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Bethel Colony
By: Henry Will
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Dear Editor:

In response to your recent inquiry, I herewith submit the following concerning Bethel and community.

I was born in Bethel 81 years ago last July, the eldest of a family of nine children.

I have lived all my life in Bethel and have noted many changes.

Probably all of your readers know the story of the Bethel Colony or community, started in 1845 by a company of Germans from Pennsylvania and Ohio, who settled in this picturesque spot on North River and here with all property in common, lived and reared their families, at first under conditions not of the best, but as the years went by, many things added, until at the time when I can first remember, many mills and shops were here and practically everything needed by the human family was available right at home.

Just a word about the founding of the colony that may be interesting. Dr. William Keil, the founder, was born in Germany, March 6, 1812 and came to America in 1838. He preached for a while in and near Philadelphia, Pennsylvania when in 1844, like the Biblical character of old who sent out spies to find the promised land, he sent out three men, viz., Adam Schuele, David Wagner, and Christian Presser to find a suitable place for the location of the colony he wished to start. These men went first to Arkansas, not liking the country there, came to Shelby County, Missouri and bought the land in and about what is now Bethel. The next year, 1845, the colonists, headed by Dr. Keil, came on and the town was started. They came by boat to Hannibal and then drove overland to their new home. Only two families were living here at that time. Mr. Vandiver owned and occupied the house which was for a number of years the residence of the late T. L. Bower, known to everyone familiar with Bethel as the big brick house not setting straight with the world, the other was a log building and power mill on North River and operated by Peter Stice. Three years after this settlement I was born in Bethel in a residence building located on the corner where the hardware store now stands, and with the exception of one person, I am now the oldest person born in Bethel now living there, the exception is Mr. August Bower, who was born two years previous, and has resided here since, being an active merchant for the last sixty-one years and is still at the store every business day in the year.

Soon after their arrival, a brick yard was started, a lime kiln was in operation and substantial brick buildings were erected, the most of which are still standing today, showing along with products of shop and mill that these sturdy people were true artisans.

Clothing of all kinds was made here. Flax was raised, harvested, and manufactured into linen goods. Two large flocks of sheep were kept and from these flocks they got the wool for the woolen clothing.

In the first years, all the goods for clothes for both men and women were made and I remember a little

later on, calico was brought on so the dear ladies had a dress or two for Sunday and holidays. Of course, there were still changes later on.

My father was a tailor by trade, he was the boss cutter in the cutting department of men and boys clothing only. The sewing was done by women and as many as a dozen or more were kept busy sewing. All the sewing was done by hand for some years as no sewing machines at that time had been introduced. Very often during the winter they worked in the shop at nights. All the light they had was the old fashioned grease lamps. As a small boy, I remember that some nights the lights in front of the shop on the street seemed to attract a lot of the geese in town, sometimes a hundred or more of them, and if they (the geese) didn't have a gab fest and a good time then I miss my guess, and when the season was ended they worked the ground into lob-lolly as they were no sidewalks at that time. It reminds me of Bethel streets at the present while the highway is being built, no chance to cross the street without your boots. Most every family had a flock of geese for feathers, for in those days they surely believed in a lot of feathers for their beds, most everybody sleeping between feather beds.

The shoes we wore, both men and women, were all made here, as well as custom work for the people in the surrounding neighborhood. In 1864 I worked in the shoe shop. At that time, about eight or ten men were working there. Before that time, a larger number of men were employed. The soles of the shoes were fastened or pegged on with wooden pegs, the shoes were heavy and cumbersome, but were well made and that was the main thing.

The tan shop was the building still standing, being the first house north and east of the new bridge and there the hides were tanned and leather made for shoes, harness, etc.

Another building of similar size and construction was located just north of the tan shop, where deer hides were tanned and where the famous Bethel buckskin gloves were manufactured. There were still many deer here but later on they would go on farther west to get a supply of deer hides, even trading some with the Indians for some of their choice deer pelts. Buckskin gloves made at this tannery in Bethel won first prize at the Chicago World's Fair (New York World's Fair.) Men's hats from both fur and lamb's wool were made here at the hat factory, some of the hats (I think) still being in the possession of our citizens.

I well remember when a boy eight or ten years old, when the first cane was raised here (that only a very small scale.) To extract the juice, the cane was run between two rollers about three feet long and about four inches in diameter, a crank at the end of the roller and turned by hand, similar to the clothes wringer. The juice extracted in this way was boiled down into molasses or sorghum.

