



**Bethel
German Colony**
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Bethel German Colony 1844-1883

**"Viele Hande Machen Bald Ein Ende"
Many Hands Make Quick Work**

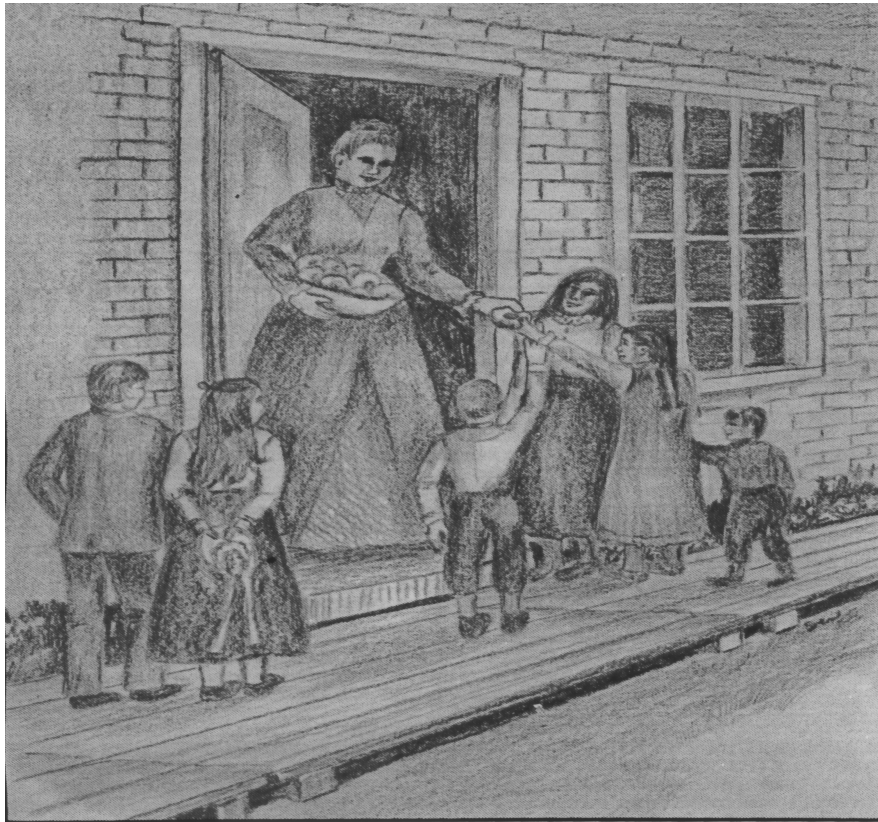
The Bethel German Colony 1844-1883

Bethel German Colony, located forty-eight miles west of Hannibal on the banks of the North River in Shelby County, Missouri, is still home today to descendants of its 19th century settlers, who founded one of the most successful communal societies in the United States. With a population of 132 residents and a thriving art colony, Bethel plays host to frequent festivals, workshops, and seminars celebrating its agricultural, cultural, and social history and heritage throughout the year. The hospitality Bethel residents extend to today's visitors to the community has its origins in the unique concept on which the Colony was founded in 1844.

History

The history of such intentional communities as Bethel is the history of the idea that mankind once lived in a state of perfect harmony, an idea which flourished in the political, religious, and social ferment that characterized Europe, particularly German-speaking Europe, in the centuries following the Protestant Reformation. As Professor Joel Hartman has noted, numerous movements appeared which attempted to create for their followers a semblance of the perfect social and religious order. Transplanted to the United States and moving westward with the American frontier, the dream of

achieving a perfect society resulted in a variety of Utopian communities formed by groups which had come to America to exercise the freedom of religion guaranteed by the American constitution but frequently denied them in Europe.



On Shrove Tuesday (the day before Ash Wednesday) children in Bethel would go from house to house reciting this pre-Lenten begging rhyme: "Kuchen raus, Kuchen raus, oder ich schlag dir'n Loch ins Haus." (Give me a cookie, Give me a cookie, or I'll knock a hole in your house.)

