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Parker B. Wagnild Portrait in Schmucker Hall

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Description

A painting of Parker B. Wagnild hangs outside of the College Choir rehearsal room in Schmucker hall. Only a plaque bearing his name is underneath the painting, even the artist remains unknown. The painting is quite small in comparison to what the man in the painting has done for Gettysburg College. Though perhaps the placement of the painting means more than its size, for it located at a central spot in the music department building, and it is right outside of the College Choir rehearsal room. This places Wagnild at the heart of both the department and the choir, both of which he founded and devoted his career to throughout his years at Gettysburg College. Thus the placement of the painting is quite fitting. It's a shame that many might pass by this painting and not know the story of the person depicted, for his influence is still a part of the choir and music department today. Wagnild built the foundation of Gettysburg College's musical reputation. [*excerpt*]

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- Course Instructor: Dr. Michael J. Birkner '72

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Keywords

Gettysburg College, Schmucker Hall, Parker B. Wagnild, college choir, music department

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Hidden in Plain Sight:

Parker B. Wagnild Painting in Schmucker Hall

History 300

Historical Methods

Dr. Michael Birkner

By

Stephanie Bonnes

Spring 2006

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Parker B. Wagnild was born December 29th, 1906 in Jackson, Minnesota.¹ Upon reporting his birthday in a narrative he wrote about his family, he reported other events, "some catastrophic, others equally as important to me but not given much publicity."² Among the events that he listed were the San Francisco earthquake, and then "the presentation of voice and music on Christmas Eve on a radio broadcast from a remote coastal station at Brant Rock, Massachusetts,"³ directly after this event he listed his own birth. Wagnild and music seem to come together just as they flow in his narrative from one paragraph to another, and just as they are given equal weight in his narrative for the importance of the year 1906. This can begin to highlight just how important music was to Wagnild, and the rest of the evidence will show just how important Wagnild was to music, especially at Gettysburg College. Wagnild's family was a

¹Parker B. Wagnild, Helen Wagnild, 1979. (Gettysburg College Special Collections), 13.

²Ibid.

³Ibid.

pioneering farming family and they moved from Minnesota to Canada in hopes of prosperity. It was in Outlook, Canada that Wagnild first traveled for musical purpose. The Outlook College Choir, under the direction of Francis Sutton permitted Wagnild to play and travel with them. Upon remembering his experience with the choir he stated, “It was my first experience with a traveling music ensemble, an experience that gave me a deep yearning to some day be a part of a first-rate musical organization.”⁴ This was important in developing the choir director that Wagnild became. Once at Gettysburg, his choir traveled extensively throughout the United States and Europe. Most notably he took his choir on a 46-49 day European tour in 1963 and a World tour in the later sixties. This experience with his first traveling choir showed him the value of music and touring, which shows why he would later embed travel in the choral experience that he directed and created for students at Gettysburg. Wagnild’s father was a minister at a Lutheran congregation, and most of the choirs he was a part of traveled to churches to play. This developed his interest in choir and chapel music, the very combination that would bring him to work at Gettysburg College. His family was not very wealthy, and each child had many tasks demanded of him or her. Wagnild himself had farming and work related responsibilities. This was enforced especially with the death of his mother on January 23rd, 1921.⁵ His father was scarcely home as it was, and without a mother to take care of household and family affairs, the responsibilities of each child grew within the Wagnild family. They eventually moved to Northfield, Minnesota due to the lack of educational opportunities in Canada, and Wagnild attended public high school while his two brothers went to St. Olaf College. Wagnild wrote that, “After two years in high school, I worked for a year and then began my higher education.”⁶

⁴Ibid., 32

⁵Parker B. Wagnild, Helen Wagnild. 1979. 41.

⁶Ibid., 43.

There were limited finances at the time; the Wagnild father made \$2,000 a year and the rent on their home was \$50 a month. Parker Wagnild had to work in construction for a year to save money for his own education, and he finally enrolled in St. Olaf College in 1926. Two years later, in 1938, Wagnild claims that “the family found itself scattered in many directions, each one pretty much on his own to make his or her way in the world,”⁷ This is how Wagnild concludes the narrative he wrote of his family. His early life implemented a few things into his character, hard-work, discipline, religion and musical interest. This narrative gives enough insight to Wagnild’s character and the man that would be responsible for founding and building the reputation of both the Gettysburg College Choir, and the Gettysburg Music Department.

