

**The Bethel Story:**  
**No Story So Strange But True**  
Shelby County Herald Harvest Fest Edition

by: Mrs. Lucille Bower

No stranger story so fascinating has ever been told than the story of Bethel, a communal settlement ruled by William Keil; prophet, priest, and king he was called.

An interesting background for the colony's history is the biographical sketch of its founder, Dr. Keil. He was born in Blei-cher-ode, Erfurd Province, Prussia on March 6, 1812. Early in life he was trained to be a lady's tailor. Soon after his marriage to Miss Louisa Reiter at Kolleda, Germany, they emigrated to America in 1836, living in New York City, still following the trade of a tailor.

He was described as a short, burly man with blue eyes, white hair and beard, excitable and somewhat suspicious; he gave no thought or token whatever of having studied any book but the Bible and that only as it helped him enforce his own philosophy.

There is no evidence or record of his ever attending any technical school or university. Letters written by Keil show a most imperfect use and knowledge of his own language.

The profession of a tailor to him seemed monotonous. He was a dreamer, restless and had visions of doing great things, a man of an imposing, magnetic personality.

First, he dreamed of becoming an actor. He next began an investigation for a "universal medicine," a panacea which would heal all the ails of the human body. This whim led him to a study of botany, gaining some knowledge of medicine. He made many experiments to solve the laws of nature and to prove the mystery of life.

In 1838 he left New York and settled in Pittsburg where he continued his many experiments, having in his possession many bottles of liquids which he claimed to be the results of his long investigations. He also had a strange book which he said was given to him by an old woman in Germany, containing many symbols and formulas written in human blood. This "Hexen Book," as it was called, was used by Keil to perform his cures. He did perform strange cures and was dubbed with the undignified title of "Der Hexendokter."

When in Pennsylvania he came under the influence of Dr. William Nast of the German Methodist Church, was converted and burned his "Hexen Book" with an impressive ceremony. Keil became a minister and was connected with several churches in the Pittsburg area, but, always impatient with restrictions, or any orders from superiors, he denounced all religious sects, took the name "Christian" and preached comfort and plenty for all.

At Phillipsburg, 28 miles from Pittsburg on the Ohio River, a large body of Keil's community took form. In 1805 George Rapp had established the famous Harmony Society, one of the largest communals in the United States. This society existed at Economy, Pa., a few miles from Pittsburg. By 1831 other visionary leaders arrived with a body of followers, causing trouble in the Rapp Colony. In time the Rapp Colony disbanded. Here Keil saw the chance to rule as he never had before. He began organizing his followers, many being former members of the old Rapp Colony.

Following the panic of 1837 the eastern states were swept by waves of religious and political unrest. Hundreds of immigrant, unused to the American way of life, were trying to establish homes. Because of this, many people flocked about leaders who preached communistic life with the result that numerous colony movements were started.

In the year 1844, Keil selected three scouts and sent them westward to seek a new home for him and his faithful followers. The site chosen was the prairie lands of Shelby County, Missouri, on the banks of North River. Keil's dream of a communal settlement began to materialize when he led the German pilgrims down the Ohio River to Cairo, up the Mississippi to Hannibal, from there overland by

wagon to what is now Bethel. Here his influence grew until he had complete authority.

The Bethel Colony numbered 476 by 1850; 2,500 acres of land was purchased and was to grow to 3,536 acres in Shelby County and 731 acres at Ninevah in Adair County.

Some of the colonists were wealthy, some had very little, but regardless of amount, all monies and property were deposited in the colony fund. At the end of the week all money accumulated at the various stores, shops, from the sale of surplus livestock and grain was turned over to the general treasury--"Share and Share Alike"--was supposed to be Dr. Keil's motto.

Each family head had his designated labor. Perhaps he farmed, taught school, worked in the various stores, shops, mill, or factories. Even children had their duties. There were no drones in the "Bethel Bee Hive." Each family had its own flock of chickens as well as cows and hogs according to family size. On Wednesdays, flour was distributed from the General Store. No man received any money for wages.

Each colonist family resided in a private home, built and owned by the colony. These houses were built of brick (made in Bethel) and stone, with walls twelve inches thick and two stories high with steps leading from the sidewalks to the door. Every available inch of land was used for productive purposes; therefore lawns were a waste of land and considered unnecessary.

The economic use of land is evident at Hebron, the colony burial ground. Here no family lots were sold, as each colonist died they were placed in rows, as close together as possible.

