

**“A VERY SINGULAR MAN”:**



**REV. MOSES DISSINGER OF  
THE EVANGELICAL ASSOCIATION<sup>1</sup>**

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In his lifetime, Rev. Moses Dissinger was compared to the pugnacious frontier Methodist preacher Peter Cartwright. A subsequent generation called him “the Billy Sunday of Lebanon County.” “Mose,” as he was known to friends, was a legend in his own day, and even before his death, stories about him had become a part of Pennsylvania Dutch folklore. His friend and colleague William Yost described Dissinger as “an extraordinary man both in body and mind, gifted with tireless energy; an original, peculiar personage, the like of which our church never had and never will again have in its ministry.”<sup>2</sup> Renowned for his quick wit, biting sarcasm and earthy, homespun preaching, Moses Dissinger was enormously popular among the Pennsylvania Germans, and during the Civil War, he became an ardent and influential supporter of the Union cause.

He was born March 17, 1824, in Schaefferstown, Lebanon County, where his great-great-grandparents and their extended family had settled in the mid-18th century. They had been among as many as 100,000 Germans who immigrated to Britain’s North American colonies in the years before the American Revolution. Pennsylvania became a particular haven for these

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<sup>1</sup> Photograph of Moses Dissinger, circa early 1850s. Photograph from the Archives at Evangelical Seminary, Myerstown, Pennsylvania.

<sup>2</sup> William Yost, *Reminiscences* (Cleveland: Publishing House of the Evangelical Association, 1911), 236.

immigrants and their descendants, who comprised a third of the colony's population by 1770. Many who settled there were members of dissident religious groups, such as the Mennonites, the Schwenkfelders and the Moravian Brethren, seeking liberty in William Penn's "Holy Experiment." But many also came from economically-crippled German lands seeking opportunity and a new life, including those who had been members of Lutheran and Reformed state churches.<sup>3</sup> In eastern and central Pennsylvania, these immigrants and their descendants developed a unique hybrid culture and language, which became known popularly (and incorrectly) as Pennsylvania Dutch—a corruption by English speakers of *Deutsch*, or German.

Dissinger's family was affiliated with the Lutheran Church—his great-uncle, Peter Mischler, who had come from Germany with his in-laws, was a Lutheran clergyman—and Moses was baptized as an infant in the Lutheran church in Schafferstown. His father, John Dissinger II, was a carpenter by trade, who also ran a roofing business and tended a small farm. From his mother, Catherine, Moses seems to have inherited both his flair for the dramatic and his sense of humor. Remembered to have possessed a sharp mind and ready wit, Catherine was Irish, of a family that had ties to the theater. Moses later recalled how his grandfather, "Irish Jimmy Conner," would make his grandchildren dance for him when visiting their Schaefferstown home. In his later ministry, Moses sometimes would warn disruptive elements at a revival service, "you'd better not get my Dutch and Irish stirred up, or something will be sure to happen."<sup>4</sup>

Despite his religious heritage, Moses had little interest in spiritual things until he was a young adult, preferring instead to spend his spare time partying with friends. Rev. William Yost, who knew him from childhood ("Our cradles stood only a few miles apart"), put it bluntly: "Before his conversion, he loved to be where there was dancing, fighting and where whiskey flowed freely."<sup>5</sup> Moses was tall, with a large, muscular frame approaching 200 pounds, and became especially renowned for his pugilistic triumphs. In his youth, great competitiveness often existed between the distant towns that dotted the rural landscape of central Pennsylvania, and one way those rivalries played out was through boxing competitions. "The town that could put forth the best prize-fighter was accorded the county championship, and the leader who thus covered the little town with glory was given the honored designation of 'town bully.'" By the time he was 18, Moses had won sev-

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<sup>3</sup> For background on German immigration to America, see Frank Tommler and Joseph McVeigh, eds., *America and the Germans: An Assessment of a Three Hundred Year History*, 2 vols. (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 1985). Of particular interest for German settlement in the Quaker State, see Don Yoder's article in the same, "The Pennsylvania Germans: Three Centuries of Identity Crisis," 1:41-65.

<sup>4</sup> These and many more details on Moses' family and lineage can be found in Thomas R. Brendle, "Moses Dissinger, Evangelist and Patriot," *William Rittenhouse and Moses Dissinger, Two Eminent Pennsylvania Germans* (Philadelphia: Pennsylvania German Society, 1959), 95-106, 137-144.

<sup>5</sup> Yost, 236-237.

enteen fights, and “thus his name and the reflected honor of his town spread far and wide.”<sup>6</sup>

A natural athlete, Dissinger later told his children how would work off steam by climbing to the top of a tall tree, and swing from its branches, letting go and catching another branch, all the way down, like a trapeze artist.<sup>7</sup> Even in his mature years, stories are told of his enormous energy and seeming inability to sit still. Dissinger had no formal education at all, and was functionally illiterate until he was in his twenties. From early youth, Moses was hired out to local farmers to work for his food and clothing. For a number of years he worked on the farm of a distant relative named John Steinmetz, just south of Schaefferstown; Steinmetz’ daughter Rebecca later helped teach Moses to read and write, though he was never very proficient at either.<sup>8</sup>

Though he was fond of rough play and carousing, Dissinger was no thug. With his likeable personality, lively sense of humor, and impressive athleticism, he made friends easily. Even local townspeople disposed to disapprove of his antics couldn’t help but like him; it was recalled that after a night of revelry, he would often walk home loudly in the early morning hours, striking fences with a stick, and shouting in his “well known, trumpet-like yell,” rousing people from sleep and inciting dogs to howl. But once they realized the cause of the disturbance, they would say “*Sis alrecht—sis juscht dar Mose*” (It’s alright; it’s only Mose), and soon both man and beast would return to their slumbers.<sup>9</sup> Another writer recalled him this way:

He was one of those men who was not afraid to work, whether in the pulpit or out. During the summer time he helped the farmers. He was at home behind the plow, and could handle a scythe, swing a cradle or thresh grain. He was a whole-souled, genial man whom everybody liked, whether church member or not.<sup>10</sup>

## Conversion and Early Ministry

At the age of eighteen, Dissinger began attending services at the Evangelical Church in Schaefferstown. Still somewhat new and controversial among the Pennsylvania Dutch, the Evangelical Association had been founded in 1800 by Jacob Albright, a self-directed itinerant preacher, who

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<sup>6</sup> H. H. Shenk, “A Lebanon County Old Time Backwoods Preacher,” *Papers Read before the Lebanon County Historical Society* 4:16 (1916), 418.

<sup>7</sup> Brendle, 143. This story, linked perhaps with accounts of him leaping on the backs of cows to drive them into barns, may have fed a rumor that Dissinger once had traveled with a circus; according to Brendel, a Baptist critic at one time publicly spread the false charge that Moses had been a clown with a New Jersey circus (165).

<sup>8</sup> Brendle, 107, 110; Yost, 238, says the he also tutored Dissinger in basic literacy skills, commenting, “in a short time, he could read tolerably well. At writing he never made much progress. I doubt that he ever wrote a letter.”

<sup>9</sup> Brendle, 108; also, with a slightly different wording by the neighbors, Henry Stetzel, *A Brief Biography of Moses Dissinger, Preacher of the Evangelical Association* (Allentown: J. B. Goranflo, 1892), 4.

