THE OLD COMMUNISTIC COLONY AT BETHEL.

BY HAROLD DAILEY.

"They first built a church, then a place to do business."

Within these words, spoken by a veteran wood-worker as he toiled on a piece of furniture, fashioned of red cedar and cut and planed by his own hand, lies the fundamental secret of the success of Dr. William Keil and his Bethel Communistic Colony, which flourished at the little village of Bethel, five miles north of Shelbyville, Shelby County, Missouri, for an uninterrupted period of over thirty-five years.

Dr. William Keil, the founder of the Bethel Colony, was a native of Prussia and was 33 years of age at the time that he led his little band of German peasants from their unproductive fields in Pennsylvania and eastern Ohio to the “Canaan” that had been selected by his three representatives, who, not unlike the twelve spies of biblical history, had gone into the western country to reconnoiter and to select a site for the colony. Keil, with whom present day traditions associate certain mystic powers, going even so far as to mention so-called “Black Art” and the book written with human blood which was said to have contained recipes for the cure of all the human ailments, was of a tall and commanding figure and easily gained a strong hold on the minds of the simple and hardworking Germans, among whom he preached his doctrine of “without money and without price.”

For a time he preached and gathered his followers in Pennsylvania and Ohio, but the German Methodist Church, whose founder had converted him, and upon which occasion he is said to have held a large public gathering, burned his “secret formulae” and forever
renounced his necromantic practices, later became dis-
satisfied with his teachings and stripped him of its
authority. It was then that the three representatives
were sent westward to find a new home for the leader
and his staunch little flock who stood by him, faith-
fully trusting that somewhere in the land toward the
setting sun they would find a place where they could
work and worship and love, entirely independent of
sordid consideration.

The place chosen by these men was a beautiful table-
land on the banks of North River, five miles north of
Shelbyville, and today the site of the Colony, as well
as much of the village itself, stands unchanged. Here
four sections, or 2,500 acres, were purchased cheaply
and later added to until there were 4,000 acres of what
is now some of the best farming land in Shelby County,
standing in the names of a few individuals, who in
reality held it for all.

Accordingly, in 1845, Dr. Keil and his little band of
some 500 sturdy German pilgrims migrated, some by
wagon train overland, others by boat down the Ohio
River to Cairo, then up the Mississippi to Hannibal
and across the 48 miles of intervening plains to Bethel,
whose meaning is “a house of worship,” and, incident-
ally, “they first built a church.”

No promise of ease and luxury were made by Keil
to those who cast their lots with him. Says one of
the men who followed the dauntless Prussian: “The
only pledge that Dr. Keil made to us was that if we
would come with him we would have plenty of bread
and water. He kept that pledge and more. We had
clothes to wear and a good roof for our heads. We
were not wealthy, but we had all that we needed and
were happy. Dr. Keil saw to it that every man and
woman had work, that the children were educated and
that each producer received a fair compensation for
his toil. There were no idlers, no legal controversies,
no fights or brawls. It was an ideal settlement, happy and prosperous and bound together by a community of interests.'"

Bread and water was his only promise, yet there were no drones in his hive! 1,100 acres of the four thousand owned by the Colony were enclosed in a single field and cultivated. A treasurer took charge of all the funds and the fruits of each man's labors went into a common store-house, from which he was entitled to draw for such things as he needed. Those who had families resided in dwellings to themselves, and those unmarried lived at the Colony boarding house, which is still standing today unchanged in appearance. All buildings of the colony faced a single street. There was the church, the school, the tannery, the distillery, the mill, the glove factory, a drug store, wagon shop and a few other industrial plants besides the various dwellings.

Of all these, probably, the most important, from the view of industry, were the glove factory and the distillery, although the mill was the first steam mill to be operated in the rural sections of the state. At the glove factory, deer skins were turned into coverings for the human hands, and so expertly was the work done that the finished products captured the First Premium at the World's Fair in New York City in 1858. Shoes were roughly made from the hides of cattle, clothing was spun and wove on the old pioneer spinning wheels and looms; all the brick that went into building the houses of the Colony, and, with but few exceptions, all were of brick, were burned on the grounds by the Colonists. All the wagons and implements of the fields, all the furniture of the homes were made by hand by the experienced mechanics of their various lines, in their own particular work-shop. The Bethel plow became famous and sold throughout the Middle West.
The Old Communistic Colony at Bethel.