Wagnild graduated from St. Olaf College in Northfield, Minnesota in 1930. He was a member of the St. Olaf choir for four years, which was under the direction of F. Melius Christiansen, who was famous in the musical world at the time. Barbara Platt, in *Every One Sang*, shows that this director wrote to Wagnild in 1930 saying, “To create beauty in choir singing one must clear away a lot of mechanical imperfections to the singers. It requires a lot of love for the human race. You have that!”⁸ Platt believes that this sums up Wagnild’s character and she placed it at the end of her piece on the History of the College Choir. As a senior, Wagnild traveled to Europe with the choir.⁹ He continued his education and got his master’s degree in Sacred Music from Union Theological Seminary in 1934. In 1935 he was a student at Gettysburg Lutheran Seminary. It was at this time that Gettysburg College decided to readmit women.¹⁰ The trustees wanted women to be given equal status to men, which meant equal opportunity in education and activities. It was within this mind set that the music committee

⁷Ibid., 45.

⁸Barbara L. Platt, “Every One Sang”: A History of the Gettysburg College Choir, 1935-1970 (Gettysburg, 1970), 55.

⁹Funeral program, 1992 (Gettysburg College Special Collections).

¹⁰ Charles H. Glatfelter, *A salutary influence. Gettysburg College 1832-1985. (Gettysburg, PA: Gettysburg College, 1987), 632*

suggested that a co-ed choir be established. As Barbara Platt states, “The Gettysburg College Choir became a possibility at the College only after the arrival of two separate entities on the campus—women and Wagnild—in that order.”¹¹ This is true, for the college readmitted women, and then wanted to create activities open to both genders, one of which was the choir. After the committee decided on this, it hired Parker B. Wagnild in 1935. The first choir members were chosen in October of 1935, and their first concert was in December of that year in the form of a Christmas program. This was the first organization of its kind at Gettysburg College. Before 1935, the only singing that was done was in the form of a men’s glee club with Robert S. Nagle as the conductor.¹² With the introduction of Wagnild as director, the program could have easily just taken a more organized form of the glee club, and could have fallen into the background, however “the choir was born—to be successful beyond the wildest dreams of its initiators.”¹³ The 1936 G-Book, as quoted in Glatfelter’s *A Salutory Influence*, stated that the college band was “the most popular of the musical organizations on the Gettysburg campus.”¹⁴ Glatfelter goes on to explain that “by 1940 the same source gave it second billing, behind the choir.”¹⁵ It seems impressive that the choir was able to gain such momentum in such a short time, but Wagnild made sure that progress was made. He took the choir on tour in March of 1936, starting a tradition of extensive tours that the college choir still upholds. According to the 1938 Spectrum, “under his directorship the group has grown and developed into an exceptionally smoothly functioning musical unit. It has received special recognition for the reputation it has built and

¹¹ Platt, *Every One Sang*, 1.

¹² *Spectrum*, 1934, 124.

¹³ Platt, “Everyone Sang,” 2.

¹⁴ Glatfelter, *Salutory Influence*, 632

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

maintained for itself.”¹⁶ This shows that Wagnild establish an outstanding reputation for the choir within a few short years, and he was able to maintain that reputation throughout his time at Gettysburg College. In 1937, Wagnild graduated from the Gettysburg Theological Seminary and received a Divinity Degree. Gettysburg College hired him as an English Bible professor in order to keep him as director of the College Choir. The choir continued to exist during the war years, and built its reputation locally more than globally during that time, for there were no tours in 1943 or 1944. In 1946, Wagnild was promoted to associate professor at Gettysburg College, and he continued to build the reputation of the College Choir and to generate enough interest in music to start a department. By 1948, after Wagnild received his masters from NYU, a music department was established, of which Wagnild was named chair. According to Dexter Weikel, College Choir manager and director of Chapel choir when Wagnild was still working at Gettysburg College, states that “The choir made Gettysburg known for music,”¹⁷ and he went onto explain that “the quality of the choir and the showing of the music at Gettysburg is what made the department grow. The department grew out of the choir.”¹⁸ He even mentions that the early budget within the department was for the choir.

