

The Deutschheim Association Journal

Der Maibaum

Deutschheim Verein Journal

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Our German Heritage

Unser deutsches Erbgut

A Utopian Settlement on the Frontier

Wilhelm Keil and Bethel Colony, Missouri

Adolf E. Schroeder



Bethel German Colony, located forty-eight miles west of Hannibal on the banks of the North River in Shelby County, was founded by the followers of Wilhelm Keil, who had emigrated with his wife to the United States in the early 1830s. Born March 6, 1811 (or 1812), in Bleicherode, near Nordhausen in the Kingdom of Prussia, Keil as a young man immersed himself in the study of religion and became a devotee of Jacob Boehme, a 16th century Silesian mystic.

Although lacking in schooling beyond the elementary level, as evidenced later in his life by his imperfect command of written German, Keil reportedly undertook various botanical and medical experiments and investigations in an effort to gain an understanding of the laws of nature and discover a *Universal Medizin*, a panacea for the ills of mankind. Shortly after arriving in the United States, Keil and his wife settled in Pittsburgh and opened a drugstore. Because of the cures he was said to have effected he was known as "Dr. Keil" or in some quarters as the *Hexendoktor*. In 1838 William Nast, the "Father of German Methodism," conducted revival meetings in Pittsburgh and Keil was among his converts. In a dramatic ceremony witnessed by Nast, he burned the mysterious book of cures he had brought from Germany, written in blood it was said, symbolically putting his days as a *Hexendoktor* behind him. However, after a brief try as a German Methodist pastor, he withdrew from the church, taking his entire congregation with him.

He joined the Protestant Methodist Church, but soon decided to renounce all churches, all titles except that of Christian, and all laws except those given in the Bible. In the following few years he gained converts among the German Methodists and other churches, Harmonists who had withdrawn from George Rapp's New Harmony Colony, and followers of Count Leon, whose remaining members eventually established a colony near Minden, Louisiana. Like many others, Keil and his followers soon decided that freedom lay in the Far West (at that time viewed as being anything west of the Mississippi) and in 1844 sent scouts to find a location for a colony in which their beliefs could be put into practice.

The first-hand account of the Bethel Colony published in the *Hannibal Gazette* less than three years after the settlement was established provides an illuminating insight into the industry and skills of the colonists who had emigrated to Missouri to found their Utopia, in which each family was provided a house and each person worked as he was able. The

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From the Chairman

Goodby to Alberta Toedebusch

We regret to announce that we've lost one of our Adjunct Board members, a long-time supporter of Deutschheim and a contributor of a collection of Plattdeutsch sayings to the *Maibaum*, many of which have not yet appeared in our pages. Alberta Toedebusch died July 22nd, aged 70. She was a dedicated supporter of efforts to save and preserve the Platt culture relocated to Missouri in general and particularly by 19th Century Westfalen immigrants from northwest Germany. She spearheaded the creation of a formal New Melle-Melle Friendship Society between Melle in the homeland (to which she had made numerous trips hunting her own and others' relatives) and New Melle, Warren County, MO. She will be missed by all who knew her and by all who cherish their northwest German roots and the continuation of spoken Platt in the New World

Summer Issue

This one follows hot on the heels of the Spring issue in our effort to get us all caught up. The Fall issue, due out in October, will be back up to the 12 pages we used to offer. So much to share and so little space!

Please encourage others to subscribe. The more readers we have, the faster *Der Maibaum* can grow.

Judy Prange

Letters to the Editor

Dear Friends, I visited Hermann in December 1994 — had a private tour, and was pleased with the whole experience. Thanks for everything. But please get your label information straightened out so that I know when my subscription is running out. I look forward to another issue of *Der Maibaum*.

Wilma J. Lass, Niagara Falls NY

We intend to have this solved in the very near future.

The article about the Easter Rabbit took me back! We always dyed Easter eggs, sometimes with boiled onion skins which produced lovely shades of brown! In the New York area the German bakery shops produced a running (or jumping) rabbit, about a foot long, that was very shiny due to an egg wash and had a raisin for an eye.

Mathilde Arnheiter Milton, East Haddam CT

What has become of those good German bakeries and their specialties?

