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Riley's Empire: Northwestern Bible School and Midwestern  
Fundamentalism in the Upper Midwest

William Vance Trollinger, Jr.

In the 1920s a loosely-united band of militant conservatives launched a crusade to capture control of the major Protestant denominations. These fundamentalists staunchly affirmed the supernaturalness and literal accuracy of the Bible, the supernatural character of Christ, and the necessity of Christians to separate themselves from the world. Most often Baptists and Presbyterians, they struggled to re-establish their denominations as true and pure churches: true to the historic doctrines of the faith as they perceived them, and pure from what they saw as the polluting influences of an increasingly corrupt modern culture. But by the late 1920s the fundamentalists had lost the fight. Not only were they powerless minorities in the Northern Baptist and the Northern Presbyterian denominations, where the struggle for control had been the fiercest, but many perceived them as uneducated, intolerant rustics. The Scopes trial cemented this notion in the popular consciousness.

According to conventional historical wisdom the collapse of the national crusade in the 1920s signalled the death of religious fundamentalism in America.<sup>1</sup> But in the past few years historians have examined more closely the place of fundamentalism in post-Scopes America. They have concluded that fundamentalists responded to their national defeats not by surrendering, but by focusing their considerable energies at the local level. Some formed independent Bible churches; others maintained fundamentalist churches that were still nominally affiliated with a mainstream denomination; still others eventually organized loosely-structured denominations such as the General Association of Regular Baptists. The point is that in all three forms grass-roots fundamentalism prospered in the 1930s and 1940s. Such prosperity came at a time when the major denominations were losing members and monies. In fact, it appears that, as Joel Carpenter has suggested, the growth of fundamentalism in the 1930s marked the

"beginning of a shift of the Protestant mainstream from the older denominations toward the evangelicals."<sup>2</sup>

These fundamentalist churches lacked the resources afforded them by a close relationship with an established denomination. Out of necessity they depended upon a rapidly expanding network of fundamentalist organizations that included publishing houses, mission boards, and radio stations. At the center of this support structure were the approximately seventy Bible schools that dotted the country in the interwar years. These schools served as denominational surrogates, providing nearby fundamentalist churches with ministers, teaching materials, Bible conferences, church secretaries, and a host of other services. Quite often this fundamentalist network was directed by the local pastor who presided over the Bible school. In effect, these pastors controlled regional fundamentalist empires.

It has become almost commonplace among historians of fundamentalism to assert the central role played by Bible institutes in the survival and growth of this religious movement.<sup>3</sup> But the thesis has not been tested, for there have been no case studies dealing with the work of Bible institutes at the grass-roots level. This article is a start toward filling this void.<sup>4</sup> The focus here is Northwestern Bible and Missionary Training School of Minneapolis, and its role in the upper Midwest in the second quarter of the twentieth century. For the most part this case study provides rich evidence confirming the standard interpretation of the role of Bible institutes in American fundamentalism. Northwestern did indeed serve as a denominational surrogate for a regional network of fundamentalist churches. Moreover, the school's president, William Bell Riley, had enormous influence within this network. In fact, Riley's empire corroborates C. Allyn Russell's observation that most fundamentalist leaders tended to be "distrustful of others and convinced of the correctness of their own

beliefs and causes," and hence "they built great religious 'empires' more about their own personalities than about a carefully arranged theology."<sup>5</sup> That this was so in the upper Midwest will be seen both in Riley's tight control of his empire, and in the empire's collapse after his death in 1947.

The focus of this article is on the structure and strength of Riley's empire. In the main it substantiates current interpretations of fundamentalism. But on one point the evidence here suggests the need for interpretive modification. In an effort to counter previous descriptions of fundamentalism as a strictly rural phenomenon, both Ernest Sandeen and George Marsden strongly emphasized the urban origins of the fundamentalist movement. As Sandeen asserted, before the late 1920s fundamentalism had much of its strength "in the cities and in the churches supported by the urban middle classes."<sup>6</sup> In one sense Riley's empire supports this thesis, in that Northwestern Bible School and its pastor-founder were based in Minneapolis. But as will be seen, from its very inception the Northwestern empire was strongly rural in character. The vast majority of the students were from the country, and after graduation most served in country or small-town churches in the upper Midwest. Riley's empire is a powerful reminder that from the very beginning American fundamentalism had both an urban and a rural constituency.

The Minneapolis minister who founded and presided over Northwestern Bible and Missionary Training School was not a typical local pastor. Instead, William Bell Riley was perhaps the most important fundamentalist of his day. The energetic Riley was the founder and leading representative of the World's Christian Fundamentals Association, the first organization that attempted to unite conservative Christians of all denominations in an international association. A tireless polemicist, he was perhaps the most effective

debater among American anti-evolutionists. At the denominational level, he was a recognized leader of the Baptist Bible Union, the militantly fundamentalist faction within the Northern Baptist Convention. He also wrote innumerable articles, pamphlets, and books for the fundamentalist cause, and edited two fundamentalist magazines. Finally, he served for a half-century as the pastor of one of the largest Baptist churches in the region.<sup>7</sup> For all of these labors, however, Riley's most abiding success came in his work as president of Northwestern Bible School, for it was in this role that he ruled over a thriving fundamentalist empire in the upper Midwest.