One mile east of Bethel, the colony craftsmen erected Elim, a stately three and one-half story brick house for their leader. Artists in their trade, the builders laid out Elim on a generous scale as they thought befitting their leader. Measuring 36 feet X 60 feet, the house has a full basement and wine cellar of hand-hewn limestone blocks. On the main floor, four large rooms open off a wide hallway. Paneled doors of walnut open to the outside of each end of the hall. A large fireplace in each room provided the heat. The entire second floor was used for a banquet and ballroom. Here the colonists gathered to celebrate the many holidays such as Easter, Pentecost, Harvest Feast, and the most important, Dr. Keil's birthday, March 6<sup>th</sup>, that also being the birthday of Mrs. Keil. On these occasions huge tables were spread with all the good things the German kitchens and cellars could offer. Everyone was invited and there was music and dancing in the evenings.

The colony church was built in 1848. It was constructed of brick and stone and walnut. The floor was made of large red tiles ten inches square and a pulpit, made of walnut, stood at one end. There were two doors, one for each of the sexes. The men and women sat on opposite sides of the room. The inside walls were also paneled in walnut. Huge walnut posts or columns supported the large balcony on three sides of the room. A portion of this spacious balcony or gallery was enclosed by a railing, here the band played on many occasions.

There was also a high cupola, with steps leading up to an outside balcony enclosed by a railing. In the belfry hung one large bell and two small bells which rang in harmony and could be heard for miles.

One of the most important phases of the Bethel industry was the steam mill, built in the fall of 1845. The mill was a two and one-half story brick building, located on the north bank of North River. All kinds of grains were ground and an excellent quality of flour. Logs were sawed for all building needs. At first this was only a grist and saw mill. Later carding and spinning rooms were added and still later looms were installed. Here wool was carded, spun and woven into cloth and blankets. The colonists raised flax and this was also woven into cloth. The woolen coverlets and blankets were in great demand and all surplus was sold. This mill burned in 1872, with the loss of \$20,000. Another mill was built immediately, but only a saw and grist mill, the carding and weaving departments were never replaced.

Another great source of income was from the distilleries. Here corn and rye were made into whiskey and alcohol. Many wagon loads were hauled to Hannibal and Quincy, selling for 15 cents per gallon.

For the making of linseed oil the colonists used stones. A large stone was made perfectly smooth and laid down horizontally. On this stone rested two circular ones about five feet in diameter and 12 inches thick. They were fastened by a rod in the center to which an axle was attached. Horses were hitched to the axle and made to roll the heavy round stones over the horizontal stone. The flax seed was spread on the flat stone, the round stones moving over this crushed the flax seed into pulp from which the oil was extracted by pressure.

Bethel had a tannery and the skins of cattle and horses were tanned and made into leather goods, gloves, and shoes. The colony shoes were carefully made and strong and many outsiders purchased shoes there. For the operation of the tannery, much oak bark was necessary. The colonists did not like to rob their own trees so when the "outsiders" were clearing land, the colonists went to them with a proposition that if the "outsider" would allow them to peel the bark for their use, they (the colonists) would cut down the trees.

Plows and wagons which were sold throughout the middle west were made in the Bethel Foundries.

Bethel, by this time almost self-supporting, also was gaining prominence as a small industrial center. The colonists, often described as having "Art in their hands" capitalized on this by turning deer skins into buckskin gloves at the Bethel glove factory. They must have been of superior quality and workmanship as they took a first premium at the New York City World Fair in 1855.

There was also a hat factory where hats were made from lamb's wool and rabbit fut. In the colony tailor ship suits and overcoats were made for colony members. All surplus from the factories was sold at Bethel or hauled to Hannibal and Quincy.

Sharing things in common, common places had to be provided for their livestock. For their oxen and horses, a barn was built in Bethel 120 feet X 48 feet. In style it was what is known as a Pennsylvania bank barn with a basement-like arrangement where the animals were kept and a large loft for hay and grain. This barn was also used for cows and stock cattle.

The colony mother led the usual life of a frontier housewife. In many ways her tasks were much easier than other colonial housewives. For instance, all the family laundry was done at the community "wash house" near the river. For the operations of the steam mill, tannery, distillery, and a colony laundry an abundance of hot water was required. A large boiler was purchased for the mill and this was made to supply hot water to the other industries. The remaining problem as how to get the hot water to the various buildings. Metal pipes they could not afford, so they took long straight beams, about 20 feet long, one and a half feet in diameter at the larger end. With a special homemade bit, they drilled a two-inch hole through the entire beam. By hollowing out the larger end and tapering the other, they made a joint which, by wrapping with flax or hemp dipped in tar, they made water tight.

