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**The Giffen Mansion:
Home of the
Mennonite Brethren
Biblical Seminary**



The Giffen home as it looked in 1919. The exterior of the building was changed considerably between the time of this photo and 1955 when the seminary acquired it. (From the Laval Collection, Graphic Technology Co., Fresno, CA).

First time visitors to the campus of Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary in Fresno are struck by the stately Elizabethan home surrounded by towering trees that serves as the school's administration building. The building's ornate design stands out among the more contemporary, less elaborate structures on the seminary and adjoining college campus, suggesting that its origins might lie elsewhere than with the unassuming Mennonite educators, church leaders and businessmen who founded the school in 1955.

Those origins indeed are found elsewhere, with a man named Wylie M. Giffen, one of Fresno County's most prominent agricultural leaders in the early decades of this century. Built as a residence for the Giffin family, the mansion would eventually pass through several hands before becoming the seminary's home in 1956. Though Giffen himself lived in the house less than ten years, it is his story that lies behind the seminary administration building of today.

Wylie M. Giffin, the son of a Presbyterian minister, was born in Greensburg, Pennsylvania, in 1872. He lived in Nebraska as a boy and came to Fresno County in 1888 when his father became the pastor of the First Presbyterian

Church in Fowler. Shortly after their arrival in the area, both the elder and junior Giffen invested in vineyard property. Wylie Giffen soon rose to prominence in the local grape and raisin industry. His land holdings grew to immense proportions during the following years and he eventually owned vineyards in seven different California counties. Giffen was one of the founders in 1912 of the California Associated Raisin Company (CARC), today known as Sun-Maid Raisins, and served as its president from 1913 to 1923.

In about 1916 Giffen began planning for a large country home, suitable to a man of his stature, at Butler and Chestnut avenues in Fresno. Giffen hired the architect Henry F. Starbuck to draw the plans and supervise the construction. Starbuck, who lived and worked in Fresno from 1910 to 1926, had already established himself as an important architect in San Diego, Los Angeles, Long Beach and Oakland. His designs for church buildings were particularly noteworthy. Among Starbuck's more significant Fresno church designs were the 1912 First Congregational Church at San Pablo and Divisadero (today the King

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The Giffen Mansion

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Solomon Lodge), the 1914 German Free Evangelical Lutheran Congregational Church, or the "Cross Church," at Los Angeles & E streets (today the Fresno Temple Church of God in Christ), and the 1917 Bethel Lutheran Church at Broadway and Nevada.¹ Given Starbuck's renown as a designer of church buildings, it is fitting that the Giffen mansion would one day become the home of a church institution as well.

The home Starbuck designed and built for Giffen during 1916 and 1917 was an impressive two-story structure in the Elizabethan country style. The exterior featured half-timbered stucco on the upper floor and brick exterior walls on the ground floor. Inside, an impressive reception hall with dark wood detailing throughout greeted visitors to the home. Off the hall were a conservatory, living room, dining room and library. An oval staircase connected the main floor to the basement and the second floor, opening above onto a spacious hallway that featured a leaded stained glass skylight. The skylight is reminiscent of the beautiful glasswork in Starbuck's Bethel Lutheran and Cross Church designs. Surrounding the upper hall were the bedrooms and guest chamber. A separate section of the second floor housed the servants' quarters. In the basement was a billiard room and social hall, fuel and storage rooms and a fire proof vault.²

The financial success that allowed Giffen to build his mansion continued for several more years. He added significantly to his already large land holdings during this period, including the reputedly largest muscat and raisin grape vineyards in the world: the 1,320 acre Lucerne Vineyard and the 1,100 acre American Vineyard. Raisin grape growers received record prices for their crop in 1920 and CARC announced a record sales year in 1921. Giffen's already considerable wealth grew even larger. He became president of Fresno's Fidelity Trust and Savings Bank in 1920 and, in 1922, Giffen organized what was reportedly the world's largest family agricultural corporation, the Lucerne Vineyard Company. It boasted a capital stock of \$5 million and encompassed over 15,000 acres in the counties of Glenn, Merced, Madera, Fresno, Tulare and Kern.³ Giffen was the company's first and only president.

Within a few years, however, Giffen's fortunes took a turn for the worse. In 1922 the raisin industry experienced a severe slump. The market was glutted and prices plunged. Giffen's financial stature took a corresponding downturn. He divested himself of considerable acreage, including the Lucerne and American vineyards,⁴ and stepped down (or lost) the presidency of CARC and the Fidelity Bank.