Riley came to the Twin Cities in 1893. In short order he transformed staid First Baptist Church into a veritable "city temple" with a membership that reached 3550 in the 1940s.<sup>8</sup> As part of the church program, but not strictly under First Baptist's auspices, Riley in 1902 founded the interdenominational Northwestern Bible and Missionary Training School. At first the school consisted of seven students meeting in a First Baptist classroom. But by 1923 over 100 students enrolled in Northwestern and attended class in a building adjoining the church. Bible School enrollment continued to rise, reaching 388 in 1935. In that year Riley founded a second school, Northwestern Evangelical Theological Seminary. Northwestern College of Liberal Arts was added in 1946. That autumn 700 students attended the combined Northwestern Schools, and this does not include the 1,000 individuals who attended evening classes.<sup>9</sup>

Riley wanted Northwestern to prepare laity for Christian service as religious teachers and missionaries. But while Dwight Moody and other Bible school founders of the time concentrated on lay training, Riley's primary objective was to train militantly orthodox, evangelistically aggressive pastors. He reminisced in 1933 that "at the time when [I] established this school there were ninety-three Baptist churches in the

state of Minnesota alone, and one hundred and fifty-two in the state of Iowa, without a pastor."<sup>10</sup> Churches of other denominations suffered similar problems. Most of these were small rural churches that found it difficult to attract ministers because of their isolation and lack of financial resources. Riley claimed that those ministers who did come to Minnesota were the "leftovers" from Eastern seminaries who moved on when a more profitable pulpit could be secured. After two or three such departures the church members would often abandon the enterprise. Unhappy with this state of affairs, Riley decided to create "a school that would prepare western men to take these western churches." In contrast with the established seminaries, Riley's school would infuse students with a willingness "to start with a bare living and trust God for increase, both in church membership and remuneration."<sup>11</sup>

Filling rural pulpits did not remain the only goal of Northwestern's pastoral program. As Riley recalled in 1933, the school had "scarcely begun" when another purpose "had to have consideration." The spread of theological liberalism in the seminaries in the first decades of the twentieth century "rendered hundreds of [prospective ministers] unfit for the pastorate."<sup>12</sup> In Riley's eyes, Northwestern and the other Bible Schools now had to serve as God's defense against these defectors from the faith. By the late 1910s Riley had broadened his school's purpose in an effort to provide both rural and urban churches with an alternative to modernist pastors.<sup>13</sup>

It is true that after the founding of Northwestern rural churches still closed and theological liberalism still existed in the upper Midwest. Nevertheless, by any reasonable standard Riley's efforts must be considered a remarkable success. In 1930 at least 94 Northwestern-trained ministers served in the Dakotas, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Wisconsin. This total rose to 107 in 1935, and 172 in

1940. Primarily because Baptists were extremely lenient in the educational qualifications they demanded from ministerial candidates, most of these pastors served in Baptist churches. A study sponsored by the Northern Baptist Convention in the 1940s concluded that 40% of all NBC pastors in the upper Midwest were Bible school graduates. It seems likely that the majority of these were Northwestern alumni.

Riley's empire was primarily Baptist. It was also an empire in motion. The length of a Northwestern-trained minister's stay at a church averaged 3.76 years.<sup>15</sup> It seems that many of these alumni were afflicted with a yen for upward mobility. One graduate ruefully observed in a 1986 interview that natural desires for financial security and increased status moved many of them along from church to church.<sup>16</sup> While his motives are unknown, the career of Paul Williams provides a good example of a mobile pastor. Pastor in St. Francis, Minnesota while a student, he served at Baptist churches in the tiny Iowa hamlets of Lorimor from 1931 to 1935 and Corwith from 1936 to 1938. From Corwith he moved to the markedly larger town of Humboldt, where he pastored from 1939 to 1942. From Iowa he went to Central City, Nebraska for a brief stay; then, in 1945, he accepted "a unanimous call from the McKinley Park Baptist Church in Omaha, Nebraska."<sup>17</sup>

Like Williams, as the years went by an increasing number of Northwesterners landed urban pulpits. But in keeping with Riley's original purpose in founding Northwestern, his empire remained strongest in the small towns and farming communities of the upper Midwest.<sup>18</sup> Because many of these churches were not able to pay ministers more than a minimal salary, many Northwesterners served three, four, or even five churches at once. Others worked second jobs during the week. One alumnus cheerfully noted that such employment provided special opportunities for evangelism. While he "preached to them on Sundays," the remainder of the week he "worked with them in the



shop [and] painted stores and homes alongside of them," during which time it was his "privilege to witness before them." This graduate concluded by noting that "Northwestern men do not work for salaries. They preach because they can do naught else."<sup>19</sup>

This commitment to bring the gospel to the rural reaches of the upper Midwest went beyond filling empty pulpits to the opening of churches that had been shut down. After a tour of Minnesota churches pastored by Bible School graduates alumnus Henry Van Kommer claimed that almost all the ministers he visited "spoke of the possibility of opening another closed church somewhere in the vicinity." In his Pilot column entitled "Dr. Riley and His Boys," the Bible School president proudly recounted the work of one alumnus in this regard:

