Again Jane Guthrie Rhodes writes up the private life of an outstanding campus personality—

Christian W. Dieckmann:

40 Years of Music at Agnes Scott

Jane Guthrie Rhodes '38

In 1905, Decatur, Georgia was a thriving town of around 2,000. It boasted four churches, several livery stables, electric street lamps operated at night by the water-driven dynamos out at Colonel Houston's mill, and a school of higher learning for young women known as the Agnes Scott Institute.

In 1905 six students at this institution began the final year of work on their A.B. degrees, little realizing that they would go down in history as the first graduating class of Agnes Scott College.

In 1905 Miss Hopkins, beloved dean of Agnes Scott from 1889 to 1938, still enjoyed frequent excursions through the country in Miss Nellie Candler's carriage.

In 1905 . . . a memorable year . . . the music department of the Agnes Scott Institute had just acquired a new piano teacher. We can almost hear Dr. Gaines, our first president and a staunch Scotch-Irish Presbyterian, as he got up to make the announcement to the assembled faculty.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he must have said, "we have been most fortunate in securing as piano teacher for our music department Mr. Christian W. Dieckmann from Cincinnati, Ohio. He is a young man in his early twenties, and Mr. Maclean, the head of our music department, pronounces him a very talented musician. Mr. Dieckmann comes with excellent references and I am sure we will extend him our most cordial welcome."

"But, Dr. Gaines," perhaps some member of the faculty protested, "do you think it advisable to bring such a young man into a college for young ladies? What of his character and habits?"

"Sir," Dr. Gaines must have replied in the brusque manner for which he was famous, "the young man is a minister's son. And as such, neither his habits nor his character can be questioned."

And so, early in September of 1905, the new piano teacher arrived. He was all that Dr. Gaines had prophesied—and more. He was talented—playing with that rare combination of sensitivity and skill. He was patient as the young ladies studying under him could testify. He was anxious to become a part of the campus and readily accepted any odd job asked of him. He acted in faculty plays, accompanied student recitals, played the organ for various churches throughout Atlanta, eventually becoming choir director and

organist for Atlanta's Lutheran Church of the Redeemer, which position he holds today. And he offered his services with such humility and good humor that he soon became a favorite among the faculty group who nicknamed him, affectionately, "The Parson."

But the most important characteristic of this young man from Ohio was his passion for orderly thinking, his love for truth. Many a campus member, misled by the new piano teacher's modest demeanor, must have been jarred by his revolutionary ideas. We can imagine one of them, perhaps, a feminine member, saying: "Mr. Dieckmann, you are of German descent, I understand. I have always admired the music of the great German composers, Beethoven, Wagner, Mozart, Haydn, and Bach . . . surely no other race has contributed as much to the field of music." To which Mr. Dieckmann must have replied gently but firmly, "Madam, it is true that I am of German descent. My father was born in Hanover and brought to this country at the age of four. As to music, however, you greatly overrate the German race. They are a clever people and have claimed many composers not their own. Beethoven was Dutch; Mozart, Austrian; Haydn, Croatian; and Bach, a native of Thuringia. The only true German among the men you have named was Wagner. And I do not admire his music. [Here a slight pause while the feminine member composes herself.] Wagner's music, in my opinion, is intellectual, selfish, cold. It preaches the German race above all and is completely lacking in human kindness. Wagner in private life was a Jew-baiter [today Mr. Dieckmann would have said: 'He is one of the men who made Hitler possible.'] I cannot admire a man's music if I do not admire his morals. A composer writes what he is. His private life cannot be separated from his music."

This was in 1905. And as the years passed, "The Parson" continued to surprise his friends and colleagues. He became dissatisfied with the music for May Day one Spring, and sat down to write his own score. His choir needed a special anthem and he produced two which were later published and adopted by fifteen other church choirs. He has eighteen compositions in print today. Again, he had the melodic inspiration for a hymn and wrote the music for the soul-stirring "God of the Marching Centuries" with which Presser Hall, Agnes Scott's new music building, was dedicated in 1940.