<sup>10</sup> J. Hauser, quoted in E. S. Woodring, “Moses Dissinger, A Mighty Preacher of Righteousness,” *The United Evangelical* (June 19, 1934).

had spread among the Pennsylvania Germans a decidedly Methodist insistence upon personal conversion and the felt experience of salvation. Among their countrymen of Lutheran or Reformed background, the Evangelicals were considered suspect for their fervent and emotional faith, and were referred to by opponents with the derogatory name *strawlers*.<sup>11</sup>

Yet the children of Albright made significant inroads among the people of Lebanon and Lancaster Counties—and that included a certain boisterous boxer by the name of Moses Dissinger, who found himself deeply convicted, and began earnestly seeking God. It was remembered that at the time of his conversion he was employed digging the foundation for a house, and was heard audibly for days to cry out with each shovelful, “O God, grant me grace!”<sup>12</sup> He soon found peace, though he later said that of all the fights he had experienced, none was harder than the last—the fight against his own sinful nature. Despite doubts expressed by friends and townspeople alike that this was nothing more than passing phase, Moses soon joined the church, and became active both at Schaefferstown and with the congregation in Kleinfeltersville, where Jacob Albright was buried.

Like the Apostle Paul, Dissinger’s energy, drive and intensity, once channeled in service to God, led to a tireless zeal for the gospel that soon made people take note. “In ways and means, the old Mose remained ever the same, only his aims were different,” one author wrote. “As he had been loudest in his profanity, he was now loudest in singing hymns of praise and shouting Hallelujah.”<sup>13</sup> He soon was entrusted with the offices of class leader and exhorter, and his old friends saw that he was in earnest. “They called him a fanatic,” an early obituary noted, “but he cared nothing for that. He meant to serve God, and he did, without respect to what he was called.”<sup>14</sup>

It was at this time that Dissinger sought help in learning to read and write, so that he could read the Bible. But Moses was more of an auditory learner, “gifted with a marvelous memory,” as his friend William Yost recalled; “what he read and heard his memory retained and he could use the knowl-

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<sup>11</sup> During Dissinger’s day, the denomination was known as the Evangelical Association, only later as the Evangelical Church. For purposes of clarity to modern readers, I will refer to it as the Evangelical Church for the remainder of this article. After a split in the 1890s and a reunion in the 1920s, two separate denominations emerged, the Evangelical Church and the Evangelical Congregational Church. In 1946, the former merged with the United Brethren Church to create the Evangelical United Brethren (EUB) Church. In 1968, the EUB Church merged with the Methodist Church to create The United Methodist Church. The Evangelical Congregational Church remains to this day, and is the body with which family members of Moses Dissinger continued their affiliation, including several clergy. On the EV, UB and EUB Churches, see J. Bruce Behney and Paul H. Eller, *The History of the Evangelical United Brethren Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1979). On the history of the EC Church see Terry M. Heisey, ed., *Evangelical From the Beginning: A History of the Evangelical Congregational Church and its Predecessors—the Evangelical Association and the United Evangelical Church* (Myerstown, PA: Emeth Press, 2006).

<sup>12</sup> Stetzel, 7.

<sup>13</sup> “Moses Dissinger,” *The Pennsylvanian German* (1915), 182.

<sup>14</sup> *The Sunday School Messenger* (October 1, 1885), reprinted in Brendle, 185-187.

edge acquired in his own peculiar manner.”<sup>15</sup> Bishop E. S. Woodring, who heard Moses preach many times, recalled him in services “reciting texts, portions of Scripture and hymns” entirely from memory, and then challenging the people to go home and check the correctness of his Bible references, saying, “if you do not find it so, *Komm und segst der Moses hot gelogen* (come and say that Moses told a lie).” No one ever did so, Woodring recalled, “because the text was always in the place where he said.”<sup>16</sup> Yost said that he often heard his friend in a single sermon “quote from ninety to one hundred and thirty passages of Scripture, mentioning book, chapter and verse, and reciting them word for word, without any notes.”<sup>17</sup> Another said that, when preaching, Dissinger “quoted from the Bible by the yard.”<sup>18</sup>

In 1853, he was licensed as a local preacher, and a year later was recommended to the East Pennsylvania conference for admission as an itinerant preacher. There was opposition to Moses’ acceptance, Yost recalled, “due to his peculiar eccentricities, overzealousness, unbounded enthusiasm and want of proper literary culture and . . . rough demeanor.” But he was accepted on trial in 1854, and in accordance with the practice of that day, was assigned to assist a more experienced preacher, and train under his tutelage. Ordained a deacon by Bishop John Seybert in 1856, and an elder in 1859 by Bishop Joseph Long, Dissinger’s first solo appointment as preacher in charge was to the Schuylkill Circuit in 1858, part of the Orwigsburg District, led by Presiding Elder Solomon Neitz.

In the early years of his life as an itinerant preacher, Moses was called upon to mourn the death of his wife, Susan Clark Dissinger, who also grew up in Schaefferstown. Susan died in February, 1857, just 26 years old, leaving her widowed husband with three young children: Frank, five years old; Abraham, three; and Elizabeth, six months. Soon after her mother’s death, baby Elizabeth also took ill, and died in March; both were buried in the Evangelical Church cemetery in Schaefferstown. Within a year, Dissinger remarried to Amelia Elizabeth Stahler, of Fogelsville, Lehigh County. Much better educated than her husband, Amelia was recalled as a “model preacher’s wife” and gifted singer, on whom Moses relied for feedback and encouragement in his ministry. The story was recalled by his nephew, S. Neitz Dissinger, that when Moses first brought his Amelia home to introduce to his family, his sister-in-law asked, “Mose, is she saved?” Moses snapped back, “Do you think I would sleep with the devil?” Moses and Amelia would have ten children of their own, five of whom survived to adulthood.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Yost, 239.

<sup>16</sup>E. S. Woodring, op. cit.

<sup>17</sup>Yost, 242. He added that Dissinger’s talent for memory was “extraordinary. I never heard the like of it from any other man.”

<sup>18</sup>Brendle, 108.

<sup>19</sup>S. Neitz Dissinger quoted in Brendle, 108; detailed information on Moses’ wives and children may be found in Brendle, 155-159.



Photograph of Moses Dissinger and second wife, Amelia Elizabeth Stahler, circa 1870. Photograph from the Archives at Evangelical Seminary, Myerstown, Pennsylvania.

### Preaching as Theater

In the days before television, internet and smart phones, people were drawn to the Evangelical Church in no small part for the drama and emotional release of its revivalism, as well as the engaging and entertaining oratory of its preachers. Dissinger understood intuitively the power of theater in worship and preaching, and used it to his advantage. One story relates a sermon describing the great multitude around the throne of God in Revelation 7:9-17. At one point, he knelt on the platform stairs and acted out the redeemed drawing from the “springs of living water” (v. 17). When he came to the sentence, “and God will wipe away every tear from their eyes,” Dissinger walked down into the congregation, drew a handkerchief from his pocket, and gently wiped a tear from the face of an elderly man who had been moved by the message. “This gesture made an overwhelming impression upon the congregation, who sat spell-bound.”<sup>20</sup>

On another occasion, Moses was preaching on the story of Elijah’s departure in a chariot of fire, from 2 Kings 2. After a vivid and imaginative account of the blazing chariots and their fiery steeds sweeping toward the earth, he stepped from the pulpit, took off his coat and swung it around his shoulders as a mantle, then stepped into the invisible chariot, as he recited a German hymn, “*Von fern glaenzi mir mein Kleinod zu*” (“From afar shines my salvation upon me.”)<sup>21</sup>

Nor was he adverse to using antics to attract a crowd. On Dissinger’s first Sunday in Bernville, the church was sparsely attended. He proceeded

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<sup>20</sup> Brendle, 152.