Now for a rehearsal of Allan Williams' undertakings: At **Hardwick**, Minn., he found a closed church, vacated by the Presbyterians. The Nordeens [Northwestern alumni] now live there and hold Sunday school, morning preaching services, and midweek prayer meetings. At **Springwater** there was a closed M.E. Church. That Williams has opened, and Sunday school and morning preaching services are held. At **Adrian**, once a Baptist church, but later Unitarian -- now thirteen families with a Baptist preference are found, and a Baptist work is hoped for.<sup>20</sup>

This drive to open country churches was at odds with the policy of the major denominations, which had responded to the population shift to urban areas with a call for consolidation of the rural churches. The ultimate goal was the establishment of federated, or interdenominational, churches; these churches would neutralize potential conflict within their diverse congregations by de-emphasizing doctrine, focusing instead on social service.<sup>21</sup> This policy of consolidating weaker rural churches made bureaucratic sense. But it did not display a sensitivity to rural people. Consolidation forced many rural church-goers to travel much further to attend services. More important, shutting down the smaller churches stripped from residents an important institution in maintaining local community.

Finally, as a 1916 survey revealed, many rural people did not want federated churches that watered down doctrine for the sake of unity.<sup>22</sup> All of this to say that by seeking to reopen country churches, and by promoting a militantly orthodox faith, Riley's fundamentalists were in touch with the needs and desires of the grass-roots populace. Such sensitivity was unquestionably a key factor in the expansion of Northwestern influence in the upper Midwest.

Another reason for this growing web of influence was the aggressive manner in which Northwestern-trained ministers promoted their fundamentalist faith. They were not content simply to present a militantly orthodox sermon on Sunday morning. In keeping with their fundamentalist colleagues across the nation,<sup>23</sup> Northwestern-trained ministers instituted extensive programs in their churches. For example, Henry Van Kommer reported that "from my observation . . . it seems apparent that where a church [in Minnesota] is open on Sunday night it is because there is a Northwestern graduate as pastor in that place." But for many alumni the burning desire to advance the fundamentalist cause went beyond holding frequent services. They also conducted weekly preaching services at various points in the region, sometimes many miles into the countryside. A few Northwestern alumni established full-blown evangelism agencies. For example, in the early 1930s Wisconsin minister and Northwestern graduate Lawrence Oman launched Wisconsin Rural Missions. In the words of one of its workers, this project sought "to reach the unreached, those who hunger for - they know not what" before they "drift into Catholicism, Pentecostalism, Russellism, indifference, or atheism."<sup>24</sup> By 1940 Oman's agency employed eight full-time preachers who evangelized and established churches throughout northern Wisconsin. In the summer Wisconsin Rural Missions directed a massive Daily Vacation Bible School effort. Dozens of teachers toured the region, "camp[ing] out in tents,

vacant rooms, old houses, schoolhouses [and] churches."<sup>25</sup>

Most of the ministers and Vacation Bible School volunteers who worked for Wisconsin Rural Missions were Northwestern alumni or students. This was not unusual. Another reason for the strength of William Bell Riley's fundamentalist empire was that it was not simply a collection of committed individuals. Instead, it consisted of numerous cooperative ventures scattered throughout the upper Midwest. Northwesterners joined together in local alumni associations or ministerial organizations, not for the purpose of socializing, but in order to engage in specific evangelistic ventures. Sometimes they would conduct Bible conferences, at which time they would instruct local clergy and laity in soul-winning techniques and Biblical instruction. Northwestern alumni groups also established summer camps, such as Camp Jim in central Minnesota and Camp Chetek in northwestern Wisconsin. Here adults and youth were fed a steady diet of Gospel messages, a central purpose being to challenge them to upgrade their commitment to Christ. Northwesterners even united to hold meetings designed to encourage support for fundamentalist missions programs.<sup>26</sup>

In their militant orthodoxy and aggressive evangelism these Northwestern-trained ministers were putting into practice what they had learned at Riley's Bible School. But Northwestern's influence in the region involved more than this. Indoctrinated in the belief that the major denominations were infested with an anti-Christian modernism, Riley's ministers relied upon the Bible School to serve as the support structure for their efforts at promoting fundamentalism. In this role Northwestern advanced the fundamentalist cause; at the same time, Northwestern itself gained in influence, contributions, and enrollment. Northwestern administrators readily granted that they expected such benefits from their efforts. Extension Director J.W. Welsh observed that in providing assistance to Bible conferences and

evangelistic campaigns Northwestern had "these objectives: to save souls, [to] instruct laymen in the Word of God, to revive churches, to present the Northwestern Bible School as a possible place of training for Christian young people, and to afford churches and individuals an opportunity to contribute toward the needs of the school."<sup>27</sup>

One way the Minneapolis school supported its alumni ministers was by sending students out to work in their churches. As the Practical Work director observed in 1942, "those [Northwesterners] serving as pastors . . . came back to their Alma Mater for that assistance which would enable the carrying out of a more thorough soul-winning work than [if they had] used their own lay workers."<sup>28</sup> This assistance included Child Evangelism leaders, music groups, and, in the summer, Daily Vacation Bible School workers. Northwestern also sent out teams of speakers to aid ministers in their evangelistic work. In the early years these groups often consisted of Bible School professors who spent their summers touring fundamentalist churches in the Dakotas, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Wisconsin. As the school grew, however, it employed one or more full-time evangelists to perform this work. In the course of each revival campaign the evangelist would often give one lecture on the virtues of the Northwestern Bible School and Seminary, which concluded with the collection of an offering for Northwestern.<sup>29</sup>

