

Father Ambros Oswald and the Utopian Community of St. Nazianz in Wisconsin: Part I

Karyl Rommelfanger



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Undated photo of workers at St. Nazianz. The men are identified as: John Gramlich, for many years the “Hausvater” of the Old Brothers at the Seminary; Joe Gramlich; and Joe Hein, Farm Boss.

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The following is the first of a two-part series about the utopian community of St. Nazianz, Wisconsin, and its founder, Ambros Oswald. The 2011 Annual Meeting of the Max Kade Institute (May 7, 2011) will include a visit to St. Nazianz, where visitors will tour the community and the religious property of this once very lively and successful colony.

In 1854 Catholic priest Father Ambros Oswald led his followers across the Atlantic Ocean to New York, and then westward to Wisconsin, where he founded

the Catholic utopian colony of St. Nazianz. The community functioned successfully until the charismatic leader’s unexpected death in 1873, after which divisions arose and the once effective enterprise began to fail.

Ambros Oswald was born in 1801, at a time when the power of the Catholic Church in his homeland of Baden was fading rapidly. The previously intertwined relationship of church and state had been dissolved, and—though two-thirds of the population of Baden was Roman Catholic—a Protestant government

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was using its power to diminish the influence of the Catholic church. Church property was seized, monasteries and convents were closed, and seminary education was regulated by state authorities.

Nevertheless, for many families in Baden, Catholicism remained very much alive, and the Oswald family was no exception. Ambros's father Mathias, a devout Catholic, ran a mill in southern Baden; and in his late adolescent years the young Oswald felt a calling to serve his church. In 1833, after two years of seminary training, Ambros Oswald was ordained a Catholic priest.

Oswald had few needs, and he led a spartan life: he was more apt to spend his salary on the needs of his parish than on himself. The central theme of the Gospel message, he told his parishioners, was to love one's neighbor, and his compassion for the unfortunate as well as his charismatic personality continually drew people to him. But Oswald also found himself repeatedly in conflict with the church hierarchy, and he was transferred from one parish to another, often to remote areas of the diocese. The controversies had to do with three aspects of the young priest's ministry.

First, Father Oswald believed that he possessed special powers to heal the sick. Indeed, it seems probable that he had become familiar with homeopathic cures because his family had practiced them. He had shown an early interest in studying plants and herbs that could heal illnesses. However, he had also read Biblical accounts of people being restored to health through fervent prayer, the laying on of hands, and exorcism.



Portrait of Ambros Oswald from the 1929 St. Nazianz Diamond Jubilee book. The inscription reads: "Everyone should use his talents to advance the welfare of others." (Jeder befördere nach Kräften seines Nächsten Wohlfahrt.)

In 1843 Oswald openly declared that he had healed 3,160 persons, attributing his power to God. In one community, local doctors called him a quack and demanded both a civil and church investigation, but after a careful inquiry, Oswald was found innocent of any wrongdoing. This aspect of his ministry remained part of his work in Wisconsin, and there are those today who still believe he was able to perform miraculous cures.

The second controversy that involved Oswald concerned his belief in mysticism, his conviction

that he had a special relationship with God and could interpret dreams and visions and see into the future. In 1849 he published a book entitled *Mystische Schriften* (Mystical Writings), in which he predicted the second coming of Christ at the turn of the century and the establishment of a New Jerusalem in southwestern Germany. This would be followed by a thousand years of peace throughout the world. Religious authorities called the book heretical and a hodge-podge of nonsense. Some also questioned Oswald's mental

stability. The Church, which could hardly tolerate a recalcitrant priest with crazy ideas, asked Oswald to pledge that he would publish no further books. Nevertheless, despite his promise, another book appeared within the year.

The third and final blow occurred in 1850 when the unmanageable priest founded a society called “Der geistlich-magnetische Verein” (Spiritual Magnetic Society). This attempt to organize his followers worried the Archbishop who, fearing the group would turn into a cult, composed a letter to each of the diocesan churches, warning parishioners of Oswald’s ideas. He then relieved Oswald of his parish and limited his priestly duties.

In 1852 Oswald retreated to Munich where he began studying medicine, a move he had contemplated for some time. Upon his return to Baden two years later, he informed the Archdiocese that he was giving up the priesthood in favor of medicine. He then requested and received permission from both civil and religious authorities to emigrate. His civil emigration papers recorded his profession as “a former priest.”