In the summer of 1922 the Lucerne Vineyard Company announced a \$2.3 million bond issue on roughly 9000 acres stretching from Glenn County to Kern County, including the 335 acre parcel on which the Butler Avenue mansion stood. The company defaulted on the bond, however, and the property was auctioned in 1926 to meet the payments. The Bondholder's Protective Committee purchased the property for \$1.2 million and turned it over to the Valley Agricultural Company, a holding company created specifically for that purpose.⁵ One writer of the time noted



Wylie M. Giffen, during his years as President of the California Associated Raisin Company. (From the Fresno Historical Society Archives).

that "from shirt-sleeves to millionaire and bank president, and back to shirt-sleeves usually requires three generations. It is said Mr. Giffen made the course in fourteen years."⁶ Amidst all the other losses, Giffen gave up the impressive home he had built less than a decade earlier.

Despite these setbacks, Wylie Giffen by no means faded from the Fresno County agricultural picture. He was one of the first farmers to discover that cotton grew more successfully than vines in the boron-laden water of the valley's west side,⁷ and eventually farmed as many as 12,000 acres of cotton and wheat there during the late 1920s and early 1930s. Neither did Giffen completely leave the raisin industry. He became chairman of the "Committee of Fifty," a statewide committee spearheading a campaign to sign up California vineyard growers under the Federal Farm Board grape control plan. In 1930 a crowd estimated at 5000 gathered in Fresno's Roeding Park to celebrate Giffen's role in the successful campaign and honor him for his work on behalf of the grape industry.⁸ Immediately on the heels of this celebration, Giffen was elected President of the California Raisin Pool, a post he held from 1930 to 1934.

In the summer of 1936 Giffen fell ill with a severe cold. Complications set in and he died in a local sanitarium on August 21, 1936 at the age of 64. He was buried in Fresno's Belmont Memorial Park.⁹

Meanwhile, after being lost by the family corporation, the Giffen home passed through several hands during the following decades. In 1927 Lora A. Pratt purchased it from the Valley Agricultural Company for roughly \$25,000. *The Fresno Bee* at the time claimed "the property is one of the finest close-in farm properties in this section, and is considered in real estate circles as one of the most desirable properties of its kind available. . . ."¹⁰ Mrs. Pratt held the property only about one year, after which she sold it to Ralph S. Heaton in April of 1928.¹¹ Heaton, the Vice President and San Joaquin Valley district manager of the Bank of America at the time, lived in the home until 1939, when he sold it to Joseph C. and Maxine Jones.¹² The Jones family owned the house for some 14 years, longer

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than any previous owner, then sold it to Rogers V.B. and Patricia Clark in 1953. The Joneses kept back a portion of the property at the time, on which they built the house that today is Fresno Pacific College's West Hall.¹³ They also still held the property immediately to the south and east of the Giffen house, which they sold to Pacific Bible Institute in March of 1955.

The school intended the "Jones Property" to serve as the new campus for both Pacific Bible Institute and the soon-to-be-established Mennonite Brethren Seminary. A site plan drawn in May of 1955 showed a proposed seminary building located immediately east of the Giffen house, straddling what is now Townsend Street. Shortly after the completion of this plan, however, the school's board learned of the availability of the "Clark Property," which contained the grand old mansion. In November of 1955, only two months after the new seminary opened its doors on the PBI downtown campus, the Clarks sold their property to the school.¹⁴ The seminary dedicated its new building on September 23, 1956.

Shortly after the purchase, seminary president B.J. Braun and his family moved into the mansion. This arrangement continued for some time after the seminary began using the building in the fall of 1956. According to one former faculty member, "this worked out very well except that, around noon, the aroma of Mrs. Braun's cooking...communicated more readily...than did the erudite words of the instructor."¹⁵

In the early years, the mansion served all the functions of the seminary: classrooms, offices, chapel and library all shared space under one roof. With the construction of a library (1962), prayer chapel (1966), conference office/chapel building (1970) and classroom/lounge wing (1982), the mansion has served fewer purposes. Still, it remains the focal point of the campus and provides an elegance uncommon to Mennonite educational institutions.

