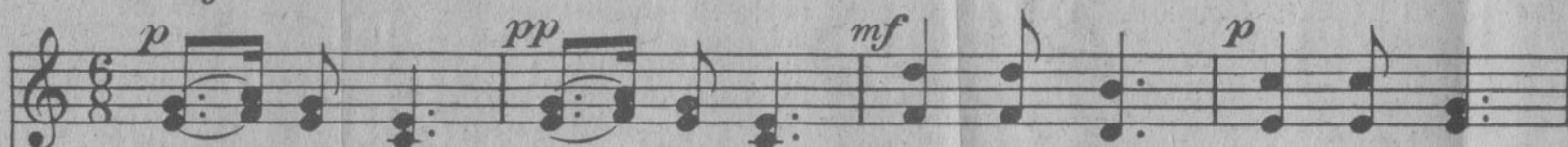


Stille Nacht, heilige Nacht!

JOSEPH MÖHR

FRANZ GRÜBER

Calmly with reverence



By GENE DIVINE
Sentinel Staff Writer

Stevens Point, Wis.—Many years ago at Christmastime the little Strasser children claimed “Silent Night” as “our very own song” and were chastized by a nun for letting their “imagination” take over like visions of sugar plums.

But the Strasser children were right. “Silent Night” is the Strassers’ song. It was Strasser children who gave the song to the world 132 years ago and the Strassers here are the last of that clan.

Father Joseph Mohr, then a 26 year old parish priest, wrote the words to “Silent Night” in the tiny Austrian village of Oberndorf on Dec. 23, 1818.

Legend has it that he wrote the poem after returning on a starry night through the still snow covered forest from a woodchopper’s house where a woman had just given birth to a child.

The following day he hurried to the home of his best friend, Franz Gruber, then 31, who was the village schoolteacher and church organist. Gruber set the poem to music for guitar and two voices because the church organ was broken.

Frank Strasser, jr., 65, who has lived here most of his life, recalls his grandmother tell-

ing him that Gruber had told her he picked out the melody on a zither and the music came to him so quickly he felt inspired.

That Christmas eve, after midnight mass in the Church of St. Nicholas, Gruber picked up his guitar and sang bass while Father Mohr sang tenor.

The simple carol was an instant hit in Oberndorf, but languished there until one of Gruber’s daughters married a Strasser.

A branch of the Strassers was musically inclined and included a professional group of “nature singers” who regularly toured Germany giving concerts.

According to Strasser, nature singers then were the equivalent of today’s folk groups like the Brothers Four or Kingston Trio.

In the group were four Strasser children with beautiful voices—two sisters and two brothers—Amalie and Karoline, Josef and Andreas.

“Silent Night” was perfect for them so they asked Gruber’s permission to include it in their Christmas concerts and received the song in Gruber’s own script—the second copy he’d made of it, Father Mohr having the original.

The year was 1833 and the Strassers traveled with their father to the Saxony capital of Leipzig where he sold mittens to the servants in the castle.

Strasser recalls tales of how the music director of the kingdom heard the children rehearsing and asked them to do “Silent Night” at a Christmas concert that year for the Saxony royalty.

Karoline was 12 at the time. The Strasser song was such a hit that it was included each Christmas as they toured the capitals of the German states.

The Saxony royalty told King Frederick William IV of the song and he caught a Strasser concert in Berlin, but it wasn’t until he heard the song by the full choir of the Imperial church in Berlin in the early 1850’s that he started a search for the composers.

Father Mohr had died in 1848 and Amalie and Josef also were cut down by this time by tuberculosis. But Karoline, who lived past 90, was on hand when Gruber received the king’s personal congratulations—his only compensation for the song.

Karoline never married as Andreas was the only survivor of the group with descendants. As near as can be determined by Strasser, Andreas was the cousin of his grandfather.

His father, Frank, sr., farmed the 600 acre Gruber homestead on which Gruber had lived and which included on one corner the monastery where Father Mohr lived. Frank, sr., came to the United States just before World War I.

During the war Andreas’ descendants were killed in battle or died of disease. After the war, refugees streaming through the area ransacked the empty Gruber house.

According to Strasser they took many of the priceless family Gruber treasures, including the copy of “Silent Night” which had been hidden in the upholstery of a rocking chair which was stolen.

What little remained Strasser lost last summer in a fire which gutted his little cottage on the banks of the Wisconsin river here, but he still has a picture of the Gruber home and barns.

Discouraged by the damage to the homestead, the deaths of relatives and the inflation which swept war ravaged Germany after World War I, Frank, sr., sold the Gruber farm, declining the opportunity to return to his native land.

In addition to Frank, jr., he had a son, Anton, and three daughters. Frank and Anton have two sons. The daughters are Mrs. Anne Dagnau, Appleton; Mrs. Frances Thompson, Stevens Point, and Mrs. Johanna Pliska, Wisconsin Rapids.

As of now, only Frank, jr., has grandsons with the family name, three of them.

The Strasser name may be declining, but around the world each Christmas eve “their song” is lofted between heaven and earth by ever growing numbers of Christian children.