

The Andrews People

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THE WISDOM SEEKERS

By Emmett K. Vande Vere

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The Wisdom Seekers is a history of Andrews University (Berrien Springs, Michigan) from its founding as Battle Creek College in 1874 until 1968. Events are related in chronological sequence and organized around dominant people — usually administrators, but also teachers, students, and staff members. This is a narrative written to emphasize the *people* of the college, and with a desire not to “overmoralize” but rather, as the author says, to let the readers themselves deduce “His teaching in our past history.” Vande Vere achieves his aim with a large degree of success. In only a few instances (too few in my opinion) does the book provide an analysis of events in terms of influences or consequences; but the parade of people continues throughout in sufficient detail to warm the hearts of old grads and to interest the general reader.

The book opens with a brief description of Battle Creek and of Adventist beginnings and developments in that region between the late 1850s and the opening of the college in 1874. From then on, events on campus dominate the perspective. Although the main events in the early part of the book, treating the Battle Creek period, will be familiar to readers of Adventist history, the richness of detail does much to lift this volume above popular histories. And when the early period is passed — those years in which Battle Creek College was almost all there was of Seventh-day Adventist formal education — Vande Vere carries the reader through a detailed and almost always sympathetic treatment of events: the move to Berrien Springs; the rise and departure of educational reform; the gradual emergence of a college in fact as well as in name; and the transition to Andrews University.

The general reader with a taste for history, whatever his connection with the college, will find rewards for his interest throughout the book, except perhaps in the tedious lists of events that appear in several chapters. Only true love could note, for example, the repair of the vocalion organ in 1913-14, or the installation of an electric dishwasher in 1920-21, or the host of similar trivia. There is synthesis and evaluation: the community and General Conference differences that led to the 1882 closing of Battle Creek College are examined; events leading to the move from Battle Creek and the power struggles that led to the departures of Edward A. Sutherland and, much later, of Floyd A. Rittenhouse are touched on. But what these may involve in terms of forces or large issues in the development of a Seventh-day Adventist view of education — indeed, just what the dimensions of these forces or issues were — is identified only occasionally, and then briefly.

The contents of the book have been derived from a variety of sources such as diaries, personal reminiscences, and publications from academic, church, and student groups. The author was fifteen years in searching out what must be a fascination of material. Yet the reader has no way of sharing the sources. A brief (and obscure)

note informs that "footnotes, bibliography, and rosters of student leaders and the faculty are deposited in the Heritage Room of the James White Library at Andrews University." For historians this is a serious defect that limits the usefulness of the book — and at a time of renewed interest in the subject within the Adventist church. A similar weakness is evident in the two biographical essays included as appendices. One hopes that neither is a definitive study; either is sufficiently attractive to provide stimulus for such study. A brief bibliographical essay may be too much to ask for in such appendices, but the absence of the standard scholarly apparatus is unfortunate.

Most college histories are written to sustain the fires of memory, glowing in the minds of alumni. Others are written with this goal as secondary to that of writing history as well as reminiscence, and excellent models come to mind: Samuel Eliot Morison's writing about Harvard; Carstensen and Curti's writing about Wisconsin; Frederick Rudolph's volume on Williams College between 1836 and 1872; the brief but competent studies of Antioch, Reed, and Swarthmore by Burton Clark. The strength of these and their kind is that they provide more than narrative. They provide synthesis and interpretation, setting origins and growth in a context.

In this, *The Wisdom Seekers* disappoints. We look almost in vain for information about other developments that may illuminate events at Battle Creek or Berrien Springs: developments of church structure and of regional loyalties within and beyond the boundaries of North America; the emergence of other Adventist colleges; a description of the general college climate in the Midwest, or of the times and society of which all these were part. The absence of context isolates the narrative and leads to the impression that growth and development toward the present were inevitable. Emmanuel Missionary College's chicken-raising president, parochial board members, and educational reformers are all equally interesting in this view, but important largely as surface diversions that conceal ineluctable forces.

The author raises the issue of "the hand of God in history," if only to avoid joining it. The topic has become something of a talisman to the general believer in Seventh-day Adventist teachings and a conundrum to many historians in the church. From his comment in the preface, Vande Vere, a professional historian, seems to assent to the likelihood, at least, of divine participation in the episodes of Adventist history, but nonhistorians and historians alike are shortly cast adrift in the narrative, with small comfort or guidance — just the hope that their disappointment not be too great. The general reader may find ground for complaint that the author teases; his colleagues may inquire why a historian should mention divine involvement at all.

Among books about Seventh-day Adventist education, *The Wisdom Seekers* is a welcome addition because so little history has been written — Dick's study of Union College (Lincoln, Nebraska) is the only other comparable volume — and because the author does provide a detailed and connected narrative of Andrews University based almost entirely on primary sources, many not used before. Moreover, in terms of the stated goals, Vande Vere has succeeded in achieving an emphasis on people and a freedom from what he calls "moralizing." Whoever wishes to read or write about Seventh-day Adventist education is in his debt. Yet, despite these considerable merits, the absence of scholarly apparatus, the lack of an adequate social context, and the dominantly narrative approach contribute weaknesses to the volume as history.