

"He Loved Those Guys"
Arnold Nemitz-Seminary Steward, 1941-1958

by

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Preface

While the author sought the help of various sources such as letters, Board of Control minutes and family pictures from the years 1941 through 1958, the author found the clearest and most interesting to be Arnold's son, Dennis Nemitz, who currently resides in Port Washington, Wisconsin. Therefore, the reader will find no formal documentation nor bibliography in the body of this paper.

"What? You're doing your church history thesis on a janitor?" "Are you serious?" "What roll could a janitor possibly play in church history?" These were just some of the responses I received after telling people what the focus of my church history paper would be. Yes, Arnold Nemitz was a janitor. No, Arnold Nemitz didn't start a great number of churches like some of our missionaries and perhaps he may not have been able to explain the hypostatic union of Jesus' two natures. Even so, Arnold Nemitz played an important role in church history as a janitor. After all, Aaron received credit in one of our hymns for holding up Moses' hands, why can't the same be true of a steward at one of the world's last bastions of orthodoxy? One can easily see Arnold Nemitz was blessed by God in many ways and he used those gifts to the glory of God. After hearing all the negative reactions to my idea it became tempting to wonder if a steward could have an important role in the history of Lutheranism. But as I heard more and more about Arnold Nemitz, my conviction that one does not need to be a clergyman or a professor to play an important role in church history, grew even stronger. Arnold Nemitz was a janitor, a capable janitor; but he was more than just a janitor. He was a Christian man who served His Lord willingly with the gifts which God gave him.

A Character Sketch

Most everyone has their own idiosyncrasies. Arnie had

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two. He lived in the days when a good cigar cost a quarter. He claimed to smoke them. Actually, Arnie would smoke a five cent R.G. Dunn until there was only a stub left, then he would chew on it for a while. When people would tease him about chewing his cigars, he would exclaim "hey, this is a quarter cigar."

Not only did he distinguish himself from the crowd by chewing cigars, but another habit he had was to carry a screwdriver and a pliers in his back pocket. This was his trademark. His son, Dennis, says, "If he couldn't fix something with a screwdriver and a pliers, it wasn't worth anything." Arnold could fix just about anything. In fact, if he needed someone to come in and fix it for him, he felt humiliated. The only times when Arnold would shy away from a challenge was when it came to heavy duty electrical work or when he just didn't have the tools to do the job, like adding freon to a compressor.

A Multi-talented Man

When Arnold came to the Seminary with his wife Adella in 1941, he was well qualified for the job. Scratch formal education from the list of qualifications because Arnold never made it past the fourth grade. But this didn't matter. Arnold was very gifted in many areas.

Before taking on the job at the seminary as steward, he held many jobs which prepared him for the task, especially in food preparing. Arnold ran the first drive-in hamburger

stand in Cedarburg (presently where Barth's at the Bridge is located). At five cents a burger, his little drive-in was frequented by many people. Arnold knew how to prepare food, especially meats. In fact, one of Arnold's former employees was a man named Al Lohmann who took Mr. Nemitz's expertise with him from the drive-in to start his own restaurant which is still in existence today: Al Lohmann's Steak House. The restaurant business proved to be invaluable later on, too. Arnold was the head of the food service at the seminary.

Another one of Arnold's specialties in food preparation was decorating cakes. He ran two bakery shops, one in Germantown and the other in Jackson. After this, he took his skill to the Jeager Baking Co. in Milwaukee, where he baked and decorated cakes. This was a skill that came in very handy when it came time for all the big meals at the Seminary which required pies and cakes, i.e. Call Day and Graduation.

Besides food preparation, Arnold was proficient in many areas. It could be said that he was a "jack of all trades and a master of most". He was a good glass cutter, butcher, mechanic, inventor and electrician; he was good at hand-lettering signs and could even weld if he needed to. As his son Dennis says, "He just had a mind for mechanics."

The Steward's Many Duties

The steward was responsible for the daily physical operation of the Seminary. Tasks included plowing and

sanding the roads in winter; giving tours to visitors in the spring; cutting lawn in summer; and preparing meals daily for dozens of students.

One of the aspects involved with daily food preparation was the ordering and buying of the foods and liquids for meals. Generally, he ordered the meats, eggs, milk and produce from Hoffman and Pallos' Meat Market in Cederburg and then brought the goods back in the seminary pickup truck. Many times, along with the other food, Arnold would bring back to the seminary whole sides of beef which he would then cut up for the coming week(s).

