When the Reverend Theodore Henry Carl Buenger opened the first academic year of Concordia College on September 13, 1893, St. Paul, Minnesota, was a fast-growing city with a population of more than 135,000, of whom a third were immigrants. As a state capitol readily accessible by rail transportation, and with three other educational institutions already established in St. Paul, the location of Concordia seemed a wise choice. Even Mark Twain would seem to agree as he wrote after a visit: "St. Paul is a wonderful town. It is put together in solid blocks of honest brick and stone, and has the air of intending to stay."

The president of the United States was Grover Cleveland, the president of the Missouri Synod was Dr. Heinrich Christian Schwan, the governor of Minnesota was Knute Nelson, and the mayor of St. Paul was Frederick P. Wright. But all of these distinguished leaders were relatively unimportant to that first class of 30 young men as they began their educational preparation for the pastoral and teaching ministry of Synod. Besides President Buenger, two part-time assistants, Mr. Theodore Berg, teacher in Zion's parish school, and Pastor Adam Detzer of Redeemer congregation in St. Paul, comprised the complete faculty.

In 1943, after completing 50 years at Concordia, President Buenger told faculty and friends: "When I had accepted the call to Concordia, sleepless nights were my lot, since there was the necessity to select literature and textbooks, finding an appropriate location to house the new institution, writing a course of study, planning and writing a schedule, serving as registrar, and arranging many other matters." In spite of a myriad of other responsibilities—correspondence, purchasing, administration—he did not have secretarial assistance during his entire presidency of 34 years.
A CENTURY OF SERVICE

During the first year of Concordia’s operation, the Board of Trustees, along with a synodically appointed committee, considered eight different sites as a permanent location for the school, but they were unable to select one without objections. But after the Minnesota Legislature voted in 1889 to sell the “House of Refuge” property on St. Anthony Avenue and move the state training school for boys to Red Wing, a ready made campus was offered to Synod for $40,000. Since this far exceeded the funds available, the state agreed to sell six of the eleven acres on which four buildings stood for $21,865. On September 9, 1894, the Missouri Synod gained ownership of this new campus just four days after the opening of the second school year.

By 1896 the school had an enrollment of 68, and the Board of Trustees felt that the early successes justified the expansion of Concordia beyond the limit of three years of high school. Since the district was expanding faster than any other district of Synod with its 157 pastors and 400 congregations, the Board requested the 1896 synodical convention in Fort Wayne, Indiana, to permit expansion to a six-year course. However, the convention did not agree, and the three-year format was to remain another six years.

The 1902 synodical convention in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, received a lengthy memorial again requesting an expansion of Concordia’s offerings to a full six years with minimum additional expense. Although the Synod was not yet inclined to add all three years, it did approve a fourth year so that Concordia could become a complete secondary school. Finally, during the Detroit Convention in 1905, the Synod resolved to add the first two years of college to Concordia’s program, completing the six-year German Gymnasium model which synodical colleges had already adopted in Milwaukee, Bronxville, Fort Wayne, and Concordia, Missouri. Interestingly, 60 years later when the synodical convention again assembled in Detroit in 1965, the resolution was approved to expand Concordia’s four-year teacher education program to include men also (though women, admitted for the two-year teacher education program in 1950, began their third and fourth years already in 1962).

With the addition of the freshman and sophomore college classes in 1905 and 1906, the original four buildings of the campus had more than reached their capacity. The crowded conditions were temporarily eased by discontinuing the teacher education program.
in 1908. This required the education students to complete their preparation at the teachers colleges in Addison, Illinois, and Seward, Nebraska.

However, the first new building that began to meet the increasing needs of a growing student body was the Gymnasium. This facility was dedicated on January 21, 1912, at a cost of $10,654, which was secured from friends of Concordia. This was in accordance with the action of Synod at the 1908 convention which approved the South Dakota District request for a gymnasium, providing it would be built with voluntary contributions. The new gym released space in the buildings for student living areas that had been used for exercise and other activities.

During the first 20 years of its existence, Concordia had survived two fires in 1899 and 1911 and a tornado in 1904, it was maturing as an educational institution, it was building a competent faculty, and it had an increasing student body. But when it reached the point at which 20 students were sleeping in the third story of the president's home, and some classes were meeting in the halls and in the chapel, the Lutheran Education Association of the Northwest joined the project to secure a new administration and classroom building. The 1914 synodical convention at Chicago approved the construction of the building, but only appropriated $30,000, with the remaining funds to be gathered from local districts and donors.

In the ensuing three years, the districts pledged to raise $70,000 so that a new proposal could be presented at the 1917 convention in Milwaukee. Upon ratification of the plan, work on the new building, originally called Recitation Hall, began immediately. Ground was broken in July, the cornerstone laying took place in September, and the dedication took place on June 30, 1918. The 60 x 198 foot building, with working and service areas on three floors in addition to faculty and administrative offices, contained classrooms, science laboratories, a museum, and a chapel-auditorium seating 354. The total cost of the new fire-proof administration building, as it was called until 1970, was $125,000.