At the end of May 1854, Oswald and 113 of his followers boarded two ships at LeHavre, France, and began a five-week journey across the Atlantic Ocean. After arriving in New York, they journeyed on to Milwaukee, where Oswald used their pooled resources to purchase 3,840 acres of land in Manitowoc County. They christened their yet unseen village St. Nazianz, after St. Gregory of Nazianz, who centuries earlier had retreated into a contemplative life, just as they intended to do.

The long journey had taken its toll, and the number of those remaining with Oswald had dwindled. In New York some had refused to journey any further, and in Milwaukee others were too ill to continue. Only the strongest traveled on to the north to begin creating a new home out of the tangled, forested wilderness that made up eastern Wisconsin. By Christmas of 1854, only 70 of the original 113 were still members of the Oswald community.

Life was difficult in the initial years of settlement. The new immigrants experienced hardships in the form of hunger, fires, unexplained deaths, and severe winters, all of which led to dissension. Worst of all was their inability to make mortgage payments on the land: if it were not for the generosity of Ulrich Kunzweiler, a German outside the community, the new settlers would have lost their property. By 1860, however, St. Nazianz had begun to grow, and Oswald had formulated his ideas about how the village should operate.

Any German-speaking Catholic, single or married, or anyone wishing to become Catholic, was eligible to join the community, as long as the person adhered to its principal rules. Members agreed to share work, money, and food, live a life of humility, observe the sacraments, educate the young, and, above all, serve others—especially the infirm, the poor, widows, and orphans. Swearing, quarreling, fighting, unlawful conduct, impurity, boorishness, and rudeness could lead to expulsion, but a person was given three chances to reform before being ousted.

Initially, all members, married and unmarried, lived in the numerous

log houses built under Oswald’s directions. In time two convents were constructed for the unmarried, who became known as Brothers and Sisters. Additional houses were added as membership increased, and eventually also a hospital, an orphanage, several schools, and a short-lived seminary, as well as mills and businesses. Among the colony’s craftsmen were a shoemaker, a tailor, a baker, a weaver, a blacksmith, a mason, and carpenters. The Sisters made straw hats, felt shoes, and an artisan cheese that were sold outside the community, and they became some of the area’s first educators, as Catholic schools emerged throughout the county.

Community members were not paid for their work, but if they performed jobs for non-affiliated individuals, they were allowed to accept pay and keep their earnings. This money they often put back into their businesses to purchase needed supplies. Non-members could also reside in the village, usually individuals who possessed specific skills or sold goods the community needed, for which they were duly compensated.

Individuals joining the colony were expected to donate whatever money they could to the common treasury. In theory a member could leave the society at any time, taking along an amount of money or property determined in accordance with the work or money he or she had contributed. Some members who left were compensated as promised, but others apparently were not.

Members of the Oswald settlement enjoyed their meals together,

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though children ate, as one member stated, “apart from the table.” While the adults worked, children were required to attend school; nevertheless, they were also expected to do manual labor when they were old enough. The colony provided its members with basic clothes and shoes, but any extras had to be furnished by the members themselves.

The St. Nazianz society never joined a specific Catholic order, although Oswald adopted the principles of the Third Order of St. Francis, an official order that included both married and unmarried members. He also introduced the Catholic Breviary, a strict regimen of prayers recited at various times during the day. A typical day involved rising early and retiring late, with the hours in between interspersed with

work, meals, prayer, and the evening recitation of the Rosary.

At its height in the early 1870s, the colony had approximately 200 members, and a century later researcher Father Alfred Schneble listed a total of some 350 persons who at various times had been members of the “Settlement,” as it was known locally.

Although mysticism had played a large role in his spiritual life in Germany, Father Oswald seems to have laid this aside upon his arrival in the United States, perhaps because of the pressures connected to building his communal society. He enjoyed good relations with the Archbishop of Milwaukee, Swiss émigré John Martin Henni, who visited St. Nazianz several times. He continued to use his medical skills to help those who were ill, collecting plants and herbs for his homeopathic cures and keeping records of illnesses

he treated. It is said that he visited anyone needing help, no matter what his or her religious affiliation.

