

Wilson Seeley Lewis

Bishop Lewis's success as an educator is suggested by an early experience while he was teaching in a country school in his native State of New York. One of the diversions of the school to which he went at the age of sixteen was to carry the teacher out and dump him into a snowbank, after which it was expected that he would leave. A vacation was then enjoyed until another candidate could be induced to face the situation by the attraction of "five dollars a week and board around". Young Lewis never left the schoolhouse "except under his own motive power, and he took his baths in the time-honored wash-tub by the kitchen stove after the rest of the family had gone to bed".

Wilson Seeley Lewis was born in Russell, St. Lawrence County, New York, on July 17, 1857, and died in Sioux City, Iowa, on August 21, 1921. His father was vigorous, industrious, and determined, but was given to unpractical plans for doing things in a large way, which always failed. There were eight children in the family, six older and one younger than Wilson. The strictest economy was necessary, although the assistance of the older children made conditions somewhat easier for the two younger boys. The large family, together with an unusually strong family affection, was probably

helpful to the development of useful social qualities. Parents, brothers, and sister all agreed that Wilson should have an education, and all coöperated to the best of their limited abilities.

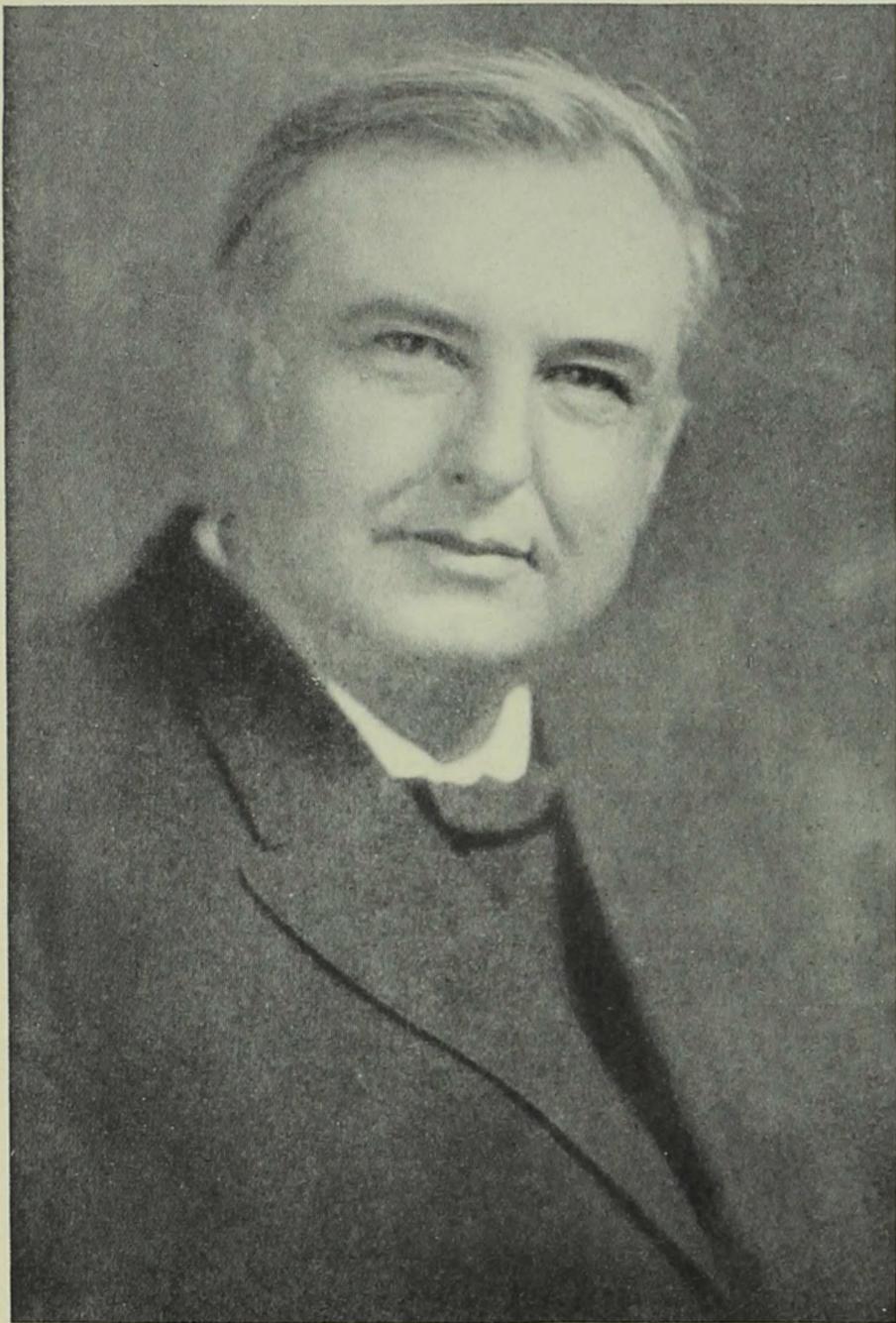
When he was about ten years old, he went to live with his brother John, who had married and rented a farm. John's wife was one of the great influences in his life. She had had only a common school education, but she carried to old age a thirst for learning. Throughout his struggle for an education, John and Ann provided Wilson with a home, John lent him money, and Ann made, washed, and mended his clothes. He was graduated from St. Lawrence University at Canton, New York, in 1880.

