

Novice Meinrad Stephen Bisig

June 25th is the anniversary of the death of Novice Meinrad Stephen Bisig. Meinrad Bisig was born in Willerzell, Switzerland, on April 7, 1854. As a student at the Abbey School of Einsiedeln, he learned of the new foundation in Arkansas from the student chaplain, Father Bonaventure Binzegger, who influenced five young men to seek a missionary vocation abroad.

In the autumn of 1880, Father Bonaventure was the leader of what became known in the history of Subiaco Abbey as the "First Expedition" from Einsiedeln to the monastery in Arkansas.

Although the new foundation in Arkansas did not have a novitiate or a training program when the three young men arrived in 1880, they became the first candidates to join our community.

The fledgling monastery had its share of setbacks in the 1800s. The inclement weather of 1881 was a hardship for the pioneer community. First, the severe winter brought a temperature of 16 degrees below zero, and then the summer of 1881 brought excessive heat and drought, causing all crops to fail. Every day for four weeks they experienced temperatures of 100 and 105 degrees with the temperature remaining near 100 until 10 o'clock at night. These newly arrived missionaries from Europe were not yet acclimated to the summer heat in Arkansas.

Then, in late June, Novice Meinrad Bisig succumbed to a sudden illness. The fledgling community of St. Benedict's, as well as the community of Einsiedeln, were shocked by the first death at the Arkansas mission of this promising young novice whom Father Prior Bonaventure had brought to Arkansas from Einsiedeln only eight months before, and whom he referred to as the "pearl of the novitiate."

Meinrad Bisig professed his vows on his deathbed, receiving the name Stephen. He had contracted "inflammation of the intestines" as appendicitis was called in the 19th century. Three doctors were in consultation but they neither provided a remedy nor did they operate, and Novice Meinrad Stephen Bisig died at 3:00 a. m. on Saturday, June 25, 1881.

In an effort to understand the illness diagnosed as "inflammation of the intestines," Father Prior wrote his confreres in Switzerland that the drinking of cold water during the excessive summer heat of the day might have taken its toll on the young novice's stamina.

Father Prior Bonaventure Binzegger entered the following notation in the church records concerning the death of the first community member:

"I buried young Meinrad Stephen Bisig...a truly dutiful and religious Novice. He died of inflammation of the intestines after unspeakable sufferings which he bore very patiently. He died prepared by all the holy rites for the dying. Though well aware of his impending death, he was undisturbed by the knowledge, as he returned his soul to God..."

At the time of his death, Brother Stephen was 27 years old, having just professed vows as a monk of our monastery. He had been at St. Benedict's monastery for eight months. He is buried in our cemetery.

WE HAVE NO
PICTURE OF
NOV. MEINRAD
STEPHEN BISIG