German Methodist Colleges in the West

by Louis A. Haselmayer

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The heavy German immigration of the 1850’s into the United States affected the Methodist Episcopal Church and its educational systems. This was very evident in the rise and fall of certain midwestern German Methodist colleges. These unique educational institutions were established for the specific purpose of meeting the needs of the immigrants and their descendants who desired to maintain a German culture in the United States.

The successful conversion of Germans to Methodism in America resulted in a demand for independent annual conferences. The 1864 General Conference of the Methodist Episcopal Church therefore authorized the East, Central, Northwest, and Southwest German Conferences. In 1878 the Southwest Conference divided into the St. Louis and the West German Annual Conferences but continued to support existing institutions.

The education of young people in a German-speaking environment, as well as the theological education of German-speaking ministers, were pressing problems. Various German Annual Conferences established colleges. Five of these schools had some continuity. German Wallace College, in affiliation with Baldwin University, Berea, Ohio, was started in 1864 by the Central German Conference. Central Wesleyan College was established in 1864 in Warrenton, Missouri, by the Southwest German Conference. The German College in Mt. Pleasant, Iowa, in affiliation with Iowa Wesleyan University, was launched in 1873 by the Southwest German Conference. The German College of Charles City, Iowa, was founded in 1890 by the Northwest German Conference. The Blinn Memorial College, Brenham, Texas, was instituted in 1889 by the Southern German Conference.

These colleges attempted multiple programs on the academy, college and theological levels; courses in music and business were also offered. None of these colleges exist today as separate institutions. German Wallace College merged with Baldwin University to become Baldwin-Wallace College in 1913. The Charles City German College united with Morningside College in Sioux City, Iowa in 1914. The Blinn Memorial College became a county junior college in 1917. Central Wesleyan and the Mt. Pleasant German College were
curiously linked as sister schools of the same conferences and had close ties with German Wallace College, Berea, Ohio. Their history highlights the survival problem of midwest German culture in America.

From its beginning in 1864, German Wallace College was in the midst of a German Methodist stronghold. Its affiliation with Baldwin University permitted students of both colleges to attend courses in either. The affiliation took place during the presidency of John Wheeler, who later (1870) became president of Iowa Wesleyan University, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa. Finding himself in a growing German Methodist area in Iowa, Wheeler suggested the same pattern of cooperation between Iowa Wesleyan and the German College in Mt. Pleasant. The Southwest Conference had already established Central Wesleyan College in Missouri, but it had just received its charter and it seemed quite far removed.

Iowa Wesleyan made Mt. Pleasant German College an offer of land, financial assistance for building, free tuition for German College students and an exchange of faculty. The proposal led to the opening of the German College in September 1873 with 24 students. Courses were offered on all levels, although the college work depended heavily upon the Iowa Wesleyan curriculum.

The students came from the St. Louis and West German Conferences, particularly from the states of Iowa, Illinois, Kansas, and Nebraska. Student lists reveal that brothers and sisters followed each other in rather regular sequence. Many students attended only a few terms. In later years some of the German College students also received degrees from Iowa Wesleyan. The fragmentary records indicate that 400 to 500 students were enrolled in the German College between 1873 and 1908. Some 179 students completed a diploma course and 63 of these obtained an Iowa Wesleyan degree. Fifty-six students were awarded the theological diploma, and many other ministers did some seminary work. It appears that though the German College had a small faculty and inadequate resources, it made a notable contribution. Its graduates distinguished themselves in the fields of the ministry, law, medicine, business, and higher education.

Maintaining a good faculty was a serious problem for the reason that in the early days there were few German Methodist ministers with college training. For the most part the German colleges had to produce their own faculty members. William Balcke, who was one of the first two graduates of Central Wesleyan College (B.A., 1870 and M.A., 1873), joined the faculty of that school in 1876 and served fifteen years; part of the time he was president. Balcke's dedication, spirituality and learning were revealed in his memoir,

Lebenerinnergungen und Tagebuch.1 George B. Addicks, B.A., Central Wesleyan, 1875, B.D., Garrett Biblical Institute, served as a professor at German College from 1879 to 1885, when he became a professor at Central Wesleyan and later its president from 1895 to 1909. Friedrich Munz, an 1877 graduate of the German College, returned to his alma mater as president from 1893 to 1897. Munz published books on homiletics and biblical exegesis. He was editor of the monthly family magazine, Haus und Herd, and edited a German Methodist hymnal. Later Munz also served as a professor at Central Wesleyan College from 1912 to 1914.