That same year he came to Iowa and served as superintendent of schools at Centerpoint and Belle Plaine. Four years later he entered the ministry and served as pastor of the Methodist churches at Blairstown and Traer. At Blairstown his annual salary was \$600. He had been offered \$1700 to remain at Belle Plaine. His choice was characteristic of the man. Throughout his life he never allowed material advantage to interfere with his devotion to what he regarded as his duty and opportunity.

In 1892 he was appointed principal of Epworth Seminary where he remained until he was elected president of Morningside College at Sioux City. Before the modern high school, such institutions provided the only means of preparation for a higher education for many people. Epworth was badly in

need of help. The three small buildings were out of repair and the campus had grown to weeds. Dr. Lewis built the main building and a dormitory, improved its financial status, and gave it scholastic standing.

In the late eighties a group of men in Sioux City determined to establish a university. They selected a hilltop at Morningside, a suburb of the city, as the site. The original campus covered sixteen and one-half acres of land. A stone building, costing thirty-five thousand dollars, was erected and a second larger building was begun, the foundation costing thirty thousand dollars. The institution was organized with fourteen colleges. Only a few students came and it was soon realized that the undertaking needed more support. The chancellor was a Methodist minister and the Methodist church was strong in that part of the State. In 1890 the University of the Northwest sought the recognition and support of the local conference of the Methodist Church. Before anything could be done in aid of the new institution, however, the panic of 1893 swept over the country, and the campus was placed in the hands of the sheriff. In 1894 the conference decided to form a new organization to be known as Morningside College to replace the defunct University of the Northwest. By June, 1896, the conclusion was reached to secure a young man with experience in educational work for the office of president. Dr. Lewis was suggested. Three out of the five Methodist col-



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leges in Iowa had approached him with offers. In September, 1897, he met the trustees and agreed to accept the presidency on condition that he was given time to finish his work at Epworth and to visit Europe. When President Lewis took up his work at Morningside, the institution was in debt, the enrollment was small, and there was no endowment.

During his administration of eleven years, the campus was enlarged, the main hall was completed, money raised to pay the old indebtedness, and also to cover the cost of the new building. Two endowment campaigns were carried through successfully. In the first drive for \$200,000, the college was to receive \$50,000 from the Carnegie Foundation on condition that \$150,000 was raised in the local territory. In the second campaign the General Education Board promised to contribute \$50,000 provided that not less than \$150,000 was secured from other sources. The result was that when President Lewis retired to become bishop in 1908, the college had an endowment of \$400,000, every dollar of which had been procured during his period of service. This capital sum was in addition to the amounts necessary to clear up indebtedness and pay for the erection of main hall and the enlargement of the campus. During the same period the enrollment increased from a hundred and eighty-seven to five hundred students and a strong faculty was developed. Morningside also came to be recognized as one of the established colleges of the State.

Less tangible, but more enduring, was President Lewis's work and influence upon the minds of the students and the faculty. Nothing short of a real college was his ambition, and he inspired all those with whom he came in contact with his own vision of what an educational institution should be. The business men of Sioux City also came within the range of his energy and enthusiasm and they rallied round him. One by one he showed them what a college would mean to the city. A typical instance was of a prominent man, who, if he could be won, would bring others with him. He had declared to his intimates that he would never give a penny to President Lewis and his college. He did not believe in colleges. They spoiled most young men. Sioux City was too poor. One college had failed. Why try again?

Some time later he described his experience with Dr. Lewis. His terse and emphatic comment was: "I had determined not to give him anything. What happened was that I made a contribution to the college and *told him to come again.*"

In 1908 Dr. Lewis was elected bishop, and assigned to the supervision of the southern half of China with headquarters at Foochow. At a farewell mass meeting at the college just before his departure Bishop Lewis said:

"Now I am not going to make a farewell speech. I am just going to say that I have dreamed of this college by night, and it has gone with me by day for eleven years. Personally, I had hoped to give my

whole life as far as it would be of service to this college, and let my ashes rest upon its campus. In my judgment, God has decreed otherwise and my field of service will be elsewhere. While I may labor for a people whom I have never seen, yet my heart is here. I shall meet Morningside College in Asia. Seven graduates will come down to Foochow to meet me when I arrive there."