The Giffen mansion has always been more than bricks, timber and stucco. It was from its inception and remains today a monument. Wylie Giffen built it as a monument to his worldly success, a success that proved fleeting. Today the building still stands as a monument to a more enduring and important concern -- the development of church leaders.

—Kevin Enns-Rempel

1. Information on Henry Starbuck provided by John Edward Powell, Fresno, California.
2. "Giffen Building Pretty New Home", *Fresno Morning Republican*, March 24, 1917, p. 12.
3. "Ranch Property of 15 Thousand Acres Involved". *Fresno Morning Republican*, January 18, 1922.
4. "\$1,000 an Acre Price Giffen Gets for Land". *Fresno Morning Republican*, April 25, 1922; "Ten Years Ago", *Fresno Morning Republican*, April 10, 1928; "Largest Raisin Vineyard Sold by W.M. Giffen". *Fresno Morning Republican*, November 22, 1922.
5. "Giffen Is Sole Loser As Lands Go Up for Sale", *Fresno Bee*, February 13, 1926; "Giffen Property Brings \$1,193,500". *Fresno Bee*, March 10, 1926; Fresno County Hall of Records, Official Record Book 666, p. 167.
6. Louis C. Levy, *History of the Co-operative Raisin Industry of California*. (Fresno: author, 1928) p. 30.
7. Richard D. Hall, "Agriculture and Water", in *Fresno County in the 20th Century: From 1900 to the 1980s*, Bobbye Sisk Temple, ed. (Fresno: Panorama West Books, 1986), p. 177.
8. "Thousands Honor Giffen In Grape Plan Celebration", *Fresno Bee*,

July 27, 1930.

9. "Wylie M. Giffen, Raisin Industry Pioneer, Is Dead". *Fresno Bee*, August 21, 1936.
10. Fresno County Hall of Records, Official Record Book 765, p. 351; "Giffen Country Home Sold for Sum of \$25,000". *Fresno Bee*, March 1, 1927.
11. Fresno County Hall of Records, Official Record Book 894, p. 466.
12. Ibid, Official Record Book 1763, p. 31; "Giffen Homesite Is Purchased by Joseph C. Jones". *Fresno Bee*, September 25, 1939.
13. Fresno County Hall of Records... Official Record Book 3290, p. 132.
14. Ibid, Official Record Book 3696, p. 272.
15. Arthur G. Willems, "Personal Reflections", in *The Seminary Story: Twenty Years of Education in Ministry, 1955-1975*, ed. by A.J. Klassen. Fresno: Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, 1975, p. 92.

Dynasties: The Families of the Elders

(cont. from p. 5)

10. **Helena F.**, born February 11, 1888. She married Jacob H. Penner, a farmer in Colony, Oklahoma.

11. **Eva F.**, born April 1, 1889. She married Cornelius P. Harms, a farmer and school teacher in Reedley, California.

12. **Anna F.**, born January 28, 1891. She was a Practical Nurse who lived in Kansas, California and Colorado.

13. **Jacob F.**, born September 11, 1892. He married Bertie Alva Wilbur in 1924 and lived in San Diego, CA .

14. **Agnes F.**, born March 5, 1894. She was a seamstress who lived most of her life in Los Angeles, California.

15. **George F.**, born August 28, 1895. He married Matilda Dyck in 1918. Two of his daughters are missionaries: Dora Wirsche and Renetta Krause.

16. **Heinrich** died shortly after his birth in December 1896.

17. **John F.**, born October 24, 1897. He married Claudia Helen Rudd in 1937. He was a farmer and stockman in Dalhart, Texas.

18. **Isaac F.**, born September 5, 1899. He married Tena Franz in 1926 and was a farmer in Vinland, Kansas.

19. **Daniel F.**, born April 29, 1901. He married Viola Grace Hiebert, a daughter of Rev. P.C. and Katherine (Nikkel) Hiebert, and was a Baptist minister.

20. **Martha F.**, born March 13, 1903. She was a teacher and newspaper worker in Los Angeles, California.

21. **Rubena F.**, born August 21, 1905. She was a domestic worker in Los Angeles, California.

Elder Schellenberg was best known for his leadership of the Ebenezer MB Church in Buhler, Kansas, but he also organized the Bethania MB Church in Escondido, California. He baptized more than 800 believers and ordained eight elders and nearly twenty ministers and deacons. At his death on April 11, 1920, he left behind a large number of friends and followers in the church in addition to his large and productive family.

—Alan Peters