Der Maibaum brought back memories of my childhood, especially the German alphabet. Please accept my small contribution toward any restoration and preservation of German historic sites.

Lydia Krompegal, Canton CT

Thank you, Lydia. Help is always greatly appreciated.

Got any thoughts, requests, suggestions, or information to pass along? Write the Editor, 109 W. 2nd Street, Hermann MO 65041.

former Harmonists are generally credited with having contributed most significantly to the rapid growth and success of Bethel's agricultural enterprises and industries. The Colony became Missouri's most successful Utopian experiment. Although Keil and some of his followers left Bethel in 1854 to go farther west, where they eventually established Aurora Colony in Oregon (which also became prosperous and successful), Bethel Colony was not dissolved until after Kiel's death in 1877. In 1879 the property was officially divided among Aurora and Bethel Colony members.

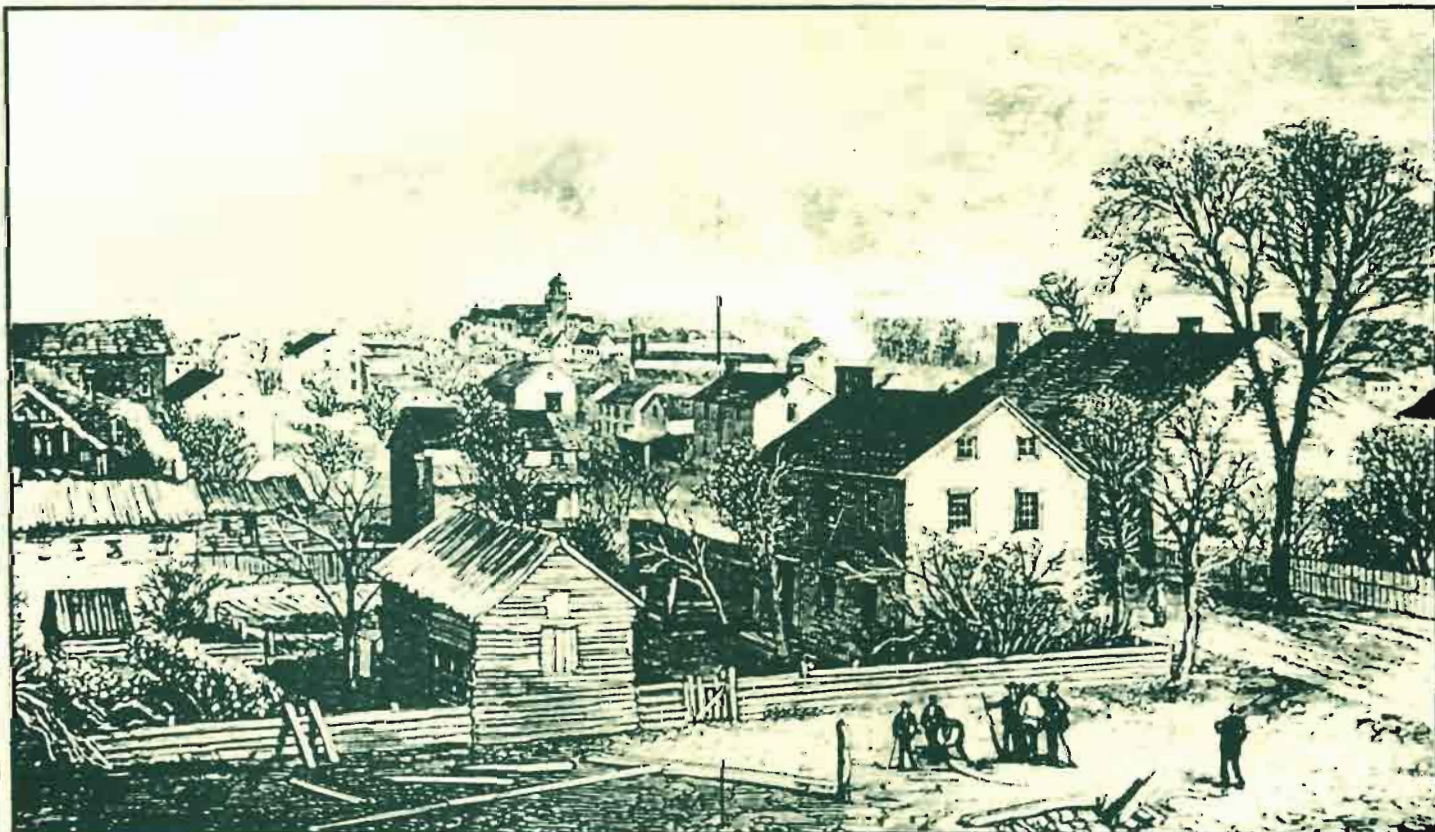
Today more than thirty of the original Colony buildings remain in Bethel. Descendants of the original settlers' families have cooperated for many years to preserve the history and German cultural life of the community.

