In the two decades prior to the Civil War, a former Methodist local preacher and his flock established a communal society whose two settlements were separated from each other by 2,000 miles of wilderness. The erstwhile preacher was William Keil; the settlements were at Bethel, Missouri, and Aurora, Oregon. The story of Keil and his settlements is an unusual one.

William Keil was born of middle-class parents March 6, 1811, at Bleicherode, Prussia. After mastering the tailor’s trade, he was married to Louise Reiter.\(^1\) An excellent tailor, hard-working, and pleasant, he seemed destined to become a solid, wealthy Junker. His interests, however, led him in another direction. His mental energies were not absorbed in his trade, and he soon became a devotee of Jacob Boehmen, the mystic.\(^2\) As such he embarked on a quest for religious truth. He devoted much of his spare time and energy to the search for a *Universalmedizin*, a panacea to cure all human ills. His pursuits led him to study botany, to gain a rudimentary knowledge of medicine, and to conduct innumerable experiments to solve the mysteries of life.\(^3\) Even after coming to America, he displayed a flask which he said was the result of his search; he claimed to be in possession of mysterious cures so secret that the old woman from whom he obtained them would never have parted with them had he not promised to leave Germany.\(^4\)

The exact date of Keil’s emigration to America is not known, but it was probably in 1835 or 1836. He set up a tailor shop in New York City, but his restless spirit would not let him stay put. Over the protests of his wife, he sold his business and moved west to Pittsburgh.\(^5\) Soon after arriving in that city, he performed some strange cures, somewhat after the fashion of modern faith healers, and as a result he was called “Der Hexendoktor” (witchdoctor).\(^6\)

In 1838, William Nast, the founder of the German Methodist Church, conducted a revival meeting in Pittsburgh. Keil was deeply stirred by the services, made a confession of faith and united with the church.\(^7\) Shortly after his conversion, in the presence of Nast and several others, Keil burned a book with “awe-inspiring cere-

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\(^2\) Ibid. p. 55.

\(^3\) Ibid., p. 56.


\(^5\) Bek, loc. cit.

\(^7\) Ibid.
monies," renouncing it as a work of the devil. Nast later recalled that Keil's book was written for the most part in blood, and that it contained numerous mystic symbols and formulae which Keil alone could read. That book apparently contained the mysterious cures passed on to Keil by the old woman in Germany.

Soon after his conversion, Keil fell in with a preacher by the name of J. Martin Hartmann, whom he later called his real spiritual father. Hartmann was deeply interested in the principles of communal living and he undoubtedly influenced Keil's thought on the subject. In any event, perfecting the communal life was to be Keil's consuming passion for the rest of his days. His determination to build a religious community after the model of the New Testament church led him out of Methodism and into a bold and lonely venture.

For a brief period, however, Keil was as devoted to Methodism as he had formerly been to mysticism and magic. He became a class leader, and displayed such zeal for his faith that he soon was chosen for greater responsibility. At a quarterly meeting on October 12, 1839, in Stewardstown, Pennsylvania, he was licensed as a local preacher, though some doubt exists as to whether the license was ever formally issued. He was undoubtedly encouraged in this step by William Nast, who believed that Keil was a sincere man concerned for the church and eager to do good.

But Keil's devotion and conformity to the church continued only a short time. Appointed to Deer Creek, near Pittsburgh, he became unruly and rebelled against the church. Keil objected to Hartmann receiving $400 from missionary funds, plus certain class monies, as salary. He based his objection on the biblical injunction, "Freely have ye received, freely give" (Matt. 10:8). He seems also to have objected strenuously to the length of the probationary period which Methodism required of new preachers. According to an old legend handed down in the Bethel community, Keil's quarrel with German Methodism reached its peak on an occasion when the presiding elder did not appear at the time appointed for the quarterly meeting. Keil took the pulpit, and asked the congregation if he should expound his philosophy of life. When the people agreed, he spoke for two and one-half hours, claiming he had had a remarkable experience, not unlike that which came to Saul of Tarsus on the Damascus road. The light he had seen had made a new man out of him, said Keil, and had given him a mission to lead the people into the wilderness of the great American West. The presiding elder arrived dur-
ing Keil's harangue and later in the day he attempted to refute Keil's thesis, apparently taking his stand on traditional Methodist principles. Keil replied heatedly, and the church was split, the majority responding to Keil's plea for loyalty to him. They became an independent church, with Keil receiving no income save what his followers chose to give him. During this period, his previous leaning toward communal living was strengthened by some former Rappists, who had joined his fellowship, and actively urged him to adopt communal principles.

