

# PAST STILL PRESENT

CPPS Archives Bulletin Issue #17, February, 2015

## WHAT THE SISTERS LEFT BEHIND IN GURTWEIL; WHAT THEY FOUND IN BELLE PRAIRIE

The village of Gurtweil is situated on the edge of the Black Forest, *der Schwarzwald*, one of the most scenic areas in Germany. Set among gardens and meadows, the sisters' home was backed by wooded hills and vineyards. The River Schlücht runs nearby through fields and meadows. Near the village of Gurtweil, it forms a waterfall whose sound can be heard at some distance.

With the help of some wealthy landowners, Rev. Herman Kessler, the pastor in Gurtweil, obtained the old castle [*das Schloss built in the mid-1600s*] on the edge of the



FOUNDATION OF THE COMMUNITY—GURTWEIL, BADEN

The Schloss set amid the green hills

photo in *Foundation & Progress*, p. 30

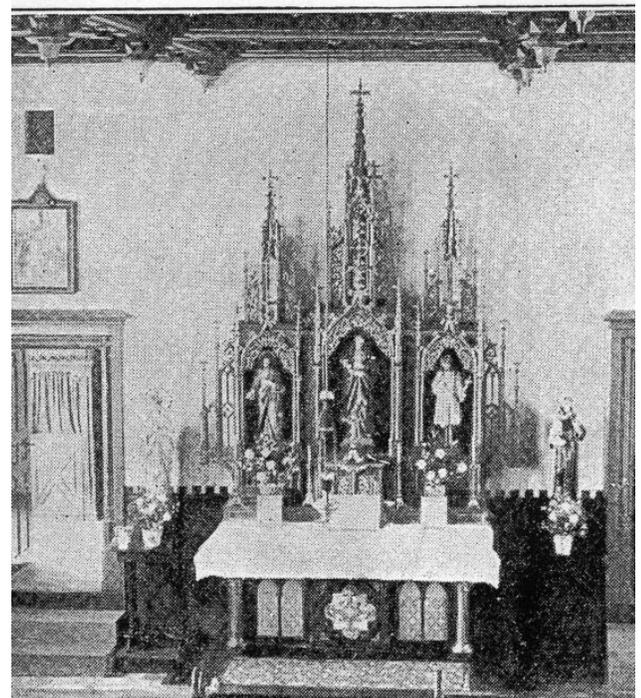
village.



REV. HERMAN KESSLER

This sixteen-acre property contained not only the sturdy, venerable, multi-floored main building, but also other buildings including a hot house, later enlarged and converted into a beautiful chapel, dedicated in 1867.

Wanting to establish an orphan home for twelve poor children left in his care, Fr. Kessler requested sisters from Ottmarsheim. In early December, 1857, six sisters went to Gurtweil to assume care of the orphans. Ten years later, there was solidly-established community of 80-plus sisters busy with many undertakings: a flourishing embroidery department making ecclesiastical vestments, an orphanage, a boarding school, and a teacher-preparation school in Gurtweil, and six schools in the Baden area.



CHAPEL—GURTWEIL

This altar as well as the Stations came to America in 1873 with the 4<sup>th</sup> group of 49 sisters led by M. Augusta

The teaching sisters were well-educated and taught academic subjects including science and French as well as practical arts in a Housekeeping or Domestic Science school [*Haushaltungsschule*]. They were well-respected throughout the countryside, and the embroidery department was kept so busy that occasionally sisters worked through the night. The community had financial security—due largely to the success of the embroidery department.

**However, not all was well.**

From the early 1860s on, the Church was harassed by political persecution. As Chancellor, Otto von Bismarck dominated German politics and fostered the anti-Catholic sentiment which gradually prevailed. Laws were passed that placed parochial schools under secular control. The government closed the school at Krozingen. In Baden convents were secularized. In Gurtweil, the sisters put on secular clothes as a precaution.



Religious congregations were banned from engaging in missions, pastoral work, and teaching. Bismarck's *Kulturkampf* (cultural struggle) 1871-1878, which enacted laws designed to reduce the role and autonomy of the Catholic Church in such areas as education, marriage, and ecclesiastical appointments, eventually led to the expulsion of all religious congregations.