An Anglo American Looks at a New German Village

As carried in the Hannibal Gazette, September 27, 1847

After spending the most part of to-day in cantering about the pleasant environs of Shelbyville, I concluded after dinner to take a drive to Bethel, as the German settlement five miles north of Shelbyville, and on a branch of North River, is called. In company with a friend, I left after dinner and at a rapid pace, drove over a level and magnificent

prairie, three or four miles in extent, lying between the timber of Black Creek, and that of North River. In an hour, we were in sight of the village, which is pleasantly situated on a gradual slope, reaching down to the very North shore of the stream. A wooden Bridge is thrown across the river at the foot of the principal street. On the right as you cross the Bridge, is an extensive tannery, 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. On either side of the street leading up from the bridge, are the dwelling houses situated at regular intervals, built of brick and . . . all of the same size. On the right, about a hundred yards from the bridge, a large hotel is in course of erection. About half a mile from the river, a large church is being completed. This building is of brick, about 60 by 100 feet, there is a wide entrance on each side, near the middle, over which is a singular oval window, at the east end is a tower, 20 feet square, and near 80 feet high to a balustrade, above which is a belfry and steeple. After mounting various flights of steps and ladders we reached the platform when we found a German engaged in painting the railing. From here, we had the whole country for an area of four or five miles within our view. Off to the North, stretched the farm of the colony, looking as regular as a chess board, and in the distant prairie their herds of cattle and sheep, with the shepherds driving them slowly . . . The whole scene . . . pleasing,
con't on p. 7



Bethel Colony, about 1850

Fortune Favors the Bold

The Saga of Johann August Sutter

Johann August Sutter a hero? Why not? One definition of *hero* is a man who is noted for his special achievements in a particular field, and Sutter certainly fit that. For decades during the 19th Century he was admired for his flashing successes. He also became the butt of detractors who have managed to tarnish his reputation. There have been few German immigrants who had the meteoric rise—and shattering fall—which marked Sutter's career. It is a dramatic tale, only a minute part of which is ever included in U.S. History textbooks.

Sutter, born in Baden and raised in Switzerland, was the son and grandson of Swiss master papermakers. He was apprenticed to a Basel printer, but was later permitted by his parents to attend a military academy in Bern. Evidently printing lacked the appeal of military life for a boy of his imagination and adventurous spirit. He rose to the rank of Captain, along the way acquiring a wife and far too many debts. He also seems to have acquired a grasp of organization and leadership which should be the envy of many a CEO.

In 1833 he fled to the United States to escape his creditors, temporarily leaving behind his wife and three children. He went to Gasconade County, Missouri, to join relatives living near the village of Swiss, south of Hermann, but found that farming was no more to his taste than printing had been. Frontier Missouri did not offer sufficient scope for someone of his heroic imagination and romantic inclinations—one suspects him as a boy of dreaming of knights and castles and derring-do in what he would have viewed as his prosaic surroundings, and never outgrowing these childhood visions. His career from 1833 to 1839 certainly supports this notion. He actively sought adventure, fortune, and fame. Unlike most of us, he found them.

After exploring the possibilities of St. Louis, he shifted to Westport just outside Kansas City in order to deal with the Santa Fe Trail traders and travelers. This also palled, no glory and there simply wasn't enough money in it to meet his past and present needs. He joined an American Fur Company expedition headed across the plains for the Astoria Trading Post and what would eventually be Washington State, but Indians, buffalo, and mountains were not enough. Restless, he went on to visit Alaska, he visited Hawaii, and then—on July 1, 1839—he finally found his destiny. He landed in Monterey.



