

# Aurora a Communistic Colony

Dr. Keil Leader in Unique Settlement in This County; 150 Followers Came to Settle In '55; Thriving Community Founded; Common Ownership Later Abolished by Group

By HELEN SADLER

THE unusual history of Aurora is synonymous with that of a man who from birth was destined to become a leader of men. The history of the man and the town cannot be separated.

The place Aurora situated in the northeast corner of Marion county on the Pacific highway, prior to 1857, was only a tract of heavily wooded timberland, with a sparkling mill pond nestling on its bosom. Here was supplied power for a modest grist mill and a sawmill perched upon its banks and owned by George White and George Smith.

The man, Dr. William Keil, born March 6, 1811, in Erfurst, Prussia, who came to America at the age of 30 years and settled in Pittsburgh, Pa., where he plied his trade as a tailor. He became the leader of a group to whom he preached his doctrine of Christianity as practiced by the disciples. His philosophy of life embraced communistic principles, where there should be all things in common, there should be no poverty, nor riches. He demonstrated his ability to sway men when that radiance within himself caused them to endure hardships and ridicule and follow him with religious zeal to Bethel, Missouri where he established a colony in 1845.

## Forbears of Today in Early Scouting Party

Years later he heard rumors of good soil, cheap land, and a moderate climate in the far west and sent a scouting party out. Among them were Chris Gelsy and wife, Henry Giesy, Michael Schaefer, Adam Knight, John and Hans Stauer, Adam Scheule, Joseph Knight and George Link, and later John Giesy and family arrived by way of Panama.

George Link returned with reports from Willapa, Washington, which caused a caravan led by Dr. Keil with 35 wagons and 150 persons to start for the land of promise by ox team, in 1855. William, a son of Dr. Keil, who had longed to go west, died just before the start, and at his request, his body was taken along in an alcohol filled casket. The trains were organized in companies, a few families constituting a company, who camped together. After five months they reached Willapa where they wintered. In the spring, Dr. Keil with a few men came to Portland in a scow. Upon approaching the city, they took out their musical instruments and played while coming up the river. Crowds gathered on the bank and greatly appreciated the music.

Dr. Keil was offered half of the land of Portland if he would locate his colony there. It is told that the tree to which the scow was tied was never allowed to be cut down.

## Northern Lights Basis for Name

A suitable location on the stage road half way between Salem and Portland was purchased, consisting of land, grist mill and saw mill. Land was cleared and houses built, March 20 the German colony was founded and named Aurora in reference to the northern lights. For some time it was known as Aurora Mills, but the Mills was soon dropped.

In 1863 and 1865 larger trains followed and others kept coming every two years. Aurora became a thriving, independent manufacturing center, operating entirely upon a communistic basis, expenses and profits divided. A shoe shop, harness shop, grist mill, tin shop, glove shop, hat factory, blacksmith shop, tailor shop, tannery, furniture store and a colony store where the colonists received needed supplies gratis.

The colony church was a wooden replica of the brick church of Bethel, Mo. Dr. Keil had the chimes shipped and placed in the belfry of the church here. One of the bells now hangs at a street intersection and was formerly used as a fire bell, now mute, having given way to the more modern fire siren. The work on the church was the labor of loving hands as testified by the huge hand turned columns which supported the ceiling and the balcony, used by the band.

## Musical Groups Were Finest in the West

Two platforms on the steeple, 75 and 100 feet above ground were lighted Christmas Eve and the band played before the Christmas exercises. Music played a large and happy part in the lives of the colonists. Prof. Fink

was only one of the instructors in music. The orchestra and band were the finest in the west. Benjamin Halladay, president of the O. & C. railroad, took the band on numerous excursions to British Columbia, Washington and Oregon points. Among the familiar names of bandmen were Henry Ehlen, Chas. Snyder, George and William Kraus, Emanuel Kell, Fred Giesy, Charles Becke.

As the stages met here and changed horses, a hotel, restaurant and livery barn were built and later a store to dispose of colony supplies to transients, which afterwards became the Fred Giesy store.

After the death of Dr. Keil in 1877 the absence of a leader and the desire of the younger members to work out life's problems individually, caused property assessed in 1870 at \$120,000 to be placed in the hands of five directors for division. The administrators were John Giesy, George Kraus, Henry Ehlen, Capt. Henry Will, and Sam Miller. Men were sent to Bethel, Missouri, to settle up that branch of the colony, and in 1881 the

## OLD CHURCH



MEETING HOUSE FOR MEMBERS OF AURORA COMMUNAL COLONY.

affairs of the Aurora Colony were closed and fins written on one of the greatest experiments in communism which lasted over a period of 36 years.

## Half-Day School Yields to Full-Time

With the years of training in thrift and industry members began starting life anew and gradually began to prosper and built the present Aurora. The home of the Aurora Observer, published by E. P. Mitchell, editor, was the former location of the school which held a half day session in colony times. The half day school slowly but surely gave way to more advanced methods until now a modern building and large gymnasium and playgrounds equipment serves two districts and supplies buses for the Woodburn high school. A large percentage of the high school graduates are students of higher educational institutions and many of them are there practically through their own efforts.

There yet remain a number of quaint landmarks—old houses with large rooms; comfortable fireplaces and tiny window panes, to link the past and present. Such a home belonged to Andrew Giesy who succeeded Dr. Keil as minister in Bethel for years. This house and the one afterwards owned by Fred Peters were the two manufacturing centers of the colony before they were occupied as homes.