In the third decade following the establishment of German College, the school had well trained and able alumni on which it could draw to fill faculty posts. The career of Edwin Stanton Havighurst is an indication of the situation. Havighurst graduated from German College and Iowa Wesleyan in 1887 and then won the S.T.B. degree from Boston University. He served as president of German College from 1898 to 1908. As president, Havighurst attracted to the faculty Karl Stiebel, an 1893 German College graduate (1895-1908), John Helmers, an 1899 graduate of German College and Iowa Wesleyan (1905-1909), and Henry G. Leist, an 1892 Central Wesleyan graduate (1903-1908). Leist also had an M.A. degree from Central Wesleyan, a B.D. degree from Garrett Biblical Institute, and two years of graduate study in Berlin. These men were professional teachers who published extensively in major German Methodist magazines.

The German College consisted of a single, three-story building erected in 1873 and a chapel built in 1902. The latter edifice also served as the Mt. Pleasant German Methodist Church. By 1908 the endowment fund of the College was $30,000. There were no dormitories; the students lived in private homes and organized their own eating clubs.

Student life centered around several religious groups and literary organizations, especially the Cicero and Goethe Societies which gave monthly programs of music and elocution. German College students, enrolled for Iowa Wesleyan degrees, were eligible for university clubs, Greek letter social organizations, and participation in university athletics.

The German College library of 10,000 volumes was devoted to German books and periodicals. There were no student publications. German College news appeared in the Iowa Wesleyan newspaper, and the Iowa Wesleyan Yearbook devoted a section to the German College. The German College did publish, under faculty leadership with student help, a well written monthly magazine, Der Mt. Pleasant Wesleyaner (1892-1908), which had a wide circulation among German families in the annual conferences. By the first decade of the twentieth century, the Mt. Pleasant German College
had created a loyal body of alumni, had made an effective impact upon church life, had established a faculty with some prestige, had built up a library and had achieved a solid curriculum.

Central Wesleyan College

Central Wesleyan College, founded at Quincy, Illinois in 1854 as an academy, moved to Warrenton, Missouri in 1864 as the Western Orphan Asylum and Educational Institute. In March, 1870 it was chartered as Central Wesleyan College and graduated its first class of two students.

The problem of Central Wesleyan College was considerably different from that of German Wallace College or Mt. Pleasant German College. Since it was not affiliated with an established college, it had to obtain a full faculty for academy, college and theological work and sustain a complete academic program. Its history as a German Methodist college extends from 1870 to 1925. After 1925 the German character of the institution rapidly vanished. Central Wesleyan’s success can be traced largely to the long tenure of three presidents, in contrast with the succession of eleven presidents in thirty-six years at Mt. Pleasant. Hermann A. Koch served from 1870 to 1895; George B. Addicks (1895 to 1909), as already noted, had formal academic and theological training, and he demonstrated his scholarship as a teacher and writer. Otto E. Kriege (1909 to 1925) wrote *Geschichte des Methodismus* (Cincinnati: 1909). This book was a standard reference work and is still valuable today.

Other faculty members, drawn entirely from the alumni, served long terms: John H. Frick, one of the first two graduates (1870), professor of mathematics for fifty years; Albert Sauer (1876), professor of French and music (1886-1914); Henry Vosholl (1871), professor of English (1878-1928); John M. Rinkel (1873), professor of German (1881-1909); Charles J. Stuckemann (1880), professor of church history and theology (1898-1928); Albert W. Ebeling (1893), professor of Spanish and science (1898-1928); Eugene Weiffenbach (1894), professor of philosophy and sociology (1904-1925); Charles Wellemeyer (1894), professor of Latin and Greek (1900-1925); Gottlieb C. Hohn (1903), professor of German (1908-1928).

Central Wesleyan’s students came from the St. Louis and the West German Annual Conferences. Chiefly they were from the states of Missouri, Kansas, Nebraska, Illinois, and Texas. Many students from the same families attended. The records show that short term students were numerous. The *1928 Alumni List* contains the names of about 900 graduates between 1870 and 1927, many of

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²In 1925 the Methodist Episcopal Church’s German-speaking annual conferences, the ministers and the congregations were received into the regular annual conferences.
whom entered the ministry, the learned professions, and business. The total contribution of Central Wesleyan College was considerably greater than that of the Mt. Pleasant German College.