The young man from Ohio had ideas about teaching, too. He increased the credit hours of the theoretical courses, Harmony and Counterpoint, thereby raising the standard of the whole music department. In 1916 and 1918 he took and successfully passed the Fellowship and Associate examinations of the American Guild of Organists which accounts for the coveted initials, F.A.G.O. following his name. Ten years ago he organized Agnes Scott's first string ensemble which is open to faculty and students alike regardless of musical experience—a group that illustrates Mr. Dieckmann's favorite theory: "Music, to have its greatest influence, must be spread among the greatest number of people. It is much better to give many students a fairly good musical background than it is to train a few concert artists."

In 1915 he surprised the campus again by carrying off as his bride, the vivacious, dark-eyed Freshman English teacher, Emma Pope Moss. And three years later he became the head of the music department.

Today, in his fortieth year at Agnes Scott, Mr. Dieckmann is still the modest, unassuming

young man from Ohio. He is undisputed master of stately Presser Hall with its labyrinth of class rooms and practice rooms, its vaulted chapel, auditorium and pipe organ. But he walks as humbly as he did in the days when he taught the young ladies of the Institute on fourth floor Main. The magnificent graying head which he inherited from his German ancestors, he carries downward to one side, as if, someone has said, he were listening to music within him. His eyes when he looks at you are steady, inquiring, youthfully alive. And he still has ideas!

"Boogie-woogie, jitterbugging, bah!" he says, "the same notes over and over in monotonous rhythm. I think today's popular music in very bad taste, and I agree with Rodzinski that it has had a demoralizing effect. Music is a moral force. Good music can inspire and unite the world. Bad music can demoralize it. As to the classical music that is being written today—only time will tell its true value. I think we should listen to it whether we understand it or not, because following its very complicated form is good mental exercise. Our modern composers deserve at least the chance of being heard."

"Yes," he says in answer to a question, "expose your children to music while they are young—and make them practice. My mother taught all six of us to play the piano, and my father demanded that we know one other instrument as well. Nothing, I think, binds a family closer than making music together."

"No," he says in answer to another question, "I have no favorites among the great composers. Each one excels in his own field. I admire Beethoven for his great humanity, Mozart for his pure melodic inspiration, Bach for his counterpoint, Debussy and Ravel for their subtle orchestral coloring. As for our great conductors, Koussevitzki and Rodzinski are my favorites because there is nothing of the showman in their conducting. They are both excellent drill masters."

He repeats a final question: "Do I think Adele (Mr. Dieckmann's sixteen-year-old daughter) will choose a musical career? I'm afraid not. At present she is much more interested in aviation."

In the evenings after a hard day's work (he averages eleven classes and fifty-eight piano lessons a week) Mr. Dieckmann relaxes with his pipe and a novel, or tinkers with one of his radio sets. "He is just like any other family man," Mrs. Dieckmann says of her husband. "He loves apple pie, pork sausage and the comforts of home. He detests shopping (I buy all of his clothes for him—even his shoes) and he fills up his desk with everything imaginable—bits of paper, wire, tools and pebbles for his slingshot which he uses to keep the squirrels out of our peach trees in June. I might also add that he has a very easy-to-live-with disposition."

A close friend makes this comment: "Dieckmann, in my opinion, is the most balanced personality on the campus. He is generous in his thinking, sympathetic toward the problems of others, and he possesses a keenly analytical mind. I feel that if I had Dieckmann's characteristics, I would be a better man." And we end the vain attempt to put upon paper the substance of a great man with this tribute from Ruth Simpson '46, one of his pupils: "When I play badly for him there is no reproach except that of my own conscience. In a world at war, it is a privilege to know a man like Mr. Dieckmann who is at peace with himself, who lives in harmony and serenity and communicates this serenity, unconsciously, to those around him."