

EMC's Quiet Superman

No building on campus bears his name. His students are dead and gone, their memories buried with them. Yet he rescued Emmanuel Missionary College from financial desperation and academic oblivion. Had it not been for O. J. Graf, Andrews University might not exist at all.

Even in life, at the peak of his career, Graf was a very modest man, most often resisting the spotlight. The *Student Movement* once noted, "as usual, Professor Graf was very reluctant to speak, but finally consented."¹ Yet he served as the leader of the campus for ten years: 1908-1918.

President Graf accepted the call to EMC and attended his first board meeting in July of 1908.² He was twenty-nine years old and engaged to be married the following month to Roberta Andrews. He had graduated from Union College and received a Master's degree from the University of Nebraska. He was then teaching history at Union, but had also served as educational secretary for the Northern Union Conference and taught in public and denominational schools.³

Emmanuel Missionary College was at its nadir. Abandoned by its founders, it had struggled along for four years under the direction of Nelson W. Kauble, who was a better poultry farmer than he was a college administrator. One board attendee, S.P.S. Edwards, described the situation in dire terms: "The attendance was way down, the school spirit lower, the faculty discouraged."⁴

The details were even more disheartening. The college carried a debt of over \$20,000. Two years after Graf took over the presidency, the S.D.A. Central Educational Association was abolished and left its \$20,000 debt to EMC as well.⁵ Still more money was needed to bring the

school into good shape: the final "monster debt" tally stood at \$60,879.55.

Furthermore, a widespread perception prevailed that EMC was no better than a secondary school and that its academic credits would not be accepted by other institutions of higher learning.⁶ As a result, only forty students enrolled at the beginning of the 1908-1909 school year.

The new, young president began to make changes at once. He took aim first at the chaotic record-keeping that had characterized the school since its move. In his very first faculty meeting of the school year, he introduced class record cards.⁷ In subsequent meetings he led faculty discussions and actions that regularized academic policies.

By early spring of 1910, in his second school year, Graf had led the college to an important moment in its

history: Emmanuel Missionary College was incorporated as an "Institution of Learning," making it a degree-granting institution.⁸ As Edwards remarked, "He started a complete reorganization of the educational policy and the curriculum of study of which the present program is the outcome."⁹ By the end of Graf's administration, enrollment had grown to 274 students.

Another high point in Graf's presidency came during the commencement exercises in spring of 1916 when he burned the final debt notes rep-

resenting the "monster debt" which had burdened the school when he arrived. Year by year he had brought EMC to academic and financial stability.

History also seems to suggest that Graf was the first president of the institution to understand the need for faculty development. He began with a bare-bones faculty in 1908 and built the staff to twenty-two by 1912. But he



O. J. Graf (front row, center), president of EMC from 1908-1918, with faculty of 1912.

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President Graf burning the college debt notes

paid attention to more than just numbers. At a board meeting in 1917, he asked a revolutionary question: "What shall we do in a financial way to assist our teachers to be progressive and keep up to date?"¹⁰ At Graf's insistence the board paid for summer courses for some of the teachers, provided funds for as many as possible to attend professional meetings, and sent depart-



The Graf family

ment heads, all expenses paid, to visit other academic institutions of good reputation.

Graf, who also taught history and philosophy, was well loved by his students. When, in 1969, Focus asked alumni to "vote" for "Andrews' Great Teachers" (September-October 11), only one teacher received one more vote than O. J. Graf. His students remembered that he could call

every student on campus by name. One of his former students characterized him as democratic, kind, impartial, and merciful.¹¹

He was no pushover, however. On the afternoon of his mother's funeral, in 1916, the school closed so that all the faculty could attend the service. It came to Graf's attention that, in the absence of the faculty, four couples had held a dance party in the basement gymnasium of the main college building. The next morning eight "trunks were lined up on the platform at the college interurban station." Their owners were expelled for the remainder of that school year.¹²

President Graf began the 1917-18 school year in poor health, weakened by an operation he had undergone during the summer. Still he tried to carry on. One day in

September, he collapsed in chapel. On the 30th, Graf and his wife, Roberta, left campus for the West and a rest cure. Unbeknown to the Grafts, as the time came for their departure, the

students poured out of their classrooms and formed two long lines along the school's main drive. As the Grafts' car drove away, the students gave their beloved leader a "chatauqua salute," all waving their handkerchiefs above their heads.

They did not know that it was a final good-bye. Everyone expected the Grafts to return to Berrien Springs. But O. J. Graf never regained sufficient strength to return to academic administration. He had given the EMC presidency his all and left the school a stronger institution poised on the brink of a golden era of growth.

Endnotes

- ¹ 7 December 1916, 1.
- ² *Journal Era*, 9 July 1908.
- ³ Obituary, *Lake Union Herald*, 31 October 1950, 1.
- ⁴ "Memories of Berrien," unpublished typescript, 1962, 8, AHC.
- ⁵ E. K. Vande Vere, *The Wisdom Seekers*, 132. The association was originally called the S.D.A. Educational Society and was formed to promote the founding of Battle Creek College; it was reformulated and renamed by E. A. Sutherland before the move to Berrien Springs.
- ⁶ EMC Board Minutes, selections from 1904 to 1907.
- ⁷ EMC Faculty Minutes, 14 September 1908, 5, 6.
- ⁸ EMC Board Minutes, 17 March 1910, 391.
- ⁹ P. 7.
- ¹⁰ EMC Board Minutes, 15 January 1917, 5.
- ¹¹ George Simpson, SM, 29 October 1913, 3.
- ¹² Charlotte Groff, unpublished typescript entitled "Dancing."

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