Another way Mr. Nemitz obtained food was through donations from churches in the area. Carrots, beets, potatoes, squash, and pumpkins were among other produce collected at churches every fall for meals. Dennis is able to recall how, almost every weekend in the fall of the year, he and his parents would go to a church in the area to pick up the charitable goods. They would leave very early in the morning, taking the old half ton chevy and spend all day driving to and from these churches. Dennis still remembers vividly how he and his parents would make the trips armed with plenty of blankets because the old truck didn't have heat. Every once in a while a member of a WELS church who worked at a large canning factory donated large quantities of canned goods like beans, corn, potatoes and etc... On one occasion, Mr. Nemitz received from a canning factory 200-300 pounds of peppercorns. When Dennis was asked what

they did with so many he said, "We fed most of them to the rats and the chickens."

Ever The Improvisor

The budget which the board of control had to work with back then, as today, was not loaded with a great deal of pork. What was true for the board was also true for the seminary steward. Mr. Nemitz realized that he couldn't spend a ton of money for repairs because it just wasn't in the budget. Since necessity is the mother of invention and since the steward needed to fix or replace many things on the sem grounds and since the money was tight, Arnold became quite an improviser and, at times, an inventor.

During the winter months, students were needed to shovel coal into the boiler hopper for heat. And during the colder times of the year, students were called on to shovel continuously throughout the night in shifts. Feeling sorry for the students who were missing out on valuable sleep, Mr. Nemitz, the improviser, designed a conveyor belt as a solution to the problem. He ran a chain from the coal bin to the hopper (a distance of approximately 90 feet), and he attached a bucket to the chain. This bucket would continuously make the rounds from the bin to the hopper. The bin would drop coal into the bucket and the bucket would drop the coal into the hopper. The conveyor system Arnold created made the shovellers a memory for the archives. Is there any wonder why Arnie was so popular among the students?

Another improvisation which Arnold made wasn't so much for the students as it was for himself and his helpers. The seminary is located on an 80 acre parcel of land. There is plenty of grass to mow today, but there was even more back then because there were fewer professors' homes at that time. Arnold bought a mower with a blade six feet long which he attached to a tractor so he could cut the mowing time down. But, since the fields were not level and were extremely rocky, the blade very often would catch a rock and become inoperable. After ruining blade after blade, he made what was called a "whirlwind lawn mower." He cut the ends, the cutting edges, off of the six foot blade and mounted them to the blade with swinging bolts. So every time the mower hit a rock, Arnold needed to repair or replace just the tip of the blades, not the entire six feet. Mr. Nemitz was very skillful in many areas, but he really seemed to shine when it came to tinkering with mechanics, whether it was inventing his own contraption or improvising, using other people's ideas and personalizing.

A Brush with Death

Arnold was very knowledgeable when it came to maintenance. He knew so much about it that one day he became careless and it almost cost him his life. The electricity shut down at the seminary so he went to repair the pump: a fuse had blown. Arnie took Dennis along with him. (He was always very careful to take someone along when he worked with electricity, especially in the pump house.)

There was always a few inches of water on the floor, so whenever he worked in the pump house there was added danger. He didn't have a fuse puller on this occasion, but always having a pliers in his back pocket he used that instead. Let Dennis tell the story.. "He failed to grab the center of the fuse so he let the pliers touch too high on the fuse box and he touched metal. We're talking 220 volts here! There I am standing on the wooden stairway, watching my father shake, he just shook. He was ready to die! So I took the 2x4 that my dad put across the bottom of the stairway as a gate (so that no one could go down by the pumps). I broke it off the hinges and I reached to hit his arm loose, remember, I couldn't be in the water with him. Finally I managed to break his arm loose from the pliers. He was all blue, but he came to by himself. I did have to lift his head out of the water, though, until he recovered enough."

The Steward's Stewardship

"He did everything with a shot and a beer," says Dennis. It sounds as though Arnold could have written a chapter in Carnegie's book "How to Win Friends and Influence People." He could handle people. He could usually get what he needed when he needed it. Arnie had a good rapport with the local business men and skilled workers, particularly the plumber. Arnie would drop by to chat and after a few moments the plumber brought out a shot and beer chaser for both. If they were on the seminary grounds, Arnie would

definitely return the favor. At the end of the social call business would follow with Arnie requesting various parts to make repairs at the seminary. Without fail, the plumber would say "Well, there a couple of those laying over there, take them along." Dennis goes on, "That's the way he was, he'd get freebies, he'd do anything to get a freebie, bring it back and turn it into something for the sem."

