

FATHER

by

Rev. Theodosius Plassmeyer, O.F.M.

"Ruegt es nicht, wenn ich den Helden
In der Heimath Farben male;
Duenkt er manchmal euch ein Traeumer,
Nun er War ja ein Westfale.

Zaeh, doch bildsam, herb, doch ehrlich,
Ganz wie ihr euresgleichen,
Ganz vom Eisen eurer Berge,
Ganz vom Holze eurer Eichen."

F. W. Weber, Dreizehn Linden.

In these lines the poet has furnished a frame in which fits well a sketch of my late father, Joseph Plassmeyer. Not that he was such an outstanding character, or that I want to eulogize him particularly. He was just one of the stalwart Westfalian farmers who settled in Osage County during the last twenty years before the Civil War. There were the Winkelmanns, the Adrians, the Willibrands, the other Plassmeyers, the Engelmeyers, the Holtmeyers, the Luebberts and others. The memory of these hardy pioneers with their fine civic and religious traits certainly deserves to be preserved. I single out father because, naturally, I knew him best; but what is said applies pretty well to all of them. The grandparents, Henry and Elizabeth (nee Heckemeyer) Plassmeyer came over during the Christman Holidays of 1857, together with five sons and a daughter, bringing with them all kinds of furniture, even bedding, and four hundred dollars in cash.

Father was not a "traeumer", dreamer, but he planned everything well. I remember him well, frequently sitting in the old rocker of an evening, smoking his pipe and planning; if the problem was of any importance, mother would sit with him, knitting, and they planned together. After mother had died, I was privileged at times to take part in the planning, but father was "zaeh", tenacious; plans once decided upon, were carried out tenaciously, though he was always ready to be shown a better way. As to being "herb", gruff, old Bernard Holtmeyer had the monopoly on that, and he had enough of it to do for all the rest. He never meant to be offensive; he just was that way. Mother used to call him "grob und eckich", unpolished of edges; all the others were of a rather gentle character--full of regard of one another's feelings.

"Bildsam", progressive? Yes, they all were progressive farmers. Father devoted himself wholeheartedly to his farm. He never dabbled in politics. Though he never went to school in this country, he learned enough English, especially whilst he served in the Union Army, to get along well in his dealings. He was bent on developing his farm. When he acquired it in 1867, the same was rather badly run down, what there was of it. His predecessor, Gerhard Winkelmann, had not been able to overcome that during the few years he lived on it. The old homesteader, Bill Mercy, had tilled only the upland; and

since he raised nothing but corn and tobacco, that had been ruined by erosion. There were ditches in it fully six feet deep, but father repaired that by draining the upland by a system of ditches; and he cleared the bottoms. He believed in variety farming, though wheat was always his main crop, raising from 500 to 1000 bushels a year. In the course of time he acquired two additional farms, the Kaiser's and the Heilmann's mainly for timber and for pasture land. His fences were always in a first-class condition, and especially the partition fences, to avoid trouble caused by the neighbors' horses and cattle jumping into the fields. Good practical gates were his special pride. The spring season commenced with splitting rails and hauling manure. There were never any idle days. When it rained, the hired hands repaired and greased the harness; father soled the boys' shoes or made clapboards; the rain over, there were fences to be repaired and ditches to be looked after.

From the beginning father carried out a well planned building program. He commenced with improving the living facilities. I barely remember this part of it. It must have been in 1870. Living quarters in the old two-room loghouse were getting too crowded, and he built the old summer kitchen. However, it served also for a smokehouse and workshop, and we boys and the hired hand slept over these rooms under the roof. The well on the northwest corner was sunk to take the place of the original springhouse at the foot of the hill (all the settlers built near a spring). Ravenous dogs had commenced to break into the springhouse by tearing a hole in the roof; then jumped in and devoured the meat, upset the milk and the butter and created a general mess. The new well served also as a very practical coolerator; butter, clabber milk and meat were let down in a crock tied to a rope. Next, the old Mercy's tobacco shed on top of the hill in the middle of the field was replaced by a substantial, spacious barn for grain and hay, on the lower hill towards the home. I remember well the building of the barn. I must have been about four years old. The heavy logs were hauled to the place by oxen. Frank Horstdaniel did the building. I shall never forget the "raising". "I was scared stiff", on that occasion. It was drizzling in the morning. I still hear Mr. Horstdaniel commandeering: eins, zwei, drei, for the men to raise the north wall. I sat on one of the scantlings, straddling the same, and did not realize what it was all about. Evidently, the men did not see me and, before I was aware of it, I was being raised too. The whole performance was halted by my SOS. Toward evening, the raising finished, Mr. Horstdaniel stood in the ridge of the gable and declaimed, according to custom, a very fine "Baumeister" speech with pathos and plentiful gestures.