In physical facilities, Central Wesleyan also outstripped Mt. Pleasant. Wealthy German laymen in Missouri and Illinois were generous with their gifts. The college plant included seven buildings for classrooms, laboratories, library, dormitories and gymnasium. An active student life included literary, oratorical and religious organizations, the publication of a student newspaper and yearbook, and an athletic program. By the first decade of the 20th century, Central Wesleyan was flourishing with an annual enrollment of three hundred students and full scale college and theological programs.

**Merger**

By 1900 a third generation of German-Americans acquired the German language mainly through study. Inevitably the children and grandchildren of the German immigrants were being Americanized. This meant that the German-speaking colleges, instead of filling a need were soon faced with the problem of survival. The 1904 Bulletin of Central Wesleyan College, printed in both English and German, said that instruction was offered in both languages and indicated that German was the exclusive language only in the theological department. About this time the St. Louis German Annual Conference was beginning to feel the burden of supporting two colleges. Talk of merger, heard as early as 1905, became more pronounced. In 1908, the Mt. Pleasant board of trustees, prompted by conference leaders, decided to amalgamate the German College with Central Wesleyan.

Edwin S. Havighurst resigned the presidency of Mt. Pleasant German College in 1908 to become president of German Wallace College, Berea, Ohio, where he served until 1910. Professor Karl Stiefel resigned from the German College to become pastor of the Eden German Methodist Church in St. Louis. In 1913 Stiefel joined the faculty of the newly merged Baldwin-Wallace College where he remained until retirement. Professor Henry G. Leist was appointed president of Mt. Pleasant German College for one year to effect its discontinuance.

The final year in Mt. Pleasant was marked by controversy, and some bitterness was evident at the last commencement. According to the terms of the 1873 agreement of affiliation, the buildings of the Mt. Pleasant German College reverted to Iowa Wesleyan. The equipment, library and records went to Central Wesleyan College. After some acrimonious debate by the boards of trustees over the German College's endowment fund of $30,000, the matter was referred to a committee of three bishops (John W. Walden, Cincin-
nati; William F. Anderson, Chattanooga; and John L. Nuelson, Omaha), who divided it equally between Iowa Wesleyan and Central Wesleyan. Most of the students in German College either left or entered Iowa Wesleyan; very few of them went to Central Wesleyan. By invitation, Professor Henry Leist joined the faculty of Iowa Wesleyan where he served until 1936, and Professor John Helmers went to Central Wesleyan where he taught history until 1925, after which date he served the college in varying capacities until retirement in 1936.

In 1910 the German College Ex-Studenten Bund placed a commemorative tablet over the entrance of the German College Chapel in Mt. Pleasant. In 1917 the word “German” was defaced, but the plaque remained as the only tangible record of the college’s thirty-six years of existence in Mt. Pleasant.

Today it is evident that it would have been wiser for the Mt. Pleasant German College and Iowa Wesleyan to have merged on the same campus as did German Wallace College and Baldwin University in 1913. But the decisions were made by independent boards of trustees and independent German annual conferences. Central Wesleyan College looked prosperous and no one in 1909 could know what the years 1914 to 1918 would do to German-American culture. What seemed like a strategic move to preserve a German tradition appeared ten years later to be an unfortunate mistake.

It is not clear why Iowa Wesleyan College did not put forth more of an effort to hold the German College in Mt. Pleasant. Possibly it was because the Iowa Wesleyan trustees were concerned at the time about the possibility of absorbing a medical college in Keokuk, Iowa, forty miles away.

**Aftermath at Central Wesleyan**

The prosperity which Central Wesleyan College was enjoying in 1909 did not long continue. The anti-German hysteria of the First World War effectually stopped the use of the German language in the school. Thereafter all instruction was in English. Edwin S. Havighurst became dean of the German theological department in 1918. For several years this department gave courses in English on such subjects as hermeneutics, homiletics, systematic theology, biblical literature and history, and religious education. But in time Havighurst’s main responsibility was the teaching of English Bible to the college students. During the 1920’s the German professors gradually retired, only John Helmers continuing on the faculty into the 1930’s. Otto Kriege resigned as president in 1925. In 1926 the St. Louis and West German annual conferences were formally dissolved, and Central Wesleyan College became the property and the responsibility of the annual conference of the Methodist Epis-
copal Church in Missouri. Central Wesleyan’s life as a German college was over.