<sup>21</sup> Brendle, 152.

to fling one leg across the pulpit and announced that this was how we would conduct himself while preaching. Sheer curiosity to see what the eccentric preacher might do next brought the people out regularly thereafter.<sup>22</sup> At the end of his tenure in Allentown, he announced gravely on a Sunday morning that during the evening service he would declare his intention to do something even the devil had never attempted. Word spread and the evening service was packed with people curious to see what the colorful parson would reveal. Dissinger finally said, "Now, I promised to do something the Devil never did. I am now going to leave Allentown."<sup>23</sup>

Relying on his extraordinary memory, Dissinger preached without notes and was suspicious of the spiritual authenticity of those who did. Yet he was honest about his own limitations and gifts. Moses did try initially to emulate some of his colleagues in their manner of preaching, but had to give it up, as he later reflected:

I once tried to preach like my brethren, but my experience was that of little David when he thought he would have to fight the big-mouthed blasphemer in Saul's armor; instead of slaying the giant he would cut off his own head. But with the weapon to which he was adapted, he knocked in the gable end of the big sinner. Only with the weapons that the Lord has given me can I whip the Devil, even if he does come upon me on stilts as high as a three story house.<sup>24</sup>

He also tended to speak very rapidly. Once Moses described a sermon which he thought among his finest, and said, "The words could not come out fast enough. They had to somersault over each other."<sup>25</sup> On another occasion, after hearing Bishop J. J. Esher for the first time speak in his slow and deliberate way, Rev Solomon Neitz asked Moses what he thought. Dissinger replied, "Well, Neitz, the cow gives good milk, but lets it down rather slowly."<sup>26</sup>

Most of his ministry took place in the country, among the farmers and artisans of Pennsylvania Dutch country, where he was most at home. He preached in his native Pennsylvania German dialect, and drew his sermon illustrations from the sights and sounds of rural life, using homespun and humorous images that are "not possible to render . . . perfectly in English in their native peculiarities."<sup>27</sup> In his denunciation of drunkenness, his descrip-

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<sup>22</sup> Brendle, 117.

<sup>23</sup> John H. Ness, "Moses Dissinger," unattributed clipping dated November 21, 1965, in the archive at Evangelical Seminary, Myerstown, Pennsylvania. Another tradition, related in Brendle, 177, maintains that the original appointment to Allentown was not the preference of either preacher or congregation; Dissinger reportedly arrived in town and announced on his first Sunday, "I know that you don't want me, but you do not know that I did not want you either. Now that we are together, let us worship together."

<sup>24</sup> As recalled in Yost, 25-257.

<sup>25</sup> Brendle, 113.

<sup>26</sup> Yost, 252; Brindle, 135, gives the Pennsylvania Dutch, "*Die Kuh gebt gude Milch awwer sie lossts langsam runner.*"

<sup>27</sup> Yost, 242. Another author says, "There is something in the Pennsylvania German dialect itself which tends to make the jokes funnier," Albert F. Buffington, quoted in Richard E. Wentz, *Pennsylvania Dutch: Folk Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 49.

tive language has become part of Pennsylvania Dutch folklore:

Just look at the drunkard! These the devil has ruined so fearfully that one might think they could never in a whole lifetime be restored . . . Now, take a good look at their outward appearance. They have noses like red peppers, ears like Fasnacht cakes, bellies like barrels, and they make faces like foxes eating wasps. But in spite of if all they go on drinking, they jump for the rum bottle like bullfrogs on red rags. If we did not know that Jesus Christ has received such degraded men and made honorable men of them, we could not hope that such drunken rum-rats could ever be delivered from the devil of drink. But Jesus Christ has obtained grace for all sinners, and even those who are the most deeply in the mire of sin are not excluded. By the power of the gospel the most wretched drunkard can be saved and gifted with power, so that he could swim in a stream of rum reaching to his mouth without any desire to drink of it.<sup>28</sup>

That excerpt reveals part of Dissinger’s appeal. Amid his colorful and often excoriating language was always a word of hope, an unbridled optimism in the power of God’s grace to redeem any and all—and Moses made it clear that this was his goal in the lives of his hearers. At a camp meeting in 1875 in Northampton County, he was giving the closing appeal to the uncommitted, and said,

O ye dear people. Ye say that we condemn you, but oh, how you are deceived. Why, if I stood at the verge of hell and one of you were to fall into it, and I could yet grasp him at his hair, I would pull him out quickly, and would blow him out, and would quickly put the wet house-rag around him to put out the fire. No, we want to rescue you and have you saved, for this reason we show you your lost condition and call upon you with a loud voice, “Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sins of the world.”<sup>29</sup>

Yost related that Dissinger’s most effective sermons were “on regeneration and on the necessity of man making preparations for his eternal salvation.” Less tintured with humor, these were always “of a solemn nature” and often accompanied by “a general chorus of praise among God’s people, as well as earnest crying and bitter weeping among the penitents seeking salvation.”<sup>30</sup> Clarence Weiss recalled, “He believed in hell-fire and he preached it . . . I never heard a man preach about hell and the punishment of the wicked like Brother Dissinger . . . [so] as to make sinners tremble, and Christians more determined than ever to live for God.” At times, he may have been “a little extreme on the subject,” but as Weiss commented, “He believed all he preached, and he showed it in his manner,” which gave him credibility among the people.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> As translated in Shenk, “A Lebanon County Old Time Backwoods Preacher,” 431-432.

<sup>29</sup> Brendle 151. On another occasion, Dissinger gave a hellfire and brimstone message at a local volunteer fire company event, but appealed to them, “My dear hearers, the Lord is ready to pardon, gracious and merciful, slow to anger and of great kindness. But unless you change your course of life, and reform you will get to a place where there is fire that you cannot extinguish, but nevertheless, with all your faults, the devil shall not have a single one of you if I can help it,” Brendle, 165.

<sup>30</sup> Yost, 241.

<sup>31</sup> Clarence S. Weiss, “Rev. Moses Dissinger—the Secret of His Success,” *The Evangelical-Messenger* (May 10, 1941).