One winter day in the mid 1950's, the roads were buried by an enormous snow storm. There was so much snow Dennis said, "that he had to make three swipes with his snowplow before the plow could get anywhere near the pavement." Somehow, Arnold got the county to come in with one of their gigantic v-plows. When he was done "my dad would go out there with a shotglass and a beer, the guy would leave the motor idle and that would be it, that was the payment. That was the way it was."

His Relationship with the Professors

Arnold was never very close with any of the professors. They had their work to do and so did he. They knew where they could find him if something needed to be fixed. Even though they never got together with any of them socially, Arnie became closest with President Lawrenz.

It was usually very cordial between the two until one day Arnold thought he might be in for quite a tongue lashing. As he drove the old chevy pickup down the hill to Freistadt Road, he noticed little puffs of smoke coming out

from underneath the bridge. When he investigated, he found his son, Dennis, and President Lawrenz's son, John, smoking cigarettes under the bridge. Mr. Nemitz motioned for young Dennis to come to him. He got on one knee, Dennis pulled down his pants and received a spanking with Arnold's belt.

John, meanwhile, laughed at his partner-in-crime because of his punishment, when all of a sudden Arnie motioned for the other rebel to prepare to receive his own. John cried out, "You can't do that to me! My dad is your boss! You can't do this to me!" But Arnie nailed him too.

After punishing his boss' child, Arnie felt a little uneasy until President Lawrenz called that evening. Instead of ~~a~~ the tongue lashing he expected, he heard "Mr. Nemitz, this is President Lawrenz calling. I want to thank you for what you did today. If you ever catch my son doing that again, you hit him twice as hard."

His Relationship with the Students

Dennis says, "He loved those guys." And it seems it was mutual. Again and again Arnie would call on the guys to help him with some of the maintenance like painting, shoveling coal, or carrying motors down to the pumphouse. He had no problem ever getting any help because he was pretty well liked. It sure didn't hurt when he'd say, "There's a couple of beers in it for you." Like Dennis says, "Arnie did everything with a shot and a beer."

Arnie took time out to get to know the students. Late

in the afternoons, before supper, he was usually found playing pool with the guys. Dennis says he was quite a pool shark. Arnie got to know most of the guys so well, that later on, after pastors would graduate and come back to the seminary for whatever reason, they would search him out and say, "Hey Arnie, let's go play a game of pool for a beer for old time's sake." Arnold Nemitz may not have been an exegetical wizzard, but what made him more than an average janitor was that he took the time to get to know each student. Dennis says, "he took an interest in each student."

Yes, Arnie was a janitor, but he went beyond his job description. He tried to teach the guys about mechanical things whenever possible. The seminary had such a family atmosphere since there was just a handful of professors and a small number of students. He'd see to it that raw beef and onions were available for special occasions or whenever the guys would ask. He used to say, "I'll see what I can do."

Arnie tried to be as accomodating as possible for the students. One day two students approached him with a request. They wanted to build a boat and they wanted to know where they could build it, indoors. Arnie told them they could have the boiler room. Dennis recalls, "This was like a major cabin cruiser. It was beautiful. There were over 4,000 brass screws that went into the mahogany and teak wood. They were counter sunk into the wood with wood filler on the top. These guys put tons of work into this boat."

There was only one problem. When they noted the dimensions of the entrance to the boiler room, they failed to realize that the steps, because they were at such an angle, made it impossible to get the beautiful boat out. The dejected students had to take the entire top deck off of the boat to get it out of the boiler room. "It was a disaster," says Dennis.

Arnie was very accomodating for G.A. as well. In those days part of the scare tactic was a fake electric chair. Arnie was the one who made the chair. He grabbed a chair that was headed to the dump from the library, put on metal strips and copper wiring and presto! The students had what looked like an electric chair. And in the evening during the week of Der Tag an announcement was made that went something like this: "If you see the lights going dim in your dorm room tonight, don't worry, we're just hooking up the electric chair to see if it works..." And sure enough, during the evening the lights would go dim. The chair was a fake but it seemed to be real. The lights dimmed when Arnold switched the power from the city's electricity to the seminary's own generator. (The city of Theinsville during WWII was worried that the seminary would use too much city power during the war) Since the generator couldn't produce quite as much power the lights would be a little dim. Thus, the juniors got quite a scare! Arnie was much more than a janitor. He was a friend and a prankster. And the students loved him for it.

