

Dr. Lowell B. Swan as a Historian

MARTIN RIST

BEGINNING with his high school days in Evanston, Illinois, Lowell B. Swan was vitally interested in history. Save for English, he had more courses in his high school career in history than in any other subject. This interest continued to De Pauw University, where he had twelve semester hours of history. Then, transferring to Drake University, where he obtained the B.A. degree in 1934, he had thirty-two additional hours of history. He did not specialize in any one area, but had a wide exposure to historical subjects, including English, American, Far East, Continental Europe, Latin America, Education, and the American Frontier. The last named doubtless had some influence upon his later doctoral research.

He continued his studies for the M.A. degree at the University of Nebraska, taking no courses other than historical, twenty-four semester hours in all and writing his thesis on some aspect of American history. Accordingly, when he arrived to begin his theological studies at The Iliff School of Theology in 1936 he had studied far more history than his professor of history had been exposed to. There were two notable omissions, however, Ancient History and Christian History.

During his residence at Iliff for the Th.M. degree, which he received in 1940, he took but two courses in history, Early Church and Medieval Church, the basic required courses at the time, though, to be sure, his Biblical studies were historically oriented. By this time he seemingly had been surfeited with historical studies, but this was not the case. For following his notable service as a chaplain in the United States Army in World War II, he returned to Iliff in the summer of 1949 to obtain a Th.D. degree in Church History, and began to take additional courses in history. One of these, taken during his first quarter of his doctoral residence, dealt with the history of various denominations in the Mountain-Plains region, which supplemented an earlier course on the American frontier.

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This course at Iliff was apparently a factor in influencing him to center his attention on some aspect of the history of Methodism in Colorado for his doctoral research and thesis. An initial study in this area had been written by another former army chaplain, Kenneth E. Metcalf, *Beginnings of Methodism in Colorado* (1948), which concluded with the organization of the Rocky Mountain Conference in 1863. Accordingly, Lowell Swan picked up where Dr. Metcalf had left off, and continued to the time when Colorado achieved statehood: *A History of Methodism in Colorado: 1863-1876*. Historically, this was a logical segment of history, for with the arrival of the railroads at the beginning of the 70's and with statehood in 1876 the future of Colorado, which had been somewhat dubious, was assured, and with this the future of the church as well.

Since he had been out of school for nine years, with busy pastoral duties and a lengthy war intervening, this resumption of graduate studies was not an easy one to make, nor was it easy to complete these studies, for during his residence for the doctorate he was a full-time pastor. It was recently learned from his typist that he often worked far into the night revising his dissertation drafts in accord with what seemed to be the exacting suggestions of his major professor. Even so, he was gracious enough to state in his preface that this professor "came forward with helpful suggestions and a kindly instruction in a brotherly spirit which made the work an experience never to be forgotten."

Obtaining the data for this dissertation was extremely difficult, for to a considerable degree the dissertation was an original research project. Not only published materials, but unpublished as well, including long forgotten manuscripts, had to be located, studied, evaluated. This involved not only using the archives of the Conference Historical Society, but also doing much additional research in the records preserved by the Colorado State Historical Society and by the Western History Division of the Denver Public Library. Moreover, he made numerous trips to local churches or to communities where churches had once been located in order to obtain additional information. One of the many baffling tasks was to locate ghost towns where Methodist preachers had labored at one time or an-

other in the period under consideration. Some of these were never satisfactorily identified.

The major portion of the dissertation shows the progress of Methodism in this crucial period in Denver and vicinity, in the Greeley or Northern District, and in the Southern District. Lowell Swan also provided brief biographies of some of the leading preachers, "vignettes," as he termed them, some of which became the basis for later publications. The thesis is provided with a number of tables, with numerous illustrations and plates, including photostatic facsimiles of many source documents, most of them difficult to locate.

He also thoughtfully provided a table giving the ministerial records of the eighty-eight preachers who served in Colorado at any time during the period from 1863-1876. None, of course, was a native Coloradoan, for the territory and state were too new for this. Some served but a year or two or so, but others were here during the entire period; some of whom were also in Colorado earlier, and some of whom continued in Colorado after 1876.

In addition he included a detailed "Guide to the Map Showing Charges in Colorado: 1863-1876," ninety-nine in number. Many of these were circuits. Quite a large number existed for a very short period of time. A few were unidentifiable. Excelsior was possibly near Pueblo, Loma near Centreville, San Juan possibly twenty miles southeast of Lake City. All in all, the thesis represented a great deal of careful, conscientious, and we might say, laborious work. Dr. Swan never lost his interest in the history of Colorado Methodism. He was a valuable member of the board of the conference Historical Society; as mentioned above, he published a few biographical vignettes. He was always eager to learn about new discoveries of historical docu-

ments, no matter how minor these might be.

He developed a great admiration for the heroic frontier preachers in Colorado. Indeed, he dedicated his thesis "To all the ministers of this early period in Colorado Methodism." His hero of heroes, however, was the valiant and effective Rev. (Father) John L. Dyer, the Snow-Shoe Itinerant, who frequently traversed the mountain regions in winter on short Norwegian skies called "snow-shoes." This abiding interest in Dyer caused Dr. Swan to save, rehabilitate, and move the log cabin church in Fairplay, originally a hotel in Montgomery, which Father Dyer had purchased and moved to Fairplay in 1867 to be used as a Methodist church and parsonage. This historic building, probably the oldest extant one in Colorado to have been used for a church, is located near the South Park Village. It was "reconsecrated" (possibly it had not been consecrated in the first place) on August 14, 1960. An appropriate bronze plaque was unveiled at the time.

Somewhat earlier, in August of 1956, Dr. Swan had obtained a suitably inscribed 300 pound granite monument to be placed on the top of Mosquito Pass, 13,180 feet high, as a memorial to Father Dyer, who went over this pass in winter time on his skis. Dr. Swan, accompanied by his wife and two other ladies, transported the monument to the top of the pass in a Jeep during a very dense fog. They dug a trench, made a cement base, and somehow or other were able to get the monument out of the Jeep and place it upon the cement base. When asked later on where he obtained water to mix with the cement, Dr. Swan replied that he had wrung it out of the fog. Somewhat symbolically, as he began to utter a dedicatory prayer, the fog-bank lifted suddenly, and the monument and the little group around it were bathed in brilliant sunshine.

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