Upper or Alta California (what we know simply as California, forgetting all that bit below today's border known as Lower or Baja California) was part of Mexico at the time, and had been since 1821, the year an independent Mexico was created from the former Spanish Empire. It was thinly settled and the northern reaches above San Francisco had barely begun to be developed. Sutter formed an expedition outfitted with shallow-draft river boats, took on provisions, weapons, tools, and a reliable crew, and set out to move up the Sacramento River to its junction with the American River. There he founded a settlement which has since grown into Sacramento, California's capitol and one of its largest cities. He named it Nueva Helvetia (New Switzerland), but the locals took to calling it "Sutter's Fort."

Sutter was granted Mexican citizenship and a huge land grant, 48,827 acres, in the Sacramento Valley. He promised Gov. Juan Bautista Alvarado that he would create a colony in what was then still pretty much wilderness occupied by semi-nomadic Indian tribes. It may well be that Gov. Alvarado was so generous to a promoter he knew nothing about because Sutter was willing to develop lands which would form a barrier between most of settled California

and the route by which migrants from the United States were invading the West Coast across the Rocky and Sierra Nevada Mountains. A large fortress in the Sacramento Valley occupied by those loyal to the government would help anchor Mexico's ownership against the onslaught of settlers from the United States, and a prosperous settlement out in the Valley might reduce the numbers of Yankees moving into San Francisco, Monterey, and Los Angeles.

In 1841 Sutter was able to add to his grant by buying Ft. Ross and a considerable region around it for \$30,000.00 from its Russian owners, who had decided to gracefully give up their nearly forty year old claims in the lower Pacific Coast region in response to pressure from the Mexican government. With Ft. Ross and its sister Russian-owned port Bodega Bay Sutter acquired a shipyard, grist mills in each small settlement, a tannery, an armory, blacksmith and carpentry shops, and a wooden-palisaded fort armed with cannon. There were cattle, horses, sheep, orchards, and vineyards too. Overnight Sutter's lands were considerably more than 80,000 acres, plus the benefits of having his own seaports directly west of Nueva Helvetia and about one hundred miles north of San Francisco.

That same year Gov. Alvarado came north from the capitol at Monterey to Nueva Helvetia to see for himself the successes which had all California buzzing. In two years' work there was already quite a bit on which to congratulate Sutter. Progress was so solid that in 1845 another governor, Pio Pico, granted Sutter additional acres, giving the German Swiss control over about 230 square miles, mostly in the Central Valley. Sutter's grants included acreage which would become some of California's most productive farm land.

Despite the vast tracts under his direction, Sutter was by no means the greatest land magnate in California. Others, such as Mariano Guadalupe Vallejo, exceeded Sutter's ownership. Vallejo's grants of about 249,000 acres included most of the Sonoma Valley. Even this extensive domain was not the largest holding; a few old-line families between Monterey and Los Angeles held even more.

Johann August Sutter had found his milieu. It seemed he could not put a foot wrong, everything he tried on his land grant was a success. He was even able to achieve close rapport with the region's Indians, who worked willingly for him and who stayed loyal to him when others (after the gold discovery) forgot all they owed to Sutter metaphorically and financially.

Alvarado appointed Sutter a major general in the California militia to enhance his capacity to maintain order and peace in his colony. As part of his agreement with Mexican authorities Sutter built an impressive adobe fortress covering more than five acres, with walls 18 feet high and nearly three feet thick. General Sutter strengthened his fort with twenty-four Napoleonic cannon, enlisted and trained forty men into a more or less military unit, and recruited settlers among the whites and Indians of the region.

He developed a prosperous agricultural district through the introduction of a well-laid-out irrigation system, the first in that part of California. At last with adequate water extensive fields of grain, large orchards, and wine grapes flourished. Sutter built a grist mill, a bakery, smithies, workshops, a winery, a distillery, and other businesses and necessary support services. Most of these were located within the fort, as was his house. Workers' villages were constructed. Within eight or nine years he also had 12,000



Sutter's fort in 1847.