Meanwhile, in the United States, the Church saw a growing need for ministry with the German immigrants who settled in the Midwest. Among the German Catholics who came to southeastern Illinois were families from Baden. One place they settled was in the small town of St. John—later Belle Prairie, and still later Piopolis—



Rt. Rev. Henry Damian Juncker  
Bishop of Alton, Illinois 1857— 1868  
Wikipedia [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry\\_Damian\\_Juncker](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Henry_Damian_Juncker)

Illinois. The pastor, Rev. Blaise Winterhalter, visited Germany in 1866, and, with the approval of the bishop of Alton, Rt. Rev. Henry Damian Juncker, invited the sisters to his parish. Bishop Juncker himself visited Gurtweil in 1867 and renewed the invitation, but the sisters put off a decision, hoping that the political climate would improve. It did not, and when Fr. Winterhalter repeated the invitation to come to America, Mother Augusta and the sisters recognized it as a God-given opportunity to secure the safety and continuation of the congregation.



Map - Wikipedia  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piopolis,\\_Illinois](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Piopolis,_Illinois)



Sr. Benedicta Hegele

Sr. Mechtilda Muehlhaupt

Sr. Walburga Schneider

Sr. Josephine Dietrich

Sr. Caroline Knoerr

Sr. Emilie Zimmermann

Sr. Theresa Wissmann

Sr. Albertina Rogg

Sr. Philippine Moser

So the decision was made to send sisters to America. Consequently, on February 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1870, nine sisters bound for America departed from Gurtweil, leaving behind them all that was dear:

their sisters,  
their friends,  
their families,  
their Convent home,  
the beautiful countryside,  
the chapel where they prayed,  
their beloved superior, Mother Augusta.



Mother Augusta Volk

Sr. Ferdinanda Wuerth was photographed with the nine pioneer sisters in Basel, although she did not leave at that time. She did leave three years later with the fourth and last group, arriving in St. Louis in September, 1873. Two months before her departure, she wrote a poem that expresses the anguish she experienced at leaving her home and Germany. Sr. Virginia Volkerding says: *"It was written as German poetry and was translated into literal prose by someone I am unable to identify. German poetry is very difficult to translate into American poetry so be gentle with my efforts, please. We have very few items that express the poignancy and the emotional turmoil the Sisters personally experienced when the decision to leave their native land was made."* No doubt the first nine as well as all the others had similar feelings. [Editor's note: The poem is a bit abbreviated to fit the space.]



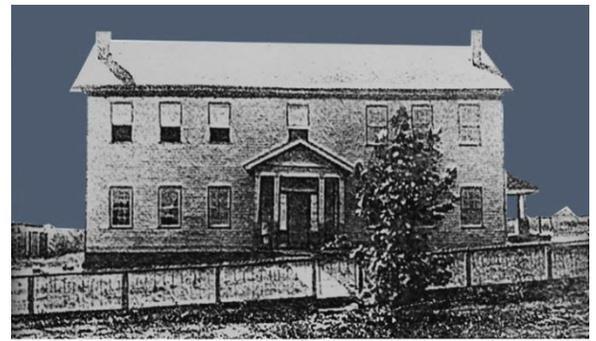
**Sr. Marie Wuerth  
[Ferdinanda]**

**MY DEPARTURE  
by Sr. Ferdinanda Wuerth**

<p>Long the heavy nearness, all around is present, and fearful are our hearts. Many anxious premonitions, for many, joy's been crushed. But it was strange! That which was whispered in the ear the misgiving full of sorrow spread and overshadowed us, all the more we are aware. .... Driven from the Fatherland! Thy will be done! O Lord, I kiss your hand.  Dangerous is our Empire. Our work with painful blows rewarded. Force prevails instead of Justice! Driven from Germany's fair fields! .... How the children's hearts did beat so true, so warm, sincere. Feeling deep the parting sorrow, they beg: "Oh, stay here!"</p>	<p>Oh, God all merciful, see the little ones whom you to me entrusted. See, Father! Hear the children weep. Listen to their crying pleas.  No more joyful happiness, only tears and sorrow seen. All around is heard the pleading, "Oh, stay here, please stay here." Yes, children, gladly would I stay. To leave I do not wish. The times demand it, and I do it, for danger is close by.  Although my life is blessed, a sacrifice it is. Not selfish is my struggle, I know a higher good. .... But we forgive and live in peace. God cares for those who trust in him. To you, dear Lord, I entrust these loved ones you to me entrusted.</p>	<p>Farewell, you whom I loved, dear little ones. Farewell to my native land! I have loved all my own. It is so hard to part. Farewell!  Farewell till we meet above where injustice is not known. We will unite in praise to God who will reward according to our works. Then, too, I wish to thank those steadfast in devotion.  Farewell, oh tender earth where my childhood cradle stood. By my dear ones I was deeply loved.  To my vocation I am true. Now duty calls! I must depart from you, my Fatherland. My home I will not forget!</p>
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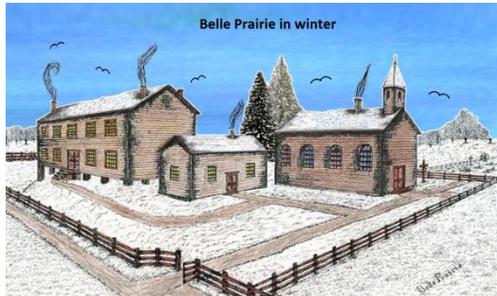
They journeyed first to Basel, Switzerland, to have their photos taken. The nine then passed through Paris on the way to LeHavre, France, where they boarded the ship Hammonia on February 5. After a rough voyage they landed at New York on February 16. They took the train as far as Evansville, IN; riverboat to Shawneetown, IL; and wagon to Belle Prairie, IL. *Foundation and Progress* describes the wagon ride: "They drove forth into the wilderness; the roads cut through the woods were narrow; on every side stumps of felled trees stood several inches above the ground. ... Boughs of trees struck them in the face" [p. 45]. To stay warm, they wrapped themselves in the farmers' red blankets. They spent the first night of the 50-mile journey in a log cabin.

