

St. Florian Carries on Tradition of First Settlers

By Marianne Bernauer

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German-American families began arriving in the Lauderdale County town called St. Florian in the late 1800s.

Being of strong Catholic background, they began almost immediately on the construction of a church. The first building for worshipers was constructed in 1872, with the first resident pastor arriving one year later in 1873. A parochial school was begun, with the church serving a dual role as church and school.

In 1876, a smallpox epidemic occurred. Almost every household in the community was affected. Among its victims was the pastor, Father Michael Mertz. At this time the Benedictines began serving the parish.

The St. Florian pastor served the immigrant laborers who were building the canal on the nearby Tennessee River. (Malaria among the laborers made his work with them more difficult.) He also served the Catholic community in Florence for a period of years. While Father Joseph was pastor, the story goes, the Mass in Florence was often late by an hour or more because Father *refused* to rush his faithful hours, Charlie.

The first visit to St. Florian by a bishop was a gala occasion, indeed. He arrived in Florence by train, and parishioners from St. Florian rode their horses to meet him, leading a beautiful white horse along. It was on this horse that the bishop made his ride to St. Florian.

The present Gothic-style church serving the parish is St. Florian was built during the teen years of this century, with the cornerstone set in place in 1916. In 1924, F. X. Zettler of Munich, Bavaria, received the contract for the stained-glass windows that today are still greatly admired by all who view them.

Most first-generation settlers of St. Florian spoke only German; their children, who were fast becoming bilingual, helped their parents contract any business transactions outside the community. But the love of and devotion to their native tongue remained strong. Even much later, when English was used in school, the third-generation children still had to study German.

The language problems caused the young people great difficulty in the religious services, since the Mass was conducted in Latin and the sermons were preached in German. Imagine the frustration of the children who had to deal with yet a third language, English, in their life outside the close-knit community!

When Father Alphonse came to the parish in 1907, he saw the language needs and began a transition program: English sermons alternated on a weekly basis with those in German. As this practice gradually gave way to all English sermons, the churchmen were careful to provide German-speaking priests for the older parishioners.

The language of the community took on another dimension in the form of adages which each generation was careful to pass on to the next. Among them were:

1. "The Lord helps those who help themselves."
2. "If a thing is worth doing, it is worth doing well."
3. "A whistling girl and a crowing hen always come to some bad end."

School

The 50-by-25 foot frame church building that was constructed in 1873 doubled as a school in which the pastor and lay teachers instructed the pupils. Although the school was church-sponsored, it was the only one in the immediate area; therefore, it admitted non-Catholics almost from the beginning.

Teachers received aid from the local school board, and thus were paid \$15 to \$30 per month. They were truly a dedicated lot who reflected the deep concern of the parents in the community that their children receive a good education.

In 1917, Father Alphonse secured sisters from the Benedictine monastery as teachers. This was a great step forward. As the county developed, enrollment grew and buildings were added. Children from the county in grades one through nine were brought to the school by bus until enrollment reached approximately 300.

In 1955, the decision was made to discontinue the school's affiliation with the county school board. Subsequently, it operated as a parochial school until it was closed in 1968.

Farming

The German-American settlers were excellent farmers; they believed in taking good care of the land and in diversifying their farming techniques. In fact, their first efforts at plowing in a terrace pattern (originally called circle ditches") were made on the farm owned by the Locker family. Another farmer, Julius Rasch, designed a long "tongue" plow and the V-shaped harrow to make it easier to plow around stumps.

The St. Florian farmers "gave back" to the land. For example, they would "plow under" anything left standing at the end of the season. They covered logs with limestone and burned them, scattering the resulting ashes on the fields.

Spreading manure on the fields, though the farmers knew it was good practice, caused the first known argument among adult friends in the community. Farmers who were fortunate enough to have water on their land shared it with neighbors. Hence, Mr. Stumpe shared his spring. Area farmers grazed their cows in Mr. Stumpe's spring lot and milked them under a large white oak tree there. One day, Mr. Rasch, who kept his cows there, arrived with a horse-drawn wagon to get a load of manure. Mr. Stumpe objected and a mild argument ensued. Mr. Rasch left with an empty wagon.

Several St. Florian farmers were asked in 1913 to write about farming in the South for the L&N Railroad Publication. Ed Rasch wrote: "We are using improved farming implements, and we get good results. The farm demonstration work is showing our farmers what they can do."

Entertainment

The hard-working people of St. Florian enjoyed socializing on Sundays, Holy Days and holidays Here are a few examples of the kinds of entertainment available to them:

1. According to a ledger entry on Jan. 29, 1893, the St. Florian Brass Band was comprised of 14 members.
2. In a 1914 issue of the Catholic Church Bulletin (published in Cullman}, these news items appeared:
 - a. "A comedy-drama was presented to a large audience Thursday afternoon and night, with lunch served throughout the period."
 - b. "The Glee Club of Florence normal School will present a program in the hall."

In addition, a traveling drama group performed annually for the enjoyment of the residents in the community.

As early as 1908, the St. Florian Fourth of July Picnic was held for the benefit of the church. The first picnics were ice cream socials ("homemade ice cream: bring your own spoon and dish.") In 1914, at the outbreak of World War I, the Fourth of July celebration was cancelled because some county residents viewed this German Catholic community with suspicion.

The annual Labor Day picnic was started at a later date and is continued to the present. It has become famous throughout the area as the place to buy homemade chicken stew and barbecue. Currently, those in charge of this event use more than 1,000 pounds of chicken in their stew, and they barbecue 1,700 pounds of Boston Butts and 50 chickens. And all of it is sold by noon!

The people of St. Florian are still nourished today by the same love of God, family and neighbors that sustained its early settlers.