In 1880 and '81 the new home was built in place of the old loghouse erected in 1820. Henry Pohl from Jefferson City made the bricks on the farm; Andrew Schneider was the architect. All the heavy lumber for the residence was salvaged from the mighty burr oaks that had been uprooted by a fierce cyclone that swept the neighborhood on the night of the nineteenth of April, 1878. Preparations had already been made for a large stable across the road, when mother fell a victim of typhoid on February thirteenth, 1882, but in 1883 in May, he married Elizabeth Mohrfeld, and also this plan was carried out. To the building program belonged also, a number of dams constructed along the banks of the Maries and of the "branch", to prevent the bottoms being washed away. This took hundreds of loads of rock. In the course of years they have submerged and covered up, but they served their purpose well.

"Ehrlich", honest, truthful, loyal. Looking back all these many years, and after having had dealings with many classes of people, it strikes me that they all possessed a profound sense of truthfulness and honesty. "Luegner", "Betrueger", liar, crook, were the worst names anybody could be called; and for the one thus labeled, it was just too bad. It would cling to him like his shadow.

This trait characterized their religious life. Their faith was deep-rooted and unshakable in consequence of their training in the old country; and in their daily lives they certainly tried to measure up to their belief. Profanity was strictly tabooed from the home; also, for the hired hands. The worst I heard from father, all those years, was a "verdant" dammed, twice, but again, we had a neighbor who could, and did furnish a goodly amount of this uncalled for, ungodly supply. Besides, he had a stentorian voice, and when, especially at corn plowing, he touched off his explosives, the detonations would come ringing across the Maries. To miss Mass on Sundays was unknown, rain, shine, or snow. When there was sleet on the ground, all the youngsters from the neighborhood bunched together and "hoofed" it; and when the Maries was too high to ford it, we crossed it in a skiff at Ortmeyer's, or, went to Richfountain. On Sunday afternoons, father and mother loved to take a stroll out on the farm, especially, in the spring, to inspect the latest improvements and the coming crops. To the chagrin of Reverend Diepenbrock, father could never be induced to become a frequent communicant, though his son was a priest; he went from four to six times a year. That was the way he had learned it; that was the way he had practiced it all his life, and that settled that. There was no card playing in Advent and Lent.

Family prayers were a custom. Mother would lead them in the morning, whilst she walked around the stove, baked corn bread and fried bacon and eggs. After chores in the evening, father would lead them, knitting at the same time. Of course, mother had taught us children extra morning and evening prayers, and she would line us up to say them. During Lent there was an extra Rosary; also, during heavy storms we said prayers, kneeling around a blest candle lighted; thus, we said them during the cyclone before mentioned. Though his relations with Reverend Paul Krier, S.J., were very intimate, Reverend Diepenbrock and Reverend Melies never thought that father was exactly doing his duty towards the parish budget, but the rather haphazard annual report of the parish finances, and the whole arrangement of the parochial school, did not appeal to his business sense. Reverend Bonkamp, one-time assistant, on the contrary, found him very liberal when the church was renovated, because he donated extra, the painting of the death of Saint Joseph \$300.00, and a stained window, \$250.00; also, a memorial window for the Church of the Novitiate in Teutopolis, Illinois, \$1,000.00. No brother or sister ever called in vain for a good cause; nor did even a tramp or a beggar pass by without receiving something. A night's lodging he never refused. Naturally, they had too much vermin about them, for mother to keep them in the house. There was a place for them in the barn and they got plenty of covering to be comfortable; next morning, they always received a substantial breakfast, possibly, also, some old clothing.

