

This Week in Eden History

Annual May Festival at Eden Seminary



The May Festival was an annual gathering held at Eden beginning in the early 20th century until 1960. Scheduled on the third Sunday of May, it brought up to 1,000 lay people to campus to celebrate the work of the seminary through tours, concerts, a worship service, lectures, a meal, and student-produced plays, often staged in the evening.



Photos dating from the mid-1950s of May Festival activities from Eden Seminary Archives

The earliest printed program held in the Eden Archives, dated 1920, lists short concerts by the seminary Glee Club, Orchestra, and Banjo Club, plus brief addresses by seminary and denominational leaders in English and German. The student play that year was “Saul of Tarsus,” directed by Professor H. Richard Niebuhr—too bad a recording doesn’t exist!

The German immigrant founders of the Evangelical Synod of North America brought with them the May Day tradition celebrating the return of spring (May 1 is a national holiday in Germany). Eventually this familiar cultural activity was adopted by the seminary to celebrate its importance as a prominent denominational and local institution. Societal changes modify traditions, however. Whether the reason for its demise was the assimilation of the ethnic German community into mainstream American culture or the increasing availability of other forms of activity and entertainment, the May Festival was no longer scheduled after 1960.