The family baking was done on certain days at the German bake ovens which stood in the yard of the "Das grasse haus" (the large house.) This was the large building where the colony store was kept, another part a hotel, and the rest of the building a dwelling place for the inhabitation of unmarried men in the colony.

Bethel would have had great educational opportunities, if it had not been for Keil, who was opposed to higher education, saying it was not necessary in making good workers for the society. A young man would be permitted to go to college, provided he learn a particular skill that would be of use to the colony. Keil's attitude toward the intellectual life of his colony leaves much to be desired. It caused many disagreements between he and his three associates, Wolff, Ruge, and Finck, who were men of higher education and great ability. Keil's severity and autocratic rule had a dwarfing affect on the minds of the colonists. He did not want his members to know too much or mingle with the "outside world" too freely.

Education would have been much higher in Bethel than the average frontier community. Living in the colony were three men, giants in the fields of education and music. Men of high morals, of great intellect and graduates from the best colleges and universities. Among them Karl Ruge, a college-bred

man prepared for the teaching profession in Germany. He was the colony school teacher and he remained in that capacity until he went to Oregon with Keil. He also was Keil's secretary, writing all his letters to the Bethel Colonists after he and Keil went to Oregon. He was also Keil's interpreter, as the "Doktor" could only speak German and never learned to speak English.

Another one to be remembered is Henry Conrad Finck, "The Music Master," truly a master in music. To him is due the high position which the colony at Bethel took as a center of music lovers in those early days. One of his sons, Henry T. Finck, born in Bethel in 1854, became world famous as an author of 18 books and a music critic in New York, giving 24 lectures on music each year for forty-three years. Henry Finck was also the first student to go to Harvard from Oregon. All his training in music before going to Harvard he received from his father and Christoff Wolff.

Christoff W. Wolff, probably the most beloved of Keil's associates was a devout Lutheran who came to America in 1848 with a great number of intellectual aristocrats. He was a graduate of the University of Hiedelberg and taught there before leaving for America. He was educated in art and the classics, a master of many languages, a teacher of the higher branches and the man who trained Henry T. Finck for Harvard.

In the spring of 1853 Bethel was prospering. The colony shops and factories were humming. Colony products were in demand, as they were carefully and well made. Taking advantage of the increased demands and as all surplus was sold, more and more money poured into the general treasury. In other words, "Bethel was booming."

At this time Keil again became restless and uneasy; he began dreaming, having visions of many colonies in the far West. He feared the people in Bethel would become contaminated by contact with the "world," as he called it. He could take his people west, so he thought, and continue to rule them. Once again, scouts were sent to the Pacific Coast to look for a place favorable for the colony. These men returned after selecting a region in the Willapa Valley in the Washington Territory.

In the spring of 1855 preparation for the journey began. Dr. Keil promised his son, William, he could lead the wagon train into the new country. Before they departed from Bethel, the boy contracted malaria fever and died. Then occurred that curious thing Dr. Keil used to impress upon the colonists, the binding nature of a promise. He had told the boy he would go to Oregon, and death did not relieve him of this obligation. So he went about preparing for the longest funeral expedition probably in the history of the land. The wagon train was led to the far west by the wagon containing the casket in which the body of William Keil had been placed. After five months of travel they reached their destination. Singing a funeral hymn composed for the occasion, "Das Grab ist tief und stille," William Keil was buried on a little knoll close to what is now Raymond, Washington.

Unsatisfied with the location at Willapa, Keil moved to Portland Ore, where he stayed until 1857, when he bought land in the Willamette Valley in Marion County, Oregon. Aurora, named for Keil's daughter, was established in 1857. Some five caravans left Bethel during these years: 1855, 1863, 1865, and 1867. Dr. Keil never returned to Bethel, but ruled from Aurora in the same fashion as he had before, appointing overseers to act in his behalf. During the last part of the colony's existence, Keil sent his son, August, to Bethel as a doctor and ruler. August was not fit for these tasks. First, he was not well trained in medicine, he possessed no business ability and was such a drunkard, none would trust his life or property in his hands. In disgrace he died alone in a barn in Bethel.

When in December 1877, Dr. Keil died, the knell of the colony sounded. The Bethel and Aurora property and lands were divided; each appointing three trustees to do the dividing. The allotments made to each individual were satisfactory—each accepting his part.