Early in his career, Dissinger became something of a celebrity among the Pennsylvania Dutch. Yost said that his friend “soon became known throughout the church as a very singular man, and everywhere people came in crowds to hear this marvelous preacher.”<sup>32</sup> One biographer wrote that “people came to hear this strange preacher who used the most common expressions of everyday life, and who cared nothing for appearance, couldn’t preach wearing a collar, and whose reputation for wit and humor was scarcely inferior to that of [Billy] Sunday . . . In meeting houses, barns and at camp meetings, Dissinger was always the largest attraction of the season.”<sup>33</sup>

He had a knack for painting verbal images that stuck with people. Once at a camp meeting where he was to preach, Dissinger was asked by a Presiding Elder if he wanted another minister to offer the opening prayer. Moses shot back, “I am going to sharpen my scythe myself.”<sup>34</sup> At a prayer meeting that was dragging and uninspiring, Moses exhorted, “You are croaking about like an old set of mill wheels when there is not enough water to set them going properly.”<sup>35</sup> On another occasion he drew a unique image to describe the inner assurance that a believer has in Christ, invisible though it is to others: “If a man has a toothache, you might look in his mouth all day long and not see anything of the toothache; but he who has it feels that he has it, and therefore he knows it. So it is with the man who has received the eternal life of God into his soul: he feels that he has it, and therefore he knows that he has it.”<sup>36</sup>

Despite his lack of polish, Dissinger’s preaching also drew great interest among his fellow clergy, and he was often called upon to preach during the annual session of the East Pennsylvania Conference. But he began to worry that his colleagues came out to be entertained by his peculiar mannerisms, rather than to be edified, so one year he decided to teach them a lesson. He was scheduled to preach one evening at a church in town during the conference session, and a large number of his colleagues had gathered among the congregants. After he led the opening time of singing and prayer, he read a passage from the Bible and announced, “Dear brethren, this would be my text if I would preach but this evening I am not going to preach.” After a pregnant pause, he added, “Brethren, did you ever see a cat sit in front of a mouse-hole watching for the mouse to come out? The cat as ready to jump upon the mouse, but the little mouse did not come out. You remind me of that cat. You came here to hear me preach—but you will not hear Dissinger preach this evening.” He then tuned to a fellow preacher sitting nearby on the platform, and asked him to close the service, with a final hymn and benediction, Moses uttering not another word.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Yost, 239.

<sup>33</sup> H. H. Shenk, *The “Billy” Sunday of Lebanon County: A Brief Sketch of the Life and Works of “Mose” Dissinger* (Annville, PA: H. H. Shenk, 1939), 9.

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in “Who is Sharpening Your Scythe,” *The United Evangelical* (August 18, 1936).

<sup>35</sup> Stetzel, 21.

<sup>36</sup> Stetzel, 22.

<sup>37</sup> Brendle, 147-148; the story was related to Brindle by Rev. C. F. Erffmeyer of Kansas, who said the incident had been related to him by Moses himself.

Dissinger was twice invited to preach before the General Conference of the Evangelical Church, once when it met in Philadelphia, and in 1871 at Naperville, Illinois. At the Naperville conference, among those in attendance was Rev. William Nast of the Methodist Episcopal Church, a well-known editor and minister, and leader of German missions among the English-speaking Methodists. Dissinger preached an “incomparable sermon with tremendous enthusiasm and power, teeming with Pennsylvania German idioms, sledgehammer phrases and home-spun illustrations.” Afterward, Nast was reported to have said, “It appeared to me that one of the prophets of old was standing before us, proclaiming the divine oracles of God to men—as one having divine authority. Never have I heard its equal.”<sup>38</sup>

### Populist and Folk Hero

Dissinger’s popularity was in large measure a result of the sea change that had been going on in religious culture since the early nineteenth century, a period that saw democratizing trends reshape the religious practices of Americans.<sup>39</sup> Revolutionary ideals of liberty and equality were not only changing the way people related to their government, as during the Jacksonian era, but also how they functioned within their churches. Older aristocratic notions were breaking down, and ordinary people found themselves less and less impressed with traditional ideas of authority, tradition and class. Among such groups as the Methodists, Baptists, Evangelicals, and United Brethren, religion became the domain of the common person, whose spiritual experience was considered just as authoritative as that of the professional clergyman. Indeed, among such groups, ministers were most often drawn from among the working classes, who were less formally educated, polished, or philosophically oriented in their preaching. Among the Pennsylvania Germans this trend was part of an “Americanizing” process, which led to splits within older denominations into “Old” and “New Lutherans,” “Old” and “New” Mennonites, or the “Old Order” and “Progressive” Brethren.<sup>40</sup>

Revivalism and populism combined to make many people suspicious of ministerial authority based upon education and rank. It was the “religion of the heart” that qualified men for ministry, not the religion of the head. Like many of his colleagues and contemporaries, Dissinger believed that the only real requirements for a preacher were a clear calling of God and the “unction” of the Holy Spirit, which formal education could never supply—and might even squeeze out of a man. To many Evangelicals of that day, the best way to ruin a preacher was to send him to seminary; it would not be until well after the Civil War that the Evangelical Church founded its first educa-

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<sup>38</sup> As quoted in Brendle, 153-15; the description of Dissinger’s sermon is from Yost, 197-198.

<sup>39</sup> For the classic work on these changes, see Nathan O. Hatch, *The Democratization of American Christianity* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1989).

<sup>40</sup> Yoder, “The Pennsylvania Germans: Three Centuries of Identity Crisis,” op. cit., 47-48.

tional institutions to train clergy.<sup>41</sup>

This democratic or folk spirituality had led to a cultural transformation of the clergyman from *priest* to *preacher*—someone who was in many ways “just one of the folks.” Among the Pennsylvania Dutch a tradition arose of telling humorous stories about the preacher, called “*Parre Schtories*” (pastor stories). These often accentuated the preacher’s eccentricities, but remained respectful, and were designed “to keep the pastor related to the same earth on which the drama of folk existence is staged.” They also served to underline the democratic spirituality of the people, emphasizing that God is “no respecter of hierarchy or ‘highfalutin’ people . . . [but] loved the simple folks who enjoyed the earth and learned to live with tears as well as laughter.”<sup>42</sup>

Dissinger personifies the religious populism of this era, as “the homespun religious hero who puts the powerful and unruly in their places.”<sup>43</sup> His rise to folk hero status was rooted in his evident spiritual authenticity, his success in attracting and converting the masses, and his willingness to challenge the more educated professional clergy of his day. And challenge them he did, in stories that are legion. Of a Presbyterian minister whose preaching and demeanor did not impress Dissinger, he once quipped, “*Ich denk der macht dem Teufel seine Geil nicht fiel schei*” [“I guess he doesn’t scare the devil’s horses much”].<sup>44</sup>

Once in Bucks County, he attended a funeral at an older denominational church for a young man who had attended some of Dissinger’s revival services. The minister used as his text, “Because I live, you shall live also” (John 14:19). During his sermon, the minister excoriated the Evangelical Church and its practices, accusing its leaders of fanaticism and of spreading false teachings. He warned his people to stay away from them, saying in part, “Pray not for the Holy Ghost in connection with this life, for ye can no receive him.” Incensed, Moses announced upon leaving the church that he would preach on the same text the following Sunday, “so that justice may be done to it.” An overflow crowd arrived at the Evangelical meeting house to hear his response, which he prefaced this way:

Now I am going to preach on this text which the priest out yonder has chewed up

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<sup>41</sup> On attitudes with the Evangelical Church regarding ministerial training and qualifications, see William Naumann, “Doctrine and Theology in the Evangelical Association/Church,” in J. Stephen O’Malley and Jason E. Vickers, eds., *Methodist and Pietist: Retrieving the Evangelical United Brethren Tradition* (Nashville: Kingswood Books, 2009), 93-107. By the time Dissinger joined the ranks of the Evangelical clergy in the 1850s, winds of change were already blowing, with increasing calls for a more educated clergy—he himself was required during his training to complete the required course of study that had been set up in the 1840s—but Moses seemed to hearken back to an earlier day of the founders and fathers in his simple and rough-hewn, yet highly effective, manner.

<sup>42</sup> Richard E. Wentz, *Pennsylvania Dutch: Folk Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1993), 34, 48-49. Wentz, 49-53, includes a short chapter of collected pastor stories, noting in his introduction “The Dutch like the saying ‘*Wie Gelehrter, wie Verkehter*’ (The more learned, the more mixed up).”

