

A FAMILY WITH AN UNBROKEN LINE OF FIVE GENERATIONS OF PREACHERS

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In an article in the "Reformed Church Messenger," March 15, 1923, pages 26ff., entitled "An Early Publication on the Seminary," the writer called attention to the fact that there are 32 family names on our present role of ministers that were also on the roll about 100 years ago. Whether or not the bearers of these family names today are lineal descendants of the bearers of the same name of about 100 years ago is another question. In the case of one family, however, the writer is in possession of facts which prove that the bearers of this particular name on our present role of ministers are lineal descendants of one of the bearers of this name a century ago. The name in question is the family name Dechant. This family has an unbroken line of four generations of preachers in this country, beginning with their immigrant ancestor. The father of the immigrant ancestor was a minister in Germany. Hence this family has really an unbroken line of five generations of preachers. This is a fact worthy of special note, particularly at this time, when we are standing on the threshold of the celebration of the centennial of our Seminary and are reviewing a century of history. To call attention to this fact and to present sufficient historical or genealogical data to substantiate it is the main purpose of the present article.

The immigrant ancestor of this family was Jacob Wilhelm Dechant, born in Germany,* February 18, 1784; his given names appear in the reverse order in the list of 1824. On October 25, 1808, he was married; his bride was Maria Rebekka Andree, born in Bremen, Germany, her mother having been a born Harklotz. The wedding ceremony was performed by the Rev. Dr. Christian Ludwig Becker, minister of the German Reformed Church in Baltimore, Md. In the year of his marriage he was licensed as a preacher of the Gospel. His father was Johan Peter Dechant, not to be identified with the Peter Dechant on our ministerial role in 1824, for the two Dechants on our role at that time were so nearly of the same age that they could not have been father and son. His father was, however, also a minister.

His was married to Jacobina, a born Wallauer, a daughter of the Rev. Georg Friedrich Wallauer.

Jacob Wilhelm Dechant and his wife had the following children:

1. Christian L. B. Dechant, first-born son, born August 14, 1809, baptized September 7, 1809, by the Rev. Albert Helfenstein. Sponsors: John Romig and his wife Hanna.
2. Maria Rebekka Dechant, first-born daughter, born February 5, 1811, baptized by the Rev. Fr. W. Van der Sloot. Sponsors: Phillip Bahl and his wife Susanna.
3. Thomas Wm. Dechant, born January 6, 1813, baptized by the Rev. Dr. Andrees. Sponsors: Rev. Thomas Pomp "and his lady Catharina."
4. Freid. Wm. Dechant, born December 25, 1814, baptized by the Rev. Thomas Pomp. Sponsors: Fried. Wm. Vandersloot "and his lady Catharina."
5. John Peter Dechant, born in Ohio, September 23, 1816, baptized by his father. Sponsors: John Peter Dechant "and his lady Laura (?)."
6. Gregorius Wm. Dechant, born in Ohio, February 5, 1818, baptized by his father. Sponsors: Georg Fried. Dechant "and his lady Catharina."
7. Adelheit Dechant, born in Ohio, October 5, 1819, "when I was absent," so adds the father who made the record. She was baptized by the Rev. Dr. Geissenheiner. Sponsors: Rev. Henry Geissenheiner "and his lady."
8. Michael W. Dechant, born in Pennsylvania, August 11, 1821, baptized by his father. Sponsors: the father and mother of the child.
9. August Ludwig Dechant, born in Pennsylvania, January 26, 1823, baptized by the Rev. Fr. W. Vandersloot. Sponsors: August Ruelze (?) and Susanna Baere.
10. Carl Theodor Dechant, born in Pennsylvania, February 7, 1825, baptized by the Rev. Jacob Miller. Sponsors: Isaac Hunsperger "and his lady."
11. George Benson Dechant, born June 24, 1827, baptized by the Rev. Conrad Miller. Sponsor: Elizabeth van Buskirk.
12. Louis Henry Dechant, born April 22, 1831, baptized by his father, May 30, 1821. Sponsors: George Dewees "and his lady Emillie."

Of the foregoing children the following died in infancy: no. 3 at the age of 19

months, buried at Zionsville; no. 8 at the age of 6 months, buried at Limirick; no. 12 at the age of 11 years, 3 months, and 12 days. No. 7 died November 30, 1875, at the age of 56 years, 1 month and 25 days, and is buried at Pennsburg, Montgomery County, Pa. She was never married. The father of this family died October 6 (sic), 1832, in Lancaster County, about 30 miles from his home ("an der Hon. Forney's Wirthshaus, 9 meilen diesseits Lancaster"), and is buried in the grave yard at the Reformed Church in Oley, Berks County, Pa. Death overtook him while he was on his "Heimreise von der Synode in Friedrichstadt." His age was 48 years, 7 months, and 17 days.

Most of the foregoing data have been taken from the "Family Record" in the Family Bible ("The Holy Bible, etc., etc.," Phila., 1824). On the front page appears the statement: "Presented to J. W. Dechant by his father Rev. A. L. Dechant." The major portion of the record is in the handwriting of the father of Jacob Wilhelm Dechant. The Record is in somewhat rugged English. It is clear that the writer is considerably under the influence of the German language and that he is translating from the German into the English. Thus, for example, he writes that his mother was "native of Wallauer" by which he means to say that she was a born Wallauer, evidently translating inaccurately the German: eine geborene Wallauer.