Bethel was one of the most informally organized of the Utopian communities established in the United States during the years of widespread experimentation in communal living that characterized the late 18th and first half of the 19th centuries, but it seemingly achieved a harmonious lifestyle as well as a remarkable economic success. Formed by the charismatic Wilhelm Keil in Phillipsburg, Pennsylvania in 1844, the group was largely drawn from former members of the German Methodist Church, which developed in the 1830's as immigrant congregations of the Methodist Episcopal Church, from the Harmony Society, which had been established by George Rapp in 1805, and from former followers of the self-proclaimed "Count Leon," who had left the Rapp Society and led a group from Phillipsburg to Louisiana a decade before. These were joined by other converts to Keil's doctrine of Christian communal life, won by articulate and dedicated young disciples he sent out to preach in neighboring states. Promised nothing but bread, water, and hard work by Keil, his followers sold their property in Pennsylvania, Ohio, and other states, committed the proceeds to the vision of their leader, and prepared to undertake the arduous journey to the Far West to establish their Colony on the sparsely settled prairies of north Missouri. Three scouts had selected the site for their first settlement, and in the autumn of 1844 Keil and his family, with a few others, arrived to spend a winter of considerable hardship on the property on the North River. The following spring other colonists began arriving, among them many skilled craftsmen, and energetically set about to erect dwellings, community buildings, and other necessary structures. It is generally agreed that former members of the Harmony Society, accustomed to the communal life and each a master of some necessary trade, were largely responsible for the rapid development of the Colony. All the buildings were large and sturdy, of brick

manufactured in the Colony. A mile east of Bethel, they built a dwelling of massive proportions for Wilhelm Keil and his family. Strongly reminiscent of 18th century Pennsylvania German architecture, constructed of brick and stone, fifty-two by thirty-six feet in size and two and a half stories high, Elim demonstrated the remarkable skills as well as the devotion to their leader of the early settlers.

By September of 1847, when a visitor traveled to the Colony from Shelbyville, he found the village pleasantly situated on the gradual slope leading down to the north shore of the North River. Across the wooden bridge was an extensive tannery on the right side and on the left a “large pile of buildings comprising a lumber mill, flouring mill, distillery, and a carding and spinning establishment, all propelled by steam.” He later observed that all varieties of weaving by hand seemed to be going on in the loom room, but plans were to convert to steam.

On either side of the street, dwellings of brick were placed at regular intervals and on the right about a hundred yards from the river a large hotel was under construction. Further on, about a mile from the river, an impressive church was nearing completion. From the church tower, reached by a series of stairs and ladders, the visitor could see to the north the farms of the colony, “looking as regular as a chessboard,” and in “the distant prairie their herds of cattle and sheep, with the shepherds driving them slowly toward the village.” There were several residences in the village which evinced a “fine taste,” but he found that of Dr. Keil most striking. The writer discovered the settlers to be friendly and communicative, and adjudged their “peaceful hamlet as the abode of contentment, happiness, and plenty,” wishing that a “thousand such colonies would take possession of the prairies and forests of Missouri, now waste and unpeopled, and cause them to smile under the magic touch of cultivation.”

This first hand account of the Bethel Colony less than three years after its settlement, published in the Hannibal Gazette of October 7, 1847, provides an illuminating insight into the industry and skills of the colonists who had emigrated to Missouri to found their Utopia.

Wilhelm Keil

Wilhelm Keil, the problematical founder and leader of Bethel Colony in Missouri and Aurora Colony in Oregon, was born March 6, 1811 or 1812 in Bleicherode, near Nordhausen in the Kingdom of Prussia, and in his youth worked for a time as a milliner in Koelleda in the District of Merseburg. Putting aside an early ambition to go on the stage, he immersed himself in the study of religion and mysticism, becoming a devotee of Jacob Boehme, a 16th century Silesian mystic, and his followers, who sought to establish a more personal relationship with God than they believed possible within organized religions. Although lacking in formal schooling beyond the elementary level, as evidenced later in his life by his limited intellectual interests and his imperfect command of written German, Keil undertook various botanical and medical investigations, conducting numerous experiments in an effort to gain an understanding of the laws of nature and discover a Universal-Medizin, a panacea for the ills of mankind.

In Koelleda he married Luise Ritter, who became and remained throughout her life one of his most devoted disciples, and together they emigrated to America in the mid-1830's. After a brief stay in New York City, where Keil worked as a tailor, they settled in Pittsburgh and opened a drug store. Because of the cures he was said to have effected he became known as “Dr. Keil,” or in some quarters as the Hexendoktor, and it was rumored that he had a flask of a mysterious medicine which represented the results of his experiments. Even more mysterious was a book he possessed with symbols written in blood, cures which he had reportedly been given by an old woman in Germany, known for her healing powers, who shared her secrets with him only on the condition that he leave the country. Biographers have speculated that the book contained powwowing formula, believed in many parts of Germany at that time to be effective against illnesses and brought to this country by German immigrants to Pennsylvania.

