

Rev. Albert Wagner, O.Carm.
1855-1908
By Rev. Anthony C. Dressel, O.Carm.

IN THE seventies, a group of — German Carmelites opened a Commissariate in Texas, but it met with ill-fortune and had to be abandoned. By order of the Most Rev. General, the men were either to return to Europe or affiliate themselves with the Province of the Most Pure Heart of Mary. Led by the Peters brothers, Anastasius and Boniface, these Carmelites came to Scipio, Kansas, in 1880. For a time things seemed to have adjusted themselves, but some of them became discontented or ill, and left for other regions. Others remained and were incardinated. Among these latter was Father Albert Wagner. From good sources we learn that he left our Province to work with the Germans, and later returned.

Father Albert was born in Hademar, Russia, in 1855. Having made only nominal junior studies, he was rushed to work at the age of fourteen. He was apprenticed to a carpenter and wagon-maker, which trades he learned thoroughly. Because he received poor wages and lived under difficult circumstances, he migrated to America at the age of twenty, only to ply his trade in the Southwest under equally poor conditions. Finally the hope of years was realized when he found his way into the Carmel of Kansas.

According to traditions in Scipio, he entered the Order there in 1879. He was a student at the Old College, then located in the hollow near the present cemetery. When he reached his twenty-fourth year, he took up his studies for the priesthood. Because of the short course, often allowed in those days, he was ordained in 1885. Thus, having been hampered in his studies in Russia, having been forced to work hard on his arrival in this country, and having been rushed through to the priesthood on an emergency schedule, Father Wagner was not a scholar of the first magnitude.

He was a man of medium height, with a very prominent and pointed forehead. He wore a heavy, sandy beard. His flushed appearance gave the general impression that he was either unwell, or was living under some terrible strain. This was actually true, but he concealed his trials to the very end.

That he was a simple, pious man can hardly be questioned, yet there was always an absence of nerve, a want of courage, an inferiority complex, and a want of initiative which was not only hard to explain but which also left a trace of suspicion that things could have been much better.

Whether all this was due to an overstretched sense of humility, or from some secret grief he was carrying in his heart, is not known. The latter, however, seems to be the case. Father Albert was seldom seen to smile and seemed always to be preparing himself for something worse to come. He was uncommunicative, and forever distrustful of himself.

Still, he was active. After serving a few years in the Kansas district, helping to care for the numerous missions the Fathers served, he was sent to Pittsburgh in 1900 and assisted at Holy Trinity Church during the pastorate and priorship of Father Ambrose Bruder. When, in 1903, Father Ambrose was elected provincial, Father Albert became the prior of the Pittsburgh community.

He was then only forty-eight years of age but seemed twice that age both in action and in manner. It was not merely the fact that he had lived so long on the farm that made a strange impression on the people he met, but he was nervous and unimpressive. He never learned English properly, but he preached a good sermon in German. Even this, however, always required noticeable effort. It could be seen that the instruction had been memorized, word for word. He gave the impression that he would have been happier if he had not been asked to preach.

St. Paul says that all have not the same gifts: to some is given the gift of speech, to another the spirit of prophecy, and to another the gift of discernment of spirits. So it was with Father Wagner. He left a good report in Pittsburgh. It more than made up for his silence and seeming backwardness in other respects. People held him in high esteem as a man who was kind and attentive to the sick, gentle to the aged, and sympathetic toward the poor. Surely this is the real test of a priest.

To be sure he did laughable things, and his Jewish appearance accentuated this. In going from house to house, in the annual visitation and house collection in Pittsburgh, he would carry a shoe-box under his arm and drop the donations into the box as he received them. Trinity people always had been generous to this collection and were trained to have their donation ready when the priest came. Father Albert came back to the monastery many times with a goodly amount of cash in the box. It was a miracle that some burly Negro, such as you see on famous Center Avenue, in Uptown Pittsburgh, did not try to take the box. Most likely they thought, as others did, that he was just another Jew selling matches from door to door.

It is known that he was made to feel that he was only a fifth-wheeler, a figure-head for Ambrose Bruder, who, while he was very busy as provincial, nevertheless kept full sway and control of the Pittsburgh Community. This Father Albert felt keenly. The Community regarded Father Albert as a puppet. This feeling was sometimes expressed, either carelessly or deliberately.

Towards the end of his term in Pittsburgh Father Albert became moody and morose. This may have been accentuated by the Pittsburgh incident, but it was also part of his make-up. The Provincial Chapter of 1906 deemed it to the best interests of himself, and all concerned, to send him to Kansas to relieve the strain that seemed always to be oppressing him and which was gradually wearing him down. He was sent back to Scipio, but his spirits did not revive.

He retired into himself. He was prayerful, read Mass regularly, but he became more silent every day. Gradually the inevitable happened. He became a sad victim of melancholia and by steps, lost his mind. From that point on he merely existed.

Father Luke Leininger always praised his intense devotion to the Blessed Mother. The Pittsburgh people, in recalling his sermons and the instructions he gave in the confessional remarked the same thing. There were few times when his beads were not in his hands, even in his most depressed moments.

However, the recuperation hoped for in Kansas did not materialize. The sun had set for Father Wagner. He lived in Kansas a brief two years, dying suddenly on July 16, 1908. If the belief of Carmelites, that the Blessed Mother's arms are wide open on Saturdays to all Carmelites and devotees of the Scapular, has any foundation, then Mary must have been at his side.

Older people as well as children regarded Father Wagner not only as out-dated and old-fashioned, but also as an old man, yet he was only fifty-three years of age when he died. He was solemnly buried from St. Boniface Church in Scipio, and was interred in the Carmelite section of the cemetery, where a suitable stone marks the grave.

Father Albert was almost thirty years old when he was ordained. His whole training had had to be redesigned. Not having the academic knowledge of the average American, and not being able to keep pace with the fast and different ways of this country, made him feel out of place and really unfit for the new world. He came from a poverty-stricken homeland. He might have been a pathfinder in foreign missions, where picks, axes, saws, and pliers do much of the work. He could not adapt himself to the energetic pace of a fast-growing church, nor its methods of pushing forward with schools, institutions, and societies.

Many an immigrant to America has found a cruel difference between this country and the old world, and Father Albert Wagner was one of them. Besides he was never well, and all this militated against him and deprived him of the happiness and success which he had hoped to find on this side of the Atlantic.

He did his share of good. People gave ample testimony of that. God alone knows what miracles took place in that soul whose outward appearance was so strange to us. Twenty-nine years in the Order and twenty-three years in the priesthood is no small record. Much good could have been packed, and likely was packed, into those long years.