

PAST STILL PRESENT

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FOUNDATION IN AMERICA—THE FIRST YEAR IN BELLE PRAIRIE

The story of the departure from Gurtweil, the hazardous ocean voyage, and the overland journey from New York to Belle Prairie has been told many times. See *Past Still Present*, issues 1, 10, 17, and 23. But what did the sisters experience when they arrived and settled in at Belle Prairie? The first years are narrated in the ***Chronicle of the Congregation of the Most Precious Blood III, 1870-1881***, translated by Sr. Angela Gieler. Here is that story, direct from the ***Chronicle***. Clarifying notes are in italicized Times New Roman font.

The sisters arrived in Belle Prairie at dusk February 28th. They saw before them a new two-story house. Reverend Father Winterhalter and the neighbors greeted the Sisters joyfully and they enjoyed the good meal prepared for them. Reverend Father Winterhalter kept reiterating that the house was not ready for occupancy yet, but promised to have it completed in the near future. Indeed, the house contained only a table in the living room, two chairs and a stove, one dormitory with five beds.

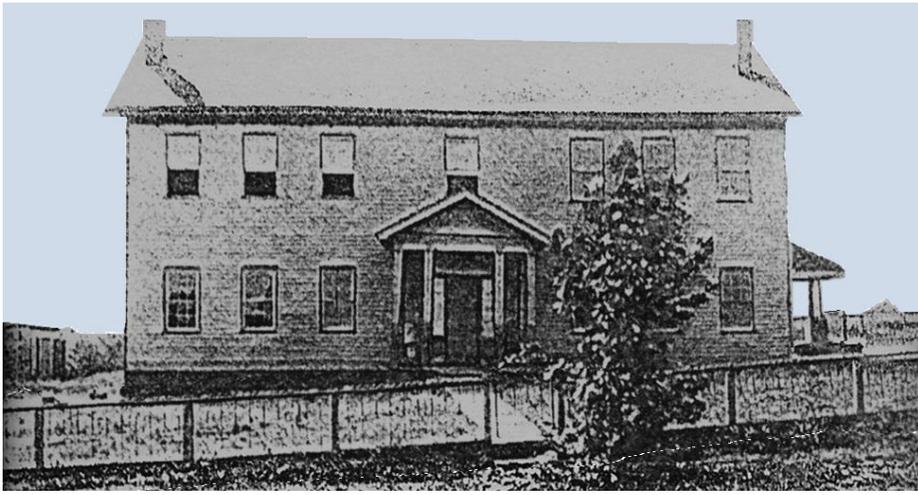
The sisters were fatigued after such a long journey of four weeks and needed rest. This was February 28, 1870... *The next day, March 1st, the sisters played and sang for a wedding. The following day, Ash Wednesday, was March 2nd.*



There was not much to see except an old frame church, a poor rectory and two dilapidated houses, or rather huts.



There was a good crowd of people who attended Mass on Ash Wednesday, two days after the Sisters arrived, and the Sisters wondered where they came from. Now they received their first impression of an American settlement where they lived in bush and prairie land. The dwellings of the people belonging to St. John's parish in Belle Prairie were arranged and grouped according to German custom. The owners were simple farmers of moderate means who came from Pforzheim in Baden and were elderly people. Because of hard work these people prospered to some extent, though few of them were rich; however, they had what was necessary. The settlement was far from the town. However, these good people shared their goods generously with the Sisters. All that was possible for them to do, these good settlers did; many of the women sewed and also knew how to weave. They were overjoyed to have a number of Sisters in their midst.



A roomy frame house, 70 x 30 feet in size, was built, costing \$3,000. Bishop Juncker also contributed \$500 to this worthy cause. The home had not been completed yet when the Sisters arrived and the surroundings seemed cold and uninviting. The forest nearby gave the entire place a wild, primitive look. The house was empty. Most of the furniture was borrowed from the parishioners who personally could afford to give very little.

Reverend Father Winterhalter loaned the Sisters three cows and kitchenware besides a piece of land which belonged to the parish. Rye had been planted in it and the Sisters could use the products thereof; an Irishman donated a hog, a parishioner donated forty acres of land as a private gift. All shared their fruits with the Sisters and later built them a stable. "The various tokens of good will and friendship shown towards the Sisters by the people cannot be all enumerated," Sister Albertine wrote.



The Sisters had little difficulty securing food, yet they were still too German to understand how to preserve food and so much went to waste. They often did not have the necessities of life and coping with new surroundings was difficult.

Alle anfänge sind schwer

The saying, "Every beginning is difficult" was realized to the fullest extent. Many of the Sisters felt very discouraged and were sorry to have left their home land.



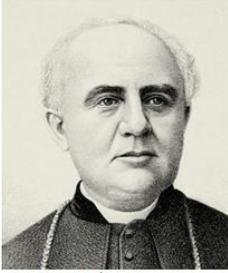
The Sisters next undertook teaching in the parish school. Only girls were taken at first since their Holy Rule forbade including boys. Permission was then obtained to include boys also since America was different. Some forty to fifty pupils enrolled or entered. Mr. Marcel Zachmann, one of the first donors who had been appointed teacher by Reverend Winterhalter, wrote in his diary: "The children are progressing well with the Sisters. Besides teaching in the parish school, the Sisters also take care of the church music and the sacristy."

There was no vacation for the pupils the first year of school.

Plans were spoken of for erecting a private school, similar to the one in Gurtweil. Some influential men of the neighboring town of

McLeansboro tried to interest the people in this project and a few girls entered,... *but* the project was given up. The Sisters were not well enough versed in the cost of living and education, and too German to cope with the demands made upon them.

