

The Founding of Mt. Angel Abbey: A Letter of 1883
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Mount Angel Abbey was established on October 30, 1882, at Gervais. The founder, Father Adelhelm Odermatt, O.S.B., was a native of Switzerland and a member of the then 800-year-old Benedictine Abbey of Engelberg in that country. He came to the United States in 1873 and settled first in Missouri where he assisted in the foundation of Conception Abbey there and where he served as pastor of the church in Maryville, Missouri.

In 1881, he was commissioned by his superior, Rt. Reverend Abbot Anselm Villiger, O.S.B., of Engelberg, to tour the western part of the United States in search of a suitable location for the foundation of another monastery.

He arrived in Oregon in August of 1881, explored the Willamette Valley and the territory around Jacksonville, and discovered the butte outside of what is now the town of Mount Angel. When he had decided on this location, he returned to Switzerland to get the approval of the Abbot and Community of Engelberg and to bring recruits for a new monastery and convent.

As soon as the foundation was made in Gervais, preparations began to purchase land and build permanent buildings at the foot of the hill upon which the Abbey is now located. In 1883, the village of Fillmore near the butte was renamed Mount Angel, the English translation of Engelberg. On July 14, 1884, the monks moved from Gervais to Mount Angel.

The letter below gives an account of the activities of the Benedictines in Marion County during these first years, 1881-1883. It is written by Father Adelhelm Odermatt, the founder, in a letter written to his superior, Abbot Anselm Villiger of Engelberg. The letter is one of 525 discovered and filmed in the Archives of Engelberg Abbey in 1951 and now preserved in the Library of Mount Angel Abbey. The translation was made by Sister Ida, O.S.B., and Sister Ursula, O.S.B., of the Convent Queen of Angels, Mount Angel, Oregon.



Praised be Jesus Christ!
Gervais, Oregon, March 8, 1883

Rt. Rev. Father Abbot

Kindest spiritual Father,

Finally, I will try to answer the various questions you have asked me about my activities in this country. I hope I shall not be interrupted while writing the letter so that my reply or answer will reach you before Easter. (1883)

Let me explain in the first place, why I am writing from Gervais, Oregon, a place in the far West, rather than from Maryville in Missouri.

The extremes of cold in the winter and heat in the summer (in Missouri), the monotony of the prairies (vast open fields), the absence of hills, mountains, valleys and forests make a person from Switzerland lonesome - homesick. I missed Switzerland with its scenic Alps and all that goes with it. According to many reports, the Oregon Country resembles Switzerland in its natural features i.e. its beautiful valleys, mountains and forests. When Mr. P. W. Olwell, one of my best parishioners in Maryville, went to Oregon, I asked him to examine these reports about the "beautiful valleys, mountains and forests" and let me know more about this new country. I knew very well what Swiss Benedictines wanted to have, or better, - should have.

The brave and enterprising pioneer, Mr. Olwell, really settled in the Rogue River Valley (Spitz-bub-Fluss Tal) a small but beautiful valley in Southern, Oregon. He wrote me frequently how much good an Order, such as ours could achieve in such a mild, excellent and productive climate. He urged me constantly to consider coming West. His descriptions were impelling. He contrasted the climate in Missouri and Oregon thus: In February, the weather in Missouri is freezing, in Oregon the bees gather honey, the birds sing, and the farmer can seed or sow his fields wearing his spring clothes. Such, and similar accounts of the yearly crops of wheat and oats, excellent fruit orchards, the best kind of potatoes, and all kinds of garden vegetables, prompted me to prefer Oregon as the more suitable place for a Benedictine foundation. The Rogue River Valley is a picture and the frame for the picture consists of the hills, forests, mountain ranges and

mountain peaks like Shasta and Jefferson that compare favorably in dignity and majesty with "Father Titlis" in the famed Alpine ranges.