Northwestern's most important work as a denominational surrogate involved the indoctrination and training of laypersons through the Northwestern Bible Conference, the evening school, and The Pilot. Regarding the Bible Conference, by the 1930s 30,000 people were attending these two-week meetings held each August at Medicine Lake, just outside Minneapolis. Many Northwestern-trained ministers in the upper Midwest brought large contingents from their churches, thus allowing the alumni a chance to renew old friendships while their congregations received further indoctrination in fundamentalism. While

some time was allowed for recreation, instruction and inspiration were the primary emphases. In 1933, for example, the daily program included: "Bible study; a discussion of Sunday-school methods and plans; a presentation of children's and young people's work; . . . a setting forth of the Fundamentals of the Christian Faith, and above all, popular evangelistic services."<sup>30</sup> By the late 1930's the Conference was offering courses in Christian Education designed to aid both professionals and laypersons in running Sunday Schools, child evangelism classes, and Vacation Bible Schools. So no one would forget who was sponsoring this conference, one to two hours an evening were often devoted to alumni testimonies. Graduates discussed topics such as "The Northwestern Bible School as it inspires Evangelism," "The Northwestern Bible School and its Spiritual Impact," and "The Northwestern Bible School and the Pastoral Office." In a 1984 interview alumnus David Farrington reminisced that these talks so moved Riley that he would often "forget he had an evening speaker lined up."<sup>31</sup>

Northwestern's evening school reached fewer people than the Bible Conference but provided more intensive training. While in the early years of its existence the school occasionally held classes at night, a formal evening school was not started until the late 1920s. By 1937 the demand became so great that the Bible School began to offer extension classes in Northwestern-pastored churches throughout the region, a practice which of course tightened the school's grip on these fundamentalist congregations. As an administrator noted in 1927, the purpose of these courses was to create an "indoctrinized" and "trained and efficient" laity.<sup>32</sup> Regarding indoctrination, the evening Bible courses were basically the same as in the day school. And while the training was necessarily quite different, because the focus at night was the lay worker, the underlying message was quite similar: just like ministers and missionaries, the truly up-to-date church worker needed

specialized training. In a sense, Northwestern was cultivating a demand for its services. There was a wide range of classes designed to assist Sunday school teachers, youth leaders, and other lay workers. These courses gave an aura of professionalization to church education, as seen in this description of a Sunday School methods class: "Having learned in Child Study the characteristics, interests, needs and capacities of each period of childhood and adolescence, the next thing is to select the most suitable methods for using the graded materials of learning to successfully build Christian lives." An Evangelical Teacher Training Association certificate was even awarded after a certain number of classes, which presumably certified recipients to instruct inexperienced teachers in their home churches.<sup>33</sup>

Perhaps Northwestern's most important quasi-denominational service was The Pilot. This monthly magazine began in 1920 as a small student periodical designed to allow students an opportunity to develop their writing skills. Gradually, faculty members began to contribute articles, and with this came an increase in both size and circulation of the magazine. In 1934 the wife of the school's president, Marie Acomb Riley, became the official managing editor of The Pilot, a move which signified that the magazine had evolved from a student periodical into the official organ of an expanding fundamentalist empire. By the late 1940s the magazine had 35,000 subscribers. The Pilot provided its ministers with sermon outlines, as well as lengthy articles which expounded upon Biblical passages and themes. Moreover, Pilot contributors gave the ministers detailed suggestions on administering their churches, including how to advertise, how to impose restrictions to keep moviegoers and smokers from being admitted to membership, and how to keep all the members busy in the Lord's work. Finally, the magazine provided laypersons with inspirational stories, detailed Sunday School lessons, and suggestions for youth and music workers.<sup>34</sup>

Northwestern itself was the focus of much attention in The Pilot. In every issue there were reports on Bible School happenings, advertisements encouraging prospective students to consider enrollment in the program, and pleas for contributions. Moreover, The Pilot kept remarkably close tabs on graduates who were involved in church-related vocations, frequently imploring them to "keep in touch with the home base."<sup>35</sup> Many did, and the alumni pages were filled with information as to their activities and movements. This publicity and support probably helped keep many Northwesterners at their isolated, low-paying posts.