The distillery was the main source of outside revenue for the Colony. Wagon load after wagon load of the liquor would be taken to Quincy, Ill., 48 miles distant, several days being required for the round trip, and there sold for 15c a gallon, considered a good price by the energetic Colonists. Liquor flowed as freely as the water in the river on whose banks the village stands, but the writer has the word of a respectable old gentleman, now nearing the century mark, that during all of that time he never saw a man drunk.

East of the town, about a mile, and upon the brow of a plateau, Dr. Keil builded his own home, three stories in height and of the self same hand-made brick, and which he called "Elim," and which stands today overlooking the peaceful little valley and the village beyond. The third floor of the building is a spacious banquet hall and here, as a feudal king, lived Dr. Keil and here met his under foremen and with them counseled as to the government of the colony, and here, it is rumored, had a laboratory where he compounded the secret "charms" of "Black Art," which he was supposed to have discarded upon his conversion to the church.

For ten years the colony grew and thrived, during which time the majority of the people never saw a dollar, but Keil was not satisfied with his success at Bethel. He dreamed of a chain of colonies reaching from his first venture to the Pacific Coast.

Accordingly, in 1855, after appointing a Dr. Wolf his successor at Bethel, Keil made preparations to set forth for Oregon to establish another colony, but before the departure could be made, his son, William, who was a favorite with the father, and whom the latter had promised might make the trip with him, took sick and died.

It was then that the element of character which made Keil the ruler of men, and a successful one at that, was shown clearly to his subjects.
Keil has been described in this latter day as somewhat of a despot, more ruler than leader, but the man, whatever else he may have been, was a man of his word. To him a promise, no matter how lightly given, was sacred in life and death—that a man should die sooner than break one.

Such was the doctrine of the "Church of the Living God," as the Colony's house of worship was known and over which Keil presided.

Therefore it is not strange that we find him, on the morning of his departure for Oregon, with his cavalcade drawn up in the center of Bethel—the point will be pointed out to you there yet—the corpse of his son in a metallic coffin filled with alcohol, sealed and loaded upon a six mule wagon. Following his short address to those who were to remain behind, began what is probably the strangest funeral march in the history of America.

In the words of the veteran colonist: "Some people have laughed at the story as a freakish whim of an old man, but we who knew Dr. Keil and his plan of life appreciated the solemnity and the seriousness of the act. To my mind, that one thing has exerted more influence for good than all else the doctor did. It was not a pleasant task to escort his boy's dead body 2,000 miles and to have with him amid that wild and lonely country the depressing influences of his boy's remains; but it made his people think; the purpose was plain. A colonist dared not lie."

Dr. Keil made good his promise to his son, but failed to return to Missouri, founding a colony in Oregon which he called Aurora and where he died in 1877. Of his five children, he outlived them all, they all dying between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. All are buried at Aurora, including the son whose remains were carried from Bethel.

Under Dr. Wolf, the Bethel Colony continued to
prosper, but dissension entered it in 1870 and referees were appointed, by mutual consent, to make an equitable division. The land was deeded to those individuals according to their rights and of the personal property each man received his original contribution and $29.04 a year for each year that he had lived in the colony. Each woman received one-half of that amount on the same basis.

Today, Bethel is a prosperous little inland town of some 400 people, the majority of whom are direct descendants of the original colonists, and who still harbor the German accent in their speech. Many of them have gone out and become famous in the world of things. William Zeigler, the Royal Baking Powder magnate, was born and reared at Bethel, as was Henry T. Finck, for 43 years on the staff of the *New York Evening Post* and known throughout all European and American music circles as the "Dean of New York Music Critics," who was a member of one of the original families of the Colony.

Friendly, prosperous, peace abiding; altogether splendid citizens in a splendid community, Dr. Keil has succeeded better than he knows.