

**Augustana Endowment Society**  
**Historical Reflections from Dec. 2019**  
**by Janet Moline**

**The Messiah at Augustana 1881**

How wonderful to hear the Chamber Singers under the direction of Jon Hurty. Listening to them has become an annual event. There is another Augustana Christmas music event that we had for many years but no longer have. Handel's Messiah. Perhaps some of you have sung in the chorus.

I thought I would share with you how the Messiah came to be sung at Augustana. My information comes from Conrad Bergendoff's book "Augustana...A Profession of Faith—A History of Augustana College, 1860—1935"

Professor Olof Olsson, who would later become a President of Augustana, visited London in April 1879 and attended a Handel's Messiah performance. His pious mother has made him destroy a violin he had as a child and then he believed that although "the arts were a gift of God", the "devil had usurped them for evil ends." As an adult he wanted "to try to make Christians appreciate the power of music as a spiritual experience." His best memory of that European trip was the Messiah. He was so moved that "when the 'Hallelujah' chorus was sung he said 'one could believe that the angels had joined the chorus'."

Back in Rock Island, Olsson planned to recreate the Messiah. In the spring of 1880 a small orchestra was organized, a leader hired and the Augustana Oratorio Society was formed. "Members were recruited from students and from church choirs in Moline, Rock Island, Andover and Galesburg." Rehearsals began shortly after New Year's 1881. The first performance was the Monday of Holy Week in Moline, snow on Tuesday postponed the concert in Andover, and Wednesday was Galva in the afternoon and Galesburg in the evening. "Thus Holy Week 1881 introduced a cultural event and tradition of enduring significance in the life of the young college."

By the way, the weather-postponed Andover concert would be sung at commencement time as was another concert at First Congregational Church in Moline.

In 1898, after a successful effort to enlist wide community participation, the organization was named the Handel Oratorio Society. The Messiah was held in April for its first thirty years.

About 1916 the Messiah was moved to the Christmas season, a tradition that would last a hundred years. Sadly, for the community that Christmas tradition ended in December 2017.