In essence, The Pilot served as a detailed map of Northwestern's growing web of influence in the upper Midwest. This web consisted of an ever-increasing number of fundamentalist churches in the upper Midwest dependent upon Northwestern for ministers, evangelists, lay training, and written materials. Northwestern's hold on these churches was heightened because of the intense loyalty of its alumni, especially its ministers. Convinced that Northwestern's well-being was necessary for the advancement of fundamentalism in the region, they worked hard to convince their congregations to become active supporters of the school. These ministers encouraged members to contribute funds to Riley's school, to the extent that in some of their churches Northwestern was included in the annual budgets. More important, they did everything possible to ensure that many of the young people in their churches attended the "lighthouse of the Northwest." For example, in 1917 School and Church reported that many Midwestern pastors were "sending [to the school] the names of promising young men and women" so that administrators could join the ministers in "counselling [these individuals] to become students in this institution." Other ministers from Riley's school took groups from their churches to tour the school and meet with Northwestern representatives. By the 1940s some were even holding Northwestern Days in their churches, at which time they

would proclaim the school's virtues and encourage the youth to consider attending Northwestern. All this work seems to have paid off. In 1936, for instance, one-third of the students currently at Northwestern were there due to the influence of an alumnus, and it is safe to assume that often this meant the hometown pastor.<sup>36</sup>

As much to the school itself, the ministers were loyal to William Bell Riley. But they were tied to Riley by more than loyalty, for this truly was an empire with an emperor. Riley exerted a good deal of influence in the lives of Northwestern graduates, beyond the fact that he had indoctrinated them in militant orthodoxy, and that he presided over an institution which served as the support structure for their evangelistic efforts. Riley was often directly responsible for the positions the young pastors held. Particularly after the mid-1920s, when he turned his attention from the failed national crusade to the local scene, Riley served as a one-man placement office. As The Pilot noted in 1933, "he is ready on a moment's notice to render service to a church looking for a good preacher who is at the same time a dependable man and destined to prove a successful pastor." As Northwestern's influence expanded, the demand for its ministers accelerated. According to Riley, by the early 1940s he was receiving as "many as three to five [requests] a day" for Northwestern-trained ministers,<sup>37</sup> with most of the requests coming from "the Central States and the Northwest." The Pilot commented in 1943 that "there are more calls for pastors than he has men who would be adapted to the places open."<sup>38</sup> This statement indicates the degree to which Riley was involved both in controlling the careers of his ministers and in shaping the emergent fundamentalist empire. He was not simply sending out names of available graduates, but was choosing certain individuals for certain posts. Actively serving as head of Northwestern's fundamentalist empire, on occasion he even controlled a graduate's move from one



church to another:

I have a request today from a church in the South, in a very attractive city, desiring a man of considerable experience, preferring such to any new graduate. That puts upon me the necessity of moving some Northwestern graduate from his present field. . . . I become a party to such removals reluctantly, but in this case I happen to know an excellent man who will fit in and shall immediately recommend him.<sup>39</sup>

Riley's involvement in the life of "his boys" also included what might be called "troop inspections." At least once a year, especially in the last decade of his life, Riley and his wife, Marie, would make a tour of churches run by Northwestern-trained ministers. Sometimes this trip was limited to the upper Midwest. More often, the Rileys combined their visits of alumni with a vacation to the West Coast or the South. Wherever they visited, it was a big event in the lives of the alumni. Not only would they show the Rileys their church buildings and discuss with them the status of their work, but they would, if possible, schedule him to speak at a special service. Moreover, at least once in their circuit the Rileys would be feted at a banquet or picnic hosted by a group of alumni in the area.<sup>40</sup>

For all of the socializing, however, Riley had additional motives in making these visits. According to his associate, Richard Clearwaters, Riley was also checking to make sure that "his boys" were still true to the fundamentals of the faith and devoted to their alma mater. Whether he ever found a straying alumnus is unknown. According to reports filed with The Pilot, these inspection tours generally yielded extremely positive results. Typical is Riley's account of his 1937 visit to Washington and Oregon, which the Northwestern president concluded by rejoicing: "It is impossible to adequately express the pleasure of these visits! The loyalty of our Northwestern boys and girls, together with the success that is everywhere attending their endeavors, is a joy unspeakable."<sup>41</sup>

If Riley was pleased with what he found in the Pacific Northwest, he must have been euphoric when examining the upper Midwest. There he presided over an increasingly powerful network of fundamentalist churches that relied upon Northwestern as a denominational surrogate. Riley's power was made manifest in the fundamentalist capture of the Minnesota Baptist Convention in the 1930s, and the subsequent rebellion of the Minnesota Baptist Convention against its national officers.

Riley's home state truly was the seat of his empire, and his influence was strongest within the Minnesota Baptist Convention. By the early 1930s at least 35% of the Minnesota Baptist Convention ministers were Northwestern graduates.<sup>42</sup> But while this was a sizable bloc, liberals controlled the leadership positions. In the 1920s Riley had been preoccupied with his national fundamentalist crusade, and thus little fuss was made about the liberal nature of the Minnesota Baptist Convention hierarchy. Riley did stick his head in long enough to ensure cessation of the MBC practice of providing monies for "non-Baptistic" Carleton College, but that was about the only form of organized protest against the state convention.<sup>43</sup> But the gradually increasing number of Northwestern ministers in the MBC, and Riley's ability to command "his boys," meant that it was only a matter of time before the fundamentalists wrested control of the Minnesota Baptist Convention from the liberals. This "revolution," as Riley termed it, took place at the 1936 annual convention. Auspiciously for the fundamentalists, this meeting was held at the Anoka Baptist Church, which was pastored by Northwestern alumnus Dudley Thimsen. As had been the practice for years, the nominations committee offered a liberal-dominated slate of officers for routine approval by the convention. But this year the fundamentalists sensed that it was their time to take the reins of power from the liberals. When the nomination committee presented their suggested slate Northwestern graduate S.P.