In 1838 William Nast, the “Father of German Methodism,” conducted revival meetings in Pittsburgh, and Keil was one of his converts. Soon afterwards he met the Reverend J. Martin Hartmann,

a missionary for the German Methodists and other German churches, whom he adopted as his spiritual father. He worked enthusiastically among the German Methodists as a class leader and in 1839 was licensed as a local preacher, although the license was never formally issued. In a dramatic ceremony witnessed and reported by Nast, he burned the mysterious book of cures, symbolically putting his days as a Hexendoktor behind him. He was assigned a congregation at Deer Creek, but he found his probationary period extremely irksome and became increasingly more critical of the German Methodist Church. After fasting to receive divine guidance, he revealed that he had received a command to teach without pay and could no longer work in a church in which the ministry was salaried. He withdrew from the German methodists, taking his entire congregation at Deer Creek with him, and devoted himself to independent preaching before joining the Protestant Methodist Church. Again his congregation followed him, and he extended his work to the "Point" in Pittsburgh where he made many converts among the iron workers and factory employees. However after refusing to submit himself to his superiors in his new church, he was expelled, and once more followed by his faithful congregation, he renounced all churches, all titles except that of Christian, and all regulations and rules except those given in the Bible. In the group of his followers he was the Central sonne, the Central sun, and his right hand helpers were designated as Lichtuersten and Lichtfuerstinnen, princes and princesses of light. At this time in his early 30's, a forceful and compelling speaker, he drew around him young men of talent and intelligence, including Christian, Andrew, and Henry Giesy, who served him as missionaries. Traveling on foot, teaching without salary in private homes and school buildings, his disciples spread Keil's teachings throughout western Pennsylvania, southern Ohio, West Virginia, Indiana, Kentucky, and as far west as Iowa, where in several towns small groups gathered to await his call.