Many antiques have become the property of the younger generation to whom they are priceless and will grace the homes, bringing the atmosphere of the old to the new.

## OLD SCHOOL AT AURORA



COLONISTS USED SINGULAR STYLE OF FRAME CONSTRUCTION. SOME OF THE HOUSES IN THIS QUAIN STYLE STILL ARE IN USE.

## Walden Able to Get Many Kinds Of Fruit on Tree

Those who are fond of calling attention to the progress made during the past eighty years often forget one industry which is so important now but which had to be built up through the years in spite of much discouragement and slow growth. This is the fruit raising industry, now one of the most important in the Willamette valley.

In the reminiscences of Sarah J. Cummins, who moved to a farm in the Waldo Hills in 1871, we find this: "Mr. Walden was familiar with orchard work and was in demand for budding and grafting among the many seedling trees that were everywhere being cultivated. We had sweet apples growing on the same tree with sour waxen-gate apples, and Seckel pears growing on the same tree with Bartletts, also one tree of seedless apples, Baldwins, Wine-saps, Winter pearmain and Gloria Mondis were among our first tree plantings and these varieties still survive."

## Large Tracts Planted to Prune Trees

The first prunes were planted in this territory in the first half of the 80's. Pioneers in this were S. A. Clarke who lived south of Salem, Dr. Reynolds who lived north of town and R. D. Allen of Silverton.

Later the Oregon land company bought wheat land in what is now the Liberty-Rosedale district and in the early 90's planted nearly 5000 acres to prunes. This land was subdivided and sold to investors at \$125 per acre, the company agreeing to care for the orchards until the trees were four years old.

It is interesting to note that most people thought the price of \$125 per acre was beyond all reason.

## Logans First Were Hard to Can

About 1897 the first loganberry plants were brought to Marion county from California. These were new to the people of Oregon and were slow in gaining favor but gradually the demand increased. As they gained in favor the canneries tried to use them but could not. The berry was so acid that it worked on the tin of the cans. Later they were evaporated and still later a type of can was developed that could be used even for such acid fruits.

Strawberries were popular before the loganberry was every heard of but their culture was confined to the "home garden and home canning" stage for many years. Commercial canning has

only developed on a large scale in recent years.

## Hops Went to \$1 Pound in 1888

Hops were first planted in Oregon in the early '70's. A man by the name of Wells is said to have grown the first hops on his farm near Beuna Vista and Ralph Geer of Macleay was one of the early pioneers in the industry. In 1886 T. B. Jones, now of Salem, set out his first hops on his farm near Wheatland.

In 1888 the hop market went to \$1 per pound and of course there was a great rush to plant more hops. In 1890 the price was 40 cents per pound and 18,600 bales were produced. The acreage continued to increase until in 1895 there were 100,000 bales produced. Then the slump came and records reveal that in 1899 hops brought only two and one-half cents per pound.

## Banks All Put in Daily Ads; Keen Race for Money

In the 1880's:—

Salem had three banks, they all advertised every day: First National, Ladd and Bush, Capital National.

Steamer N. S. Bentley was running a Fourth of July excursion to Corvallis, round trip \$2.00.

P. H. D'Arcy, Tilmon Ford, Geo. H. Burnett, lawyers, had professional cards.

Lute Savage and T. McF. Patton had big ads about their bookstores. J. D. McCully was running a "clearance sale of summer suits at cost." S. Friedman and E. L. L. Johnson sold dry goods. Beer was 5 cents a glass at Belvedere saloon and E. Eckerlin's.

Dugan Bros. were plumbers, Godfrey and Moores and E. M. Waite job printers. Robert Ford ran a livery stable. A. Olinger & Son were contractors and buildings. E. C. Cross ran the Franklin meat market.

Foreign ads consisted of "S.S.S.", Acker's Baby Soother, Colgate's toilet soap, Royal Baking Powder, Columbia bicycles, Simmons Liver Regulator.

## PREACHING IN 1886

"Revival Meetings—The Baptist church was again crowded last night to hear Dr. Graves on the subject of 'Holiness and Sanctification.' He took for his text Heb. 12, 14, showing the experience of the second blessing as well as the growth of holiness in the soul. . . . Tonight the subject will be 'The Unpardonable Sin.'" — Statesman, Feb. 4, 1886.

## 80 More Years Wished Paper

BY BERNARD MAINWARING  
Editor, Baker Democrat-Herald

"The Oregon Statesman of Salem, Ore., one of the few morning papers to weather the tendency toward consolidation during the past few years, will be 80 years old March 28. It is the second oldest publication in the state, the Portland Oregonian being less than a year its senior.

"The Statesman was founded in 1851, when Oregon was a semi-civilized wilderness, only recently a territory and not to be admitted to statehood for nearly eight years. For a time it followed the state capitol when it was moved from place to place, picking Salem as its permanent location when the capitol was finally settled there for keeps.

"The Statesman was for many years published by Asahel Bush, one of Oregon's grand old men. Following him R. J. Hendricks piloted the paper for years. A few years ago it passed into the hands of younger men who have raised it to new standards of achievement. The Statesman is one of the state's best papers. Its editorial policy is vigorous, courteous and fair. In typographical appearance it ranks with the best to be found in a city of similar size anywhere. The Democrat-Herald joins with the press of Oregon in wishing this great old pioneer newspaper 80 years more of life and service."