

SANGMEISTER, THE EPHRATA CHRONICLER

The Ephrata Cloister has, for well-nigh 200 years, been a subject of perennial interest in American life; its fame has spread beyond our shores, and attracted the attention of even the scholars of historic Europe. It has made Lancaster county the Mecca of many an historic pilgrimage and furnished rich material for the scholarly writer as well as for the ubiquitous penny-a-liner. Nor has interest in it ceased. Inquiries for copies of the *Chronicon Ephratense* are still reaching the translator of this historic monograph, to be answered with the statement that copies can only be picked up casually at second-hand book stores and at sales of private libraries.

Although Dr. Fahnestock wrote already in 1844: "Ephrata has fallen—degenerated beyond all conception. It is now spiritually dead. Ichabod is written upon the walls of this branch of our Zion"—its history will engage the attention of students for many a day to come.

The *Chronicon Ephratense* was written from the standpoint of the hero worshipper, in such a manner that one can readily read between the lines that matters are being glossed over, and that the story is not an unbiased one. For example. We read: "He (Beissel) once appeared to two of the Brethren in the form of one who is drunk;" again: "He once came to a Brother in the likeness of one who is drunk." Sangmeister in his "Leben und Wandel" relates cir-

cumstantially that Beissel was drunk for a week at a time; that he fell down stairs on account of his maudlin condition; that he was found at night outside a building, tipsy, groping around and unable to find the door. Sangmeister abounds in data like these, and is an indispensable original source of information to the impartial student of the Ephrata Cloister.

The investigator can not get a just view of the soldier life of a State by viewing the barracks or seeing the soldiers on parade day. Nor could casual visitors understand or get an adequate conception of Ephrata by a hasty look at the buildings and their appointments, or by attendance on religious exercises at the midnight hour, or by reading the biased chronicles of "Lamech and Agrippa." No one can know the Ephrata community who has not read Sangmeister's "Leben und Wandel."

To the question, Who was Sangmeister, and why should we be interested in him? an answer will be given by noting what a few authorities on the Ephrata Cloister say:

In his "First Century of German Printing," Seidensticker uses the following language about Sangmeister:

"Henry Sangmeister (he called himself Brother Ezechiel upon entering the Ephrata Cloister) was born in Hornberg, Prussia, 1724, and came to America in 1743. After sowing his wild oats he felt conscience-stricken and was induced to join the Ephrata brethren in 1748. Much disgusted with his experience, he secretly left his refuge in company of his friend, Anton Höllenthal, and settled in the Shenandoah Valley, where other nondescripts of both sexes associated with him. He revisited Ephrata several times, and finally came back to stay in 1764. He died

about 1785, and left concealed behind the wainscoting an autobiography which was accidentally discovered in 1825. About one-half of it was printed by J. Bauman in four parts, published in 1825-1827. The rest Bauman offered to print if a sufficient number of subscribers were found to cover him against loss. The book is very scarce. It has been said that nearly all copies were designedly destroyed on account of the scandalous charges made against Conrad Beissel and other inmates of the cloister." (P. 225.)

The four parts referred to in this description cover 414 pages of octavo size. Besides introductions by author and publisher, it gives a summary of the leading events at the Cloister from its inception to 1748. It then takes up the life of the author prior to 1748, when he was received into the community. He was a lynx-eyed, conscientious, fearless, impartial, non-partisan chronicler of what he saw, heard and thought there. He talks familiarly of the daily labors, dissensions, spiritual struggles, the day dreams and visions of the inmates of the community, of Beissel's domineering spirit, his double-dealing, drinking, immoralities, jealousy, teachings and unholy prayers, of the Indian massacres, of the pioneer life in the Shenandoah Valley, Virginia, and makes the reader live the times over with him. The part of the Chronicle printed ends 1769, when Sangmeister was but forty-five years old. This constitutes but half of the Chronicle. What became of the rest of it the writer is unable to say. The presumption is that it has been destroyed. Should any one who reads these lines have any knowledge of the manuscript, he will do the learned world a great service by making the fact known.

