

MEMORIES OF IMMANUEL LUTHERAN CHURCH, Bristol, CT
Herbert M Kern

CHURCH

At times when a special project required a sizable outlay of money, Pastor Duessel made the solicitation after the service. He called on the attendants to make pledges publicly. In response one person got up and promised to give a specific amount. Then another.. This inspired still more. The process continued until the goal was reached. It was a fast, simple, effective way of raising money.

In my early teens I was one of several youths who pumped the organ. We pushed a rod on the right side of the organ up and down. This rod was a few feet long and extended into the instrument. The pumping forced air into the bellows of the organ, enabling it to play.

I worshiped at Immanuel until I left home for college. Up to that time there was no bathroom in the pastor's office or any where else on the main floor of the church building. There were rather shabby, dimly lit bathrooms in the basement. Older folks had in earlier years not been used to indoor plumbing. The three-seater my mother's parents and their eleven children used was located about 100 feet from the house next to the barn. They used Sears Roebuck catalogues for toilet paper.

The highlight of the Christmas celebration was the special program presented by the school children on Christmas Eve. The church was filled to capacity - with about 650 people in attendance. Since there were no microphones, the children were coached to speak loudly. I have a distinct memory of speaking at the top of my voice so the people could hear me.

In the German services we used a small hymnal without music. The lusty singing of the congregation made a lasting impression upon me. In school we first used an all-German song book in the upper grades. Later we had a mainly German song book with a few familiar English songs.

Government officials were skeptical of the patriotism of some of the Germans of Immanuel in World War I. Spies attended the services to check whether anything suspicious took place.

SCHOOL

My father started teaching at Immanuel in 1912. A year later became the principal. Shortly after his arrival in Bristol the city school board threatened to close the school because of the poor condition of the school property and the unfavorable scholastic

record. My father pleaded with the board to give him the opportunity to put the school on a sound footing. From that point on for the rest of his 46 year career he did everything within his power to make Immanuel Lutheran School a respected member of the city school system. In time the school excelled both scholastically and athletically. In 1934 I was the valedictorian of the high school graduating class and Ida Reich of Immanuel was the salutatorian. *The Bristol Press* in an editorial on March 18, 1959 reported: "Prior to the current scholastic year, either the valedictorian or the salutatorian of six consecutive classes at Bristol High School was a product of the Immanuel Lutheran elementary school, one of the smallest schools in town. Yesterday it was announced that both the valedictorian and the salutatorian of the class of 1959 were alumnae of Immanuel."

Immanuel's basketball and baseball teams were among the best in the city. Some of the top athletes at Bristol High – such as Andy Palau and his brother, the Utke brothers, Al Gurske – were from Immanuel. Graduates of Immanuel played on High School basketball teams that competed in state tournaments.

Other products of Immanuel served in prominent positions in the civic life of the community.

Often before baseball and basketball games all the pupils gathered in the assembly room on the second floor of the school building for a pep rally. This helped to put our players in a winning mood.

When I was in grades 3 to 5, our family lived on the second floor of the home of Mr and Mrs White on Divinity Street. Our family life and the good work my father was doing at Immanuel evidently impressed the Whites, who had no children. They gave \$46,000 to Immanuel School in their will.

When a pupil seriously misbehaved in class, the other teachers sent the child to my father – who taught grade 8 - for corporal punishment. He used his belt to give them a whipping.

When I was in 8th grade, the enrollment was 321, the highest in the school's history.

FAMILY

During the school year of 1922-23 my father was given a leave of absence since he was diagnosed with tuberculosis. Our family spent the year with my father's parents in Frankenmuth, MI, where my father recuperated. I attended second grade in the church school. The instruction was in German. When we returned to Bristol, I was embarrassed because my sister could not speak English.

The teachers of Immanuel, as in other church schools, were underpaid. As a result my father for a few years worked in a factory following the afternoon session. One summer he worked at the golf course on Chippens Hill. My mother got a job at the Wallace

Barnes factory. This enabled my parents to afford a house. They bought a house with an adjoining lot on Edward St for about \$6000. My folks bought their first car when I was in the 8th grade.

The members of the Wunsch family were faithful church-goers. They walked to Immanuel Church every Sunday morning, weather permitting. The children attended the church school. The distance to Immanuel was about 5 miles. Part of the last third of the way to the Wunsch home in Pequabuck was uphill.

My father was active in both church and community. He served as church organist and choir director, coach and athletic director.. At various times he was the chairman of the congregation and was for many years its recording secretary. He was the Church Extension Fund representative and superintendent of the Sunday School. For a time he was the president of the Atlantic District Teachers Conference.

He was an influential member of the Park Board for 35 years. The Herbert L Kern Park (about 12 acres) in the northern part of town was established in his honor. He was active in scouting, Parent-Teacher organizations, the Bristol Boys' and Girls' Club, the West Cemetery Association, was a corporator of Bristol Hospital, and served on the City Charter Revision Committee.

Concordia Teachers College, River Forest, IL awarded him a doctor's degree for his responsible citizenship. He received the Valley Forge Foundation award for his exceptional work in teaching an understanding of the American way of life..

Teacher Oscar Wulff, who was on Immanuel's faculty with my father for many years, stated: "Dr Herbert Kern, a man consumed with earnestness and purpose, confident in his ability, with faith in the worthiness of his efforts, brought enthusiasm to all his undertakings. He inspired his staff and pupils to strive for excellence in all their tasks."