Wagnild was a demanding director and a demanding department head. He required excellence from his staff, which helped the choir and the music department thrive. Wagnild was so dedicated to excellence in choir that he went to find the best instructors and tried to employ them. According to an instructor in the music department in the 1960's, Norman Nunamaker, “[Wagnild] was able to convince the administration to hire more and more faculty so that by the 1960's the department was quite large and thriving, and he was chair, it was a lifetime position

¹⁶ Spectrum, 1938, 100

¹⁷ Dexter Weikel interview conducted by Stephanie Bonnes on 2/17/06.

¹⁸ Ibid.

for him, and he remained department chair through 4-5 college presidents.”¹⁹ In 1955, Wagnild found Dexter Weikel. He had heard him play at a conference and wanted him in the Gettysburg music department, and made him an offer that he originally refused.²⁰ Wagnild was determined to get Weikel for the Gettysburg Choral Program, and he asked him again with a different, and better, offer, which he then accepted. Upon reflecting on being asked to work with Wagnild, Weikel said, “Parker was the figure head in the Eastern part of the country because of what he did with the College Choir.”²¹ He was honored because Wagnild was well known throughout the area. Though he respected Wagnild, he had to decline the first job offer, for it was simply not enough money for Weikel. Luckily for both of them a second offer was made in 1961 which paid more and put Weikel in a manager position for the college choir. This solidified a friendship and a professional relationship that took the college choir to the next level. Hiring Dexter helped develop the Chapel Choir singers and established them while the college choir was still being established and building its own reputation. People began to come to see both, which increased not only the College Choir’s reputation, but the reputation of the music program at Gettysburg College. Though the department was a product the choir, and most of Wagnild’s energy went into the college choir, his co-workers followed his lead and fed off of his intensity and applied his energy for college choir into their own aspects of the music program at Gettysburg. This helped build the department and let it flourish. Weikel admits to learning a great deal from Wagnild, especially with respect with how to hold rehearsals, and he applied the things he learned to Chapel Choir. The intensity of both of these groups at once allowed for more to be done with music at Gettysburg.

¹⁹ Norman Nunamaker interview conducted by Stephanie Bonnes on 2/09/06

²⁰Dexter Weikel interview conducted by Stephanie Bonnes on 2/17/06. Wagnild wanted him to play the organ in required Chapel meetings. He would also play during church services on Sundays, and teach organ to students, while playing the organ about 5 days a week. The job Wagnild originally offered Weikel would pay \$2,500 a year, and he declined.

²¹Dexter Weikel interview conducted by Stephanie Bonnes on 2/17/06

Wagnild put most of his energy into the College Choir and it was obvious to his staff and students that he was completely devoted to his choral programs. This helped create an atmosphere of devotion among students and other faculty, which led to the strong reputation of the Gettysburg College Choir, and later to the music department at Gettysburg College. In a choral program from the 1940-1941 academic school year this quote was placed on the back,

Gettysburg College thinks of an education not as the acquiring of information, not as exposure to fields of study, but rather as the promotion of an all-around development which will fit one for triumphant living. You may lose your health, you may lose your fortune, you may lose your dear ones—unless through all of these experiences you can keep your head and come to the end of your life with something nobly worthwhile, your education has been defective. Gettysburg College offers you a course of training that will fit you for richer, happier, and more useful living. Your college education will constitute the one secure investment which will yield dividends, not only in preparing you to earn a livelihood, but to promote and develop a life that will possess the deepest satisfactions.²²

The quote alone suggests that the education at Gettysburg went beyond just the classroom. Coupled with its being on the back of the choral program, the suggestion is that Choir is a part of an enriching extra experience that Gettysburg offers. Some may interpret this to mean that Gettysburg offers many extra-curricular opportunities, and that choir is only one of them. This is true to a certain extent, but Parker B. Wagnild would most likely argue that being in the choir alone would yield the results that Gettysburg College was after. This is true because he limited his singers' involvement on campus to solely College Choir.²³ Sources such as the Gettysburg Spectrum claim Wagnild as the reason for the growing reputation of the choir, "Part of the great success of the choir is due to the deep admiration of the members for the director, Parker B. Wagnild. To his understanding of young people and his devotion to his work, the choir responds

²² Henry W.A. Hanson as quoted on Gettysburg College Choir Choral program from the 1940-1941. (Gettysburg College Special Collections).