The new administration building helped make it possible to fulfill the request of a small portion of the Norwegian Evangelical Lutheran Church which had withdrawn from its parent body because of its merger with other Norwegian Lutheran churches in 1917. Thus it lost access to the educational institutions now controlled by the
newly merged Norwegian Lutheran Church of America. This request involved permission to enroll students from the “Little” Norwegian Synod (as they were often called) in Concordia College to prepare for matriculation to Concordia Seminary in St. Louis. The Norwegian Synod agreed to jointly call a theologically acceptable professor with Concordia College and assist with his salary. Subsequently, a call was extended to Pastor Sigurd C. Ylvisaker, who accepted the position to teach Norse, Greek, and Hebrew at Concordia, with special responsibility for the young men of Norwegian descent planning to study for the ministry. This arrangement continued until Bethany College and Seminary was founded in Mankato, Minnesota, in 1927. The Reverend Professor Sigurd C. Ylvisaker, Ph.D., later served as president of Bethany College for twenty years.

The most significant campus landmark was dedicated on October 30, 1921, when the Luther statue was unveiled as part of the quadracentennial observance of Dr. Martin Luther’s courageous stand at the Diet of Worms in 1521. The statue was a gift from Mr. and Mrs. Ernest Rubbert of Minneapolis. With more than 3,000 people looking on, the daughter of the donors and also President Buenger’s daughter-in-law, Mrs. Myrtle Rubbert Buenger, slowly pulled the cord which removed the United States flag unveiling the gigantic bronze figure of Luther. President Buenger accepted this gift with gratitude and hoped that it would be an inspirational reminder of the blessings of the Reformation. Since the dedication, a traditional early service at the Luther statue has begun each Reformation Day observance.

The German sculptor Ernst Friedrich August Rietschel (1804–61), a professor at the university of Dresden, designed a Luther monument for Worms, Germany, which was the model for Concordia’s Luther statue. It was cast by the Flour City Ornamental Iron Company of Minneapolis for which Mr. Ernst Rubbert was the treasurer. The imposing figure of Luther is over twelve feet high, containing 3,700 pounds of bronze and standing on a pedestal of St. Louis granite six feet high which weighs 40 tons. His pose is representative of the moment when Luther is pointing to an open Bible as the source of his faith which he will defend as he confesses before the assembly at Worms, “Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise: God help me! Amen.”

With the construction of the Poehler Administration Building in
1969, the Luther statue was moved a short distance to its present position in front of the administrative center of the campus.

In addition to Concordia's Luther, the Flour City Ornamental Iron Company also cast three other duplicates of Rietschel's work which are at Luther College, Decorah, Iowa; Wartburg Seminary, Dubuque, Iowa; and Lutheran Memorial Park, Detroit, Michigan.

With the increasing student body and the additional academic facilities in the new administration building along with minor curricular changes, Concordia sought accreditation by the University of Minnesota as the highest accrediting agency in the state. By increasing offerings in the sciences and decreasing the number of required courses, Concordia reached its first milestone of academic excellence by receiving accreditation from the University of Minnesota during the 1920–21 year.

Another important development in American education was the rise of the junior college. In 1920, President Buenger presented a paper in Chicago at a meeting of junior college representatives explaining that the “new” ideal of a six-year high school—junior college program had been in effect with the Missouri Synod pre-ministerial colleges from their beginnings, and they were, therefore, among the oldest junior colleges in the United States. At this meeting the American Association of Junior Colleges was formed with Concordia as a charter member. Concordia's leadership in the association was recognized nationally in the following decades.

A special celebration of thanksgiving was held on January 16, 1924, commemorating President Buenger's 30th anniversary as president and the 40th anniversary of his ordination, even though the latter was over a year late. Especially memorable was the bronze tablet, presented by the Alumni Association, containing a relief profile of President Buenger and the Latin phrase, “Aeterna Moliri.” This motto is translated “Building for Eternity” and was the president's favorite expression of Concordia's mission. Years later, the Concordia faculty used this motto in creating the Aeterna Moliri Award to honor annually at commencement an individual whose service to the church contributed to building for eternity. The original sculptured tablet is appropriately displayed in the Buenger Memorial Library.

The final addition to the Buenger legacy on the campus was the construction of East Dormitory in 1925. With a record enrollment
in 1922, and armed with photographic proof of dangerous over­
crowding, the Board of Trustees made an urgent request to the 1923
synodical convention for a new residence hall. The delegates re­
sponded by appropriating $125,000 for a new building to accom­
modate 100 students.

Plans for the new East Dormitory were finally approved so that
ground-breaking ceremonies could take place on June 4, 1925. The
laying of the cornerstone occurred on August 9, 1925. When school
began, there were 64 students with temporary sleeping facilities in
the gymnasium and an unfinished basement room in the adminis­
tration building. Finally on November 15, 1925, the building was
dedicated, and by December 1, the students joyfully occupied the
new dormitory. The total cost of East, including room furnishings
donated by congregations, totaled $143,000.

