

# PAST STILL PRESENT

CPPS Archives Bulletin Volume 2, Issue 3, December 2013

## CHRISTMAS REMINISCENCES

Not a great deal is known about Christmas celebrations in our earliest history. Here is what the various diaries record.

There is no mention of Christmas in **Steinerberg, 1845**. The fledging community, founded in early September, was busy with establishing themselves. In early November, the sisters locked the door to the former tavern and hung a bell to signal that conventual life had begun. Just before Christmas [December 20], they began Perpetual Adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament, conducted in silence. On the first of January they were able to conduct their adoration audibly.



Statue of Mary holding Jesus  
St. Anne's Church, Steinerberg

On **Christmas Day, 1846**, four sisters received the veil and the little red Precious Blood rosary. Three of them died the following year, victims of the illness that took 26 lives: Sr. Rosina Dreier at the age of 20, Sr. Katharina Hettich, age 21, and Sr. Secunda Kunzelmann, age 25. The fourth was Sr. Seraphina Zwissig, who lived long enough to come to O'Fallon where she died at age 67 in 1898.



In the fall of **1847, Switzerland** was enmeshed in the *Sonderbund* War. This was a time of severe trial for the sisters; illness was rampant, their convent was subjected to inspections, and they were threatened with expulsion and the termination of the community.

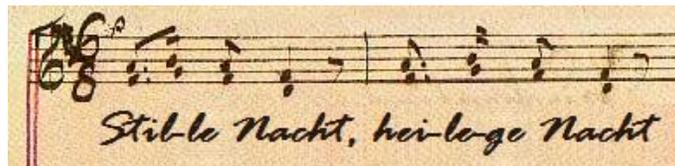
The diary records for **December 24**: "On the day before Christmas, our dear Very Venerable Spiritual Mother arrived at St. Anna on the Steinerberg. This was for us an indescribable joy. For a long time we had longed to have her in our midst again and could hardly wait for the moment when it would happen. Finally, the dear God had mercy on his children and gave us our dear Mother. For sheer joy all of us wept and went around her like little children. But she was very weak, having been sick since she was in the little Convent in the Au. However, she managed to stay here with us for some time. Later she visited the sick Sisters whose joy was very great. Then she could no longer endure and had to go to bed. In order to increase the joy of the Sisters and to express her great love for them, she had made each Sister a scarf to be given by the Christ Child [*Christkindlein*]."



das Christkindlein  
devotional card, 19th c.

Anticipating that they would soon have to leave Steinerberg, shortly after Christmas (December 30) "ten sisters from St. Anne left for the Alsace in order to find a place to live." The year ended with more inspections. **December 31**: "Again an investigation took place by the army physician, who had been here on Dec. 27. He brought with him 2 officers, who were known to be wicked men. The Sisters feared them, as they followed the Sisters in an unbecoming detestable manner. Praise and thanks to God Who protected us so fatherly and did not allow anything to happen which would displease His Divine Majesty."

By **December, 1848**, the sisters were established in **Ottmarsheim**. The diary records: "For the first time here at Ottmarsheim we had the great joy to have midnight Mass and to receive our newborn King in Holy Communion. We spent the hours before midnight in prayer and singing hymns."



**Christmas in Ottmarsheim, 1849**, was particularly joyful. The diary describes the occasion at length:

Dec. 25 On this day the dear Christ Child gave us much joy. Already the eve before His Birth He brought gifts to us, i. e., at about 8:30 p. m. This was the first time since our Congregation was established that the Christ Child came to bring us gifts.... The presentation of gifts was made as follows. After supper we all went to the front room, said our night prayers, etc., during which the Christ Child prepared the Community Room. Mother Celestine erected a nice little crib for us and to give us added joy she prepared a Christmas tree. After everything was ready she rang the bell to summon us to the Convent quarters. When entering the room we found everything so beautifully prepared and we were filled to overflowing with joy. We were enthused to see the crib and the tree. On the tree hung apples, pears, cookies, etc.



