

## Theo Christ and the 1850's

From journals kept by Theo Christ (1830-1910), we learn about life in the 1850's and 1860's in Lewisburg and in the nation - pleasant social activities, and unsettling preludes to civil war.

Christ was a son of businessman Levi Christ and Hester Sterner. As a young man he enjoyed many leisure activities.

Sleighting was a popular winter activity for young people, who rode through the countryside, then enjoyed meals at a hotel or home of one of the sleigh-party. Supper parties with music and dancing were also popular, and groups from surrounding towns came to parties in Lewisburg.

Holiday celebrations, such as Fourth of July gatherings with parades, music and speeches, were attended by hundreds of townsfolk. Christ described a New Year's celebration on December 31, 1856: an oyster supper for the Brass and String Bands, at midnight steam whistles sounding and bells ringing, bands playing until daylight, with 200 or 300 people on the street all night. The festivities continued on New Year's Day with more music and house parties.

A lecture series was organized by James Aiken (poet and educator) for Saturday evenings through the winter of 1857. Aiken would read Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The eight to twelve week course was offered at 50 cents (for the series) or 10 cents per evening. Noted speakers J. Merrill Linn, George Bliss, Hon. James Pollock, Rev. Watson, Henry C. Hickok, Rev. Prof. Curtis and Rev. Fink, as well as James Aiken, gave free lectures at Lewisburg's Independent Hall in the winter of 1858.

Political lectures, and political commentary in local papers, focused on the overriding issues of the day, especially slavery. Speakers brought out hundreds, even thousands of listeners at rallies in Williamsport and Lewisburg. The admission of Kansas as a slave state, and thereby the extension of slavery into other new areas, was fiercely opposed by northern states. The threat of secession by southern states was imminent.

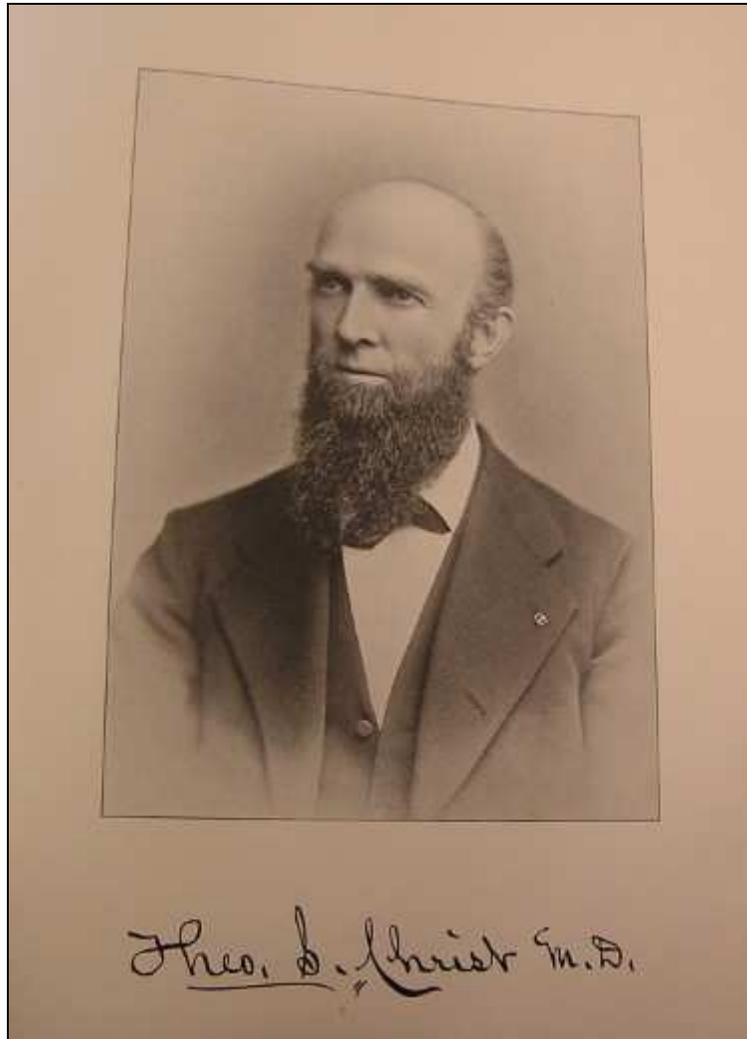
Train travel was far-reaching in the late 1850's. Theo Christ went by train to Philadelphia for business supplies (for his Christ-Caldwell Drugstore). He also traveled to New York City. In 1857, Theo, his mother and sister journeyed to Chicago. The four-day train ride (with overnight hotel stops) took them from Lewisburg through Northumberland and Harrisburg to Pittsburgh; through Ohio to Fort Wayne, Indiana, then on to Chicago. A steamboat excursion took them up the Mississippi River to Minnesota. In Freeport Illinois, they visited friends who had moved there from Union County. The train-ride home passed through Detroit, Michigan, into Canada, to Niagara Falls NY, then through the Finger Lakes district to Williamsport and finally back to Lewisburg. Theo wrote in his journal about the diversity of the American population and culture in contrast to homogeneous Lewisburg.

Having decided upon medicine as a profession, Christ studied in New York City in 1858-59. He attended a lecture by Frederick Douglass. In Lewisburg in 1859, he heard speeches against slavery, and "slaveocracy" vs. American liberty. In New York

and in Philadelphia, where he studied medicine in 1860, Christ had first-hand encounters with southern students and their beliefs.

Christ was to see the effects of slavery and slave society, as a surgeon in the Union Army, and he would recall his observations in his journals. Theo Christ's journals are discussed in the Union County Historical Society's Heritage book: *Theodore Sterner Christ: Civil War Surgeon from Union County* by Kenn Reagle.

In 2011 we commemorate the start of the Civil War, 1861-1865, with programs and exhibits locally and nationwide. Readers will hear more about Theo Christ's Civil War experience in a future column.



Theo Christ