<sup>43</sup> Wentz, 35.

<sup>44</sup> Brendle, 166.

so badly. God in heaven knows how much pity I have felt for this text! It seemed to me exactly as if you had thrown a bag full of oats before a hog and left the bag tied up. The hog will sniff about it and smell that there is something within, but he cannot get it. Just so that godless priest went around this text, smelling that there is something in it; he sniffed it over and chewed it all up and yet he failed to find the grain. But this day justice shall be done to this text. God’s eternal truth contained in this text shall now be preached.<sup>45</sup>

Seminary-trained preachers who wrote their sermons out on paper and read them he derided as “paper-shooters,” or even the “real priests of Baal” [*“di richtichi Bawlpaffe”*]. One evening he was expounding upon this theme in a sermon entitled “True Preachers and True Christians,” which happened to have in attendance several theological students. In his distinctive way Moses “ridiculed and burlesqued” those who thought advanced degrees made them ministers of Christ. “They are ever learning and never able to come to a knowledge of the truth,” he thundered. “In a thousand pounds of learning they have not an ounce of religion, and when they preach the devil goes to sleep right in front of the pulpit and right under their eyes and noses, well knowing that his cause is perfectly safe in their hands.” Offended, the students stood up and walked out, to which Dissinger responded, “Some have felt the cheese-knife; this is the way it goes in the world; there they go! When the teakettle boils over, then the cats and dogs get out from under the stove.”<sup>46</sup>

Nor was he impressed with the customs of the Amish and other Mennonite groups who wore distinctive dress and separated themselves from the world. “Whoever wishes to enter heaven must be converted to God,” Dissinger insisted. “This is not done as many people think. They think, if they have been baptized as adults, if they belong to the church and wear broad-brimmed hats and round-tiled coats, everything has been done that they can do to be saved and enter heaven. All who believe this cheat themselves out of their soul’s salvation.”<sup>47</sup>

But he did not spare his own church from criticism either. In the pulpit one Sunday Dissinger pulled out a black walnut and said, “Now, this nut represents three churches.” He first removed the outer black covering, and said, “This is the Lutheran Church—this is no good; we will throw it away.” Then he cracked the nut and said, “This hard shell is the Methodist Church. That also is no good; so we will throw it away.” Then he came to the kernel and announced, “this kernel is our church.” But it was no compliment: the kernel was “shriveled and decayed.”<sup>48</sup>

On occasion, however, even the great Moses Dissinger could be outdone. Once on a street in the city of Lebanon he encountered a Rev. Johnston of the

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<sup>45</sup> Stetzel, 5-16. Stetzel also reports that on the way out of the funeral, Dissinger had muttered to colleague who attended with him, “If only I might have a hold of that hellhound for fifteen minutes, I would have him so that the dirt would flow from him.”

<sup>46</sup> Brendle, 162, 181.

<sup>47</sup> Shenk, *Old Time Backwoods Preacher*, 434.

<sup>48</sup> Brendle 174.

Reformed Church, who mentioned his congregation's plan to erect a cross atop the church building. "Is that so?" said Dissinger, who had little regard for extraneous trimmings of that sort. "Why don't you put a mule there?" "We were considering that," replied Johnston, "but we concluded that you would be too heavy."<sup>49</sup>

### Rural Evangelist

At heart, Dissinger was an evangelist, who loved camp meetings and revival services, exhibiting endless enthusiasm and remarkable stamina. "Without any intermission," Yost recalled, "he kept on singing, praying, shouting and working with penitents at camp meetings and quarterly meetings, from morning till night, and during the night till the sun arose, being gifted with unusual physical endurance."<sup>50</sup>

Dr. Clarence Weiss, who grew up in the Evangelical Church at Weissport, Pennsylvania, recalled Dissinger's tenure as pastor there in 1870. Weiss reported that the church was regularly "packed" with people, "so that long benches were placed in the aisles, and the back of the church, and these were occupied, especially on Sunday evenings." He wrote that many attended Dissinger's revival services "through curiosity" and were surprised to find themselves converted to Christ. "Moses Dissinger was a great revivalist," Weiss wrote, "and it is wonderful how he got folks under conviction and had them rush to the altar." Among them was Weiss himself, then just 12 years old. "I was at the mourner's bench thirty-three nights seeking salvation," he remembered; "the reason I was at the altar so long was because in those days no one was believed to be a real Christian until 'he got through,' as they said. By this they meant until he was thoroughly converted and showed it . . . by singing, by shouting, praising God or in some other way, by which everybody, and even the devil, would know he 'passed from death to life.'"<sup>51</sup>

Dissinger was most at home in the country, and related well to the unpretentious farmers and artisans of the rural counties of central Pennsylvania. "His preaching was very plain," Yost recalled; "and at times very rough, adapted to the conduct and comprehension of the people among whom he labored."<sup>52</sup> As a result, when his name was called at the 1865 East Pennsylvania Conference session to serve the pulpit of a sophisticated urban congregation in Philadelphia, the announcement was greeted with surprise and "considerable commotion." His colleagues wondered if the Lebanon County rustic would be able to succeed—including William Yost, who decided to look in on his friend on a Monday morning about six weeks into Dissinger's tenure. "I called at the parsonage," Yost recalled, "and found him at home and in good spirits." The two then called upon a leading member of the church, who excitedly shared that Dissinger was already drawing crowds, and that

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<sup>49</sup> Shenk, *Old Time Backwoods Preacher*, 426-427.

<sup>50</sup> Yost, 238.

<sup>51</sup> Weiss, *op cit*.

<sup>52</sup> Yost, 240.

the day before "they had to place chairs and benches into the aisles to accommodate all the people."

His appearance, however, needed some improvement, the member counseled, "Your clothing will do among the farmers in the country," the man advised, "but not for the city . . . Next Sunday is Palm Sunday and we then expect a good sermon from you appropriate to the festal day and for this occasion you shall have a new suit of clothing." He then took Moses to a tailor and had him fitted with a new suit, and from there, to Yost's bemusement, to a haberdashery to be equipped with a silk stovepipe hat. Back at the parsonage, Dissinger wasn't sure what to make of his new appearance—nor of the reference to the liturgical calendar. "Palm Sunday. Palm Sunday. What kind of a Sunday is that?" he said to his friend. "I am to preach a Palm Sunday sermon and don't know what it means. I am completely lost. Can you help me out?"

In general, Dissinger had little regard for formal liturgical rituals and traditions—especially in connection with churches he regarded as spiritually-corrupt or dead; but in this case he was open to the counsel of his friend that he needed to learn some of the customs of his more refined urban congregation. Yost explained the meaning of the day, and the need for his colleague to learn the liturgical calendar, and gave him a biblical passage to preach from that day, Zechariah 9:9, which Dissinger proclaimed a "bully text." A week later, Yost called upon his friend to see how he had fared with his text and his new suit. "I found him at home and remarkably pleased with his success; that I should have seen the commotion in the church, the shouting, weeping, laughing, clapping of hands and the many hallelujahs." When his appointment in Philadelphia came to an end two years later, Yost met him at the annual conference session and asked how his tenure there had gone. Dissinger answered, "The Devil is whipped, over one hundred sinners converted and I have \$1,200 in my pocket."<sup>53</sup>

### **A Muscular Preacher**

Moses Dissinger was cut from the mold of David rather than Timothy, and no small part of his notoriety was based on his sheer physicality. Dissinger's was a muscular, masculine Christianity; he had no qualms about threatening—or even using—physical force to keep the devil and his minions from disturbing his gospel work. It was not uncommon in the mid-nineteenth century for groups of young men to disrupt revival services and camp meetings. Often well-lubricated with alcohol, they came to have fun at the expense of the gathered faithful by heckling the preacher, mocking worshippers, and even starting fights. A big, imposing man who exercised regularly all his life, Dissinger's fighting skills were employed more than once to restore order when trouble came to services he was leading.