²³Dexter Weikel interview conducted by Stephanie Bonnes on 2/17/06.

with a spirit of loyalty and cooperation that is uncommon in college organizations”²⁴ His unique ability to motivate students and to demand discipline at the same time was key to its success. Auditions for choir were intense, and over 200 students auditioned for about 10 open spots each year. There were typically two weeks set aside in August for the auditions. Students reacted visibly to making it into the choir: “I have seen people weep because their name was on the list, I have seen people weep because it wasn’t on the list, and I have seen people jump up and down as if they won the lottery.”²⁵ Most people auditioned for both the college and the chapel choir at the same time, once it was established in 1955 following the construction of Christ Chapel and under the direction of Dexter Weikel by 1961.²⁶ Wagnild kept the people who he selected secret until he posted the audition results outside of the rehearsal room. Even Weikel wasn’t informed, and he often wanted to know so that he could then choose people for the Chapel Choir, he too had to wait in the wall for the list to be posted with all of the students. This added to the intensity of the College Choir, and to the competitive atmosphere that surrounding the music program. Wagnild put College Choir over everything else, he once told Weikel, “If you get a good tenor [who auditions for Chapel Choir], I take him.”²⁷ The rehearsals were also demanding. According to Weikel the following quote sums up Wagnild as a choral director, “He once took me aside and said, ‘I’ll tell you a secret of mine, I see what they can take, we either make ‘em or we break ‘em’”²⁸ There were rehearsals Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, and Friday, at four, then an additional rehearsal from 6:30-8:00 on Wednesdays. The choir met as a group five times a week, and then they were required to go to a sectional rehearsal once a week. He was very demanding, “But that is what made the choir so great,” claims Weikel. He was completely devoted to the

²⁴ *Spectrum*, 1942, 140.

²⁵ Dexter Weikel interview conducted by Stephanie Bonnes on 2/17/06.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

college choir and expected the same of its participants. In the 1960's a freshman had made plans to go home which would have resulted in him missing a rehearsal, he was faced with a decision; postpone the trip or get kicked out of choir, he postponed his trip. Weikel commented that he had seen “people one minute late for rehearsal sprinting across campus to get there on time.”²⁹

Norman Nunamaker commented that his students really bonded with him, and would do anything that he asked³⁰ this was reaffirmed by Weikel who said that “He was greatly loved by his students, but if he said jump, they said how high, and how quickly?”³¹

His demands from his singers, students, and staff most certainly created an atmosphere that allowed for him to do the great things that he did with the choir. He took them on a 44 day long European tour in 1963. This generated excellent reviews throughout Europe. In a Helsinki paper, a review stated, “The concert proved to be a beautiful demonstration of the high level of American choral singing. Professor Parker B. Wagnild directs his singers with a sure hand, bringing to realization relatively rich nuances, powerful dynamic contrasts, surprising tonal attracts and many rubatos without difficulty.”³² The choir actually got rave reviews throughout Europe, “except when they sang Bach.”³³ According to Weikel, after Wagnild heard the complaints about how the choir sang Bach he eliminated it from the concert without altering the programs. Wagnild did this because he claimed that “the Europeans don’t like how Americans

²⁹Ibid.

³⁰Norman Nunamaker interview conducted by Stephanie Bonnes on 2/09/06.

³¹Ibid.