Keil's entire life showed that he was a man who could not conform, and that he was restless under any authority. But notwithstanding his independent spirit, he desired to belong to an established religious denomination. On leaving the Methodist Episcopal Church he joined the Methodist Protestant Church, again taking his entire congregation with him. However, he steadfastly refused to accept a salary and continued to live on the charity of his flock. In addition to his duties with the Deer Creek congregation, he extended his ministry into the "Point," the lower part of Pittsburgh, where he won many converts among the iron workers and factory hands. Keil had ability, and he might have risen high in Methodism had it not been for his strange ideas and his stubborn refusal to accept constituted authority. Because he refused to obey his superiors in the Methodist Protestant Church, he was expelled from that body. Thus, in less than a year, Keil was in and out of two of the major branches of American Methodism.

Perhaps the most unusual thing about Keil was the steadfast devotion which he elicited from his followers; they willingly obeyed him. One concludes that there had to be something charismatic about this man, who could lead his flock from one denomination to another and keep them loyal to him for years in communal experiments in Missouri and Oregon. Apparently part of the charisma came from Keil's beliefs and the doggedness with which he clung to them. The very simplicity of Keil's convictions seemed to attract men and inspire confidence.

Negatively, Keil denounced all ministerial service for pay, all sectarianism, and all church regulation as the work of human hands and unessential to real Christianity. He would agree to no rule except that found in Scripture, and he claimed no title save that of Christian. Positively, he preached the Golden Rule and the pure moral life. His theology was the fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man, not as a vague hypothesis, but, literally, an omnipotent, omniscient heavenly father, "a Father, with all the attributes of an

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15 Hendricks, op. cit., p. 8. The Rappists were members of an eighteenth-century German communal religious sect that settled in Pennsylvania in 1803.

16 Bek, loc. cit.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., p. 58.
earthly father infinitely magnified and extended, and a brotherhood embracing all the race."

Having no connection with any established church after leaving the Methodists, Keil omitted the usual observances of the church. Thus, the Bethel colony did away with baptism and confirmation. If they observed the Lord’s supper at all, it took the form of a general meal in the home of a member. Bek says that Keil made use of the confessional, but only for the purpose of instilling fear of his authority. This may explain in part some of Keil’s charisma.

No doubt Keil had a strong will and a vital personality. He certainly had the capacity to inspire confidence and win the loyalty of others. His lifelong followers remembered him as a dynamic person with the ability to command and lead. Hendricks quotes one of Keil’s followers as saying:

The old doctor . . . could inspire confidence and courage, and obedience to his wishes, in any one by the piercing look of his eyes, as if he were gazing into the innermost recesses of the heart, and searching the very soul of his listener.

Such was the nature of the man who led his followers to Bethel, Missouri, in 1844, to found a communal religious settlement.

A band of some 500 German pilgrims migrated from Pennsylvania and Ohio, some by wagon train overland, others by boat down the Ohio River to Cairo, Illinois, then up the Mississippi River to Hannibal, Missouri and thence overland to Bethel. According to the sources, “They first built a church, then a place to do business.” Approximately 3,500 acres of land was taken in the name of Keil and a few subordinates, and it was held by them in trust for the entire community. Each family was given a house, while a long two-story brick building near the center of the village served as a hotel and dormitory for the single men. Besides the homes and the hotel, the village consisted of a church, school, tannery, distillery, mill, glove factory, drugstore, and a wagon shop.