While leading a camp meeting near Catasaqua, in Lehigh County's coal

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<sup>53</sup> The story of Dissinger's appointment and experience in Philadelphia is found in Yost, 253-256.

region, Dissinger confronted a group of youths who were determined to break up an evening service. The men pushed their way onto the grounds, and then paused momentarily before a group of campers. Moses leaped forward, seized one of the apparent leaders and sent him sprawling, shouting, "Stand fast, brethren, don't retreat any further!" As he knocked a second invader to the ground he called out, "Take clubs, brethren, and give it to them!" As Henry Stetzel told the story, "He scarcely had time to catch a third, to show him how to throw a somersault in Mosaic fashion, when the whole crew in breathless haste rushed back into the darkness." An Allentown paper published a report of the incident, saying that while most Evangelical ministers sought to win souls by preaching, there was one who tried to convert sinners with clubs. Though he was not named in the article, many who read it said, "*Des war gewiss der Mos*" ("surely that was Mose!")<sup>54</sup>

In Fleetwood, Berks County, northeast of Reading, Dissinger had to contend with a local group of rowdies who would attend prayer meetings, sing over the congregants and outshout them with "Amen's." Moses took to carrying a club into the pulpit with him, and "when too much raucousness prevailed, he would leave the pulpit and brandish his club until the boys were subdued . . . . From this point he would again take up the sermon at the point of interruption."<sup>55</sup>

On another occasion, Dissinger was leading revival services when three young rowdies walked in, took seats in the front row, and proceeded to spit upon the pulpit. Moses stepped down and asked them, "Do you want something?" "Yes," they answered . . . . "We want to see a miracle." Moses shot back, "We don't perform miracles here, but we cast out devils!" He then motioned to a muscle-laden blacksmith friend in the congregation, and the two men threw the three troublemakers out of the building.<sup>56</sup>

At other times, his quick wit and sharp tongue was enough to send disturbers of the peace into retreat. Invited to preach by a colleague in Millerstown, Lehigh County, Dissinger's sermon was interrupted by a group that began to talk loudly and "make a general nuisance." Moses stopped and began to harangue them, calling them dogs, and using a favorite biblical allusion, that of the possessed man in Mark 5:1-20, also known as the Gadarene (or Gerasene) demoniac, whose "Legion" of demons were cast out by Jesus and sent into a herd of pigs:

I did not know there were any of those accursed Gadarenes here. You are as full of devils as was the Gadarene. I will tell you now what you have to do—you *must keep quiet*, or I'll come down and throw you out of doors, that you break your necks. I can lick half a dozen such stuck-up chaps as you are. *Dissinger is my name!* And if you don't believe me, just stand outside the door, when the meeting is dismissed, and I will show it to you . . . . [then, turning to the congregation] I would advise you to secure your hog-stables; for if the devils ever should leave these Gadarenes and enter your hogs, these will certainly die, every one of them."

<sup>54</sup> Stetzel, 13-14; Brendle 149, 175 .

<sup>55</sup> Brendle, 175.

<sup>56</sup> Brendle, 179.

There was no further disturbance.<sup>57</sup>

Even aside from the occasional brawls, there was a decided physicality to his preaching. Henry Stetzel described his "unusual physical exertions and the activity of all his limbs."<sup>58</sup> Several stories are told of his physically pressing rickety pulpits beyond their endurance. Once while preaching at a camp meeting in Northampton County, he leapt into the air and came crashing through the platform to the ground below. After pulling himself up Moses exclaimed, "*Gott sei Dank ass es net in die Hell gange is*"—"God be thanked, it didn't go down into hell."<sup>59</sup> Moses also had a deep bass voice that carried great distances. At a camp meeting in Lehigh County, he once raised his voice to such a level that it startled the horses at the rear of the encampment, so that they had to be restrained.<sup>60</sup>

### **Battling the Devil**

The Christian life for Dissinger was less an invitation to spiritual tranquility than it was a call to battle—and in that conflict his principal opponent was the Devil. As with Martin Luther three centuries before, Satan was no mere symbol to Moses, but a very real, malevolent personality, who challenged the preacher to do battle with him daily. "The Devil was always a very real person to Uncle Mose," his nephew S. Neitz Dissinger recalled.<sup>61</sup>

And, like St. Paul, Dissinger found the imagery of warfare—updated to use nineteenth-century weaponry, of course—to fit precisely the spiritual struggle he and his fellow preachers were engaged in. "When the gospel is proclaimed by converted and spirit-filled ministers," Moses proclaimed, "it is just like a battery by which fortifications are shot down." Referring to ministers who read manuscript sermons, he said, "These come with paper guns and paper balls, which they have brought out of school . . . and when they have fired off their paper battery a few times, they imagine they have shot the Devil dead, but they do not know that they have not yet touched a hair of his back or of his tail . . . [and] he will lay himself at the foot of the pulpit and go to sleep and snore." However, he insisted, "as soon as the rifle-guns thunder the eternal truth of God like fiery balls into the filthy, sinful

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<sup>57</sup> Stetzel, 9-10, where he gives both in the Pennsylvania Dutch original and an English translation. The same story is in Brendle, 115. On another occasion in Northampton County, Dissinger took aim at some hecklers in the back row, and said, "Once upon a mountain the devils which had been driven out of men went into swine, and the swine threw themselves into the depths of the sea. And lo these many years they have been lost, but now, behold, they are found. Back there they sit and the devils are still in them" (Bendle, 120).

<sup>58</sup> Stetzel, 3.

<sup>59</sup> Brendle, 178, quoting an elderly Charles E. Hess who saw the incident himself as a child. Several versions of this incident, or perhaps others similar to it, also have been passed down. Another account in Brendle, 118, has it occurring at a "'Bush Meeting' near Shiedy's." Yet another variation in Brendle, 181, has him preaching at Slatedale when he jumped from the pulpit to the floor, which gave way, after which he jumped back up and said, "Thank the Lord that I didn't go into the cellar."

<sup>60</sup> Brendle 145.