Also, his duties as a citizen, father took very seriously. His taxes

and his bills were always paid promptly, and he voted conscientiously. For many years he was a straight Republican on account of his Civil War affiliations, but later, he voted for the best candidate and for the best platform. He could never be induced to run for an office, but he frequently served on the jury. In this connection, I remember some beautiful tributes to the class of citizens I am describing, and that from unsuspected sources. A Mr. Ernstmeyer from Washington, Missouri, had been elected Circuit Judge. His predecessor, Judge Seal, had been easy going, and the docket had gotten glutted, but the new Judge meant business. He gave instructions that the panels of the jurymen should be drawn as much as possible, from amongst the German farmers of Westphalia and Koeltztown. The consequence was that father, Anton Willebrand, Henry Loehner and Henry Arentz had to serve on the petit jury for fully three weeks. They traveled to and fro by a spring wagon and two horses. They used to amuse us boys, when they returned Saturday evening. Mr. Loehner had a powerful voice, and we could always hear his voice ring through the night fully fifteen minutes before they reached home. They took supper with great gusto and their humor seemed inexhaustible. How we enjoyed that! Well, the docket was cleared, and the Judge thanked the "fine jurymen for their fine service". At another time, after I had been priest already for years, I met lawyer Ed. Zevele in Linn; we had known each other in our younger days, and he said of the same class of people: "We lawyers have reason to thank God that not all the people in the county are like those German Catholics; if they were, one lawyer would starve to death. We never get any lawsuits from them. They are settled by their priests". At times they did have a lawsuit before their Justice of Peace, August Kleinsorge, but that local dignitary generally made so much fuss about his spectacles, about the law and its interpretation, that the whole procedure was considered more of a farce than anything else.

Our parents, together with the rest of their neighbors, were great lovers of home and home life, hence the substantial and spacious residences. Mother took care of our religious education, and did her part well. Father had to look after the recreational and educational part of it. In this I never knew that he made any distinction between his two step-sons, Bernard and Herman Winkelmann, and his own. He was very playful with us. The first recollection I have of that is, that we loved to meet him at the entrance of the yard, when he came from the field with his heavy boots on; I would catch him by the leg, sit on his foot and hug the shaft of his boot. Even in the long winter evenings we had our indoor sports; "Blinde Kuh" was a favorite. Of course, we boys loved the racket; and mother would never get nervous over it, though we did upset chairs or even broke dishes. We boys had "to do them", and at one time I broke five dishes in an outburst of joy. Toys, we didn't have many. Cards played an important part. In the outdoor sports a little wagon, young dogs, calves and colts had an ample share. As we grew up, fishing, swimming, and hunting were introduced. Father was a good marksman with his heavy rifle; for the boys he bought a double-barreled 32 muzzle-loader shotgun. At ten I shot my first squirrel with spectacular success. He took a great interest in our schoolwork, and he, himself, generally belonged to the School Board; and in the evening the chores in the barn having been done, he would supervise our studies. There was the a.b.c., spelling and reading, both in German and in English, the tables, the fundamental operations in arithmetic and geography.

Then, there was also a good deal of reading during the long nights of winter. Father was a good reader. He read for us the stories and novels from the old German Amerika of which he was a stockholder from its beginning. Herchenbach's story books borrowed from the parish library, were our favorites. Naturally, we loved to listen to his beautiful reading. He also took pains to teach us to read aloud. Brother Herman turned out to be a good reader, but I was no good at it, having suffered from poor eyesight in my younger days.

As we advanced in age, we youngsters took part in the social life of the neighborhood. Every summer they had their round of "visits", at which they would come together on Sunday afternoons. There was very little dancing, except at weddings and barn raisings; it was mostly cards, horseshoe throwing, swings, races, etc. We boys loved to play Black Peter with the girls. That gave us a chance to paint them black with a charred piece of cork. What a racket there would be! Discipline? Yes, there was discipline, but we would rarely chafe under it. It was administered with great prudence. When we went out alone, we children, we had to be back at the appointed time. Later on, we could set our own time, but we had to tell where we were going, what was going on, and had to be back at our self appointed time. As far as I remember I was the only one who ever got chastized with a rod by father, and did I feel it? Not the physical pain but the disgrace! I never knew of a quarrel amongst the neighbors. They were great for mutual help at log rolling, barn raising, threshing, butchering, and in a hundred other ways, especially during times of illness. When in the winter of 1881 to '82 the typhoid epidemic raged, mother nursed neighbors for two months before she fell a victim to the same; also, brother Bernard succumbed. Herman, myself, Martin and Mary were critically ill for weeks; only father and Clara being spared; however, throughout the whole time the neighbors assisted us loyally. The visitation naturally jolted our family life severely, but father never complained, never was he discouraged. He remarried in May, 1883 and life went on again as before. From this marriage was born Colonel Joseph Plassmeyer.