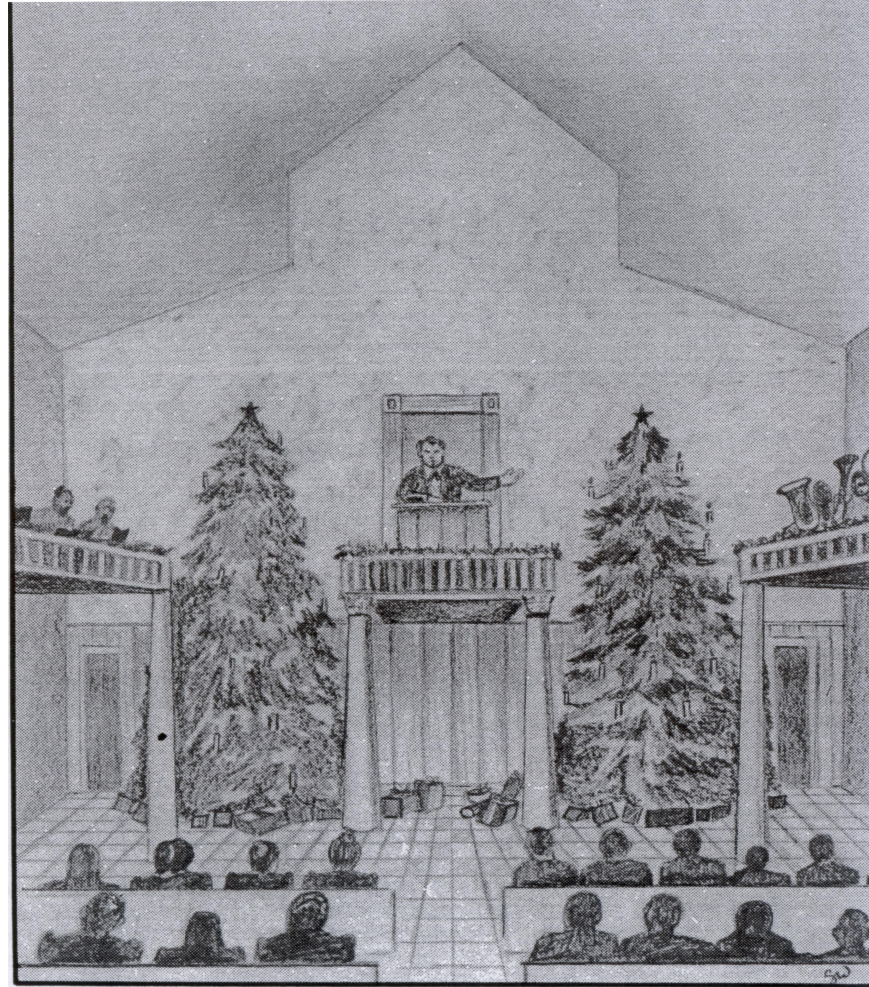
Religion In Bethel

The plan to establish a settlement in the west based on the principles of Christian communal life took form among a people whose aspirations in emigrating to America had been to find the freedom to follow their pietistic beliefs without interference from government or established churches. Phillipsburg was only a few miles from Economy, where George Rapp had brought his community of Harmonists in 1825. Rapp, a mystic and visionary, born on a farm in Wuerttemberg, had brought about 200 of his followers to Pennsylvania in 1803. He first established a settlement in Butler County, Pennsylvania, and in 1805 organized the Harmony Society as a communistic theocracy. Celibacy was required of members after 1807. In 1814 Rapp had moved his group to a site on the Wabash River in Indiana, "New Harmony," but in 1824 had moved back to Pennsylvania and established Economy on the Ohio River 18 miles below Pittsburgh. It was to Phillipsburg that Count Leon had taken his followers after being expelled from Harmony and from which he emigrated in 1834 to Louisiana, where Germantown, a communal community with many attributes similar to those of Bethel, was established. Keil's mentor, Martin Hartmann was deeply interested in the concept of a Christian communal society, and Keil was influenced by his views, as well as by the ex-Harmonists and ex-Leonists he encountered who still believed in the efficacy of the ideal communal life in spite of their experiences with Rapp and Leon.

Among the Utopian colonies established in America, all of which had beliefs and characteristics unique to their leaders and members, Bethel German Colony was characterized by the simplicity of its government and its open acceptance of non members in the community. A constitution had been prepared, but Keil rejected the need for written agreements, and the document was never signed. Colonists often said that the Word of God was their constitution and by-laws. Practical Christianity was stressed. "Without money and without a price" was a maxim. Each family was given a house and each person worked as he was able. No records or accounts were kept of work done or supplies provided within the community. Food was distributed from the Colony stores each Saturday and clothing was provided in the spring and fall.

The Colony Church, completed in 1848, was a large and imposing structure of brick and stone,

sixty by a hundred feet, with wide entrances on either side, and a tower almost eighty feet high, topped by a balustrade, belfry, and steeple. The arched ceiling of the interior was a deep azure, and a spacious gallery, faced with large carved panels of black walnut, ran around three sides of the interior, with the high pulpit at the end. There was a railed off area for the band, which played on special occasions, and the floor was a large red brick or tile. The church was the largest west of the Mississippi at the time, and was built by Colony members almost entirely from materials produced in the Colony. It is said that only the windows, nails, and the bells, cast in Ohio, had to be purchased.



"...the bells were rung at 4 o'clock on Christmas morning. Two colossal trees [had been] erected, and on these were placed gifts for all."

Church services were held only every two weeks, and attendance was voluntary. Men and women entered by separate entrances and sat separately. Reportedly the church was usually filled. Keil was an eloquent and dynamic speaker, who "preached the doctrine of moral living," respect for authority and work for the common good. If he had learned, through confession or some other means, of the transgression of a member, he made known his findings in open meeting and charged the transgressor to rise, confess, and repent. Most endured the denunciations from the pulpit and were repentent, but it was this practice that was mostly criticized by outsiders and those who left the group. Some of the traditional Christian rituals had been abolished. There was no baptism or confirmation, and if communion was practiced it usually with a common meal at one of the homes. Easter was celebrated

and Pentecost was observed. The holiday most vivid in the memory of Colony descendants was the Christmas celebration.

Christmas And New Year In Bethel

Fred Burckhardt, who was four years old when the Colony disbanded, wrote of his memories of the Christmas celebration in the church in Bethel.

They rang all three bells in harmony....a pleasing musical sound... heard for miles around. The night before Christmas someone remained at the Church to attend the fires and the bells were rung at four o'clock on Christmas morning. Two colossal trees [had been] erected, and on these were placed gifts for all. (From an undated manuscript in the Shelbina Public Library)

The Christmas service included a band concert, followed by a talk by the preacher, and congregational singing. Hosts of visitors from outside the Colony came to participate in the celebration, and huge baskets of cakes and apples and, later, candy were distributed, with colonists and strangers sharing equally.

Christmas was also observed in the individual homes. Henry Will recalled that "Each family had a Christmas tree at home, trimmed with cookies and apples and sometimes they cut big red beets into strips and hung them on the tree." (Shelby County Herald, January 15, 1930. There are indications that customs originating in the different home localities in Germany or Switzerland of the colonists were practiced in the homes. Some residents remember that St. Nicholas or the Black Santa came before Christmas, probably in observance of St. Nicholas Day, December 6. Elsewhere in Missouri German communities St. Nicholas visited on this day, accompanied by "Black Peter" or the devil in chains. Fred Burckhardt recalled that in Bethel "Kris Kringle" visited each home, "and this event was looked forward to with joy and reverence. The children knelt and gave thanks to God for the gifts he brought them. A visit could be expected from "Base Kringle" (sic), who wore horns and chains and was dreaded by bad boys."

Clarence Bower wrote that in his home in his childhood there was always a visit from Kris Kringle.