<sup>61</sup> Quoted in Brendle, 108.

camp of Satan, his sleep is at an end, and he runs like mad to save his tattered reign; for then there are crashes in every corner of his dirty kingdom.”<sup>62</sup>

To Moses, the most powerful weapon in his spiritual arsenal was prayer. “He was much given to prayer,” his friend William Yost recalled, “spending hours on his knees.” A favorite comment of Moses’ when it came to starting the day with pray was, “The devil must be whipped before breakfast. He will then easily stay whipped all day.” Moses called prayer “talking with the Father,” and would often excuse himself before a service began to prepare himself through prayer. Yost recalled that at camp meetings, when the time approached for Dissinger to preach, he would say, “Let us go out into the woods, we must talk with the Father. I am to preach, you know, [and] I am only one of the Lord’s sprinkling cans. If he don’t fill it with living water fresh from under the Throne I am walking around . . . with an empty can, and the devil would just laugh at me. I can only give to the people what the Lord gives me.”<sup>63</sup>

Yost also related how at times of prayer with families with whom he was lodging, Dissinger would pray on until “every converted member of the family was either leaping for joy or shouting aloud the praises of God, and such as were not converted were crying for mercy.” A colleague named C. F. Erffmeyer of the Kansas Conference, in which Moses spent the last few years of his life and ministry, recounted the opening of the 1880 session of that body, when Dissinger was called upon to pray. Describing the experience as a “wonderful outpouring of the Holy Spirit,” Erffmeyer recalled years later the “wonderful power” of Dissinger’s prayer, even some of its image-laden language: “O heavenly Father, Thou art rich in mercy; we are so poor, so needy, worms of the dust. Thy table is loaded with the things we need. We pray Thee, take the four corners of the table cloth and just empty it all out upon us.” Erffmeyer said of the experience: “Forget it? No! I think it will go with me to the end.”<sup>64</sup>

### **Dissinger and the Civil War**

By the time of the outbreak of the Civil War in 1861, Pennsylvania’s large ethnic German population was roughly divided into two groups. One was Dissinger’s Pennsylvania Dutch compatriots, with their distinctive hybrid culture and language, living largely on farms and in towns in non-urban areas, in such counties as Lebanon, York, Berks, and Lancaster. The second group consisted of more recent immigrants, born in Germany, who came to America seeking high wage jobs in Pennsylvania’s burgeoning industrial economy. Many of these lived in ethnic neighborhoods in Philadelphia, Allentown, and other industrial centers, speaking the dialects of their native regions, publishing German newspapers, and active in German clubs, churches, and civic organizations. The older German groups saw themselves

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<sup>62</sup> Quoted in Yost, 248 and Stetzel, 21.

<sup>63</sup> Yost, 240-241.

<sup>64</sup> Brendle, 109, 154

as distinct from the more recent immigrants, often referring to the newcomers as “New Germans,” “European Germans,” or even “*Deitschlenner*,” “*Deutschländer*” or “Germany-Germans.”<sup>65</sup>

Significant numbers of the newer German immigrants responded enthusiastically to Lincoln’s call for volunteers, and formed regiments that were distinctly German in their identity, and often commanded by German expatriates, but there was much more resistance among the Pennsylvania Dutch population to the war. Some, such as the Dunkers and Mennonites, were pacifists, but the opposition of many others was rooted in their loyalty to the Democratic Party, and a belief that “extremist” abolitionists had pushed the country to war, and were dominating the Republican Party.<sup>66</sup>

The energetic and outspoken support of Moses Dissinger for Lincoln and the war effort was therefore noteworthy, and was considered an important factor by local historians in raising support for the Union among the Pennsylvania Dutch, and inspiring men to enlist. Two of Dissinger’s own brothers, Cyrus and David, served with the 93rd Pennsylvania Regiment, recruited in and around Lebanon County.<sup>67</sup>

Dissinger was also rare among his Pennsylvania Dutch contemporaries for his support of emancipation and his sympathy for the enslaved. The Evangelical Church had been strongly anti-slavery since its inception, and in 1839 passed a rule barring slaveholders from eligibility to church membership. But Dissinger took the anti-slavery attitudes of his church even further than most of his colleagues. African-American historian Charles Blockson identified Moses as one who not only “spoke for the freedom of the southern slaves,” but a participant in the Underground Railroad in the 1850s. Moses’ Schaefferstown home was reported to be a safe house for runaways from below the Mason Dixon Line, on their journey north to freedom.<sup>68</sup>

It was recalled that during one pro-war rally, Moses was on the podium, scheduled to speak after a sermon by another. He sat quietly while the speaker extolled the value of free government in America and the need to preserve it through the war effort. When, however, the speaker began to talk about the injustice of slavery, and how slaveholders lived in abundance upon the backs of four million enslaved human beings, Moses became visibly agitated. “A tremor pervaded Mose’s entire body,” wrote Henry Stetzel, “He began to shuffle his feet back and forth with gradually increasing rapidity

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<sup>65</sup> Yoder, 51.

<sup>66</sup> A helpful review of the wartime history and attitudes of Pennsylvania Germans war may be found in Christian B. Keller, “Pennsylvania and Virginia Germans During the Civil War” *The Virginia Magazine of History and Biography* 109.1 (2001): 37-86.

<sup>67</sup> David C. Dissinger (1840-1882) served initially in a 90-day regiment, the 14th Pennsylvania; in the fall of 1861 he became 1st Lieutenant of Company F of the 93rd Pennsylvania. His brother Cyrus Dissinger (1837-1926) was a private in Company F. See Penrose G. Mark, *Red, White and Blue Badge, Pennsylvania Veteran Volunteers: A History of the 93rd Regiment* (Harrisburg: Aughinbaugh Press, 1911), 53, 358, 385, 388.

<sup>68</sup> Charles L. Blockson, *The Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania* (Jacksonville, NC: Flame International, 1981), 78; also William J. Switala, *Underground Railroad in Pennsylvania* (Mechanicsburg, PA, Stackpole Books, 2001), 153.

and violence . . . like a racehorse . . . getting ready to start.” The preacher, realizing Moses was ready to speak, ended his message. Dissinger leapt up and exclaimed, “God be thanked for the truth. This is the eternal truth fresh from the shovel. So I like it, when the truth is pushed off the shovel, clean and fresh.”<sup>69</sup>

Dissinger’s advocacy on behalf of the Union and the Lincoln administration also went well beyond what other ministers were willing to do. Many within the Evangelical Church (and other churches) opposed what they called “political sermons,” and were wary of preachers taking a direct role in political causes. But the regional Evangelical body, which in the past had generally refrained from official pronouncements on political issues, set a new tone in 1863. At its February, 1863, session held in Millersburg, Dauphin County, the East Pennsylvania Conference passed a resolution declaring the “present fratricidal and satanic rebellion in the south as groundless and without righteous cause.” The statement squarely identified slavery, “the product of hell,” to be the “true original cause of the present ungodly and hellish rebellion,” and went on to assert that the conference was “unconditionally” in support of the Union and the war effort:

We unanimously unite in supporting with our influence and assistance our government in the stress of its conflict with high treason, tyranny, and slavery, in its heroic struggle for order, freedom, right and the security of its citizens; and that above all we will remember the same in our prayers before God, for this is acceptable before the Lord our Saviour.<sup>70</sup>

No less forceful in his pulpit denunciations of the South and its leaders, Dissinger added his own colorful language to the cause. “This Rebel egg was laid by that old dunghill chicken Calhoun,” he declared; “the old dunghill cluck, Jeff Davis, hatched it out; and that old dunghill rooster, Buchanan, fed it.”<sup>71</sup> In the fall of 1863, Moses took an active role in the reelection campaign of Pennsylvania Governor Andrew G. Curtin. Curtin was a Republican, and his bid to be returned to office was regarded (as it had been in 1860) as a bellwether for the national election to be held a year later. Curtin’s margin of victory that year was considerably smaller than three years before, and Dissinger’s efforts were recalled as an “immense help to Governor Curtin in carrying the state.”<sup>72</sup>

The next year, Moses took to the stump once more, this time in support of the Lincoln administration. In the summer of 1864, high casualties and a stalemate between the northern and southern armies in Virginia had brought northern morale to a new low, and a Republican victory was in serious doubt. Convinced that Lincoln’s return to office was critical to preserving the Union, Dissinger went on a speaking tour of Lebanon and Lancaster

<sup>69</sup> Stetzel, 23.