A more immediate inducement for the foundation in the West was an indirect commission from you, Father Abbot, and an invitation from Archbishop Charles Seghers of Portland, Oregon to Father Nicolaus Frei O.S.B. and me to make an exploratory trip through his Archdiocese which extended from Mt. Shasta, California, to Port Townsend, (and) Puget Sound, and Walla Walla in Washington. We left Maryville, Missouri, June 4, 1881 for the West and were the guests of Archbishop Seghers from August 2 to November 16, 1881. During this time we traveled the Archbishop Seghers diocese. I earned the traveling money by preaching and performing other types of parochial work.

As gladly as I left Maryville where my health was never good, even so it was a sacrifice for me to leave my parish in Missouri where I had worked eight years, and, more so, I probably would have to make a new beginning in the West. I recommended the entire matter to our dear Lord, the Blessed Virgin Mary and St. Joseph, praying them that they themselves would select the place provided for it by Divine Providence.

In Fillmore (Mt. Angel) Marion County, nearly 7 miles from Gervais, on the narrow gauge R.R. which was built between Woodburn and Silverton is a high hill, a butte, with an elevation of 200-300 feet, 1 ½ miles long and ½ mile wide. When Archbishop Seghers on September 12, 1881, feast of the Holy Name of Mary, blessed the little church that the self-sacrificing German Catholics had built, he visited this butte early one morning and was delighted with the beauty and locality of this hill. He expressed the idea that a church should be built on this butte or hill. The zealous and pious Archbishop thought that God directed Mr. Mathias Butsch, a former experienced Schwabian school teacher, and now a practical farmer and saw-miller to read in a newspaper that Swiss Benedictine Fathers were exploring the state of Oregon to find a suitable place for a new monastic foundation, and that he, Mr. Butsch, had asked to send the Fathers to Fillmore (Mt. Angel) for he had the best hopes that the Fathers would like Fillmore and the nearby butte for their new monastery. (For ten years several of the men had foretold that a monastery and a college would be built on this "hill.")

In the meantime we were in Jacksonville, Oregon, 300 miles south of Portland where his Grace sent us after

our arrival (zum invigilieren) so that the Rev. F. X. Blanchet, Pastor, could attend the Synod in Portland. The people in the Rogue River Valley were kind to us. They offered to buy one of the finest farms for us in case we wanted to build a monastery there. Though the valley was beautiful, we found that the six weeks in September we spent there, were not so agreeable from a physical standpoint. The heat was oppressive and the valley was subject to fevers. My friend, Mr. Olwell, was particularly kind to me. On leaving for Portland, he handed me a gift of \$100. May God reward him!

When we returned to Portland, the Archbishop sent us to Fillmore. We arrived in Gervais on Saturday and stopped at the residence of the pastor, Rev. F. Hartleib. When I entered his roomy house, I reflected how suitable it would be for a chapel and a "provisional" monastery.

The following Sunday, I went to Fillmore, October 3, 1881, to say Mass at ten o'clock in their little church. October 5, 1881 found us in Sublimity. We held services in the church of St. Boniface for twenty-thirty families. We, Father Nicholas and I, wanted to take care of the people, who were so kind to us. When we returned to Portland on November 16, 1881, the Archbishop asked us where we wanted to settle. We both answered, "In Fillmore and Sublimity". The Archbishop added, "And I could give you Gervais also." Father Hartleib, the pastor, had asked the previous year to be transferred to another parish. That was agreeable to us, since Gervais had a large church and a rectory that would serve us well for a temporary monastery. (Father Nicholas went to San Francisco during the winter of '81 and '82 to learn more English but it seems he did not take any lessons.) Father Hartleib's reason for asking for another parish was his difficulty with the English and French languages. The Gervais people wanted a French, a German, and an English sermon each Sunday. I (Father Adelhelm) wanted practice on these languages, and when the Archbishop asked me if I could go at once, I answered in the affirmative.