In order to be certain that the Sisters would remain permanently, the parish, through a deed, wished to donate the home and thirty acres of land to them, but the Reverend Bishop Baltes had other intentions and opposed the plan. Scarcely had the Sisters been six weeks at their destination when the General Vicar, the Reverend Father Janssen sent by orders of the Bishop, appeared on the scene. He made inquiries concerning their rule, silence, and mode of living. He said the Bishop was very happy to have the Sisters but he thought the place was not suitable to have their Motherhouse here. He asked for their opinions. Sr. Albertine mentioned all the sacrifices these poor people had made in the Sisters' behalf and said she would not like to be so ungrateful as to leave them.



Rev. John Janssen
Vicar General, Alton Diocese

In the month of May, 1870, the Most Reverend Bishop [*Peter Joseph Baltes*] had Confirmation and he asked Sister Albertine to come to Teutopolis, Illinois on May 14. Acceding to his wishes, Sister had a private room, the School Sisters of Notre Dame insisted on her staying with them and Sister Albertine acquiesced. In her extra two meetings with the Bishop he said his predecessor had been in Springfield, Illinois, the capital of the state of Illinois, and had bought a house for a certain purpose. The Sisters could occupy the same for the time



Rev. Peter Joseph Baltes,
Bishop of Alton, 1870-1886.



being. They were also given a garden which they could cultivate. The cost of all was \$25,000. The Sisters should start a Day School and in September take over the parochial school. It would be advisable to take another place rather than sit idle in Belle Prairie. Sister Albertine replied that the Sisters at this time were not able to invest and that they were provided for at Belle Prairie for the most necessary things, also that the learning of the English language was still a big problem. The Bishop advised not to purchase the house then, since perhaps a better location for the Motherhouse might be found later. Sister was given over the Sunday to consider his proposition. He asked for an answer on Monday. Sister Albertine said they had considered all angles and would write to the Mother Superior and when they would receive her reply the Bishop would be informed. He gave her to understand that he was anxious for the Sisters to go to Springfield at once. He did not approve of a close

relationship with the German Motherhouse. In order to hasten matters the Bishop sent the Vicar General, Janssen, with Sister Albertine to Springfield. Sister Albertine was pleased with the house but for such a great cost the rooms were not very practical and were also rather far from the church. Sister Albertine told the Vicar General she intended to remain at Belle Prairie and was expecting a reply from the Superior Mother Augusta. The reply was long in coming. Summer sped by yet no answer came. The Sisters had no connection at all with the Reverend Bishop.

Many of the Sisters became ill that summer. Had they only used more foresight with regard to acclimating this would not have occurred to such an extent. In spite of being warned the Sisters thought they could carry on as in the homeland, plowing the fields and cutting rye in the heat. Almost all had a fever; the stronger Sisters even lost consciousness.



Sister Albertine was quite ill.

Sister Bernardine [*Mechtilde*], who had never had a good day since her arrival, was very ill.

Sister Aemilia, the organist, was always sickly.



Sr. Albertina Rogg



Sr. Mechtilda Muehlhaupt



Sr. Emilie Zimmermann

Those Sisters who were less afflicted cared for the others who were seriously ill. And how they suffered from the terrible heat! The house was directly exposed to the sun's burning rays; no tree was near to provide shade. There were no blinds or curtains on the windows; curtains were also missing at the beds. Often during the night the poor Sisters could not find a place to sleep so they sat on the porch. They were short of medicine. However, the loving help and respect shown to them by the parishioners helped to assuage the pain. Many of them sought advice from the Sisters and gave them their respect and confidence. How happy they were, especially the older German people, that their grandchildren would receive a regular schooling through which both the German language and also good conduct would be perpetuated.



In course of the following year, four priests came and left Belle Prairie. Sometimes months elapsed before a priest came. One Sister wrote, "Although we had enough food which many others did not have, still, being deprived of Spiritual Sustenance was a trial which cannot be expressed in words." It is not known when a letter would come from Gurtweil...

The Sisters were discouraged. They saw that the labor was great but the laborers were few.... Inexperience was the main reason why the Sisters were so fearful. While they were in this frame of mind, a letter from the Reverend Bishop Baltes arrived. He demanded that they should decide whether they would follow his advice and erect a Motherhouse at Springfield, Illinois, or not. He promised to further the good cause and would give them the best schools; they could also refer to their superiors in Germany to receive spiritual assistance and take Sisters from there to assist them, but without his permission none would be permitted to return there. If the Sisters would not agree to this proposal they could remain in Belle Prairie and this would conclude the matter.

Sister Albertine asked the opinion of the Sisters concerning the proposal. *The sisters all agreed and signed a document which was presented to the Bishop who was favorably impressed and expressed his joy and satisfaction.*

In the meantime a letter arrived from Gurtweil with a change. This letter stated that the Motherhouse at Gurtweil would provide Sisters, and extra ones as co-workers, if necessary. The Sisters saw to their dismay that their methods were not approved. Now what was to be done? The Sisters could give their Superiors no other information save their fear of what would occur. Sister Albertine was very depressed and said with a sigh: "Oh! If I could only speak with Mother Superior for fifteen minutes!"

Editorial observation: As the first year drew to a close, the fate of the little community was uncertain. Illness, hard work, and uncertainty took their toll. The chronicle continues with 1871—as will a subsequent newsletter.

[Sr. Virginia Volkerding's note: This chronicle was written in retrospect. As far as I can gather it was written for the occasion of the 1895-96 silver jubilee.]