The whole family would be seated around the decorated juniper tree with candles for lighting....Of course we were all anticipation, awaiting a knock on the door. Kris Kringle, always a woman, would be robed in white, heavily veiled. In one hand she carried a small hand bell and in the other a wand. Her helpers carried a large wicker wash basket filled with gifts. Kris Kringle would stand in front of each child in turn, and they would have to repeat this prayer when she rang her little bell.

Christ Kind komm, mach mich fromm.

Dass ich zu dir in den Himmel komm!

Christ come take me, make me good,
that I may to you in Heaven come!

If we performed satisfactorily we would receive a gift. If not we would receive a smart rap with her wand. Did we shake in our boots! (Letter to A.E. Schroeder, April 18, 1973. Information from Nora C. Bower, 84, and the writer, Clarence W. Bower, 80.)

Historian Lucille Bower reports that New Year's Eve was celebrated in Colony days with supper

and dancing at Keil's residence. At midnight the blacksmith fired the anvils, and after a midnight supper, dancing went on again until dawn. The Christmas trees in the church stayed up until New Year's, and the gifts from the trees were distributed to the children in the Colony on New Year's Day.

Work And Daily Life At Bethel

All activities of the Colony were under the nominal direction of Keil, who seems not only to have exerted an extraordinary power over his followers but to have inspired an extraordinary devotion among them. His word was final in all legal, as well as religious and social matters.

A system of supervisors and managers took care of the day to day activities in the Colony, which by 1850 had 476 members. Agriculture was the primary occupation of the Colony, and whatever his occupation each Colony member worked where he was most needed. Keil himself is said to have labored in the fields at harvest time, with his coat and vest off and sleeves rolled up. A common field of 1100 acres was fenced near Bethel, where corn, grains, flax, and hemp were grown, and large herds of cattle and sheep grazed on the prairies. A huge bank barn was built for the work horses and an separate barn sheltered the work cattle. A visitor reported observing a drove of eighty cows approach the village in the late afternoon and separate to their several homes for milking.

The day to day work life of women in the Colony was described in an undated letter Beatrice Finck wrote to her relatives in Germany, published by Henry T. Finck in My Adventures in the Golden Age of Music.

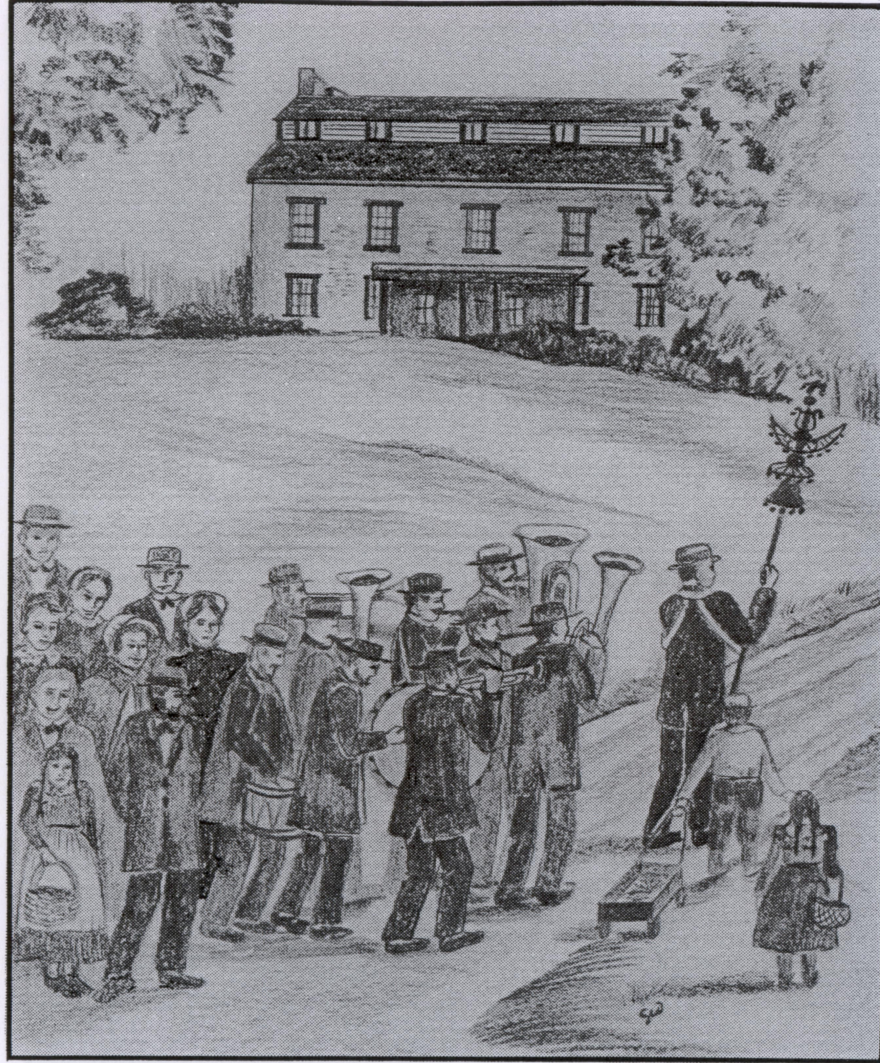
...besides attending to the things my dear mother taught me, such as the cooking, baking, washing, ironing, sewing, knitting, mending, etc.... Well, I can milk a cow, which gives me special pleasure; also I can make trousers, vests, and coats. There is no work I dodge and I am not ashamed to perform the humblest tasks; however you have no occasion to be ashamed of your daughter; I am withal the same merry Beatrice, I often sing from morn to night.