On the vigil of St. Gertrude the Great, November 16, 1881, I traveled by train to Gervais, Oregon, as pastor of the parish. I said Mass for the first time on the feast of St. Gertrude, on an altar that was decked with eight bouquets of fresh flowers. From that date on, for the following winter, I was pastor in Gervais, Fillmore and Sublimity. In Gervais, I preached each Sunday in English, French and German, and in Fillmore and Sublimity once a month. Sublimity and Fillmore were German parishes. Sublimity was 25 miles from Gervais

and Fillmore 7 miles. The people in Gervais were of different nationalities but lived harmoniously together. They wanted very much that we Benedictines should settle permanently in their place, but I told them that would not be possible for there was no hill or butte suitable for a monastery, the land was too low, too wet in winter and too dry in summer. Neither was the soil as good as in Fillmore. I did recognize though that Gervais was a central point of French Prairie (it could have been called German Prairie) that would soon need a Sisters' or a parish school. I had 60-70 children in my catechism class every Sunday afternoon. Parents, concerned about the religious training of their children, asked me whether I could secure Sisters for a school. I promised I would as soon as possible. Generous benefactors gave a large monstrence to the church; also a set of beautiful stations of the cross valued at \$80. (I blessed them in May 1882.)

Complying with a request of some of the parishioners, I called a meeting of the people in Fillmore and the surrounding country. I explained to them in an address of an hours' length the vocation and activities of our Order in general, as also the object or purpose of a new foundation here in Fillmore. The Catholics were naturally favorable from the beginning but now even the non-Catholics took an interest. Their attitude, without exception was friendly and helpful. After the Catholics obliged themselves in writing to raise \$2500 within 3 years to pay for a temporary wooden building on the butte to be used as a monastery, the owner of the butte offered to give 60 acres as a building site for a monastery. One person also offered a cow, another a calf and a third a steer

Thus are Missions founded in America and the foundation laid for a monastery!

I thanked all benefactors heartily for their offer, and then explained that all depended on our monastery in Engelberg, Switzerland; whether it was satisfied with the place and the locality and whether the monastery would accept their offer or not.

It was Lent 1882. This time is usually hard on priests who do heavy missionary work. I became ill and had to go to St. Vincent's Hospital in Portland during Holy Week. After two weeks I was quite well again. The Archbishop gave me leave of absence for six months that I could go to Switzerland, to grow well and strong, and especially to secure able helpers for the vineyard of our Lord in Oregon. In the meantime, Father Nicholas Frei, O.S.B. arrived from San Francisco, who with the help of a diocesan priest took care of the three parishes

during my absence. Before I could go, I had to do some begging for a few days. When I blessed the Stations in Gervais in May 1882, the parish asked the Archbishop for permission to build a school or a Sisters' house. The Archbishop gladly gave his consent, and asked that a building committee be appointed for this purpose. I named Father Nicholas as chairman of the committee and gave him six laymen as helpers. This committee succeeded in building a suitable school and residence by the end of October '82. The Archbishop asked me to visit the homes in Gervais, and ask for donations and subscriptions for the building project. As I visited the families and petitioned for help I collected \$2,600 in three days. Many subscribed sums later so that \$3,400 were signed for the same year, most of which was paid. The Archbishop asked me to get Maria Rickenbach Sisters not only for Gervais, but also for the Indian School in Grande Ronde, which had been without teachers for six months.

Before my trip to Engelberg, in May 1882, I stopped at Maryville, Missouri, where Mother Mary Gertrude Leupi O.S.B. gladly gave me three Sisters who traveled to the Grande Ronde School at once.

Our monastery in Engelberg was very enthusiastic about our foundation in Fillmore (Mt. Angel) Oregon and accepted it unanimously.

