

This Month in Moravian History

A monthly newsletter published by the Moravian Archives in Bethlehem,
commemorating events from Moravian History

No. 11

September 2006

Karl Bregenzer - The Last Moravian Martyr

Br. Bregenzer was...permitted to kneel in prayer. "Whom do you pray to? To Holy Mary or one of the saints? they asked. "I pray to the Lord Jesus Christ," he answered. The leader then took the machete and...beheaded him...and otherwise maltreated the corpse.

If this account sounds like a news clip from our current conflict in the Middle East - it's not. Sadly, history has only repeated itself since March 31, 1931 when the Moravian missionary, Karl Bregenzer, was killed by Sandino fighters in Nicaragua at Musawas, the Moravian mission station he served. The attack was part of a nationalist rebellion against the U.S. military presence in Nicaragua during the early 20th century. From Nicaragua Rev. Adolph Danneberger reported that the Sandinos "uttered threats against the Moravian Mission...apparently they are badly informed about our work and have been made to believe that we are getting money out of the Indians."

This year we remember the 75th anniversary of Bregenzer's tragic death at 36 years of age. He was born in Sigmaringen, Germany to Roman Catholic parents on April 12, 1894, and completed his theological training at Moravian Theological Seminary in 1922 after joining the Moravian church a few years earlier. That same year he was ordained a deacon of the church, and soon after entered mission service in Nicaragua, where he ministered to the Sumo Indians. In 1918 he married Elizabeth Remke of Watertown, Wisconsin, with whom he had two children: Karl and Ruth (pictured with their father in 1927). The Bregenzer family moved to Musawas



in 1928 as the first white resident missionaries in the village. From Bregenzer's yearly station reports we find that his ministry was strict and at times overzealous, but showed real concern for the state of the souls in his care. In 1930 Musawas was credited by the Superintendent, Guido Grossman, with having the best mission schools in the Province under the direction of Sr. Bregenzer: "The discipline and methods are splendid and the result surprising."

On the morning of March 31, 1931 the Bregenzer family read the Daily Text: "Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends" (John 15:13). Not long after word came that the village was about to be attacked. Bregenzer sent his wife, mother-in-law and children away from danger with some native helpers, while he chose to stay in the village. His wife later reported "that morning Bro. Bregenzer was much burdened with the souls that were still lost, and it was this that kept him there to give the Gospel to the enemy, for 'how shall they hear without a preacher[?]' (Romans 1:16).

"*The Lord God is still alive!*" These were reported as the last words of Karl Bregenzer to his wife. That Karl Bregenzer uttered these words under such circumstances seems amazing. Even more amazing is Sr. Bregenzer's response when she and her children had reached safety: "*The Lord has been so good to us.*"

Sources: Bregenzer, K. Annual Reports from Musawas, Nicaragua, 1929-30. *The Moravian*, April 22, 1931, p. 186; April 29, 1931, p. 199; May 6, 1931, p. 210; May 13, 1931, p. 219; May 27, 1931 p. 243; June 3, 1931, page 253-54, 259, 261-62. Mueller, Rev. Karl A. *Among Creoles, Miskitos and Sumos: Eastern Nicaragua and its Moravian Missions*. Bethlehem: Comenius Press, 1932.

This Month in Moravian History is compiled by Paul Peucker and Lanie Graf (Moravian Archives) in cooperation with Markus Gill (Moravian Church Utrecht, Netherlands). Moravian Archives, 41 W. Locust St., Bethlehem, PA 18018. To subscribe, visit: www.moravianchurcharchives.org