Andersen countered with a substitute list of officers. Riley immediately moved "to distribute copies of both ballots to each delegate." His motion was accepted, and the fundamentalist ballot was victorious by a vote of 144 to 118. As Riley crowed years later, this election ended "modernist rulership" of the Convention.<sup>44</sup>

The Minnesota Baptist Convention was now part of Riley's empire. Fundamentalists, often Northwestern graduates, dominated the leadership positions, while behind the scenes William Bell Riley was, in the words of one alumnus, "running the convention."<sup>45</sup> In 1944 and 1945 Minnesota Baptists made this control official, electing him their president. As president he aggressively prodded the MBC to rebellion against its more liberal parent body, the Northern (now American) Baptist Convention. Under Riley's guidance the MBC developed and promoted its own literature and youth work, supported independent fundamentalist missions organizations, and asserted control over denominational monies spent in Minnesota. By the mid-1940s the point of no return had been crossed. In October of 1947, Riley, who was to die in December, publicly withdrew from the Northern Baptist Convention. The very next year the MBC followed the example of its fallen leader and pulled out of the denomination.<sup>46</sup>

Riley's control of the Minnesota Baptist Convention from 1936 to 1947 is compelling evidence that this was, indeed, his empire. Put another way, the fundamentalist enterprise in the upper Midwest revolved around the powerful personality of William Bell Riley. In creating a religious empire centered around himself Riley was in keeping with many fundamentalist leaders, then and now.<sup>47</sup> One problem this poses for the fundamentalist movement is that some day, of course, the great leader will die. Whither the empire? In the case of William Bell Riley, in the years after his death in 1947 his empire fragmented and collapsed, as various individuals and the factions they represented fought for his

mantle. Billy Graham was Riley's hand-picked successor, but in his five years as president he was not able to halt or even slow the infighting. By 1957 one faction had started its own seminary and Bible school, and in 1966 the old Northwestern folded.<sup>48</sup> Moreover, the feuding carried over into the Minnesota Baptist Convention, fragmenting Minnesota Baptists into six separate Baptist groups.<sup>49</sup>

The collapse of Riley's empire is prime evidence of the fragility of personality-based religious organizations, and points up a serious shortcoming in American fundamentalism. But to focus on the empire's demise is to slight the importance of Riley's achievement. Despite devastating national defeats in the 1920s, Riley and his fellow fundamentalists in the upper Midwest successfully labored at the grass-roots level to create a formidable regional organization. The strongly rural character of Riley's empire is an important reminder that the early fundamentalist movement was not strictly or even primarily an urban phenomenon. On the other hand, Northwestern's role in the upper Midwest certainly confirms the current thesis that Bible institutes were crucial to the survival and growth of fundamentalism in the interwar years. Of course, considering what little is known about the work of other Bible institutes at the local level, one must be tentative about any claims that Riley's empire is representative. Much remains to be done, and this article is just a start. But Riley's empire in the upper Midwest should serve to underscore one simple truth: in examining fundamentalism in America, or even religion in America, historians must not confine themselves to the national level. Those who do so will miss much of the story.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>For example: Stewart Cole, The History of Fundamentalism (New York, 1931), esp. pp. 35-40, 336-337; Norman F. Furniss, The Fundamentalist Controversy (New Haven, 1954), esp. pp. vii, 177-179; William E. Leuchtenburg, The Perils of Prosperity, 1914-1932 (Chicago, 1958), pp. 217-224; William McLoughlin, "Is There a Third Force in Christendom?," Daedalus 96 (Winter, 1967): 45.

<sup>2</sup>Joel A. Carpenter, "Fundamentalist Institutions and the Rise of Evangelical Protestantism, 1929-1942," Church History 49 (March, 1980): 64-65; George M. Marsden, Fundamentalism and American Culture: The Shaping of Twentieth-Century Evangelicalism: 1870-1925 (New York, 1980), pp. 193-195.

<sup>3</sup>Ernest Sandeen, The Roots of Fundamentalism: British and American Millenarianism, 1800-1930 (Chicago, 1970), pp. 241-243; Carpenter, "Fundamentalist Institutions," pp. 66-67; Marsden, American Culture, p. 194.

<sup>4</sup>For an extended analysis, see the author's "One Response to Modernity: Northwestern Bible School and the Fundamentalist Empire of William Bell Riley" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison, 1984), particularly chapter 4. For an excellent work which concentrates on the Bible schools as educational institutions, see: Virginia Lieson Brereton, "Protestant Fundamentalist Bible Schools, 1882-1940" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Columbia University, 1981).

<sup>5</sup>Voices of American Fundamentalism: Seven Biographical Studies (Philadelphia, 1976), p. 213.

<sup>6</sup>Sandeen, Roots, esp. p. xi-xii; Marsden, American Culture, pp. 188, 201-202.