Towards the end of September 1882, Father Bede Horat, F. Barnabas Held, F. Anselm Wachter, Bro. Theodore Wyrsh, several clerical and brother candidates left Engelberg for Oregon. Among the Sisters from Maria Rickenbach were Mother Mary Bernardine Wachter, her assistant, Sister Mary Agatha Langenstein, Sister Birgitta Sonderegger, and Sister Mary Benedicta Protzman. From St. Andrews Convent in Sarnen came Mother Joanna Zumstein, Sr. Fr. Rosalia Rubli and Sister Mary Magdalen Zuber. The Sisters from Sarnen came along to learn the language, the customs of the country, and later to found their own convent. (Cottonwood, Idaho) Since laborers are few some of the Sarnen Benedictine Sisters helped the Rickenbacher Sisters conduct the Indian school in Grande Ronde.

A definite time for building a monastery depends on various factors. Such factors could be promising personnel for the institution or promising financial support, or call it plain good luck. We arrived in Gervais on October 30. On November 1, 1882, we had solemn High Mass. The appropriate church music reminded us of our Abbot's feast day in our Engelberg Abbey. On November 13, 1882, feast of all the Saints

of the Benedictine Order, we introduced regular choir service which has continued without interruption up to the present time in the Gervais church, given us by Archbishop Seghers. He also gave us the rectory. Both buildings probably cost the parish nearly \$6,000.

Since a parish rectory is hardly suitable for a silent monastery, we longed for the time when we could move into a monastery ever so simple and inexpensive. A wooden structure will be built in Fillmore during this year, 1884, and God willing, we shall be living in it when we read the calendar year 1885. Much depends upon our benefactors and all depends on God.

Personnel of our Monastery: 5 Fathers 1 Professed Frater 3 Frater Novices 10 Brother Novices 2 Brothers A few candidates.

A group of Brother candidates, Fathers and students from Switzerland is expected soon.

Fields of activity in parochial work. We cannot report the exact number of souls. We shall make an exact record of everything and send it to you. Gervais may have nearly 75 families or 4-500 souls.

Fillmore has 35 families or 150-200 souls.

Sublimity 25-30 families or 100-150 souls, more or less.

Gervais has a Catholic boys and girls' school taught by the Sisters from Rickenbach.

100 pupils. There are three societies: Altar Society, Young men's society, and young ladies society.

The religious zeal of the people is excellent. Church attendance is regular even on rainy days. Exceptions are the stormy days. The reception of the Sacraments is irregular due to the great distances the people have to come. There are rarely many at one time. A few also come during the week. There are those who receive often, even every week and those that go less frequently. All are good. Then there are Easter "calves" and even worse.

Missions

Fillmore:

Father Barnabas O.S.B. (Statthalter) is pastor. He lives on our farm with Brother Theodul and ten Brother candidates, craftsmen and laborers. He holds services every day and gives instruction to the Brother novices. On Sundays, and now and then during the week, he says Mass in the little church, preaches and teaches catechism. The people wanted a Sisters' School so

Father built a small addition to the church large enough for 2 or 3 Sisters. They have only a public school at present. We have no chapels except a very small one on the top of the Butte to which our stations of the cross lead. The people have subscribed \$200 for a bell and nearly \$1000 for our new monastery.

Sublimity:

This parish is 4 miles from the narrow gauge railroad and 8 miles from the Southern Pacific railroad that goes to California and on which Gervais is situated. Sublimity is 25 miles from Gervais and 18 miles from Fillmore. Father Bede Horat takes care of the parish once a month. He leaves Saturday afternoon. He says Mass on Sunday, preaches once or twice, catechises the children, and returns to Gervais on Monday.

The spirit of the people in Sublimity is not too fervent. Some bad example or scandal was given in this Mission before we came. We shall offer reparation for the wrong done.

The work of missionary priests in America calls for many types of service besides the spiritual care of the missions. Scandals must be righted, peace must be established, fallen away Catholics must be converted, and all this, in heroic self-denial and self-sacrifice. The physical difficulties are not wanting either, i.e. impassable roads, and inaccessible places.