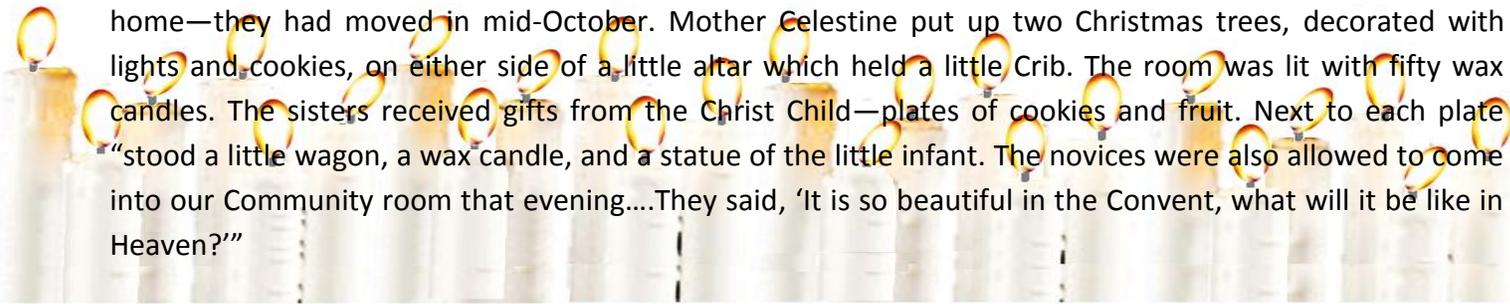
After viewing the crib and the tree Mother told us to take a look at the table. On it, to our great joy, we found a plate filled with fruit and cookies, for each Sister. Then our Ven. Mother prayed: Praised and blessed be, etc., and intoned the *Gloria in Excelsis* which we then sang in chorus. This was followed by the Litany of the Infant Jesus. After this our Ven. Mother allowed us to talk and eat as much as we desired. After enjoying ourselves for a time, recreation came to an end and we then prayed until 11:30 p.m., after which we went to the Parish Church for Midnight Mass. For the feast itself our Ven. Mother prepared for all of us a letter, which was read aloud at the breakfast table. In it she exhorted us to be like little children and she assured us of her love."



In **1850**, the sisters in **Ottmarsheim** spent Christmas day "in holy joy, prayer, and song. Our Convent was lit up by almost a hundred candles. The Christ Child had also remembered us, but we had also been diligent in praying to him. Since the feast of St. Nicholas together we had prayed 8,432 Precious Blood rosaries. For Christmas we all received a beautiful little wax Infant."



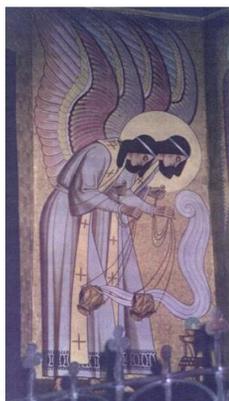
**Ottmarsheim, December 25, 1851**: the sisters celebrated the feast of Christmas in their new convent home—they had moved in mid-October. Mother Celestine put up two Christmas trees, decorated with lights and cookies, on either side of a little altar which held a little Crib. The room was lit with fifty wax candles. The sisters received gifts from the Christ Child—plates of cookies and fruit. Next to each plate "stood a little wagon, a wax candle, and a statue of the little infant. The novices were also allowed to come into our Community room that evening....They said, 'It is so beautiful in the Convent, what will it be like in Heaven?'"



**Ottmarsheim, 1852:** “Dec. 25 This holy night we spent in our Chapel until 12 o'clock singing hymns before the little crib which our Ven. Spiritual Mother Celestine had erected herself.”

“Dec. 27 On this day our Ven. Mother gave us the blessed St. John's wine and the following day we celebrated the feast of the Holy Innocents and also the death anniversary of our beloved founder, Caspar del Bufalo. [Note: Remember, the Steinerberg Community had been incorporated into the Congregation of the Most Precious Blood in Rome in August of 1847.] We spent the day in prayer and recreation and were not allowed to work.”

“Dec. 31 After recreation the Sisters all went to chapel to give special thanks to the dear Lord for all the many favors, joys, sorrows and blessings we received during the past year. In conclusion we sang the Te Deum Laudamus!”



Angels in the convent chapel, Ottmarsheim, 1995

---

**Ottmarsheim, 1853:** “The Christ Child was very generous and brought us many gifts. We attended Midnight Mass in the Parish Church, but our Rev. Spiritual Father also read a Mass in our Convent Chapel at 7 a.m.”

---

During the **remaining years in Ottmarsheim**, the Christmas celebration stayed much the same. Mother Celestine continued to put up the crib and over the years added figures to it. The diary for **December 25, 1856** says that the crib had

“200 figures not counting the trees and flowers.” The sisters themselves were not able to view the crib until evening because “people came in large groups throughout the day to view it.”