Arnie was most accomodating for the students even during the bad times, the worst of times, like the burial of G.A. The students came to Arnie and requested a tombstone. He said, "I'll see what I can do." Just prior to this request, in the David's Star Cemetery, Arnie's mother-in-law's tombstone collapsed. Her tombstone sat behind the shed just waiting to be put to use. So Arnie spent a few evenings for the guys painting a portion of her headstone: "Here lies G.A...Born...Died..." That was the kind of guy Arnie was: eager to please and willing to accomodate. Dennis says, "He was constantly looking for ways to make those guys more comfortable or for ways to make their lives a little more cheerful. He loved those guys."

The Seminary as a Temp. Agency?

Not only did Arnold try to treat his students well, but he tried to do the same with everyone whom he came into contact, even the bums and beggars. Dennis recalls, "We always had bums coming up the Sem. They must have had some kind of sign down by the tracks that said you could get a good meal there." Arnie would always give anyone a hearty meal. But if they wanted to stay for a while, he would put them to work. Some of the bums would stay for a meal, others would stay two or three nights, while some would stay for weeks at a time. Dennis explains, "We never gave any money, just food and a place to stay. They worked side by side with us and the sem students. We'd even give them

clothes. The students would leave clothes at the end of the school year and if any of it was good we'd say "let's give it to the bums."

A Model Attitude

Did Arnold view his job as a nine-to-five, ordinary job? No way! "He never viewed it as a job. He loved it. He was very dedicated to it. He loved being a "fix-it" man." When I asked Dennis if Arnold was more dedicated to his position knowing these men were studying to be ministers he said "Oh, I know he did, he loved those guys." He was well aware that these young men would eventually become ministers and he respected and loved them for it. To show his appreciation to them, he tried to make their stay at the seminary as pleasant as he could. Arnold genuinely was grateful to his Savior for the opportunity to be with and to influence hundreds of future shepherds of God's flock.

Not only was Arnold content with his position as steward, but he was also content with the living conditions offered to him at the seminary. Dennis explains, "The seminary was a family. As the steward's family we had our own private kitchen but we never used it. We used to eat with the kitchen help or the guys." The seminary was a good Christian atmosphere, a great place to bring up kids. Dennis said that growing up with 80 acres to play in was a dream for any child. Dennis says that "the sem is the best place in the world to grow up."

"Weren't there any drawbacks?" I asked. "What about a lack of privacy or a small paycheck?" Well, Dennis contends that the pay may not have put Arnold in Forbes Magazine "but there were no bills. All he had to pay for was gas for their car and clothes for the family." Oh, there was one drawback. "We were pretty sheltered from the rest of the world, we didn't learn how to curse and swear growing up at the sem."

Arnold's Death

Arnold worked two other part-time jobs while at the seminary to supplement his income. One job was a school bus driver and the other was a mail carrier. One day on the mail route, he was rear ended, sending him into the ditch. His big pot belly was slammed into the steering wheel.

What no one realized initially was that he had a cancerous tumor about the size of a grapefruit in his stomach. When he hit the steering wheel, the tumor burst and spread like wildfire throughout his body. The time from the accident to the day of his death was only thirty days, and he never knew he had cancer until three days before his death. He had a nasty backache ever since the accident which kept going downhill along with his overall health. Finally, a doctor made a house call and told him that he had three days to live.

Conclusion

After those three days, Arnie, the janitor, died November 17, 1958. He was not a typical janitor. At his funeral, Dennis says that there were over 1,000 people in attendance, many of whom were pastors. Arnold was well loved by many. He was loved because he loved people: professors, businessmen, beggars, but mostly the students. "He loved those guys." Arnold was a janitor, a capable steward. He didn't do anything profoundly theological, but he did have the opportunity to influence hundreds of pastors as they studied for the public ministry. Arnold Nemitz was more than just a janitor, he was a fine Christian man using the gifts given him for the glory of God.

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