³²Olavi Kauko, as translated by Mrs Robert Fortenbaugh, in the “1963 European Tour” folder (Gettysburg College Special Collections)

³³Dexter Weikel interview conducted by Stephanie Bonnes on 2/17/06. According to Weikel the Europeans did not like the way the choir sang the vowels in Bach. This may have been a technique instructed by Wagnild due to his training with St. Olaf College.

sing Bach, so we won't sing Bach for the Europeans."³⁴ The tour allowed the choir to travel through the Berlin wall, and half of the choir actually went to Leningrad. The choir was "known and acclaimed far beyond the mere limits of this campus,"³⁵ and for adding "social enrichment of the college by its concerts on campus."³⁶ These are two things that hold true for today's Choir. The current College Choir sang at the grand re-opening of the Majestic, and it's still central to many activities on campus. Wagnild also took the choir on a world tour in 1967, where it made over 27 appearances. In a memo from Wagnild in 1966, he explains that "At long last we can make the announcement. The college choir is going to Europe. Let me repeat, we are going to Europe this coming June via this route,—California, Hawaii, Tokyo, Taiwan, Hong Kong, India, Cairo, Jerusalem, Athens, Rome, Vienna, and London. This proposed trip will last 47 days."³⁷ This world tour generated excellent reviews and established the Gettysburg College Choir in areas in Asia. "The Gettysburg College Choir can easily be rated as the best among the American choral groups that have so far visited India. The distinction of the Gettysburg Choir does not end with the full complement of vocal resources. Director Wagnild has drilled the choir to perfection. The voices blended and parted, separated into antiphonal roles and came together in block harmony, preserved the freedom of parts in weaving intricate tapestries of sound, with flawless timing, just the right volume of dynamics. The program layout also showed fine musical

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵Spectrum, 1964. Page 106.

³⁶Ibid.

³⁷Wagnild, 1966, in "World Tour 1967" folder (Gettysburg College Special Collections).

judgment.”³⁸ Other extraordinary appearances include, a concert in New York City’s Town Hall, a concert in Chicago at Orchestra Hall, a concert at the White House, and at many Lutheran churches in the United States and throughout the world.³⁹ All of the tours and concerts contributed to the excellent reputation of the College Choir, and to the music department at Gettysburg College in general. This reputation has continued to grow, now there are more than just two choirs that exist, including College Choir, Concert Choir, Women’s Choir, World Music Ensemble, Chapel Choir, and Camerata. The department now offers a bachelors degree in music performance, a bachelors of arts degree in music, a bachelor degree of science in music education, and a music minor. There is also a distribution requirement that can be fulfilled by taking music, and choral programs that are all open to non-majors. These opportunities in the musical field would not have been possible without the presence of Parker Wagnild in the Gettysburg College music department from 1935-1976. Though Weikel stated it, many would claim that “today’s choir was jump started by him and he would be impressed now with the choir and department growth.”⁴⁰ When asked about what Wagnild might think about today’s opportunities in music at Gettysburg, Weikel said, “He would be amazed to see what the music department is like, because it was on a short string when he started it.”⁴¹

Wagnild was widely praised for his direction of the Gettysburg College Choir. He received an honorary doctorate of music from Thiel College in Greenville, Pennsylvania, in

³⁸Times of India, New Delhi. From the scrapbook of the 1975 choir tour (Gettysburg College special collections)

³⁹ Glatfelter, Salutary Influence, 933.

⁴⁰ Dexter Weikel interview conducted by Stephanie Bonnes on 2/17/06.

⁴¹ Ibid.

1972. He was also rewarded an honorary doctor of divinity from Gettysburg College. He remained as College Choir director and music department head until his retirement in 1976.⁴² A final concert was held in his honor in May of 1976. In attendance were “325 Gettysburg College Choir alumni, along with the 1975-1976 college choir.”⁴³ Over 400 people sang together at the final portion of the concert under Wagnild’s direction. In his career at Gettysburg he directed over eight hundred concerts, and he established the College Choir as the “most widely traveled of campus organizations.”⁴⁴ The reputation of the choir did not die with Wagnild’s retirement, but flourished on the foundation that he built for it. In a newspaper article about the choir from the year after Wagnild’s retirement it was stated that, “Some traditions never die. The faces may have changed but the standard of excellence achieved through the years by the Gettysburg chapel and college choir remains intact.”⁴⁵ This was under a new director, who successfully overcame the challenge to uphold the reputation that Wagnild had built for the choir, thus Wagnild built a reputation for the choir and music department that it could sustain itself in the absence of its creator.