---

The transfer to **Gurtweil** began in 1857 and was completed in 1858.

The diary for **December 25, 1858** reads, “A day of great joy and great graces for us. This year for the first time, the Midnight Mass was celebrated and that in a most solemn manner, in our Chapel.”

---

Another year (undated) it is recorded: “In a spirit of silence and mortification the **Gurtweil** Sisters waited for the coming of the Savior. Christmas morning found them at the parish church participating in the solemn celebration. With joyous hearts they reached home to find a few nuts, cakes and three prunes, which in the simplicity of their hearts, they thoroughly enjoyed.” [Little Cloister, 12/1938 and republished in Archives Bulletin [Sr. VV] 12/1989]



---

Christmas was not joyful in **Gurtweil, 1869**. “[O]ur Sisters indeed shared the stable’s privation since it was on that day that the government demanded the removal of their beloved habit.” [Little Cloister] Before Midnight Mass the Sisters “laid aside their religious habits in order to save their home and to prove their loyalty to the government.”

---

Less than six weeks later, February 2, 1870, the nine pioneer sisters left Gurtweil for America, arriving in New York February 16 and at Belle Prairie, Illinois, on February 28, 1870. For two years the community remained in Bell Prairie, struggling to adapt to American expectations, including those of the bishop.

---

“The Christmas celebration of our Sisters at **Belle Prairie** was similar to that of Gurtweil in spirit and simplicity. After returning home from the parish services they were made completely happy by the little wax Infant living in a nut shell which had been prepared by Sr. Seraphim and was on this account treasured. Sr. Bonaventure Muehlhaupt always beautifully decorated the home Chapel. The crib she prepared was perhaps a homely one but nevertheless inspiring.” [*Little Cloister*, 12/1938 and republished in *Archives Bulletin* [Sr. VV] 12/1989]

---

On **December 11, 1872**, the community at Belle Prairie, fourteen sisters and seven novices and one postulant—with the exception of three sisters who remained behind to take care of the school—went to St. Louis. The Ursuline Convent at 12th and Russell welcomed them, giving them “a living room and a refectory, also sleeping quarter....The Ursulines were very benevolent and friendly toward our Sisters. For example, Venerable Mother Aloysia spent almost every noon recreation with our Sisters. She wanted them to feel at home....” [*Chronicle of the Congregation of the Most Precious Blood*, III, 1870-1873. Translator: Sr. Angela Gieler]

With such hospitality in evidence, we may suppose that the Christmas of 1872 was a joyous time, relieving for the season the burdens of uncertainty concerning their future. The sisters remained with the Ursulines for two months, until February 11, 1873, when they moved into the convent at St. Agatha—and eventually to the Motherhouse in O’Fallon.

---

The various **Chronicles** contain much information, but not about Christmas celebrations. For that we must depend on the article first printed in *Little Cloister*, December, 1938:

“In **1894** Mother Armella imported the present [1938] crib from Fribourg. At that time a light shone into the stable which created a Bethlehem atmosphere.”

“At **O’Fallon**, Christmas and Midnight Mass were synonymous. It was during this Mass the Sisters received Communion. When for any reason the Holy Sacrifice could not be celebrated at Midnight the Sisters assembled at that sacred hour for adoration. They sang the High Mass in three parts and the beloved “*Heiligste Nacht*” traditional from the Gurtweil days, was expressive of peace and joy. The Sisters sang German songs during the second Mass”



Nativity scene that stood in the corner near the Novitiate cloister walk until the West side of chapel was built, c. 1962

“With the exception of the three-part Offertory, Chant was sung during the third Holy Mass which was celebrated with great solemnity. The remainder of the morning was remarkable for its silence. In the afternoon the Community assembled in Chapel to chant the Solemn Vespers of our Blessed Mother.”

A Christmas tree was used for first time in 1903. At their request, Mother Beata sent the novices to the woods for a tree. “When they had decorated it with nuts, apples and cookies and had prepared their simple crib, their joy was complete.” In 1904 the Christmas tree was placed in the refectory.

[Except where the source is named [*Chronicle* & *Little Cloister*] the information is taken from the two Steinerberg-Ottmarsheim diaries, translated by Sr. Loyola Kohnen and Sr. Marie Klein. Editor’s note: the graphics are only for illustration and do not pretend to be authentic to that time—there are no pictures from those earliest days. Unless otherwise noted, various graphics were found through Google and re-worked for this issue.]