

June 4, 2001

Dr. Axel Steuer
President, Gustavus Adolphus College
St. Peter, Minnesota

Dear President Steuer:

As of June 1st I have retired from the position which I have held since April 1978, namely, Lutheran Church archivist, and I think that this is a good time for me to set down some of my thoughts relative to the Archives.

First, a brief summary of the history of archives at Gustavus would seem to be in order, and I will make such a review here. In preparing this I am greatly indebted to my predecessor and to former colleagues who have made similar summaries in the past. I am referring to Emeroy Johnson, whom I succeeded as Minnesota Synod archivist, and to Florence Peterson and Edi Thorstensson, College archivists.

The earliest reference to archival matters is found in the June 3, 1864 minutes of the Minnesota Conference of the Augustana Synod. The Conference was the owner and supporter of St. Ansgar's Academy, which in time grew and developed to become Gustavus Adolphus College. The October 1868 Conference minutes record that a box for Minnesota Conference documents should be obtained and placed in the library of St. Ansgar's Academy. The connection between Church records and Gustavus began with this resolution. Nine other references to archives are found in various minutes, reports, and other sources dating from 1877 to 1911. The Archives disappeared from historical accounts at that point, only to reappear again in a 1943 *Gustavian Weekly* story about Joshua Larson, emeritus professor of Astronomy and Swedish. The story told of the appointment of Dr. Larson as Conference and Gustavus archivist. Dr. Larson served as archivist until his death in 1949. He was succeeded by Dr. Conrad Peterson, emeritus professor of History. After his death in 1956, two archivists were appointed. Florence Peterson, widow of Dr. Peterson, became College archivist, and Dr. Emeroy Johnson took over the duties of Conference archivist. Florence was College archivist until 1982 and was followed by Edi Thorstensson (1982-95). She, in turn, was succeeded by Denise Hudson (1995 -1997). Michael Haeuser, the present College archivist, began his duties in 1997. Emeroy Johnson retired as Minnesota Synod archivist in 1978. He was succeeded as Church archivist by me, and I have continued the work with Church records until my retirement at the end of May this year.

During the century and a third during which time there have been archival collections at Gustavus, the archives of College and Church have moved around in a physical sense. Emeroy Johnson whimsically referred to his career in the Archives as having been "a moving experience". Locations prior to the 1940s seem to have included the President's office, College Library, and a fireproof room on College premises. It is certain that the combined Archives was located at the north end of the west basement of Uhler Hall in the fall of 1940. It was next to the room where I was in the process of

setting up the beginnings of a Geology department. Archives and Geology were eventually displaced by the Gustavus Food Services. Geology moved out in the fall of 1946, to be followed by the Archives a year later. Details of the subsequent wanderings of the Archives are not fully known. Homes for the Archives included the Wolfe House, later called Sweden House, on Seventh Street; the first Folke Bernadotte Memorial Library, now the Anderson Social Science building; and the abandoned parish hall of First Lutheran Church located west of Minnesota Square. The Archives reached its present home in the second Bernadotte Memorial Library in June 1973.

The Church Archives, in content, has had a somewhat complex history. Until 1962 this collection consisted only of the records of the Minnesota Conference. In 1962 the Augustana Lutheran Church (formerly Augustana Synod) was involved in a merger with three other Church bodies, and the Minnesota Conference became the Minnesota Synod, thereby acquiring the archives of the English Evangelical Lutheran Synod of the Northwest, formerly part of the United Lutheran Church in America. At the same time the Red River Conference (anciently part of the Minnesota Conference) merged with the same three regional Church bodies in its area to become the Red Valley Synod. In 1981 the Red River Valley Synod requested, with favorable reply, that Gustavus Adolphus College become the repository of its archival records. Thus Gustavus holds the records of five regional Church bodies: the Minnesota Conference and Synod, the Red River Valley Conference and Synod, and the Synod of the Northwest.

In describing the contents of these collections I shall deal only in generalities. Included are official records of each Conference or Synod. These include the minutes of the annual conventions, minutes of executive boards and various committees, correspondence of the presidents and, later, bishops, minutes and documents relating to social service and educational institutions supported by the Church, periodicals, newsletters and much else.

Over the years much church related material has accumulated from various other sources. There is a collection of several hundred congregational histories, and another collection of documents relating to individual congregations. A considerable biographical file has been developed relating chiefly to members of the clergy in these various church entities. The Archives has a collection of microfilms of the records of almost all of the congregations of the Minnesota and Red River Valley Conferences. The Archives has papers and correspondence of pastors, particularly to those who have played important roles in the life of Gustavus. There are papers and correspondence of missionaries, notably those of Richard Reusch, who in his later years was professor of Religion at Gustavus.

Thousands of books, many relating to the pioneer period, have found their way to the Archives. Included here are several hundred Bibles, many of them having come to America in immigrant trunks. There are two copies of the Swedish Vasa Bible. These date back to 1541. There are hymnals, beginning with those used by the pioneers. Of special interest are two copies of a little booklet containing hymns for the psalmodikon, an instrument used in some of the early churches. Dated 1856, this was compiled by Eric

Norelius. The literary preferences of the Swedish Lutheran pioneers can be seen in the books of sermons, devotional books, catechisms, and children's books which line the sliding shelves in the Archives. A selection of these is on display in the Heritage Room on the third floor of Bernadotte Library. There are several special collections, including several hundred books from the library of Eric Norelius and a substantial number from the library of L.G. Almen, a pastor who played an important role in the life of the College shortly after the turn of the century. A very useful collection is that of several thousand photographs of churches and of pastors and laity prominent in the history of the Minnesota Conference and Synod.

During most of its history Gustavus Adolphus College was owned and operated by the Lutheran Minnesota Conference of the Augustana Synod. The relationship between Conference and College was very close, and the Church and College archival collections are closely intertwined. Each complements and supports the other. Together, they constitute a record of Swedish-American Lutherans from the pioneer days down to the present. Gustavus Adolphus College was an arm of the Church, and arguably, was the chief cooperative achievement of the Swedish Lutherans of the Upper Midwest. It produced pastors for the churches, teachers for the schools, and prepared children of the pioneer and later generations for participation in all the walks of life. Alumni and former students, many of them raised in the Lutheran tradition, have been faithful supporters of the College, have sent their children here, and continue to do so to the present day. The famed Gustie spirit which is an important source of strength to the College is rooted deeply in the past.

It is my hope that Gustavus Adolphus College will continue to house and support the archival collections mentioned above. They serve as our memory, a collective memory which reaches back to the days of struggle when an immigrant people began to establish itself in a new land. In their poverty these people had the vision and boldness to establish many institutions, including this College. If we are to have a history, we must write it ourselves. No one else will do it for us. Biographies and histories already have been made possible by the existence of these records, and there are stories yet to be told. We hope that the Archives at Gustavus will be the seed-bed for many of these.

Very sincerely,

Chester O. Johnson

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