She added: Among my greatest joys is churchgoing, and when I feel like reading I take the Bible or Arnd's "True Christianity." (Finck, p. 4)

A visitor to Bethel reported that every house had its garden "where a supply of vegetables for the family is raised and...a few flowers gladden the eye. Every family has its pigs and poultry." Bethel had a curious blend of communal living and opportunities for individual enterprise, and early visitors to the Colony were often puzzled by the harmonious blend of individualism and communism. Surplus produce could be sold by the Colonists to buy items in the stores which had been established by settlers who had withdrawn from the Colony but continued to live in the village, operating their capitalistic enterprises among their neighbors devoted to the communal life.

Although Bethel farming practices were progressive and successful, the economic prosperity achieved by the Bethel colonists can be attributed to their industry and skill in creating a diversified and self-sufficient economy. Bethel blacksmith Bob Patrick has noted that Bethel Colony had three different blacksmith shops, each employing more than one person. As the blacksmiths had built much of the equipment the Colonists traveled from Pennsylvania with—the wagons, the tools, and the weapons,—they also made the tools which were "essential to the masons and carpenters who built Bethel, to the sawyers, the farmers, the tanners and builders of equipment." Cloth was made from Colony wool and flax, and clothing produced in the Colony. The boiler for the mill supplied hot water for the other industries and the Colony laundry, piped through wooden beams joined the hemp or flax dipped in tar, a technique which had been utilized in the Harmony Society. Das grosse Haus served as a hotel and restaurant, a boarding house for unmarried members of the Colony and the Colony warehouse. As the Colony grew, daughter colonies were established at Mamri, on the south side of North River, across from Bethel, and at Hebron, a mile northwest, where the cemetery was laid out. A barn for stock cattle was built there. Nineveh was established on the Chariton River in northern Adair

County in 1851 by some twenty-five colonists from Bethel, and their milling, tanning, and weaving operations were set up and a three-story shoe factory was built. Shoes were made and sold in the area, and gloves made in the Colony won first prize at the New York World's Fair in 1858. Bethel plows, manufactured in the Ziegler blacksmith shop were known throughout the Midwest. The most profitable of the industries, however, was the distillery, where large quantities of corn and rye whiskey were produced. The Colony's "Golden Rule" whiskey, sold in Hannibal and Quincy for fifteen or twenty-five cents a gallon, brought in a steady income.



"The March 6 birthday of Keil and his wife, born on the same day in the same year, was the occasion for a great feast and dance at Elim, for which the whole community marched to the residence, preceded by the band and led by the Schellenbaum..."

Education And Music

Unlike other German settlers in Missouri the Bethel Colonists were not particularly concerned with perpetuating the German language. School was conducted in English, and as a result High German soon disappeared, although the German dialects, used in the family and among neighbors, persisted into the 20th century. Elements of the language still survive among the descendants of the Colonists in sayings and proverbs as well as in terms for everyday objects. Keil was not favorably disposed to higher education, but young men were permitted to go to college provided the knowledge acquired was

of a practical nature and would be of immediate benefit to the Colony. Some visitors commented on the absence of a library in the Colony, but there were books in every home.

Although the craftsman's skills were valued more than book knowledge and Keil did not encourage intellectual pursuits such as learning languages, music was an integral part of the community life. Conrad Finck, an apothecary by vocation, a musician by avocation, was largely responsible for the rich musical life in Bethel. Henry T. Finck wrote of his father:

(He) gave his leisure time to training a village band and a choir.

This seemed to be his chief delight of his life...He learned to play nearly every instrument in the band—just for fun—and his enthusiasm did wonders in getting the young men and women of our village interested and proficient in playing or singing together.

