

Personal Memoirs

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The undersigned was born during the dark days of the Civil War, Dec. 7, 1861, in the city of New York. My father's name was Joseph Johnson, whose birthplace was Goehlheim, Bavaria, Germany; my mother's name was Friederika (Geiger) Johnson, whose birthplace was Weiler, Schondorf, Wuerttemberg, Germany.

My father served his native land in the War of 1848, and was among the troops sent into Schleswig-Holstein. In 1853 both father and mother came to America making their home in New York City, where they became acquainted and were married. The children of the home were, Christina, now Mrs. Rev. L. V. Soldan, of Butman, Michigan; Margaret, who died at the age of 16 years; Charles G., who died in Colorado Springs, Colorado in 1897; George, the subject of this sketch; Elizabeth, who died in 1885 in Grand Rapids, Michigan; Kate, now Mrs. Theo. Hutt, of Grand Rapids, Michigan; Lillie, now Mrs. Daniel Schantz of Caledonia, Michigan; and Carrie F., now Mrs. Francis Mochmar, of Diamondale, Michigan.

As soon as possible after coming to America my father became a citizen of the United States to whose interests he was loyal until his end. In 1861 he volunteered his services to President Lincoln, and became a member of Company 1, of the 8th New York Infantry, and at the expiration of his first term he re-enlisted and became a member of Company 1 of the 16th New York Cavalry, in which he served to the end of the war in 1865, when he was honorably discharged.

During the dark days of the war, my poor mother with her brood of little Tena, Maggie, Charles and George, living in New York City suffered indescribably from hard work and anxiety. Mobs and riots seemed to hold sway and for weeks she had her few belongings packed ready to fly with and for the safety of her little ones. Ours was a good mother, tender, kind and self-sacrificing, always on the best of terms with her neighbors and leading a God-fearing, upright religious life and implanting the fear of God in each of her children. Her memory remains a benediction. She died at the age of 76 years, father having passed away at he age of 74 years.

Immediately after the close of the Civil War my parents moved to Ironton, Lehigh County, Pa., where at the early age of nine years, in order to help the family, I began to work during the summer months, in the Iron Mines of the Ironton Railroad Co., and attended the village school about four months of the year. The panic of 1873 was very hard on us and prompted father to think of another location. Because of father's two brothers, Michael and Charles being in Michigan we moved into that state, arriving at Caledonia, Kent County, Michigan on the morning of July 19, 1876, in my fifteenth year. Being a strong, husky boy, now accustomed to hard work, I immediately went to work on farms in the summer and in the woods, with ax and saw with my father and others in the winter. Unfortunately this did not give much opportunity for school, in fact my school days were over. Reading however, was very fascinating to me and I read practically everything I could get my hands on. Of course, the selections were not always fortunate.

The family settled down on a small piece of land, now owned by Daniel Schantz, my sister Lillie's husband, where our first house was built of logs. These logs father and I cut

from the woods near by and the neighbors came and “raised” it for us. It was not a mansion, yet it was home. There was no trouble about keeping the house well ventilated for the wind had full sway through the broad cracks in the gables and roof. Often in the morning we found our beds generously covered with snow.

Working on the farm as a hired man brought me into the home of Uncle Charlie and Mother Cook, who were English people and good Christians. They formerly were members of Charles H. Spurgeon’s Church in London, but now were Congregationalists. The influence of this home was a benediction to me. Family worship was conducted regularly every morning. My sister Lizzie also was employed in the home assisting Mother Cook in the house.

During this year, I began attending the Sunday School of the Leighton Church, in Allegan County. This was the church of the Evangelical Association. I soon found acquaintances here and in the autumn of 1879, a great revival broke out, under the pastorate of the Rev. O. Ragouts, and a large number of people, especially of the young, were happily converted to God. Among these was Hannah E. Weber, a farmer’s daughter, who afterward became my wife, and myself. This occurrence however did not quite please my father, how was a member of the Missouri Synod Lutheran Church and some of his fellow church people. Soon after my conversion, thoughts of the gospel ministry surged through my soul, but were resisted because of the meager education I attained and the seeming impossibility of securing more. However, God’s spirit won and in the fall of 1883 I set off for Naperville, Illinois. I however had no adequate idea of what I needed, and no one to advise with as to the best course to pursue. My stay at the school was very brief, but profitable – I learned to realize the greatness of the task before me and the inadequacy of my preparations for it. The few dollars which I earned and saved up for the occasion were soon spent and I was going into debt to my older sister Tena, who was forwarding me money now and then. I was sawing wood and doing odd chores when my studies allowed to earn a little money. My clothes were poor and without an overcoat I soon discovered that I must do something else.