Recruitment of students and the procurement of qualified faculty members for Central Wesleyan in its new status was difficult, and the onset of the great economic depression in 1929 made it well-nigh impossible. By 1930 Central Wesleyan had dropped in rank to a junior college, accredited only by the University Senate of the Methodist Episcopal Church and by the University of Missouri, which would accept students by transfer from Central Wesleyan. Within a few years even the transfer privileges were lost.

In 1939 Franklin F. Lewis became president and tried to revive Central Wesleyan, but the outlook was anything but promising. Methodist unification came in 1939, and united Methodism in Missouri immediately found itself with two moribund colleges on its hands, Central Wesleyan and Ozark Wesleyan, the latter coming from the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. The annual conference journals for this period show that legislation was adopted which would permit the sale of both colleges to any interested buyer. In April 1939, a committee of the General Board of Education of the Methodist Episcopal Church, headed by John L. Seaton, examined Central Wesleyan College and recommended that it discontinue operations at once. The school continued to decline; the 1940 catalog was a simple folder with a desperately worded statement on accreditation. Central Wesleyan College expired in June 1941.

Central Wesleyan’s buildings and funds were turned over to the Orphans’ Home which had continued operation in Warrenton through the years under church auspices. Soon the orphanage was moved to St. Louis where in time it was merged with the Methodist Children’s Home, a strong institution which was brought into united Methodism from the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. After the orphanage moved away from Warrenton, the Central Wesleyan buildings for the most part were left vacant to fall into disrepair. The library was sold to the Northwest Missouri State Teachers’ College in Kirksville, and the records were deposited in the same institution. A few buildings and an annual alumni reunion (the last reunion is scheduled to be held the first Sunday in August 1964, the one hundredth anniversary of the founding of the college) in Warrenton are the solitary witness to the former existence of Central Wesleyan College.

Iowa Wesleyan Today

In Mt. Pleasant, Iowa the German College building was used by Iowa Wesleyan College until 1961, when it was torn down. The German College chapel was razed in 1926 and the bricks and the 1910 commemorative tablet were stored. Efforts to explore the
history of the German College were largely futile prior to 1961 because there seemed to be few if any records available. Then by a curious coincidence in October 1961 the Reverend Zwingli F. Meyer, Crete, Nebraska, a 1911 Central Wesleyan graduate, offered Iowa Wesleyan College his personal library of German-American Methodist history, which contained considerable archival material on Central Wesleyan and the Mt. Pleasant German Colleges. Meyer was an alumnus without an alma mater, and he was seeking some permanent institution in the middle west where he could place his collection.

Iowa Wesleyan College accepted Meyer's library. When the materials were cataloged, it appeared that they would be a valuable source for research in German-American Methodist history and that among them were documents which had long been missing from Mt. Pleasant. Correspondence with former German College alumni and their descendants has brought to Iowa Wesleyan additional materials in the same field.

In its own Founders' Day celebration, February 17, 1963, Iowa Wesleyan College officially took note of the Ninetieth Anniversary of the founding of the German College in Mt. Pleasant. A historical sketch of the German College, which included a list of alumni, was printed and distributed on the occasion. At the same time Iowa Wesleyan formally received the Zwingli F. Meyer Collection, conferred an honorary doctorate of divinity on the donor, and authorized the erection of a historical marker on the site of the German College. This monument, constructed of the original bricks and the 1910 commemorative tablet which had been kept in storage, was made possible by the generosity of nine descendents of the Havighurst family. The monument was designated as a memorial to Rudolph and Edwin Stanton Havighurst, both of whom served as president of the German College. Iowa Wesleyan declared itself a center for future reseach and publication in the traditions of German-American Methodism. The cycle had been completed.

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Cincinnati. 1906.


Archives

Central Wesleyan College, Warrenton, Missouri.
Catalogs and Bulletins. 1864-1941.
Central Wesleyan Star. Complete File.
Student Records (incomplete).
In Archives Collection, Northeast Missouri State Teachers College, Kirksville, Missouri.

Mt. Pleasant German College, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa.
Catalogs 1873-1908. Incomplete file.
Commencement Programs, Organizational Programs. Incomplete file.
Minute Book. Board of Trustees. 1873-1900.


In Zwingli F. Meyer Collection of German-American Methodism at Iowa Wesleyan College, Mt. Pleasant, Iowa.