In February, 1873, Ambros Oswald became ill and died within a few days, leaving the St. Nazianz colony in complete shock. Members held a public visitation for their priest, and large numbers of people from the surrounding area, some even from neighboring states, came to pay their respects. Father Oswald was laid to rest in St. Ambros’ Chapel, but years later his body was moved to the newer Loretta Chapel, where it remains today. With his death, the communal society of St. Nazianz began to change.

(Conclusion follows in the next issue.)

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The St. Nazianz Colony Struggles to Survive: 1873–1896

Karyl Rommelfanger

The following is the second of a two-part series about the utopian community of St. Nazianz, Wisconsin, and its founder, Ambros Oswald. The 2011 Annual Meeting of the Max Kade Institute (May 7, 2011) will include a visit to St. Nazianz, where visitors will tour the community and the religious property of this once very lively and successful colony.

The Catholic communal colony of St. Nazianz functioned effectively for almost nineteen years, from its founding in 1854 to Father Ambros Oswald's unexpected passing in 1873. But with his death, rumblings of dissatisfaction festering beneath the surface exploded into a whirlwind of accusations and disputes. Without the charismatic priest's dynamic leadership, the grand experiment would never be the same again.

Much of what we know about the colony today comes from a chronicle written between 1854 and 1887 by Oswald's right-hand man, Anton Stoll. Stoll came to Wisconsin with Oswald in 1854 and was the manager of day-to-day operations. He was the *Ökonom*, or manager of the estate, and he thus wielded substantial influence. His job was not easy, and he was viewed as somewhat arrogant.

On his deathbed, Father Oswald designated Peter Mutz as his spiritual successor. Originally a Lutheran, Mutz was living in poverty when Oswald invited him to St. Nazianz,



The village of St. Nazianz, undated..

where he fed and clothed him. Later, having studied for the priesthood, he was serving a congregation in Schlesinger ville (now Slinger, WI) when Oswald died. A mild-mannered yet determined individual, Mutz is often viewed as a weak leader, though this is probably not the case. When he returned to St. Nazianz, he proposed a change that split the community into factions.

Mutz wanted the colony to abandon the use of the Breviary, a strict regimen of daily prayers and devotions around which the day's schedule revolved. Oswald had found in the Breviary not only a religious regimen, but also a handy tool to keep the operation of the colony under strict control. Anton Stoll was outraged at Mutz's proposal and argued that copies of the Breviary had been purchased and shipped from Germany at great expense. Stoll was also concerned that the elimination of the frequent devotions could weaken

the community's resolve to continue the ideals of Father Oswald. Father Mutz, on the other hand, argued that the Breviary was meant only for clergy, and that the time spent for numerous recitations could be better used for rest. A power struggle ensued: Mutz called Stoll a "Weltmann" (a man of the world), and Stoll compared the community under Mutz's leadership to "eine Herde ohne Hirt" (sheep without a shepherd). The issue was finally resolved by allowing each individual community member to choose. But in the meantime, the fabric of the community had been torn, and life in St. Nazianz would never be the same again.

Thornier issues concerned land ownership, incorporation of the colony, debt payment, collection of outstanding loans, and court challenges. The colony could not look to the Milwaukee Archdiocese or the larger church in Rome for legal assistance, because Oswald had never

formally aligned his followers with a specific Catholic order.

The community's first legal entanglement had to do with the ownership of the property. All the land—over 3000 acres in Manitowoc County, additional land in Calumet County, and property in Canada—was held in Father Oswald's name, though it had been purchased with funds from a common treasury. Heirs to the estate were Oswald's brother and sister in St. Nazianz, Martin and Margaretha Oswald, and a brother-in-law in Germany, Rafael Wenzinger. The former readily signed waivers of inheritance, and eventually Wenzinger did as well. However, before individuals could purchase land from the estate, the colony needed to be incorporated.

On July 27, 1874, the incorporation documents were agreed upon by the 102 followers of Father Oswald who had elected to continue their communal lifestyle. In many ways the agreement simply put into legal format the rules under which the colony had operated for the previous twenty years. But there were a few significant changes. A Board of Directors with elected officers would now become the chief governing body of the organization, while the spiritual leader, Father Mutz, would be the Board President. Only the Board of Directors could buy and sell land, make loans, accept new members, and expel members who failed to live up to the society's rules. The colony now became the Roman Catholic Religious Association of St. Nazianz (RCRA).