At dusk on the second day, February 28, they saw their destination: a newly-erected two-story frame building meant to serve as convent and school. The building had two large classrooms downstairs, a small classroom and three rooms for the Sisters to live in upstairs. There was also an extension room to the south that was a kitchen. But it was unfurnished and unfinished. The living room had a table, two chairs and a stove, and one dormitory held five beds. The doors were not yet on their hinges.



1870, Convent at Belle Prairie, now Piopolis, Illinois

Father Blaise Winterhalter and the neighbors greeted the Sisters with joy and gave them a good meal—on loaned dishes and kitchenware. Indeed, due to the warm welcome and generosity of the parishioners, they lacked little. On March 1, the day after they arrived, in the morning they sang at a wedding.



The sisters had a hard time adjusting. For example, although food was plentiful, they were “still too German to understand how to preserve [it] and so much went to waste. They often did not have the necessities of life and coping with new surroundings was difficult....Many of the sisters felt very discouraged and were sorry to have left their home land” [*Chronicle*, p. 5].



Cornfield in winter

In contrast to the Gurtweil area, Belle Prairie [Piopolis] is situated on flat land. No wooded hills and vineyards here, just cold wind sweeping across the open countryside in winter, and in summer, the intense heat of the American Midwest. As difficult as that first winter might have been, the first summer proved even more of a trial. Unaccustomed to the climate, many of the sisters became sick with violent life-threatening fevers. “Their home stood on the open plain and no tree afforded shelter; no shutters, no shades were at the windows to keep out the rays of the sun. The water was muddy and doctors and medicines were hard to obtain” [*Foundation and Progress* p. 49-50]. In addition, they suffered spiritual deprivation: Fr. Winterhalter was transferred to Calhoun County; two other priests came and left. Not until the following year did the parish again have a permanent resident priest.



near McLeansboro, Illinois, 7.6 miles from Piopolis (Belle Prairie)

To add to the burdens, already in May, Bishop Peter Baltes, Bishop Juncker’s successor, informed the sisters of his plans for them, namely, to establish a motherhouse for them in Springfield, Illinois, abandoning Belle Prairie, and put them in charge of the best schools if they would agree to certain conditions. Sr. Albertine Rogg, the superior, did not have the authority to make such a decision; she wrote to Mother Augusta, but a reply was long in coming. Meanwhile the sisters remained in Belle Prairie.



These pioneer sisters who left grave uncertainties behind in Germany, found equally grave uncertainties in America. Nevertheless, with great strength they persevered and laid the foundation for the community that became the

**SISTERS OF THE MOST PRECIOUS BLOOD OF O’FALLON, MISSOURI.**

Acknowledgements: Information gleaned from *Foundation and Progress*, *A Time to Sow*, *Chronicle*, 1870-1881, and “*Piopolis, Refuge in the Wilderness*” by Deanna J. Wilson. Images: poem’s background: <http://klosterweg.de/OffenceMuseum/SchlossGurtweil...> (site no longer available); “near McLeansboro”: <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Piopolis,+IL+...> “Cornfield in winter”: [http://mdc.mo.gov/sites/default/files/media/images/2013/12/snowy\\_in\\_com\\_stubble.jpg](http://mdc.mo.gov/sites/default/files/media/images/2013/12/snowy_in_com_stubble.jpg). Fr. Kessler, Gurtweil chapel: *Foundation and Progress*; Pioneer sisters, M. Augusta, Belle Prairie house, O’Fallon chapel: CPPS Archives; others as noted.