Their meeting place was in our home and thus I grew up from the start in a musical atmosphere. (Finck, pp.2-3)

Many stories are told of the famed Bethel band which provided weekly concert, played for all Colony festivities, and gained fame throughout North Missouri.

Celebrations

In addition to the religious holidays celebrated in Bethel and customs related to the Christian year, such as the pre-Lenten (Fastnacht) and Easter traditions of the children, other events throughout the year afforded the Colonists opportunities to celebrate. The March 6 birthday of Keil and his wife, born on the same day in the same year, was the occasion for the great feast and dance at Elim, for which the whole community marched to the residence, preceded by the band and led by the Schellenbaum, the ceremonial “Bell Tree” built in the Colony. There are photographs documenting May Day celebration, and July 4 was marked by firing the anvil, a parade in which Colony boys and girls carried flags, and a picnic at Elim. A Harvest Fest was also the occasion for a great feast at Elim, and at this celebration or at others strangers were always welcome to share the Colony's bounty. At all appropriate occasions there was music and dancing.

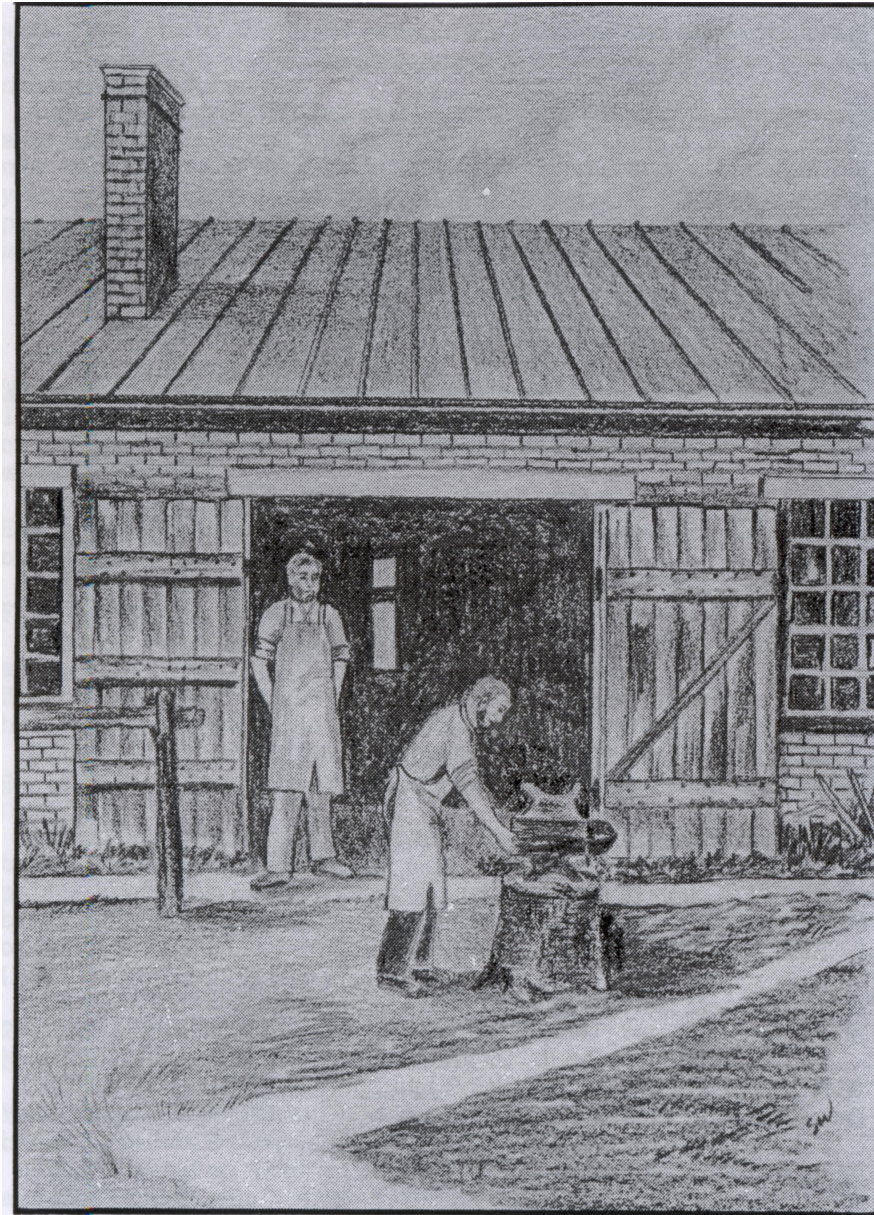
The Move West And The Dissolution Of Bethel Colony

By 1855 Bethel Colony had a population of 650 residents and its property included almost 4,000 acres in Shelby County as well as over 700 acres in Adair County. Its industries were thriving and its people contented. Yet Wilhelm Keil had grown increasingly more restless throughout the 1850's and in 1855, after sending scouts west to locate a site for a new colony, a group from Bethel Colonies prepared to depart Missouri. In late May a bizarre procession of twenty-five wagons with about seventy-five people left Bethel for the 2,000 mile trip overland. The first wagon in the train bore the body of Keil's son, Willie, who had been promised he could go west with the first group but had died before their departure. As the somber group set out on their trip those departing and those left behind sang “Das Grab ist tief and stille,” “The grave is deep and still,” a funeral hymn composed by Keil.