Autumn Dishes the German American Way
Or: How To Feed Eight People on a Pound of Hamburger

A Favorite One-Dish Dinner—Cabbage Pudding

Germans call a one-pot dinner an *Eintopf*. Simple meals prepared all together have a long, honored history in German kitchens. Like much of the best food to be found in any country, these were peasant dishes slow-cooked for hours while all the able-bodied family members were at work.

This is an Americanized *Eintopf* descended from the slow-cooked cabbage/onion/meat deep pot casseroles of southern Germany and the German parts of Switzerland. Tante Rosa Strehly kept it from a 1932 flour bag recipe folder. This and other mass-produced early twentieth century recipes with German overtones demonstrate yet another way in which German culture has influenced the entire nation, often without anyone realizing.

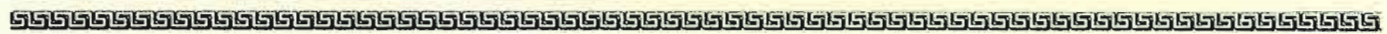
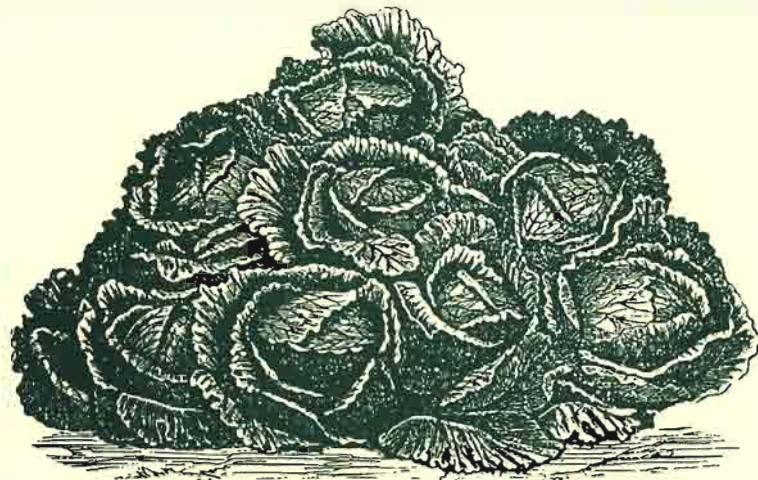
Here is a truly ethnic bit of period history to try.

- 1 small head of cabbage
- 1 tsp salt
- 1 small onion
- 1 TBS butter
- 1 slice of bread, over 1" thick
- 1 lb lean ground beef
- 2 eggs
- ½ c. milk
- 1½ tsp salt
- ¼ tsp pepper
- ¼ tsp nutmeg

sauce

- 4 TBS butter
- 4 TBS flour
- 1 c. milk
- 1 c. liquid from the cabbage
- 1 tsp salt

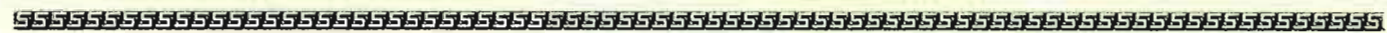
Cut the cabbage in half, and place in a sauce pan with 1 tsp salt. Cover with boiling water and cook just 5 minutes. Sauté finely chopped onion in the butter until transparent. Soak the bread in cold water and squeeze it dry. Mix ground beef, beaten eggs, milk, seasonings, onion, and damp bread together. Grease a 10" casserole which has deep straight sides. Place a layer 1" thick of drained cabbage leaves on the bottom. Add a layer of the beef mixture. Alternate, making at least 3 layers of cabbage about 1" thick. Place in steamer or on top of stove, or steam-bake in 350° oven in a larger pan of water. When it is done, after about 2 hours, pour off the liquor collected in the dish; set aside. Make a cream sauce by melting 4 tbs butter, blending in 4 tbs flour, and adding the liquor and some milk—enough to make 2 c. in all. Cook over low heat 10 minutes, stirring continually. Season with salt and pepper. Turn the cabbage pudding onto a deep serving platter. It will look like a layer cake. Pour the sauce over it and serve it hot. Makes 8 servings.



Uese Härgott weet alls, aower nich wat in de Wuorst is.