<sup>7</sup>Despite Riley's importance, very little of a scholarly nature has

been written about him. One reason for this might be the fact that only one file folder of Riley's papers remains, housed in the Northwestern College library in Roseville, Minnesota. The best published piece is Charles Allyn Russell's sketch in Voices of American Fundamentalism: Seven Biographical Studies. See also: Lloyd B. Hull, "A Rhetorical Study of the Preaching of William Bell Riley" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, Wayne State University, 1960); Dell G. Johnson, "Fundamentalist Responses in Minnesota to the Developing New Evangelicalism" (unpublished Th.D. dissertation, Central Baptist Seminary, 1982); Robert Sheldon McBirnie, "Basic Issues in the Fundamentalism of William Bell Riley" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, State University of Iowa, 1952); Ferenc Morton Szasz, "Three Fundamentalist Leaders: The Roles of William Bell Riley, John Roach Straton, and William Jennings Bryan in the Fundamentalist-Modernist Controversy" (unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, University of Rochester, 1969).

<sup>8</sup>Marie Acomb Riley, The Dynamic of a Dream: The Life Story of Dr. William B. Riley (Grand Rapids, 1938), p. 181; "Forty Years of Service," The Pilot 17(March, 1937): 164. An almost complete collection of Pilots is housed in the Northwestern College library.

<sup>9</sup>"The Evolution of Northwestern," The Pilot 8(November, 1927): 4-5; "Opening Day," The Pilot 16(October, 1935): 3; "Northwestern Opening Reveals Largest Enrollment in History," The Northwestern Pilot 26(September, 1946): 334.

<sup>10</sup>William Bell Riley, "The Surplus of Preachers," The Pilot 14(December, 1933): 90.

<sup>11</sup>"The Northwestern Theological Seminary and the State Baptist Convention," The Pilot 23(January, 1943): 99.

<sup>12</sup>Riley, "Surplus," p. 90.

<sup>13</sup>William Bell Riley, The Menace of Modernism (New York, 1917), p.

151; Riley, "Surplus," p. 90; William Bell Riley, "The Northwestern Schools," The Pilot 21(November, 1940): 48.

<sup>14</sup>Trollinger, "Modernity," pp. 161-162; Hugh Hartshorne and Milton C. Froyd, Theological Education in the Northern Baptist Convention: A Survey (Philadelphia, 1945), p. 123.

<sup>15</sup>Trollinger, "Modernity," p. 169.

<sup>16</sup>Interview with Fred Julius, Shoreview, MN, August 25, 1986.

<sup>17</sup>The Pilot 10(January, 1930): 132; The Pilot 11(July, 1931): 301; The Pilot 14(January, 1934): 114; The Pilot 16(August, 1936): 333; The Pilot 19(January, 1939): 118; The Northwestern Pilot 25(April, 1945): 214; The Northwestern Pilot 26(November, 1945): 44.

<sup>18</sup>Granting the problems in using current data, I used Rand-McNally's 1980 list of Metropolitan Areas to gain an indication as to whether Riley's empire became more or less urban over time. In 1925 21% of the Northwestern ministers in the upper Midwest (Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin) held urban pastorates. In 1945 the figure had risen to 26%. But including Minnesota is problematic, in that some of these ministers were current Northwestern students who were temporarily serving in Twin Cities pulpits as part of their "practical work experience;" upon graduation, many would become pastors of rural churches. Excluding Minnesota, in 1925 11% of Northwestern ministers in Riley's empire were in metropolitan areas, while in 1945 the figure had jumped to 24%. World Atlas: Census Edition (New York, 1981), pp. 123-146; Trollinger, "Modernity," appendix.

<sup>19</sup>Henry Van Kommer, "'Northwesterners' in Minnesota," The Pilot 18(October, 1937): 22.

<sup>20</sup>Van Kommer, "Minnesota," pp. 15, 22; William Bell Riley, "Dr. Riley and His Boys," The Pilot 23(November, 1942): 56.

<sup>21</sup>For extended discussions of this reform effort, see: William L. Bowers, The Country Life Movement in America, 1900-1920 (Port

Washington, 1974), esp. pp. 82-84, 113-115; Mark Rich, The Rural Church Movement (Columbia, MO, 1957); Merwin Swanson, "The 'Country Life Movement' and the American Churches," Church History: 358-373.

<sup>22</sup>Bowers, Country Life, p. 114. For two rather patronizing references to the resistance of rural people against the consolidation of their churches during the Great Depression, see the following volumes in the series, "Studies on the Social Aspects of the Depression:" Samuel C. Kincheloe, Research Memorandum on Religion in the Depression (New York, 1937), pp. 134-135; and, Dwight Sanderson, Research Memorandum on Rural Life in the Depression (New York, 1937), pp. 91-95.

<sup>23</sup>Hartshorne and Froyd, Baptist Education, pp. 33-42; Tinder, "Fundamentalist Baptists," pp. 162-166.

<sup>24</sup>Van Kommer, "Minnesota," The Pilot, p. 22; Harriet Gleason, "Pioneering in Central Wisconsin," The Pilot 17(October, 1936): 13-14. See also: The Pilot 20(January, 1940): 116-117; The Pilot 20(June, 1940): 277.

<sup>25</sup>"Wisconsin Rural Mission," The Pilot 20(May, 1940): 227-228.

<sup>26</sup>"Pastors' Conferences," The Pilot 11(May, 1931): 248; "Iowa Fundamentalists," The Pilot 22(May, 1942): 251; "Business Meeting," The Pilot 8(December, 1927): 15; "Northwesterners, We Are Proud of You," The Pilot 25(October, 1944): 17.