Agriculture was a means of livelihood in the colony, but apparently the glove factory and the distillery were more important features of the economy of the group. Gloves made by the colonists were so superior in quality that they won first prize at the New York World’s Fair in 1858. The main source of revenue was the distillery which sold whiskey by the wagon load in Quincy, Illinois, for 15 cents per gallon! Bethel boasted the first steam mill in rural Missouri. All clothing, shoes, brick, furniture, wagons, and farm implements used

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20 Hendricks, op. cit., p. 6.
21 Bek, op. cit., p. 70; Knobbs, op. cit., p. 6.
22 Hendricks, op. cit., p. 4.
23 The remainder of this article is based on an address by Mrs. Ray Gonnerman to the Shelby County Historical Society, October 24, 1963, and drawn from unpublished accounts of the colony and recollections of the settlers still extant in Bethel.
24 Bek, op. cit., p. 73.
by the colonists were made in the village shops, and the surplus was sold in the surrounding area.

East of the town a large brick mansion, named Elim, was built for Keil. From there he ruled his little colony, and there, according to rumor, he had a laboratory in which he compounded the secret “charms” of black art, which he was supposed to have discarded on his conversion to the church.

Bethel was an autocratic theocracy; Keil’s word was final in all religious, social, and legal matters. There were no written laws, “the word of God [being their] constitution and bylaws.” Members owned their own houses and gardens, but they worked together and all proceeds went into a common treasury. Provisions in the storehouse were free to all. This did away with the need for a money economy, and it was supposed to eliminate the drive to accumulate wealth, the achievement of social status, and the like. But notwithstanding the communal nature of Bethel, several families broke relations with the colony and were still allowed to retain their property, live in the village, and even operate stores. This lack of exclusiveness was a constant puzzle to visitors who wanted to put the Bethel colony into a neat category. In view of the persecution suffered by the ultra-exclusive Mormons, it may be that Keil’s tolerance of the families that withdrew served to protect his colony from the suspicions and hatreds of the Missouri frontier, a society which was bitterly opposed to exclusivism.

For ten years, Bethel thrived, but Keil’s restless spirit would not let him be satisfied. He dreamed of a chain of colonies reaching from Bethel to the Pacific Coast. Therefore, in 1855 he formulated plans for an expedition to Oregon, where the second of his colonies would be established. From that expedition arises one of the strangest stories in the history of the American West.

Willie Keil was his father’s favorite son, and Keil promised Willie that he could lead the train to Oregon. But before the time set for departure, Willie fell ill and died. Believing that a promise was a promise, Keil sent to St. Louis for a metal casket, filled it with alcohol, placed the boy’s body in it, and loaded the coffin into a wagon which was kept at the head of the train during the entire journey to Oregon. The presence of that strange hearse and the faith of the hymnsinging pioneers, excited the superstitious dread of the plains Indians and kept them from attacking Keil’s train during a year when there were Indian uprisings all across the frontier.25

After the departure for Oregon, the Bethel colony was governed by deputy presidents, a group of trustees, and correspondence from Keil. In spite of the 2,000 miles of wilderness between Bethel, Missouri and Aurora, Oregon, Keil was the head of both colonies, and

25 For a detailed account of the trek to Oregon, see Hendricks, op. cit.
they shared a common treasury, Keil holding the two together by the sheer force of his dominant personality.

Upon Keil's death in 1877, there was a complete vacuum of leadership and the two colonies dissolved. The total value placed on the two colonies was $109,806.35. When the complicated system of dissolving the property was completed, each man was given whatever amount he had originally contributed plus twenty-nine dollars for each year he had spent in the society. Women received half the annual wage allowed the men. The land was deeded to individuals on a similar basis, each colonist taking his share and disposing of it as he wished.

Thus ended the saga of the Bethel and the Aurora communal colonies which came into being under the charismatic influence of William Keil, an erstwhile Methodist local preacher.