The line from Jacob Wilhelm Dechant, the immigrant ancestor, to the Dechants on our present ministerial roll (1923) comes down through number 9 in the foregoing list, that is through August Ludwig Dechant, and is as follows, numbered according to generations: I. Rev. Jacob Wilhelm Dechant, 1784-1832; II. Rev. Augustus Ludwig Dechant, 1823-1901; III. (a) Rev. Abner Stauffer Dechant; (b) Lic. John Franklin Dechant; IV. Rev. Clement Weiser Dechant; (b) John Mayer Dechant, a member of the Junior Class in the Seminary. These two are the sons of III a.

While there are a number of family names on our ministerial roll today that also occurred on our ministerial roll about

100 years ago, nevertheless, so far as is known at present to the writer, the Dechant family is the only one in that early list that in each successive generation since has furnished a son or sons for the ministry of the Church. This is a fact for of special note at any time. However, at this time it is a historic fact that leaps into particular prominence, because we are standing near the close of our first century as a Seminary and are reviewing the Seminary's first century of history. Moreover, it is a historic fact of which any family might well be proud.

The father of the immigrant ancestor was Joh. Peter Dechant, who matriculated in Heidelberg University, Germany, in 1764. He came to the university from Stadecken. He died in February, 1796, at the age of 49. From 1776-1796 he was minister in Appenheim (Rhein Hessen). His father-in-law was Georg Freidrich Wallauer, who matriculated in Heidelberg University, Germany, in 1727. From 1739-1776 he was minister in Appenheim. In 1776 he resigned in favor of his son-in-law. He died later in Doermoschel. Cf. *Familiengeschichtliche Blaetter*, Leipzig, April, 1921, col. 123.

According to the church records of Stadecken, Germany, Johann Peter Dechant was confirmed at Easter in 1762, at the age of 14. According to the records of Appenheim he died in February, 1796, at the age of 49. He must therefore have been born in 1747 or 1748. In the Appenheim records there is an entry made in the year 1748 which reads as follows, translated into English: Johann Peter, born February 19th, and baptized on the 25th of the same month. The name of the parents are given as "Johann Phillip Dechen, Kirchenaeltester, und Gemeine Vorstehler allhie und Anna Maria uxor." The marriage of Johann Peter Dechant's parents is recorded as follows: "1731 den 10ten April wurde copulirt Joh. Phillips Dechen, seines Handwercks ein Schneider, ledigen Standes von Undenheim, mit Anna Maria, Hr. Daniel Laubensteins, Gerichtschoeffen allhie ehel. Tochter." From this it appears that the father of Johann Peter Dechant was a tailor, and that the ministerial line of the present Dechants on our ministerial roll begins with Johann Peter Dechant of Stadecken, Germany, who is the father of the

immigrant ancestor Jacob Wilhelm Dechant.

Here a correction should be made. Harbaugh, 1. c., page 175, states that the paternal grandfather of Jacob Wilhelm Dechant was a minister of the Gospel. According to this entry in the Appenheim records his paternal grandfather was a tailor, at any rate at the time of his marriage in 1731. So also later. At the time of the birth of his first-born child, Johann Nikolaus, in 1732, he is spoken of as "Meister Phillip Dechen, Schneider"; in 1735 he is spoken of as "Unterthan und Schneider"; in 1746 as "Presbyter"; in 1747 and 1753 as "Kirchenaeltester und Gemeindevorsteher"; in 1770 as "Gemeine Vorsteher"; in 1787 as "Kirchenaeltester."

He was therefore not a minister. It should also be noted that in 1767 he writes his family name not Dechen but Dechent. The father of this Phillip Dechen was Johann Phillip Dechen, Undenheim, Germany, who in 1704 married Anna Elisabeth Alter. His grandfather was Johannes Dechen, "Schultheiss," born before 1645, died 1724. His wife was Anna Margaretha, born 1648, died 1696. The data of these church records the writer has taken from excerpts furnished by Professor Dr. Wilhelm Diehl, Ev. Predigerseminar, Friedberg, Hessen, Germany. Further facts from these records could be presented, but these do not contribute anything directly to the main purpose of this article.

In the case of the generations immediately preceeding that of the first minister in the line, the family name appears in the records as Dechen, once noted above as Dechent. The name goes back through the Middle High German and Old High German to the Latin Decanus. Originally it was a title, meaning "a leader of ten," as, for example, a leader of ten monks. Cf. Heintze-Cascorbi, *Die deutschen Familiennamen, geschichtlich, geographisch, sprachlich*. 4th ed. Halle, 1914, Page 134. It has assumed various forms, as Dechant, Dechent, Dechend (for the latter: *Literary Digest*, September 25, 1920, page 13, where mention is made of Harry Dechend, editor of the *Labor Record*, Youngstown, Ohio). The letter "t" or the "d" at the end is simply an excrescent letter which in no wise affects the meaning; such excrescent

letters are frequently added at the end of words in the history and growth of a language. The addition of such letters that are not a part of the original form of the word is technically known as epithesis. Cf. Willmans, *Deutsche Grammatik, Gotisch, Alt-Mittel und Neuhochdeutsch*, 1911, part 1, page 210f.

In Catholic circles, in Germany, Dechant is still used as a title. Cf. the title of Schaffner's recent novel, "Der Dechant von Gottesbueren," 1917. Protestants use the form Dekan. The English equivalent is Dean, from the French Doyen.

*His name appears in the list of passengers arriving at Philadelphia, September 5, 1805; it is stated that he was 22 years old at that time and that he was born in Weilburg, Nassau, Germany. See Pennsylvania Archives, Second Series, Volume XVII, page 640.--According to Harbaugh, "The Fathers of the Reformed Church," vol. III., page 175, he was born "at Kreutznach, in the Palatinate." Cf. also *Familiengeschichtliche Blaetter*, Leipzig, February, 1921, col. 56.