Seidensticker in his "Bilder aus der Deutsch-Pennsylvanischen Geschichte" devotes eighty-two pages to "Ephrata—eine Amerikanische Kloster-geschichte," of which eight pages are devoted to a discussion of Bruder Ezechiel's Bekenntnisse." He says: "Bei der Schilderung der inneren Zustände von Ephrata kommen wol am geeignetsten die indiscreten Enthüllungen zur Sprache welche 'Ezechiel Sangmeister's Leben und Wandel' enthält—Es sind Bekenntnisse einer ungeschönten Seele. Sangmeister war mit sich und der ganzen Welt unzufrieden, ein unleidlicher Querkopf, ein arwohnischer Griesgram, der überall Niedertracht witterte und dessen boser Zunge wir nicht unbedingt Glauben schenken dürfen," p. 228, or freely translated:

"In a description of the inner condition of Ephrata the most serviceable material is the revelations contained in the life and conduct of Ezekiel Sangmeister. They are the confessions of an unbeautiful soul. Sangmeister was dissatisfied with himself and the whole world; he was an intolerable wrong head, an envious grumbler, who was always on the lookout for vileness, whose evil tongue we can not grant unconditional faith."

The author then discusses Sangmeister's life, the contents of his *Leben und Wandel*, the inner life of the community, saying in this connection among other things: "Was sollen wir nun zu diesen Sittengemalde sagen? Wenn Sangmeister die Wahrheit spricht so stand es schlimm um die Seelenreinheit und Selbstverlangnung des Asceten."..... "Was er (Sangmeister) von seinen eigenen kleinen Erlebnissen erzählt, können wir ihm gern glauben ebenso seine detaillirten Aussagen über die

Schwachheiten einzelner Bruder und Schwestern," or (freely translated)

"What shall we say to this picture of manners? If Sangmeister speaks the truth it looks bad for the soul purity and self-denial of the ascetics. . . . What he relates of his own small experiences we may well believe, as well as his minutest remarks about the weaknesses of individual brothers and sisters."

Sachse, in his "German Sectarians," Volume II—"A Critical and Legendary History of the Ephrata Cloister and the Dunkers," makes a number of references to Sangmeister.

He speaks of his intimacy with the Eckerlins, his early life, his joining the community, his withdrawal to the Shenandoah Valley with others, his life there, his erection of a small cabin as a laura, his visits to the Eckerlin brothers, his becoming joint owner of 150 acres of land, and other events of his life, without passing judgment on the credibility of the writer or the importance of his autobiography as a contribution to the history of the Ephrata Cloister.

W. M. Fahnstock, M. D., in an article published in 1844 says: "This society has been much misrepresented by writers who know but little of them, and mostly draw on their imaginations and the libels of the persecutors of the society, for the principles of this people." After discussing some of the charges made, he continues: "These little things would not be considered worthy of any notice but from fresh currency which has been given to them by a late popular work, which is extensively circulated throughout the State." That he refers to the then recently-published edition of Sangmeister is not improbable.

Respecting Sangmeister's trust-

worthiness or truthfulness, the following facts give evidence:

First—Sangmeister was writing for himself and not for publication. It is not likely that he would have made his private chronicle, or diary, a fabric of lies.

Second—Joseph Bauman, the publisher of Sangmeister, vouches for the truthfulness of the record.

Third—Persons I have interviewed who have read Sangmeister and who often spoke with and were related to inmates of the cloister, state that they know of no reason for doubting the veracity of Sangmeister.

Fourth—Dr. J. Max Hark, the translator of the Chronicon, is of the opinion that what Sangmeister relates may well be believed in view of the evident effort of the writers of the Chronicon to conceal or explain away various happenings at the Cloister.

Fifth—Seidensticker, while stigmatizing Sangmeister as an envious grumbler with an evil tongue, yet maintains that we may believe all he relates.

Sangmeister's "Leben and Wandel" supplementing the partial and one-sided Chronicon Ephratense, is indispensable to a correct understanding of Beissel and his community, and incidentally becomes a valuable contribution to the history of mysticism, communism, the Christian Church, the French and Indian War, and Pennsylvania home life prior to the Revolution.

Author: Kriebel, Howard Wiegner, 1859-1936.

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