The Leighton Church having recommended me to the ministry, the Michigan Conference at its session held at Portage Prairie in 1884, under the chairmanship of my later good friend, Bishop Thos. Bowman granted me a license to preach and immediately assigned me to Byron Mission, in Livingston County, consisting of three preaching places – Byron school house, Cohoctah Church and Conway – all country places. My first Sunday I made the round in the company of the former pastor, Rev. Daniel Heininger. Uncle Johnny Schiedel of Cohoctah and his good wife gave me a comfortable home and with my little mouse colored pony and open buggy I traveled the mission. It surely was not profound preaching, but rather the fire and zeal of youth that prompted the people to come to church. I had a good Christian experience and my stay at North Western College deepened it. The people came and quite a number of persons were converted. This greatly encouraged me. The people were very good to me. During the year a call came through the Evangelical Messenger for a preacher to visit the vicinity of Lansing – responding to this call, I visited the neighborhood of Henry B. Parker near Lansing and also the old Haag and Beal neighborhood near Holt, here we established preaching places and I divided my time – one Sunday for the three first named appointments and the following Sunday at the appointments thirty miles away, near Lansing.

The following year I was transferred to Petoskey Mission, away up north. During my pastorate at Petoskey and vicinity, I was happy to receive my bride, Miss Hannah E. Weber, as a helpmeet who since April 14th, 1886 has cheered my heart and home. Patient gentle and tender she has been my loving joy, through privations and hardships for many years. She has been a good, loving and tender mother to our children. They were born at home. Lila May, Lloyd Joseph, Lola Bernice, Lois Margaret, Claudius George, Charles Bertrand and Ester Doris. All are yet living, save Lloyd Joseph, who died at the tender age of three years and four months. He was a bright, good child. His death was a great sorrow to us.

From Petoskey, we were transferred to Woodland Circuit, and there to Jackson and from Jackson to Buchanan and then to St. Joseph on Lake Michigan.

During my first year's pastorate here in 1896 I was unexpectedly requested by the Trustees of North Western College to travel in the interest of the College and Union Biblical Institute, to solicit funds and encourage students to attend. At first I refused but after continued pressure from that source, yielded. In this work I continued for 12 years, during eight of which I also served as treasurer of these institutions, however all the time retaining my connection with the Michigan Conference. I was privileged to sit in the following General Conferences – Berlin, Ontario – 1903; Milwaukee, Wisconsin – 1907; Cleveland, Ohio – 1911; Los Angeles, California – 1915; and Cedar Falls Iowa in 1919.

At the General Conference held in Milwaukee in 1907, I was elected Secretary-Treasurer of the Missionary Society of the Evangelical Association of North America. I was re-elected in Cleveland 1911, and again in Los Angeles 1915, and since 1911, when the Superannuation Fund was established by the General Conference, I have served as its Treasurer, associated with my kind and good friend, Bishop S. C. Breyfogel, its General Secretary. In my associations with the members of the Board of Missions and its Executive Committee, I found them very patient with me, and indeed brethren beloved. My associations with Bro. T. C. Meckel so long connected with the Missionary Society, I found very pleasant and cordial. God bless them all.

My life has been a very hard one, but perhaps sweeter because of that. God has been and is my refuge and strength, Jesus Christ is my lowly elder brother, who in infinite mercy and love offered Himself as my sacrifice that I might attain unto this relationship and fellowship. The Holy Spirit is my councilor and Guide. I commend to the love and care of the Triune God, each and all of my beloved children and all mankind.

January 5, 1919

George Johnson

(Died Feb. 1920)