This Month in Moravian History

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The Moravian Star

Nowadays, "Moravian" stars seem to come in any shape and form. A simple search on commercial websites such as eBay or Amazon.com will reveal numerous star-shaped ornaments in a wide range of sizes, colors, and materials. Is there such a thing as a true Moravian star? And—what is Moravian about a star?

Surprisingly, the origins of the Moravian star have little to do with Advent or Christmas. They are connected to the Moravian fondness for celebration and decoration. As early as 1747 there is mention of colored stars that were lighted in the windows of buildings in the Moravian community of Herrnhaag, Germany. Nothing is known about the exact shape of these stars, and it is far from certain if these early stars are directly connected to the decorative stars of a century later.

We do know that Moravian stars are connected to math lessons in school where students learned to draw and make geometrical shapes. One of the shapes was a pyramid. At the Moravian boarding school in Niesky, Germany, pupils practiced by making shapes from paper. The shape of an elongated pyramid must have inspired the geometry teacher and the students to glue the paper pyramids together to form a new shape: a star. As early as 1821 stars were used as festive decorations: during the 50th anniversary of the Niesky school an illuminated, multi-colored star of 110 points was hung outside the school building. Another report tells us about lighted stars being made for the 100th anniversary celebration of the Niesky congregation in 1842.

The first account of a star made specifically for Christmas dates from 1867 when Hermann Bourquin, a former pupil at Niesky, made a paper star for his parents in Herrnhut. At that time boys in the various Moravian boarding schools began decorating their rooms with stars during the Advent season. By the end of the nineteenth century the stars rapidly spread throughout the Moravian world. Families decorated their homes with stars and it would not be long before the stars made their introduction into the churches. An Advent star was first displayed in the Herrnhut church on the first Sunday of Advent in 1891. A photo of the Nazareth Moravian church from 1907 shows a very early American example of a star.

As the demand for stars grew, entrepreneurial Moravians started to produce stars on a commercial basis. Pieter Hendrik Verbeek began the serial production of stars in Herrnhut in 1897. In the Brethren's House in Herrnhut a production room was equipped where women glued the points and attached them to metal supports. Verbeek even patented his clever idea of connecting the points by sliding them onto a prefabricated metal framework.

> After the holiday season, the stars could easily be taken apart for storage. By 1925 Verbeek had developed the star even further: by connecting the star points directly to each other with clips, the internal metal framework became obsolete, and in 1927 the metal supports on the points were replaced with carton ones. Since then, the star has changed very little. In January of 1926 American Moravians ordered 3,600 stars from the Star Factory in Herrnhut. In 1933 the Star Factory moved to its current

location where today hundreds of thousands of Moravian stars are produced every year. The factory is owned by the Moravian Church and its proceeds are used to support activities of the church.

The Moravian star is distinguished by its well-proportioned shape. The length of the points corresponds proportionally to the diameter of the body. Whereas the points of the first stars in the nineteenth century came in many different colors, nowadays most stars are white or yellow. The Moravian stars are simple but attractive ornaments that, in their simplicity and plainness, reflect the Moravian sense of beauty. Stars fit in wonderfully with other Moravian decorative traditions such as the Putz or the simple candles in the windows. Moravians have adopted the star as one of their most cherished objects. And not only Moravians appreciate these stars: they have become an ecumenical tradition. Every year thousands of stars shine into the darkness, symbolizing our anticipation of the light of hope to enter into the darkness. The points shine into all directions, uniting us in expectation with other people in all parts of the world.

source: Morning Star, o Cheering Sight. The Moravian Star and Its History (2008).

www.moravianchurcharchives.org