Bishop Lewis served twelve years in South China. In May, 1920, owing to the death of Bishop J. W. Bashford, he became the senior bishop in China, and was assigned to northern China with headquarters at Peking. From 1909 to 1921 he travelled through China from east to west and from north to south. No mission station was too remote or inaccessible for him to visit. He journeyed hundreds of miles in sedan chairs carried by coolies. Because of the fact that it required more than the usual number to carry his chair, he was known as "Bishop Big Man" among the Chinese. He made no careful record of his travels, but sometimes jotted down notes by the way. His experiences were varied in character, involving hardship and privation, but always he bore them with a serenity founded upon his deep Christian faith. He could not speak the language, but he preached the gospel by his acts. To the coolie, it was a lighter load, an extra dime. To the chair-bearers it was a command to stop at the foot of the high hills, so that he could climb the steep and leave them the empty chair to carry.

One of his last journeys was from Chungking to Shanghai in the midst of robber dangers. Every effort was made to conciliate the officials along the river. Four days passed without incident. On the morning of the fifth day, word came that the bandit chief wished to become acquainted with the Bishop. It was also indicated that a fee of five dollars was expected. At the appointed place, the boats landed and the Bishop served tea to the chief on his boat. After a time he handed the chief a five-dollar bill, but he refused to accept it. Some time was passed in conversation. Skillfully the Bishop passed the bill to his servant, who then passed it to the servant of the chief, and he in turn handed it to the chief, who pocketed it without giving any indication of the act, and without interruption of the conversation. A little later the chief departed. The journey was continued without further interference. The next party was robbed of all their valuables, even to a woman's wedding ring. Bishop Lewis's diplomacy in managing this bandit chief is an illustration of his ability to understand and deal with all kinds of people. His success in his various undertakings was largely due to his sympathetic insight into human nature in all its different forms.

Because of his work at Morningside College, Bishop Lewis was able to interest the Rockefeller Foundation in educational work in China. He travelled throughout the entire country with representatives of the board, and as a result the foundation

decided to establish four great educational centers in China. Bishop Lewis showed the Rockefeller representatives that universities could not be maintained without schools as feeders to the higher institutions. Consequently a great system of secondary schools was established by the Rockefeller Foundation in addition to its liberal gifts to medical schools and hospitals. Bishop Lewis was also instrumental in the development of a college for women at Foochow. He planned to have students from the colleges of China sent to the United States to complete their education.

Bishop Lewis was very popular with the Chinese. In the larger cities he was welcomed cordially, and he was often consulted by the leaders of the Chinese Republic.

When the great Centenary Movement of the Methodist Church began in 1918, Bishop Lewis was recalled from China to assist in the work. He spent eighteen months travelling and speaking, and is said to have done more than any other man in Methodism to carry through the campaign.

For forty years Bishop Lewis was engaged in religious and educational work. Epworth Seminary, Morningside College, and Chinese education represent his most important undertakings. He was an educational statesman in the best sense of these words. His ideal of education was of the highest type. To him education and religion were one and inseparable. His ambition at Epworth, at Morn-

ingside, and in China, was the same — to build educational institutions of the finest quality as a foundation for an intelligent, tolerant, and sincere religion. He had no sympathy for and little patience with narrowness and insincerity. His rare criticisms of associates were based upon their manifestation of such characteristics. His intellectual attitude is illustrated by these comments made during his journeys in China: "I have just finished re-reading Eucken's *Problem of Human Life*. I am starting to-day to re-read Bergson's *Creative Evolution*." Later he added: "I finished to-day the re-reading of Bergson, a truly wonderful and epoch-making book in the realm of philosophy."

An editorial in the *Sioux City Journal*, written at the time of his death, estimated his life and work as follows: "Ceaseless energy, devotion to the tasks he set himself, sympathy for and understanding of mankind's needs, natural ability for uplift which he developed in his work, and a benevolent attitude that marked the devout and sincere Christian — these were used by Bishop Lewis in the accomplishment of his work. He gave all that he had of physical and mental strength and of ambition and inspiration to the work he set out to do. His own people at home valued his service; the Chinese found in him a loyal and devoted friend. His life was divided between America and China. In each he built schools, educational systems that will live long after him."

F. E. HAYNES