

*Aurora*  
*Daughter of the Dawn*



*A Story of New Beginnings*

*J. J. Kopp*

*With drawings by Clark Moor Will*

*Afterword by Jane Kirkpatrick*

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Aurora

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*All beings live in one light only  
So does every eye of nature  
And the whole history of the world  
Preaches about nothing but Aurora*

*Aurora, Aurora you lovely light  
When you come return  
Forget me not*

First verse and chorus of song titled Aurora, written by Wilhelm Keil, verses of which appear at the beginning of each chapter

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*Aurora*



1853

*All beings lay in deep slumber  
As in the gray night of death  
Everyone felt his grief  
Before Aurora did awake*

Some of my earliest memories of life in the Bethel community were of that large house called Elim, which was home to our family but also a gathering place for many others in the colony. Papa and the men would sit in one of the rooms for discussions and to smoke their pipes. I mostly remember the smells of the room where the men met as Gloriunda and I would sometimes sneak into the room after the men left. I am sure that Papa would not approve and we know that Mama did not as she caught us coming from the room late one afternoon. She scolded us harshly but it seemed like she had given this sermon before. Gloriunda and I had strong suspicions that one of the boys—perhaps Willie—had told Mama of our escape.

I also remember the hustling and bustling of the women doing the work in the kitchen of the house, making bread, preparing meals, and making candles. Those smells come to mind and they are much nicer than the smell of stale smoke in the room where the men met.



As I lie here in this darkened room with one small candle flickering in the corner, I am eager to get up and go down to the kitchen in our new big house in Aurora. At times I can smell the bread cooking or hear the voices of the women helping to prepare meals. I ask Mama when I can get up to go help and she always says soon.



Mama is an excellent cook and she was helped at Bethel (and here too) in the kitchen by my older sisters as well as several of the unmarried women of the colony. When I was too young to help with the cooking, there were still things for me to do to help out. One was to watch after Amelia—just a year younger



than me though she didn't take to my ordering her around—and Emmanuel who was just an infant. Later I learned that even though Mama had told me to watch over my younger siblings, each of my older sisters had been given the same assignment for those younger than her. And I suspect Mama even told Amelia that her job was to watch over Emmanuel. But it was probably best that we watched over each other in such a large family.

The young unmarried women who helped at Elim also assisted in keeping watch over the Keil children, although Willie, August, Fritz, and Eli often were out working with the men in the fields or in one of the other regular labors of the colony. We each had a favorite among the women who tended to us. Mine was the young Wagner girl, Emma, who often was at the house even when she did not have responsibilities for caring for us. She would say that she liked being at Elim because there was always something happening there, and indeed there was. Emma was thirteen years older than me but for some reason we became close, perhaps because, as Mama would later say, we were of the same cloth. Although Mama had four girls



of her own, I think she was very fond of Emma as well; perhaps she too was of the same cloth.



I remember the day that Emma told us she was going to go with Christian Giesy, her new husband, and a few other men to a faraway place to look for a new home for the colony. Papa may have told us about the scout party but it had no meaning for me until I learned that Emma was to be part of it. This made me very sad and even Mama telling me that this was a new beginning for Emma and possibly for all of us did not make me feel better. It was only after Emma took me aside and told me that I needed to be strong as she expected me to grow up to be just like her that I started to feel some better. Before Emma left she gave me a small needlepoint as a gift but she said it was not finished, so she wanted me to keep it and give it to her when I saw her again so she could finish it.



The completed needlepoint of forget-me-nots sits on the table near my bed now where I am resting. Mama told me the story once that this flower got its name because it cried out to Adam and Eve as they left the Garden of Eden—"Forget me not." The needlepoint reminds me of the flowers at Elim but also all the flowers I have seen since and those along the streams here at Aurora. When I am well, I am going to make a quilt of flowers, perhaps of the sunflowers; I like them most as they stand so proud but also because they turn toward the sun at dawn.



I knew Mama was going to miss Emma too. Emmanuel was just a baby then, having arrived shortly before Yuletide the

previous year. Amelia was not quite three years old, and Mama appreciated the help Emma provided. Many of the other women helped Mama and she was grateful for that but, as Mama would tell me later when we moved to Oregon, some people just like some cloth pieces tend to go together better than others in making a quilt. But Mama also said that it takes many different cloth pieces to complete a quilt. Each part helps to keep the larger piece together, held by a common thread. I think Mama meant that Papa was the common thread but I think of Mama as the common thread for our family and for the women of the colony.