In 1947 East Dormitory was officially renamed Luther Hall. In
addition to its close proximity to the Luther statue, this is a most
appropriate name because a stone-sculptured face of Dr. Martin
Luther was placed above the main entrance to the building. Luther
is flanked by two early presidents and theologians of the Missouri
Synod, Dr. Carl F. W. Walther and Dr. Francis Pieper. Dr. Pieper,
often called one of the founding fathers of Concordia, was selected
as the primary speaker for the dedication service in 1925. Very rarely
in synodical history has a dedicatory speaker ever addressed an
audience standing beneath his own image on a building.

Luther Hall served as the dominant residence hall on campus
for over 30 years. It underwent extensive renovation in 1961 before
it became a women’s residence. Additional remodeling was com­
pleted in 1989.

During the summer of 1926, President and Mrs. Buenger made
a return trip to Europe. The focus of their travels was the classical
world of the Mediterranean Sea with special emphasis on its rela­
tionship to Biblical studies and languages. Meanwhile in St. Paul,
Professor August Schlueter failed to recover from surgery and died
on June 23, 1926.

After the 1926 synodical convention in St. Louis approved the
addition of two new professorships, the Board of Electors met on
August 24 to fill these two positions in addition to selecting a re­
placement for Professor Schlueter. The list of candidates to replace
Professor Schlueter included President Buenger. Although he al­
ready had a call to Concordia, the Electors extended a second call to President Buenger as professor of languages. Since the Board could not reach the Buengers during their travels, President Buenger did not become aware of his second call until he returned to St. Paul.

In explaining their call to President Buenger, the Board indicated that since the president was 66 years of age, they felt he might appreciate the opportunity to become a more traditional teaching professor without the pressures and responsibilities of the presidency. The minutes of the Board give no additional clarification nor explanation of this call which seemed confusing to many.

After carefully considering the nature of his call and desiring to continue his service to Concordia, President Buenger accepted this call. He agreed to relinquish his presidency when a new president could be selected. The final year of Dr. Buenger's presidency concluded with the June 16, 1927, graduation of 43 students, the largest class in the history of the college.

From 1927 until his retirement from the faculty in 1943, Dr. Theodore Buenger taught courses in Latin, religion, and the arts. His three trips to Europe helped him prepare to teach the humanities course introduced in 1937 which emphasized the visual arts and architecture of western civilization.

During the first century of Concordia's history, it is difficult to realize that one individual could serve an institution for half of that time and establish a legacy of ministry almost without equal in the Missouri Synod. Dr. Theodore Buenger, as Concordia's founding president, provided the dedicated leadership not only to build a viable functioning campus, but also to establish a respected academic community that assisted in the educational preparation of young men for service to the church and the world. He readily professed that any successes that resulted from his efforts were directly the blessings of the Triune God who helped his ministry of Building for Eternity.
Concordia’s first president was born on April 29, 1860, in Chicago, Illinois, where his father Theodore E. Buenger was a parish school teacher. Both his father and his mother, Martha Loeber Buenger, arrived in Perry County, Missouri, with the Saxon immigrants in 1839.

Theodore H. C. Buenger followed over three centuries of family tradition by also deciding to study for the pastoral ministry. He completed the six-year pre-seminary program at Concordia High School and Junior College in Fort Wayne, Indiana, in 1879. He entered Concordia Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri, and graduated in 1882. His theological education was greatly enhanced in St. Louis by time spent with his uncle, Dr. C. F. W. Walther, the first president of the Missouri Synod, especially during the controversy concerning the doctrine of election and predestination with the Ohio Synod of the Synodical Conference.

Pastor Buenger began his ministry as a missionary in northern Wisconsin where he served 30 mission stations for two years. Some of the preaching stations had been organized into congregations by the time he accepted a call to a congregation in Tinley Park, Illinois, in 1884. After seven years in Tinley Park, Pastor Buenger received a call to Zion Lutheran Church, the oldest Missouri Synod congregation in St. Paul, Minnesota, and began his pastorate there in 1891.

On April 8, 1885, during his time in Tinley Park, Pastor Buenger
was married to Ottilie Pauline Meier, whom he had met in St. Louis during his seminary days. They became the parents of four children: Elsa, Theodore, Albert, and Edgar.

In 1893, Pastor Theodore Buenger received a call to become the first professor of the newly approved Concordia College. Although he was the functional director of Concordia from its inception, he was called to become the permanent director or president in 1896. He served as president until 1927 when he relinquished this office at age 66, but he continued as a full-time classroom professor until his retirement in 1943.

Following his retirement, President Buenger went to Portland, Oregon, to make his home with his daughter Elsa Buenger Neils because his wife Ottilie Meier Buenger had died on April 11, 1935, just three days after they had celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary.

On September 9, 1943, President Emeritus Buenger died in Portland, Oregon. Funeral services were held in the college chapel on September 13, with interment in the family plot in Sunset Memorial Park.

In 1923 Concordia Seminary in St. Louis honored President Buenger by conferring on him the Doctor of Divinity degree in recognition for his service to the church as pastor, educator, and administrator.