Our God knows all things, but not what's in the sausage.

From Plattdeutsch sayings, *Plattdeutsche Spröake*, submitted by Alberta Toedebusch, New Melle MO



simple, and pastoral. We could not help but pause to contemplate it—and as we looked with admiration around us, the painter ceased his occupation, and following our gaze, seemed to catch the inspiration of the scene, as he swept with his brush around the horizon, and exclaimed in broken English, “dat ish grand!” He seemed sociable, and communicative, and gave us all the information we solicited in relation to the colony.

Leaving the tower, we entered the main building. We found its roof arched, and painted a fine azure color. The arch is supported by light columns, which extend from the floor to the gallery, and thence level to the ceiling. The galleries extend the whole length of the building, and injure the effect of the arch very much—I observed a small door opening in from the tower, about 10 feet from the floor. I guessed the pulpit would be erected here, and the speaker enter it from a sort of vestry room in the tower.

Having completed our examination of the church, we next went to the loom-room. Here all varieties of weaving seemed to be going on by hand, but in a short time this department will be moved by steam also. There are several residences about the village which evince a fine taste. That of Dr. Keil, is the most striking and really the appearance of the grounds surprised us when we recollected that but a few years have elapsed since they found this a wild, untouched by the hand of man. As the Sun lighted up the tree tops with his lingering rays, we left the village, highly delighted with our visit. We could not but regard the peaceful hamlet, as the abode of contentment, happiness and plenty, and we heartily wish 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. As we left the village, the female portion of the inhabitants, came in from the potato fields each with a basket and hoe and the males left their labor to prepare for rest. The Band were making preparations to attend the great barbecue in Monroe, of

this band hereafter. The colony numbers about 600 souls, and is in a prospering condition, and on the best of terms with all their neighbors.

The Great Barbecue in Monroe.

The good people of Paris were aroused this morning by an unusual reveille: the firing of cannon and martial music. At an early hour people of both sexes, of every age and condition came pouring in along every road—and the streets were literally thronged by crowds bent on enjoying the occasion to the full. At ten the crowd gathered into the court-yard and amid the thunder of cannon, and the flourishes of music, the Marshals of the day made an ineffectual attempt to form a procession. The music, headed by the banner of the Colony, and the volunteers headed by the flag, presented by the ladies to them one year ago, now all torn and faded, kept in order, but over a thousand ladies and four thousand men who thronged after them utterly escaped all appearances of order, and then the living mass moved out of town, across the bridge, to the grove, and filling up the seats, stood thick and far, around the speaker's stand, and by thus had an opportunity not only to hear the addresses, but to observe all that was going on. After the band had delighted the assembly, by the faultless performance of a national air, Col. Phillip Williams was introduced and delivered an address of about an hour's length; a good thing in its place.

This newspaper article, found by Dr. Schroeder in his continuing research on the colony, has been reprinted by permission from *The Bethel Sun*, a publication of the Historic Bethel German Colony, Inc.

Tours of several of the surviving half-timbered and brick buildings are available, local dishes can be enjoyed at the Colony's restaurant, and a variety of special events (don't miss Sheep Days in September!) and crafts classes are offered by Historic Bethel German Colony, Inc. For more information contact them at P.O. Box 127, Bethel, MO 63434, or telephone 816-284-6493.—ed.

Sutter, con't

head of cattle, 10,000 sheep, 2,000 horses and mules, and 1,000 hogs on his estancia. The man who left Switzerland to escape his debts had become one of the wealthiest and most respected men in California.

The fort that he built reflected his Swiss German background in its layout and the style and proportions of its buildings. A kitchen survives with a typical raised hearth (Herdstelle) in the German manner. Sutter may have become a Mexican citizen, but just like the many Germans who settled in the United States he saw no reason to give

up the culture of his birth. His predilections were reinforced by others from Germany and Switzerland who came to work for him.

PART II, THE DISASTER, IN NEXT ISSUE





Coming
In Future
Issues . . .

*In folgenden
Ausgaben kommt*

Johann August Sutter,
Part II
Serfs or Peasants?
Turner Societies
Der Belznickel

Watch this
space

for information on under-
standing when your mem-
bership needs to be re-
newed.

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