I remember the day the scout party left to head west, mostly because of a tearful goodbye to Emma as I clung to Mama's skirt as she too stood with a tear in her eye. Mama tried to console me by telling me it was a new beginning for Emma but I only saw it as an end of something special. My sadness was softened some by the powerful words that Papa spoke to the party and to all the community. I do not recall what he said but I remember the sound of his voice capturing the attention of all present, even the horses and other animals. Papa had a way of making his voice seem like a trumpet as it called out to his people. Then Papa also blew his trumpet to send the scout party on its way as we waved our final goodbyes. My gloom briefly turned to mirth as I saw Willie hurry alongside the scout party as it left Bethel. He was riding one of the old mules—the one with the shorter right front leg so it limped along as best it could while Willie sat proudly atop it pretending to blow his own trumpet. Willie was excited about the promise of this new beginning and his zeal for a moment made Emma's departure a little more bearable.



## *History of Aurora Colony*

One of the more successful American utopian communal societies in the nineteenth century was founded on the Pudding River in Marion County in 1856. Named for a daughter of the leader of the Christian communal group, the Aurora Colony (or Aurora Mills, as it was also known) grew to a population of more than 600 individuals who followed the basic Christian beliefs of Wilhelm Keil (1812-1877). The Aurora Colony became known for its orchards, food, music, textiles, furniture, and other crafts as well as its communal lifestyle and German traditions.

Keil was a Prussian-born tailor who also practiced apothecary and became a preacher and leader of souls. Arriving in the United States with his wife Louisa in the mid-1830s, at a peak of a religious revival, Keil sought his calling among several Protestant groups. Ultimately, he denounced all organized religion to establish a primitive Christian group devoted to the Golden Rule. After living in New York City and Pittsburgh for several years, in 1844 he sent a party west to find a suitable location to establish a colony where his followers could put into practice their common beliefs. They selected a site in Shelby County, Missouri, to establish the Bethel Colony, where Keil led nearly eight hundred individuals at its peak, with several satellite communities.

In 1853, Keil sought a new location for the colony and sent a scouting party to the Pacific Northwest. The scout group chose a location on Willapa Bay in Washington Territory, and in 1855 Keil led a party across the Oregon Trail to the new site. At the head of the wagon trail was a hearse carrying the body of Keil's oldest son, Willie, who had died shortly before the group left for the Northwest.

Keil was dissatisfied with the Willapa location and, despite burying his son there, chose to move south to Portland with many of his followers. In 1856, he purchased a donation land claim on the Pudding River, and the Aurora Colony became the new home for his followers. Bethel continued as part of the communal experiment under Keil's indirect leadership. In 1862, a smallpox epidemic struck the colony, and Keil lost four more of his children, including Aurora, after whom he named the colony.

At its peak, the population of the Aurora Colony grew to 600 from the 250 who left Bethel to follow Keil west. Aurora was slow to develop until 1863, when a large contingent arrived from Bethel. The group included carpenters and craftsmen who would lead the rapid build-up of the colony. Keil continued to serve as leader of the community, but in 1866 he drew up an agreement that would transfer control of the colony to a group of trustees. The trustees wrote "Articles of Agreement" that served as the constitution for the colony.

Keil was instrumental in bringing the Oregon & California Railway line to Aurora in 1870. The railroad connected Aurora with other cities and brought more business to the Colony Hotel, as well as spreading the word about the offerings at Aurora. The Aurora Colony Band became famous on the West Coast and traveled to many locations to play music, much of it written by Aurora musicians.

In the early 1870s, after the death of his only remaining daughter, Keil began to transfer ownership of several parcels of colony land to individual households, with the intent to transfer more later. Keil died suddenly on December 30, 1877, without having made any further transfers. The trustees assumed leadership of Aurora and Bethel and decided to dissolve the two colonies, a process that took several years and was overseen by Judge Matthew P. Deady. The final settlement of the dissolution was declared on January 22, 1883.

Ten years after the dissolution of the Aurora Colony, the City of Aurora was incorporated. Many colony descendants continued to live in the area, and several colony buildings survived, although the Colony Church, the Gross Haus (Keil's home), and the Colony Hotel were among those lost to fire and demolition. In 1963, a group of descendants and other interested individuals formed the Aurora Colony Historical Society to preserve the buildings and artifacts of the Colony. In 1966, the Old Aurora Colony Museum was dedicated, and in 1974 twenty sites in Aurora were placed on the National Register of Historical Places. It was the first historic district of its kind in the state.

*by Jim Kopp from the Oregon Encyclopedia*

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For more information on the Aurora Colony see  
[www.auroracolony.org](http://www.auroracolony.org)