<sup>27</sup>J.W. Welsh, "Northwestern's Extension Department," The Pilot 9(April, 1929): 6.

<sup>28</sup>Frank Bass, "Daily Vacation Bible Schools: Northwestern's Contribution to This Great Movement," The Pilot 22(May, 1942): 231.

<sup>29</sup>"The Northwestern Bible Training School Bible Conferences," The Pilot 2(July-September, 1919): 192-193; William Bell Riley, "The Sweep of Northwestern Schools," The Pilot 17(January, 1937): 108; "Northwestern's Field Evangelist," The Pilot 17(February, 1937): 156.



<sup>30</sup>"The Northwestern Bible Conference," The Pilot 19(March, 1939): 178; "Medicine Lake Bible Conference," The Pilot 14(May, 1934): 233; "The Northwestern Bible Conference," The Pilot 13(July, 1933): 302.

<sup>31</sup>"Summer School at Medicine Lake, August 14-28, 1939," The Pilot 19(July, 1939): 292; "Northwestern Bible Conference," The Pilot 13(May, 1933): 241; Dell G. Johnson interview with David Farrington, as reported in letter to author, July 3, 1984.

<sup>32</sup>"Extension Classes in Teacher Training," The Pilot 18(November, 1937): 53; "Our Layman's Course," The Pilot 7(May, 1927): 4.

<sup>33</sup>Mrs. E.P. Barrett, "Pedagogy, Unit V of Teacher Training Course, Evening School," The Pilot 18(January, 1938): 109; "Northwestern's Evening School," The Pilot 20(November, 1939): 53.

<sup>34</sup>Marie Acomb Riley, "From the Editor's Desk," The Pilot 22(October, 1941): 3; "The President of Northwestern," The Pilot 13(October, 1932): 3; The Pilot 14(July, 1934): 290; John Lundberg, "Do You Let Your People Know?," The Pilot 24(December, 1943): 69; L.C. Masted, "The Successful Church," The Northwestern Pilot 25(June, 1945): 265-266, 280.

<sup>35</sup>"Don't Forget to Write," The Pilot 8(January, 1928): 15.

<sup>36</sup>"Suggested Sources of Revenue," The Pilot 23(December, 1942): 76; "The Northwestern Bible and Missionary Training School," School and Church 1(August, 1917): 144; "First Annual Northwestern Day," The Pilot 21(September, 1941): 351; "A Survey of the Student Body," The Pilot 16(March, 1936): 182.

<sup>37</sup>"Good Prospects for Churches Without Pastors," The Pilot 14(October, 1933): 10; William Bell Riley, "The Demand for Ministers," The Pilot 21(June, 1941): 259.

<sup>38</sup>"Progress of Memorial Hall," The Pilot 23(November, 1942): 56; "Progress of Memorial Hall," The Pilot 23(August, 1943): 315.

<sup>39</sup>Riley, "Demand," p. 259.

<sup>40</sup>Examples: William Bell Riley, "Twelve Days with Northwesterners," The Pilot 22(August, 1942): 311; William Bell Riley, "Northwesterners Visited On Our Western Trip," The Northwestern Pilot 24(April, 1944): 227; Marie Acomb Riley, "My Day," The Northwestern Pilot 25(August, 1945): 307, 319.

<sup>41</sup>Dell G. Johnson interview with Richard V. Clearwaters, as reported in letter to author, July 3, 1984; William Bell Riley, "Northwestern Boys as Church Builders," The Pilot 17(August, 1937): 341-342.

<sup>42</sup>Minnesota Baptist Annual, 1930, pp. 101-106 (mimeographed); "Friends of Northwestern," The Pilot 10(January, 1930): 98.

<sup>43</sup>"The Sixty-Sixth Annual Convention," North Star Baptist 11(November, 1926): 3; "Carleton College," North Star Baptist 11(December, 1926): 10-11; "Alumni Attend Baptist Convention," The Pilot 9(November, 1928): 17.

<sup>44</sup>Minnesota Baptist Annual, 1936, pp. 12-13 (mimeographed); William Bell Riley, "Recovering Majority Baptist Rule!" The Pilot 23(August, 1943): 312; Johnson, "Minnesota," pp. 49-50.

<sup>45</sup>Interview with Ray Anderson, Minneapolis, MN, August 25, 1986.

<sup>46</sup>It should be noted that many separatist fundamentalists, including many former colleagues in the Baptist Bible Union, bitterly attacked Riley for not leaving the denomination until months before his death. For an in-depth discussion of the Minnesota Baptist Convention's conflicts with and eventual separation from the denomination, see: Trollinger, "Modernity," pp. 198-230.

<sup>47</sup>For a particularly incisive critique of "personality cults" within fundamentalism, see: Gabriel Fackre, The Religious Right and Christian Faith (Grand Rapids, 1982), pp. 74-80.

<sup>48</sup>Central Baptist Seminary (1956) and Pillsbury Baptist Bible College (1957), and the new Northwestern College (1972), represent the two sides of this school split.

<sup>49</sup>Russell, Voices, p. 103. For an in-depth discussion of the collapse of the Riley empire, see: Trollinger, "Modernity," pp. 231-246.