Bethel's old frame mill was located on the site of the mill burned in Bethel several years ago, just west of the new bridge.

The old mill was noted and patronized by people who came many miles from every direction to have their grain ground. Many a time have I seen the mill platform in front of the mill filled with sacks of grain waiting their turn to be ground. Some customers would stay until late at night, some would stay all night before they could get the grist.

About fourteen feet of the old mill was located a manufacturing establishment, which, if in operation today would doubtless have the biggest business in the country. This was the distillery where hundreds of gallons of whiskey and alcohol were made.

The grain was ground at the mill and wheeled across a bridge or platform to the distillery in two large wooden buckets on two rollers, each bucket as large as a barrel. Most of the products of the distillery were delivered at points on the Mississippi in wagon loads, the price of some as low as 18 cents per gallon. To anyone visiting the distillery while in operation, a free jigger or snake bite medicine was always on tap, even if not been bitten at the time. Most all believed in the theory that an ounce of prevention was worth a pound of cure, for at that time we still had some rattlers around here. However, considering the opportunity, very few people were seen drunk, especially so among the young people, but if by chance someone imbibed too freely, there were not the ill effects afterwards that some know of these later days.

We must not over look the woodworker's shop, where much walnut lumber was worked into substantial and handsome furniture, much of which is still in use in Bethel, fine guitars were made here also.

Agriculture and stock raising were also an important factor in colony life, large tracts of land near Bethel were owned and operated by colonists. There was open range for stock from Shelbyville of west of Bethel as far as Kirksville, each family in the colony cared for from two to five cows according to the size of their family. When I was a small boy, my first task was to help herd the cows. An old man would go along on horseback and a boy on foot; the cows, from 25-100 in number, would be taken out each morning in summer to pasture on the range. Most of the cows wore a strap around their necks with a bell on it, and I will never forget the music they made, but this was necessary to keep from losing them when passing back and forth through the timber.

In raising corn, they used a diamond plow, and would bar plow or throw the dirt away from the corn, then go through and plow the dirt back. I well remember the first cultivator that plowed both sides of the row at once. The old fellows gathered around and said it would never be a success, "too much to watch."

When time came for haying, most of the men and some of the "cooks" turned out to help "make hay." The grass was cut by hand with a scythe, and was raked by hand, the women helped with that part of the work. The feed raised on the farms was divided among the people who cared for the stock. In the harvest field by way of refreshments could always be found water, vinegar, and whiskey. If it were that way on the farm today, the back-to-the-farm movement would have some impetus.

We had a community church, three men doing the preaching, each taking a turn about. Each Sunday, everyone able was supposed to attend the church service. It was generally long and I suppose to some uninteresting, especially so to the youngsters, many of whom stayed away at every opportunity, but if not at church, they stayed out of sight for there was an old man with a cane on the watch out for all who played hooky from church.

Ever since I can remember, we always had a community Christmas service at the big church. On Christmas morning, we always had two Christmas trees in the church, decorated with home-made cookies and apples, and in later years, a little candy.

On Christmas morning at 4 o'clock the band played at the church. The church was a large building with a balcony all around on the inside, and seating hundreds of people. After the band concert, services were held and by that time the church would be filled with people from the town and country roundabout. Everybody was there, the presents were then distributed and great stacks of apples and cookies, (and in later years some candy) were given away, everyone got something and the trees stayed up until New Year's.

Each family had a Christmas tree at home, trimmed with apples and cookies, and sometimes they cut big red beets into strips and hung them on the Christmas tree for ornaments.

It doesn't seem that we have the cold, hard winters that we had years ago. I will never forget one winter in particular, I think it was in 1868. I was 20 years of age and working in the shoe shop at that time, when a few days before the new year it was decided that the Bethel Band, of which I was a member, should go to Nineveh for the New Year's celebration. Nineveh was a settlement and branch of the Bethel Colony some 60 miles distant, about 12 miles beyond Kirksville, so the day before the new year we set out at two o'clock in the morning on our journey—four sleds and about 8 people to the sled. Of course some of the sweethearts had to go, too, so it made a large crowd.