Also, father's relation toward his hired hands always was of the best, including the two negroes, George Jackson and Jim Lawson, who came from Jefferson City, for years, to help during the harvesting season. There was lots of work--hard work and long hours, but he paid them fair wages, treated them right, and there was never a complaint. Father would cut from eight to ten acres of wheat with the Old Kentucky dropper a day; the hired hands doing the binding. By seven o'clock he quit; then came a substantial supper and a little rest, after which, everybody got busy shocking the wheat, we boys carrying the bundles together. If, by nine o'clock the spirits were getting low, "the boys" were called in for a little "Schnapps"; then the negroes would sing, whistle and work till the last bundle was in the shock.

With his push and thrift and tenacity father naturally prospered. He also accepted a moderate pension. For years he refused to do so in spite of all the solicitors that were constantly after him, because he "could make his own living and he did not want to burden the taxpayers", though he was wounded twice and suffered a sunstroke in the battle of Iuka. He was "honorably discharged in consequence"; however, for many years he suffered every summer from the effects of that prostration, when the heat rose to about 90 degrees, but

when he realized that Uncle Sam was literally throwing money away for pension, and that everybody was eager to accept it, he decided to "pick up some, himself". When the question of investing his savings arose, he put them into land holdings. A favorable occasion came for that enterprise when a number of younger farmers moved away from Osage County to Maries and to Miller County. They needed financial aid and they put their confidence in father. Thus he assisted "Dick" Holtmeyer, the Feldkempers, the Volmers, the Parkers, and others. He would go along with them to make sure that they secured good land and clear titles. If he did not have the cash when it was needed, he would borrow it from friends for six per cent, and loaned it to these farmers at eight per cent, which they were perfectly willing to pay. He visited them annually to assist them in their financial transactions. The experience he thus gathered, served him in good stead, when the Westphalia bank was opened. He became one of the directors for many years, and farm loans were his specialty. He knew that part of the business and the farmers trusted him.

Born on the 7th of March, 1841 in Wadersloh, Germany, father died on the second of May, 1930. After he had outgrown the ailment contracted during the Civil War, he enjoyed exceptionally good health; the only sickness which I remember he ever had, was a case of appendicitis at the time this human ailment began to be recognized by the medical profession. A surgeon from St. Louis operated on him on a table at home. His height was six feet one inch, and he weighed 200 pounds. He died as he had lived, all planned. His will was drawn up in due time, and he died well prepared by prayer. He used the old leather bound family prayer book to the last, and by the reception of the Sacraments. His features in the coffin were a picture of peace. I conducted the solemn funeral services myself, and preached a short funeral sermon on the fifth of May. I hastened back the same day to Waterloo, Iowa, to be present the next day; the seventh, in Dubuque, Iowa, for the installation of our new Archbishop, the most Reverend Francis J. Beckman.

It is evident that these sturdy pioneers had an ample share in clearing away the primeval forests, and in opening up the agricultural and commerce resources of Central Missouri. Moreover, they bequeathed a fund of cultural, civic, moral and spiritual values to their descendants for the formation of their civic and religious character, that defies appraisal. They have finished this eventful career and have finished it well. May they rest in peace. I, for one, consider myself indeed fortunate for the privilege of having grown up amongst them. I gratefully dedicate this little marker to their memory. We, the children, have reason to be justly proud of our ancestors. Let us preserve their memory for the inspiration and guidance of future generations.

As I have begun, let me conclude with words of another poet:

"Lives of such men" all remind us we can make our lives sublime,
And departing, leave behind us footprints on the sands of time;
Footprints, that perhaps another sailing o'er life's solemn main,
A forlorn and shipwrecked brother, seeing, shall take heart again."

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow.

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