Eventually, in the Willamette Valley in Oregon, the new Colony was established. Keil named it Aurora, which he had named his favorite daughter, for the book, first published in 1612, in which Jacob Boehme had recorded his compelling visions. For the next two decades Bethel in Missouri and Aurora in Oregon were held to their purpose by the magnetic personality of Wilhelm Keil and the devotion and loyalty of his followers. Bethel remained neutral during the Civil War, but in the 1860's many Bethel Colonists migrated to the prosperous new Colony in the West by wagon caravan and by way of the Isthmus of Panama.

On December 30, 1877 Wilhelm Keil died unexpectedly, and the force that had held the separated Colonies together was gone. It was soon decided to dissolve the bonds between the Colonies, and a harmonious, if not entirely equitable division of common holdings was achieved by representatives of the two Colonies on June 30, 1879. Bethel Colony itself, which by then had only 200 residents, was dissolved in 1879, with each member receiving what he or she had contributed to the common property. Additionally each man was paid \$7.76 for every year he had worked in the Colony and each woman one half of that sum. A final decree dissolving the Colonies was signed in Oregon in 1883.

Jacob G. Miller tried to reorganize Bethel Colony and had a small following for a time, but the plan was eventually abandoned. Bethel was incorporated as a town in 1883.



"...July 4 was marked by firing the anvil, a parade in which Colony boys and girls carried flags, and a picnic at Elim."

Bethel Memories

Today over thirty of the original Colony buildings survive in Bethel, which was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1970, largely through the efforts of Lucille Bower. An active historical preservation group sponsors a series of events to raise funds for restoration projects. The memory of Wilhelm Keil and his followers and the early Colony days was kept alive after the dissolution of the Colony by those who remembered how it had been.

A moving eulogy to Dr. Keil and Colony life by Miller over twenty years after Keil's death echoed a devotion felt by many: "Quite a number of former members regret the dissolution of the communities and regard the years spent in them as the happiest of their lives...He was the most powerful preacher I have ever heard or ever expect to hear. Some persons may speak evil of him, but I revere his memory."

Read More About Bethel: A Selected List

William G. Bek, "A German Communistic Society in Missouri," in the Missouri Historical Review, vol. 3 (October, 1908, pp. 52-74 and January, 1909, pp. 99-125) is based on Keil's letters written to member of the Society at Bethel, interviews with persons at Bethel and Aurora, and early writings on Bethel.

Carl G. Koch, Lebenserfahrungen, (Cleveland, Ohio: Veriagshaus der Evangelischen Gemeinschaft, 1871), which contains much information on Keil's early life.

Henry T. Finck, My Adventures in the Golden Age of Music (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1926).

Robert J. Henricks, Bethel and Aurora, and Experiment in Communism as Practical Christianity (New York: The Press of the Pioneers, 1933) is a fictionalized account of life in the communities, particularly in Aurora, but contains important documents relating to the colonies.

William Alfred Hinds American Communities, Revised Edition (Chicago: Charles H. Kerr & Co., 1902) is based on personal visits to the colonies.

Wilhelm Keil's letters, "From Bethel, Missouri, to Aurora, Oregon. Letters of William Keil, 1855-1870," were translated by William G. Bek and published after his death in the Missouri Historical Review, XLVIII (October, 1953, pp. 23-41 and January, 1954, pp. 141-153). The letters were originally published in German in the German-American Annals, vol. 7-8 (1901-1910).

"A Visit to the German Colony," letter from Shelbyville, Mo., September 27, 1847 in the Hannibal Gazette, October 7, 1847, partially reprinted in Missouri Historical Review, vol. 53 (April, 1959), pp. 287-288.

Charles Nordhoff, The Communist Societies of the United States (New York: Harpers & Brothers, 1875), contains accounts of Aurora and Bethel based on personal observations.

Floyd Shoemaker, "Shelby County, Home of Experimentation, Progress, and Good Citizenship," Missouri Historical Review, vol. 50 (April, 1956), pp. 259-270.

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