The RCRA continued to provide shelter, food, and clothing for its members, but only with special



Anton Stoll, undated.

permission could a member live in private housing within the village. This meant a physical division between members and non-members. Non-members who so desired could sign lease agreements and continue to reside in the village, much of which was still RCRA property; and over time the RCRA sold its property, and St. Nazianz was incorporated as an independent entity. To further emphasize the communal nature of the association and to avoid future misunderstanding, the RCRA put into writing what had always been the practice, that there was to be no pay for work.

The probate court now appointed a

panel of commissioners to negotiate the payment of debts, recover loans, and resolve disputes. The commission's job was difficult, and there were frequent resignations and new appointees. Especially hard to untangle were land deals Oswald had made with some of the members. Oswald had always promised he would compensate those who chose to leave the colony. Sometimes this was through a gift of land. Oswald, however, did not always furnish the recipient a deed to the property. The commission ruled that anyone claiming such land needed to prove ownership through the presentation of a deed.

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Unfortunately, one of those denied his property was Ulrich Kunzweiler, the very individual who, when the colony could not pay its mortgage in 1858, had bailed out the community by purchasing its land and then donating it back.

A major conflict occurred when Conrad Moerchen, a former member and the blacksmith in St. Nazianz, sued the colony for back pay, putting the RCRA in danger of collapse. Anton Stoll represented the RCRA until the association was finally forced to hire a lawyer. The frequent trips on foot or horseback to Manitowoc, a distance of about 20 miles, took their toll on Stoll both physically and emotionally, and finally he elected to stay in St. Nazianz and watch the course of events from afar. The protracted legal battle went on for six years, and in the end, the court ruled in favor of the RCRA. The transcripts of this lawsuit provide a valuable historical record of everyday life in the Oschwald colony.

Joining Moerchen in his lawsuit was Sister Anna Silberer, a feisty and outspoken member of RCRA's Board of Directors. She was also the Mother Superior of the Sisters' convent and no friend of the haughty Stoll. She accused Stoll of burning valuable documents and wanted Stoll removed from his position as administrator. The altercation caused such unrest in the sisters' convent, that in February, 1878, she was removed from the Board of Directors and from her position as Mother Superior of the convent. Thereafter she began her own legal battle, suing the RCRA for a piece of land for which she, to be sure, could not produce a deed. In

1885, the court ruled against Sister Anna, but it also arranged that she, though no longer a colony member, should receive a monthly stipend from the RCRA and have room and board in the sisters' convent for the rest of her natural life. She was 64 years old at the time. She died seven years later, and is buried in an unmarked grave.

In 1879 the RCRA was able to buy back much of its land from the Oschwald estate. Surprisingly, the association had continued to be self-sustaining during these years of struggle. It had also continued to clothe and feed over 200 disadvantaged and handicapped individuals, both children and adults. The State of Wisconsin recognized the importance of its orphanage and began to help support its efforts in 1876.

As time passed, RCRA members became older and needed care. Anton Stoll died in 1889. Father Mutz continued his leadership until the mid-1890s, when ill health prevented him from continuing his work. In 1896 the Order of the Divine Savior, an official order of the Catholic Church, purchased the old Oschwald property with the understanding that it would care for the now elderly brother and sisters until all had died. This Salvatorian order kept its word and continued its work in St. Nazianz, running a seminary and later a high school until the mid-1990s, when the property was sold. Today it is in private hands. 

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Friends of MKI Annual Meeting May 7, 2011

Mark your calendars for the 2011 Friends' Annual Meeting on Saturday, May 7, near Manitowoc, WI, where we will visit St. Nazianz, the site of the Oschwald communal society you have read about in the newsletter. A guided tour will include St. Gregory's Catholic Church and cemetery; a walk through the village, to see the site of the first church and the Anton Stoll house; a visit to the local museum and other landmarks; and a stroll to the old Salvatorian property just south of the village, where we will have refreshments and visit Loretto Chapel, where Father Oschwald is buried, and St. Ambrose Chapel. The Friends of MKI Annual Meeting will be held on the property. We will conclude the day with supper at the Silver Valley Banquet Hall just west of Manitowoc, near the I-43 freeway. Further details and registration forms will soon be posted on the MKI Web site and sent to you by mail.