was adopted.

Philip von Rohr, a great leader, a great administrator, a man concerned about Christian education, and a man who is not given enough credit. Behind all of these lay Philip's main concern: "Preach the Gospel." Preach to the young and the old, to people near and far, to all people. Philip was mission minded. This becomes immediately clear when we see the number of congregations that he started around the Winona area. There was Wilson just to name one. While he was president, he went to different areas to see if it would be feasible to start a congregation there. It was also during his presidency that the Apacheland mission got its start.

Yet, while Philip was kept busy with all of these other things, he did not neglect his family. Philip's wife was Emma nee Schaal who bore him three boys and five girls. Along with everything that Philip was good at, he was also a good father. Tolerance and reasonableness and powerful personality made Philip a good father.<sup>35</sup> Philip's family was famous for its Gemuetlichkeit. They always had company, especially after he became president of

the Joint Synod. Such notables as Ernst, Notz, Hoenecke, the Badings and others often visited their home and graced the city of Winona with their presence.

Philip von Rohr, a man filled with energy to preach the Word, a man dedicated to serving the German immigrants in the town of Winona, a man who was a natural leader and administrator. Philip von Rohr, a man remembered, yet forgotten. This great man, the "Forgotten President," died Dec. 22, 1908, in Winona.<sup>36</sup> When he died there were 2000 souls at St. Martin's church. 2000 people attended his funeral and heard Gausewitz preach the English sermon, and Bergemann the German.

When he died, the Winona Republican Herald rightly said, "The almighty prince of Israel has fallen. This can truthfully be said of the death of the Rev. von Rohr. A man zealous in good works and a mighty leader in the cause of righteousness, whose demise will be mourned not only in Winona, but throughout the entire Northwest and indeed throughout the nation, for Mr. von Rohr had become a national character in the work of the German Lutheran Church."<sup>37</sup>

Though he died, yet he left behind traces of himself. Philip baptized 4089, confirmed 2032, married 991, and buried 950.<sup>38</sup> He also left behind a part of in the children, grandchildren, neices, nephews, and other relatives he left behind. To this day there are remnants of this great man in the Winona area. The Heise clan, the senior Heise having married Adele, one of von Rohr's daughters, is still quite prominent in Winona. The Heise boys are known for their doctoring. They still belong to St. Matthew's, at least the ones who attend church. They did not stay with St. Martin's in the split. On September 13, 1980,

Ada, another daughter, celebrated her 100th birthday in Winona. Indeed, the "Forgotten President" is not totally forgotten.

Following in the footsteps of Philip von Rohr is a man possibly known even less. The man I'm referring to is Alfred Sauer. He came to St. Martin's three years before Philip von Rohr died, and served as his assistant. It was not long after he arrived that the senior Pastor left for Europe to seek treatment.

Pastor Sauer was born in Bloomfield, Wisc., August 18, 1881. He went through NWC and the Seminary at Wauwatosa and graduated and was ordained in 1905. He came to St. Martin's in August of the same year. It was a year later that Pastor Sauer had to take over while Pastor von Rohr was gone. It was also at this time that he fell in love with von Rohr's daughter Elfrieda. They were married by the senior Pastor when he got back from Europe. The special date was July 18, 1906. Pastor von Rohr christened there first child Philip von Rohr Sauer and baptized him.

After Philip von Rohr died, Alfred Sauer got the call to be the churches regular full time pastor. His distinguished career included the introduction of English services in 1910. One year before that he had introduced President William Taft, who delivered the well-known Winona speech on the tariff question. In 1911, an addition was added to the West End parochial school, the first in a series of notable building additions Pastor Sauer fostered, additions mentioned earlier.

In 1912 the last debt of the church was paid and four years later the congregation procured a new Austin organ.

In 1930 a new \$75,000.00 parish school was erected and in 1951 a five year church renovation program was begun with the rededication ceremony being held in 1954.



Pastor Sauer also created many new functions in the church such as the Sewing Guild, the Men's Club, and others. He also organized the Pickwick Lutheran Church. Along with activities in the church, he kept himself busy by also being active in the community.

One of the highlights of his career had to be when his son, Alfred von Rohr Sauer, was appointed as assistant pastor in 1943.<sup>39</sup> His son is now instructor at the Concordia Lutheran Seminary.

Pastor Alfred Sauer, a man who continued the work that Pastor von Rohr had started. More has been written about von Rohr because he was president of the Synod for 19 years. Pastor Sauer never attained that position, but served his congregation very faithfully until his death. He died May 17, 1955, just weeks before he would have observed his 50th anniversary at St. Martin's.<sup>40</sup> He was 73 when he died. His ministry was an active one, and this can be seen by the figures of the "accomplishments" of his ministry. Alfred Sauer baptized 3316, about 750 less than von Rohr; he confirmed 2282, 250 more than his predecessor; he married 2463, 1472 more than Pastor von Rohr; and he buried an even 2000, 1050 more than his elder. As these figures indicate, the congregation experienced its youth and early adulthood under its first pastor, its full maturity under the second.<sup>41</sup> The congregation was blessed with these two men for a total of 93 years. Because these two men were so very influential in the growth and development of the congregation, I felt it was a must to say a little more about these two.

Philip von Rohr, that great man, the "Forgotten Man," the man who served faithfully as president for 19 years. Pastor Alfred Sauer, a man dedicated to his congregation and its

growth. Praise the Lord for such men who were indeed needed in the early years of the Synod and in the early years of St. Martin's congregation.

St. Martin's, an interesting story about a large congregation, a church which is still one of the great landmarks of Winona, a church which is the mother church of St. Matthew's of Winona and other congregations. It still is a large, beautiful church. St. Martin's, one of the earlier churches in the Synod, a church which was blessed with two great and inspiring pastors in the persons of von Rohr and Sauer. Though St. Martin's is now a member of the Missouri Synod, it still was and is a very interesting congregation to study. It was an influence in the Wisconsin Synod, and provided men who also were very important to the beginning years of the Wisconsin Synod.

St. Martin's, von Rohr, and Sauer, memorables of Winona, men who will be remembered, a congregation which is still a big influence in the city today. In closing, I recommend a visit to this beautiful church if you ever get to the Winona area. It would indeed be time well spent as was studying the congregation and its two great pastors.

## ENDNOTES

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