Young Doctor Keil was along and his team had sleigh bells, the only team that had bells. Snow fell the night before and it was snowing and blowing when we started, and of course we soon became separated from each other and before long we realized we were lost. On the prairie just north of Bethel at one time we heard the faint tinkle of sleigh bells, but could never get close to them, and on one occasion we came to a place that we recognized as having been there before, and at 6 o'clock in the morning, after traveling 4 hours, we came to a house only 6 miles from Bethel. We again started out and gradually worked in a northwestern direction and noon found us within a mile of Locust Hill. At a farm house, we tried to get the man to guide us to Locust Hill. He said he could go there blind folded so got on his horse and started out, but soon gave it up as impossible. The storm had grown worse all day and we were never at any time able to see over 20 yards away. We were glad for a place to stay all night and accepted the hospitality of the farmer which we shall never forget. There were two girls in the family and three girls in our party. All five of them slept in one bed. We men sat up by the fire place, freezing on one side while the other side cooked. At 2 o'clock in the morning our supply of wood was exhausted and we had to dig wood out of a snow bank. The next morning was clear and very cold, and we resumed our journey, wondering if we should turn back or go on, having no word from the occupants of the other sleds, and fearing greatly that some or all of them had perished, and knowing that the home folks would be worried about us, but we went on and before night reached our destination and there that night were all reunited, all the sleds getting in and recounting more or less adventures. By way of celebration we danced all night New Years. On our return trip, the snow drifting in places was so deep and frozen so hard that we drove over the tops of stake and rider rail fences, which is something I haven't noticed for a long time. The folks at home rejoiced on our safe arrival, as they surely expected some or all of us to be lost. I have often thought it a miracle that someone of us didn't perish and I wouldn't take chances on another trip like it for all of Shelby County.

Those who are familiar with the Shelby County history remember that after a number of years of successful administration of the Bethel Colony, Dr. Keil, overcome by the wanderlust, decided to go west and there established other colonies. Again, scouts were sent out who reported favorable and wonderful opportunities in the far and beautiful west. Shortly before the appointed time for the covered wagon expedition, Dr. Keil's son, who was anxious to go west and who had gained his father's consent to go, sickened and died, thereby giving his father a chance to demonstrate what he had always tried to impress on the colonists, the serious nature of a promise. Dr. Keil had promised his son he should go and he immediately set out to fulfill his promise. To do this, he secured a copper casket, placed the body in it and filled the casket with alcohol, sealed it, and placed it in a wagon and started on their long journey across the plains toward the land of the setting sun. Thus in 1855, Dr. Keil, accompanied by friends and relatives, about 12 wagons altogether, started on what I believe we may call the longest journey of any funeral procession known. While not missed so much at first, as the years went on, the colonists at home realized more and more that they had lost the leadership of a man whose place no one

could fill and could match the strong personality and guiding power of the man who had always been their leader. Other men were selected as leaders but none seemed to have the control over the people as did the old Dr. Keil. So in 1878, after hearing of the death of their old leader, they voted to dissolve the colony, and five member of this colony were selected to work in conjunction with some from the colony in Aurora, Oregon in setting up the business of disbanding and apportioning each member his or her part. The five selected here were Philip Steinbach, Sr., John Shaffer, Philip Miller, J. G. Bauer, and myself, all of whom are now deceased except myself. We had the able assistance in a legal way of Col. Pat Dyer of St. Louis, an eminent lawyer who gave us sound advice. It was a stupendous task, but accomplished without discord or dissatisfaction, early all being glad they were to be freed from what the younger generation considered to be the yoke of oppression, that had been their lot all these years. They realized that the time had come when the thrifty could get together some of this world's goods and not have to divide with their more indolent brethren. The property was valued and the members paid according to what they had put in at the beginning and a wage for each year they worked in the colony after they were 21 years of age. Thus ended the Bethel Colony after having existed for over 30 years and so far as I know, one of the most successful of its kind.

Bethel was then incorporated and I well remember among many other things came the discussion and demand for sidewalks. Of course they were built of lumber as this was before the day of concrete and there was great opposition as some claimed the hogs root them up, turn them over, and otherwise destroy them, but of course this opposition was overcome and the board walks were built and later replaced with the modern concrete.

As the years went by and people prospered, the demand came for a bank, and in 1892 the Bank Of Bethel was organized with T. L. Bower as president and C. W. Haman, cashier, and it filled a long-felt need.

In colony times there was no need for a bank as the money was kept in the general treasury where there were surely stored large amounts of cash without thought or fear of robbery, something that could not be done now.

In conclusion, I will say that this is only an outline of colony life as I remember it.

Yours respectfully,
Henry Will