

## LOOKING BACK

# A new year's memory

St. Boniface community faced many challenges

By Mary Owen

In 1889, the first peals of the new bell at St. Boniface Catholic Church rang out clearly on New Year's Day. Sadly, the bell rang out for the untimely death of the Sublimity church's first resident pastor, Father Werner Ruettimann.

"Friends from back East had sent the Sisters a bell that rang for the first time on New Year's Day, but the young priest had not been well and had succumbed to tuberculosis early that morning," said Henry Strobel, a historian for St. Boniface Archives and Museum, who researched the archives and provided the information for this story.

The author of *These Valiant Women, History of the Sisters of St. Mary of Oregon*, Wilfrid Schoenberg, SJ, wrote, the bell would "ring merrily, the Sisters said, because they had finally driven the specter of possible failure out of their lives."

The Sisters believed the New Year was bound to be better, according to Schoenberg.

But when the bell rang out on that historic morning, Schoenberg said, "In contrast to its sweet tones, ringing over the frosty village of Sublimity, the dogs howled dismally. The people of the parish took special note of it, as they were drawing nearer to the church to share in the celebration. They gathered and waited for the priest to

begin Mass. When Fr. Werner did not appear, two sisters hurried across the field to his little house and pounded on the door.

"Fr. Werner, alas, could no longer respond. He had died alone during the early hours of the New Year. He was gone and the sisters suddenly realized how alone they really were."

Schoenberg described Ruettimann, or Father Werner as he was commonly called, as "a sick man, and it was sometimes suggested, though never in public, that he was also a cranky one."

Born April 16, 1857 in Sursee, Switzerland, Ruettimann was appointed pastor of the Marion County Missions. Schoenberg noted that Jordan, one of the missions, was over the line in Linn County, "a nice distinction which made little difference in those uncomplicated days."

Schoenberg said Ruettimann "appeared to be serious beyond his age, a man of great concern for the salvation of



Father Werner Ruettimann

souls."

"A contemporary photograph presents him also as a man of mystery," he wrote. "His dark, moody eyes beneath a wide black biretta, stare intently at the enemy, and his thin black moustache and small goatee on the chin give him the appearance of a magician at a county carnival."

The Swiss priest came to Sublimity via Gervais in 1884 at the age of 27. Ruettimann had studied in Switzerland, both at the Abbey of Einsiedeln (the "Hermitage," which founded St. Meinrad Abbey in Indiana), and at the Abbey of Engelberg ("Mount Angel," which founded Mount Angel Abbey in Oregon.)

Four years prior to Ruettimann's arrival, the old college building was purchased and divided into small rooms, not ideal for a church. The first floor was used as the second St. Boniface Church, and the upper story with its broken windows was still the domain of bats and pigeons, according to historical records.

"Father Ruettimann took up lodging on the first floor near the front door," Strobel said.

As well as Sublimity, Ruettimann served the communities of Scio and Jordan. Schoenberg said Ruettimann had been in the Benedictine Order for "a lean seven years, a priest for

only three, when he was entrusted with the care of souls in Oregon. Fluent in three languages, including German and French besides English, he was an excellent choice for sending to Jordan, because some of the Sisters there could speak only German."

The young women were living a semi-religious life in the Jordan colony, southeast of Sublimity, when Archbishop William Gross visited and invited them to become a formal religious community.

In 1885, because of a disagreement with their trustees, the Jordan sisters left to live for a few months with the Benedictine sisters in Mount Angel.

They planned to move to Sublimity and begin their new life as the Sisters of the Precious Blood, later to be known as the Sisters of St. Mary of Oregon.

"Father Ruettimann arranged for the upper floor of the college building to be used for the sisters' convent, and also built a two-story addition on the back of it," Strobel said.

"The building was decorated with evergreen boughs for the occasion by the nine sisters, and the two Boedigheimer brothers, who had moved to Sublimity from Jordan. Father Ruettimann called the new convent 'Maria Zell' after a favorite shrine to Our Lady in Austria. But it was very



Father Ruettimann at his one room school.

primitive, and the sisters had little in the way of furnishings or even food starting out."

The nine were: Brother Joseph Boedigheimer, Brother Franz Boedigheimer, and Sisters Barbara Rauch, Theresa Arnold, Emma Bleily, Catherine Eifert, Aurelia Boedigheimer, Mary Silbernagel and Martha Eifert. In 1888, a substantial new rectory was built to replace the tiny two-room house Ruettimann had been living in. It was replaced again in 1947 by the brick building, which now houses the archives.

"In that same year of 1888, the Sisters of St. Mary opened the first parochial school in Marion County, in a new one-room schoolhouse built by Joseph Spenner," Strobel said. "Half the day classes were taught in German, half in English, as many of the settlers spoke German."

The first teacher was Sister M. DeSales, a Franciscan from Wisconsin who came for a year to also instruct the new nuns. Back in the day, two school systems, public and Catholic, worked together.

"For many years following, Catholic nuns also taught in the public schools, after passing the state certification exams," Strobel said. "At that time not many attended school beyond the fifth grade."

Father Ruettimann served St. Boniface until his death from tuberculosis at age 32. He was buried in the hilltop cemetery at Mount Angel Abbey. ✱