<sup>70</sup> S. C. Breyfogle, *Landmarks of the Evangelical Association* (Reading, PA: Eagle Book Print, 1888), 182-183.

<sup>71</sup> Shenck, *Old Time Backwoods Preacher*, 417.

<sup>72</sup> Brendle 125.

counties. During the course of his travels he met with serious, even violent, opposition from local "copperheads," as Democrats who opposed Lincoln and the war effort were called. Near Columbia on the Susquehanna River, an open air meeting was assailed by stone-throwing protesters. Dissinger tried to rally his companions by saying, "*Buwe Wann ihr's schtende kenne kann ich aw*" ("Boys, if you can stand it I can too!"), yet another saying that passed into Pennsylvania Dutch lore. But the shower of projectiles became too intense, and the party was forced to retire, prompting an incensed Moses Dissinger to mutter, "If only I had my pistol the devil would have had fresh meat for breakfast."<sup>73</sup>

His most famous Union speech was held at the courthouse in the city of Lebanon during the closing week of the campaign. A three-day rally included as its featured speakers Governor Andrew Curtin, and attorney A. J. Herr of Harrisburg, who later became a state senator and President of the Pennsylvania Senate. But it was the eccentric parson who outshone both political orators in stirring up the crowds. Dissinger was the principal speaker on the second evening, a Friday, and opened with a prayer in which he thanked God that for once he was able to get lawyers on their knees. He then proceeded to excoriate local copperheads and southern leaders alike, in an address which a local paper said "brought down the house." At one point, speaking in Pennsylvania German, he painted a characteristically homely image:

Do you know of what this rebel government in the south reminds me? Why, it is just like an abandoned farm, whose fences are nearly all broken' down, while everything is overgrown with bushes, thorns and weeds; where the barn has no doors left and nothing within, and everything looks empty and miserable. At the house all the window panes are broken and no one can live there now. No living creature can be found except a half-starved ox on a dunghill, who pulls dirty straws out of the dung and eats them to save himself from dying and hunger and roars dolefully through' his empty belly, "I'm a-hungered! I'm a-hungered!" Nearby is an old pig stable with an old long-snouted pig in it, and when she hears the ox she grunts, with her snout in the dirt, "Hoo'goo! Hoo'goo!" Now, see whether it is not exactly the same in rebeldom. When the people of the south, just like the half-starved ox, call out, "We are a-hungered! We are a-hungered!" old Jeff [Davis], the old hog, grunts, with his pig's snout in the dirt, "Hoo'goo! Hoo'goo!"

With this the crowd went wild, amid a rain of tossed hats and handkerchiefs, and continuous cheering, as "pandemonium reigned" for many minutes. Lincoln and Johnson carried Lebanon County—and Pennsylvania—in the election, and their success among in Pennsylvania Dutch country "may at least be partly attributed to the enthusiasm stirred up by Dissinger."<sup>74</sup>

A year later, Dissinger was stationed in Philadelphia when the news of Lincoln's assassination came over the wires. On the morning after the shooting, a young law student from Schaefferstown named Charles Zerbe was

<sup>73</sup> Brendle, 128

<sup>74</sup> Shenck, *Old Time Backwoods Preacher*, 436. Accounts of the speech, along with the German original may be found in Shenck, 436-438 (reproduced here), Stetzel, 24-26, Brendle, 128-131, and Yost, 249-253 (English only).

reading a bulletin posted in front of the offices of the *Philadelphia Press* newspaper, when he was tapped on the shoulder by Dissinger. Moses asked the young man to interpret the news for him in German. As the two were talking, a surly crowd began to gather nearby, suspicious that their conversing in a foreign tongue was concealing something sinister. In the raw aftermath of the initial shooting (Lincoln did not die until that morning) the north was rife with conspiracy theories, and angry mobs in Philadelphia were on the lookout for anyone who acted suspiciously. The crowd was ready to give them both a beating, but fast talking by Zerbe reassured them that Dissinger was a staunch supporter of both the Union and the President—as indeed he had been. How ironic, given all that he had done the previous years, that Dissinger might have come to grief suspected as being a southern sympathizer.<sup>75</sup>

### Removal to Kansas and Death

After the war, Dissinger continued his ministry in Eastern Pennsylvania for another fourteen years, serving churches and circuits in Allentown, Fleetwood, Slatington, and elsewhere. But in 1879, at the age of 54, he asked for a transfer to the Kansas Conference. Exactly why he wanted to go west is not entirely clear. One source, Charles Hess, asserted that he simply had caught the “great fever to go West;” another suggests he had grown disheartened by the decline in the use of the German dialect among the churches of Eastern Pennsylvania. Whatever the reasons, Moses soon established himself in Kansas as the same energetic, engaging preacher as before—but not for long. His daughter Laura, who was thirteen at the time of the family’s western relocation, later testified that her father “swam streams, braved snow storms, and wore himself out.” Afflicted with rheumatism, his health declined, and Moses Dissinger died on January 25, 1883, just two months shy of his 59th birthday. He was buried at Turkey Creek Cemetery, in Douglas County, Kansas.<sup>76</sup>

At a memorial service held during the Kansas Conference annual session, addresses were given on Dissinger’s life and ministry by Bishop J. J. Esher and Rev. S. L. Wiest, leader of the Evangelical Church’s Missionary Society, both life-long friends.<sup>77</sup> His nephew, Solomon Neitz Dissinger, recalled that when news of the death of “Uncle Moses” reached his family, “two of my uncles came to our home at Cornwall, Pennsylvania, and we had a season of silent meditation. It was a day of silence and meditation.”<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> Shenck, *Old Time Backwoods Preacher*, 416-417; Brendle, 131-132, reproduces Shenck’s account, and adds that he himself heard the story related to him as a youth from others, and that in his recollection, the mob “had already laid hands on Dissinger.”

<sup>76</sup> Brendle 108, 132, 177.

<sup>77</sup> *Fifty years in the Kansas Conference, 1864-1914: A Record of the Origin and Development of the Work of the Evangelical Association in the Territory Covered by the Kansas Conference* (Cleveland, OH: C. Hauser, 1915), 156.

<sup>78</sup> Solomon Neitz Dissinger, Letter to Robert S. Wilson (November 30, 1956); in the Archive at Evangelical Seminary, Myerstown, Pennsylvania.

Even before his passing, the world that Moses Dissinger exemplified was passing away; the use of German in everyday life and in worship was fading; both clergy and laity were becoming more educated and refined; and rural life was giving way to an increasingly industrialized economy and culture. Yet he was remembered as someone whose manner and style hearkened back to an earlier, seemingly simpler, and more authentic time. His championing of the concerns of ordinary people, fearless preaching of the “old time gospel,” and his blunt speaking to both the high-born and the lowly, made him a folk hero. A last word will be given by an early biographer, H. H. Shenck of Lebanon County:

If Whitefield is to be held in grateful remembrance for his work in spite of strenuous opposition in New England; if Cartwright is to be honored because he voiced the religious sentiment of the frontier; if [Billy] Sunday’s work received the endorsement of . . . a President of the United States, should not Lebanon County honor the man who in natural ability was the equal of any of these evangelists? With a power over an assemblage surpassed by none, and with a native sense of humor equaled by few, his use of Pennsylvania German phrases and idioms has never been surpassed in effectiveness.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Shenk, *Old Time Backwoods Preacher*, 421.