

“The Shelby County Herald”
A Colonist Tells The Story Of Bethel

The following are excerpts taken from “A Historical Narrative Of The Old Bethel Colony” written by J. Fred Burckhardt, who was four years old when the Bethel colony dissolved.

“Many changes have taken place in Shelby County, Missouri, in the one hundred and five years since the present site of Bethel was settled by the immigrants, that I will endeavor to write about in this sketch.

In 1845 Dr. Keil with 500 sturdy German Pilgrims, migrated into Shelby County and to the place which was christened Bethel, meaning a house of worship. A steamboat was chartered and the trip was made down the Ohio River to Cairo, then up the Mississippi River to Hannibal. From there the trip was made overland by wagon to Bethel, a distance of 48 miles. It necessitated the making of several trips to convey all the people, stock and provisions they deemed necessary to bring with them to their new home. Much of the food consisted of cured and dried meat. The meat was brought in hogsheads and some of it was stolen in transferring it from the boat to the wagons.

If anyone entered the colony and was dissatisfied, he was furnished free transportation back where he came from. A treasurer was in charge of all funds and everything that was raised or manufactured went into the common storehouse. From this storehouse each person drew out his allotted share. Dr. Keil saw to it that every man and woman had work and that each producer received fair compensation of daily needs for his labor. There were no idlers, political discussions were unknown, for Dr. Keil was Lord of all. The economy and the use of all available land is very evident in the colony burying ground. Here no family lots were sold, but one was marked off and as each person died, he was placed next to the last person buried. When one row was filled, another was marked off. Hebron was the name of the cemetery.

In 1847, in a small town by the name of Newark, a fair was being waged. Of all the most interesting features, a band contest was being held. There were real band wagons in those days. The contesting bands, excepting the Dutch town musicians, rode in red circus band wagons, each drawn by six horses, wearing beaded blankets and head plumes. The parade was beautiful to gaze upon. All gaily decorated wagons headed the procession. The Bethel German Band drove in last and waited patiently until each of the other bands had made its appearance, then seated in a homemade lynch-pin wagon with red running gear and blue body drawn by four mules in chain harness. The German musicians dressed in home-spun blue jeans, trousers and red flannel shirts drove up. Before the first selection was half finished, the German aggregation had not only won the approval of its audience, but had all the competing members climbing from their elaborate wagons and conceding the contest. The rest of that day, the German Band furnished the music.

Plows which were sold throughout the middle west were made in Bethel foundry. There was a wagon factory and a mill used for grinding food for the people. Molasses was made from the choice of the cane and their own flour and meal were ground at the common mill. Flax was grown and through the process of skinning and weaving it was converted into linen goods.

Perhaps the greatest source of income was from the distilleries. Here corn and rye were made into whiskeys and alcohol. Many a wagon load was hauled from Bethel to Quincy, a distance of 48 miles. Here it was sold for as low as eighteen cents a gallon.

Dr. Keil took the Bible for his creed, which was without money and without price. No one was requested to join the Church, and also not urged to attend. Someone was supposed to see to it that the boys did not loaf on the streets on Sunday while preaching services were going on. Sometimes, I think it was absolute freedom that caused the big Church where Dr. Keil preached being filled every Sunday.

Education was considered very important and all the children were kept in school where good teachers were supplied. The school term was twelve months a year.

About two miles east of town on a high elevation not far from North River, the colonists erected the Governor's Mansion, where he lived a style befitted the dignity of his earldom.

Dr. Keil was, as his name implies, truly a Doctor of the Colony, for he made all the medicine used by the entire colony. After Dr. Keil's wife, Louse, and six children and Willie in the casket, started across the plains for Washington, August and Rosa Keil, his wife, took possession of the mansion for several years.

There arose a desire among some of the members and especially their leader, Dr. Keil, to start another colony near the west coast, so eight men and one woman were commissioned to go across the plains to find suitable choice for a colony in the far west. In the year of 1853, they traveled across the prairie.

Dr. Keil unexpectedly died on December 30, 1877. The news of Keil's death cast a spell over its people that no words can describe. Some of his intimate friends had been informed by Dr. Keil of the seriousness in his last sickness. The greater was the shock on account of the suddenness of it. From the time of the spreading of the dreadful news till the afternoon of the next day after the New Years, his people spoke in whispers and went about as though they were treading upon Holy Ground.

The end was a sad disappointment to the founders of the colony who were living at the time of the disbandment. By their agreement, it was decided that the Aurora community should have and retain all of the real and personal property then owned in Oregon, and in addition thereto, the Bethel community should convey to the Aurora community, town lots in Shelby County, Missouri, of the appraised value of \$7,601.00.”