Gymnasium (School)

We will speak of our school when we have one. At present I teach three young men from town French and three others German. Fraters Maurus and Placidus study rhetoric. Fr. John studies philosophy and introduction to theology. Father Anselm is his professor. We are asked by many to take more young men into our classes, but we need a place, a house, and professors.

Our Possessions: We own:

600 acres arable land in Fillmore
200 acres undergrowth and shrubs
400 acres brush and stumps
600 acres nearly arable

1800 Acres

2760 acres hilly land in the foothills
80 acres growing trees suitable for lumber

2840

1800 plus 2840 equals 4640 total acres

22 horses and 1 colt
13 oxen and 3 beeves (beef cattle)
350 Sheep
4 Goats
100 Pigs
45 Head cows and calves
640 acres pasture for 4-500 sheep
1280 acres for grazing pasture in foothills for summer
and fall
160 acres for winter shelter and some grazing

Hay need not be fed. The cattle grow fat on the forage available. This "Alp," if we have enough young cattle, will be one of our first financial incomes with which to pay interest on borrowed money to pay the land in Fillmore. Cattle is always money; also cheese and butter. Wheat and other grain is harvested only once a year. A few men can take care of the cattle.

Heart of Jesus, give us souls. Give souls to all of us.

In making this report on temporalities, I completely overlooked the spiritual data on our Gervais parish. Here in the Gervais parish we had since January 1, 1876:

247 Baptisms
34 Marriages
69 Funerals
38 Confirmations November 7, 1880 (first confirmation)
67 Confirmations April 8, 1883 (second confirmation)
3 conversions last year
2 conversions 1883
1 conversion—the wife of a free mason

Very interesting is the story of this wife of a free mason, and the role the free mason himself played in her conversion. Mrs. S. . . . was a niece of the deceased Bishop Rosencranz and General Rosencranz. She described her whole life to me in the following comparison. Father, she said, my whole life was as even and upright as the sun at midday. She expressed her wish to become a Catholic during the first winter I was in Gervais. However, she feared her husband who was a free mason, but she had a mind to become a Catholic in secret. I did not think this was right, and advised it only if there was real evidence that she should die suddenly. In the meantime her husband became very sick. All thought he would die especially since he was quite old and chronically infirm. I visited him often, which pleased him greatly. I brought holy water and asked if I could use it on him. He allowed it and the holy water helped miraculously.

The best and most amusing fact was the following: The man's hair was Katz-grau - gray. The place where I applied the holy water became genuinely black. The protestant neighbors who visited him marvelled at the change, and asked him if he were growing young again. He related quite simply what had happened, and defended the power of the holy water quite resolutely. The time came that I was to visit Switzerland and Mrs. S. . . . explained she would wait with her entrance into the church until my return to Gervais. When I came back in the winter of '83, I visited Mrs. S. . . . and found she was failing rapidly. I asked her husband if his wife might become a Catholic since it was her earnest wish and will. He consented and witnessed all the beautiful ceremonies of Baptism with marks of respect and devotion. Mrs. S. . . . is now as zealous a Catholic as if she had been one all her life. The free masons had already planned an elaborate funeral for Mrs. S. . . . but she escaped from their clutches. She said that a simple burial with Mass and prayers will be far more agreeable for her at the time of her death. Mr. S. . . . gets holy water every week for himself and his wife. He believes firmly in its efficacy. He has the same faith in the medal of St. Benedict, but he cannot quite believe all the dogmas of the church. He was an honorable man as the following incident shows or indicates:

One of the daughters of Mr. and Mrs. S. . . . who had several children was dying (in a distant place) and asked one of her daughters to bring her a crucifix from a certain room so that she might look at it. She died as a protestant. The daughter, Adelaide, 13 years old, and her little brother, George, should have been adopted by protestant relatives, but for Mr. S. . . . said "no" but that Mother M. Bernardine should have charge if she wished. I baptized both children and the free mason grandfather takes care of them. Little George blesses him with holy water and prays the "Our Father" so that Grandfather will get well.

God give us many such souls!