Parker Wagnild died in 1992, and his funeral was held in Christ Chapel. Two of his former colleagues had solos in the procession. Kermit Finstad who sang, and Dexter Weikel who played the organ.⁴⁶ Though his loss was felt throughout the community, his presence was not buried with him, for “The story of Parker Wagnild now becomes in great measure the story of

⁴²Funeral program, 1992. (Gettysburg College Special Collections).

⁴³“Final Concert before Wagnild in Christ Chapel on Saturday,” *Gettysburg Times*, Wednesday May 26th, 1976.

⁴⁴Ibid.

⁴⁵Carol Long. “Crowds fill Christ Chapel For Concerts,” *Gettysburg Times* 1976. (Gettysburg College Special Collections). This source was a photocopy of the article, with just the year given in handwriting.

⁴⁶Funeral program, 1992. (Gettysburg College Special Collections).

the Gettysburg College Choir, for as surely as he gave his lie to the choir, they now give life to each other.”⁴⁷ And the thriving music department shows this. There was a scholarship made in his name that still exists at the college today. The scholarship, formed in 1965 by former choir members, was established as a “tribute to the inspiration, influence and lasting friendship of Dr. Wagnild.”⁴⁸ The former choir members who helped form this scholarship did so because they thought that due to Wagnild “music majors and staff enjoy an unusually fine relationship and faculty members are always available to assist with academic or personal problems.”⁴⁹ This scholarship still attracts students to Gettysburg College, and the reputation of the Gettysburg music department is still building on Wagnild’s foundation. Leah Sigle, a current music education major at Gettysburg College, affirms that the choir is still at the center of important events. She states that “The college choir has sung at events such as Kate Will's inauguration and parents' weekend, and the re-opening of the Majestic theater. I feel like when I joined I had 50 instant friends from all different majors and backgrounds within the campus. It's really nice to walk around and always see someone that I know from the choir.”⁵⁰ This not only reaffirms that the Choir remains an important part of campus activity, but that the friendly atmosphere that Wagnild created in his choir is still there as well. The scholarship also carries some weight in drawing students to Gettysburg. Elizabeth Van Voorhis, a music performance major at the College, stated that the \$5,000 per semester offered through the scholarship was one of the reasons she chose Gettysburg. And one final Wagnild scholarship recipient stated that “I think year by year the music department is gaining an even greater representation. We are in the process of becoming a

⁴⁷Platt, *Every One Sang*, 55

⁴⁸Gettysburg choral program, 1975. (Gettysburg College Special Collections) Page 5

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Leah Sigle. "Wagnild Scholarship ." E-mail to Stephanie Bonnes. 02 2006.

conservatory which will make Gettysburg one of 4 colleges in the United States to be a liberal arts school with an affiliated conservatory (called the Sunderman Conservatory).”⁵¹ She stated that the conservatory “gains Gettysburg a lot of respect within the music department. This school was already known for having a good music department and curriculum and it is just getting better as the years pass.”⁵² This was reaffirmed by Van Voorhis: “I think it's everything's really starting to improve with the implementation of the conservatory last year. It's kind of cool to be able to say that I'm in a conservatory of music instead of just I'm a music student at a college.”⁵³ The Gettysburg music program is still gaining in reputation and is still doing concerts on campus and abroad.

The scholarship, the painting hanging in Schmucker, and all other things bearing Wagnild’s name that exist around campus as a reminder of the man who put Gettysburg College Choir at the forefront of activity on campus, and who gave it a worldwide reputation worth bragging about. A man who made a music department out of his choir and who established both into the college as serious disciplines and activities with opportunities to students who were disciplined and willing to learn. They are all just a reminder of “a man who IS the Gettysburg College Choir. He founded it, fought for it, teaches it and cherishes it. He has quite literally given his life to it and through his tremendous talent and devotion it has become one of the great choirs of the land.”⁵⁴

⁵¹Kate Stocker “Wagnild Scholarship .” E-mail to Stephanie Bonnes. 02 2006.

⁵²Ibid.

⁵³Elizabeth Van Voorhis “Wagnild Scholarship .” E-mail to Stephanie Bonnes. 02 2006.

⁵⁴Platt, Every One Sang, 53.