

PIONEER DAYS

by Brian Andrews OAM, for the Coalfield Heritage Group

Silent night

There are numerous stories detailing the origins of "Silent Night, Holy Night," a carol which is quite possibly the favourite among all Christmas Carols. For much of the following I am indebted to Dr. Joe Morley for his work on researching the subject.

Every year at Christmas, millions of people throughout the world listen to the carol sung, which is said to be the most popular and well-known carol of all time.

From its humble beginnings in the little Austrian town of Oberndorf (96km east north-east of Salzburg - the famous Sound of Music city), on Christmas Eve 1818, when it was sung in the parish church of St Nicholas in its original German *Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!*, the carol which in simple words tells the story of the birth of the child Jesus.

The Nazis even banned it when they invaded Austria in 1938.

Today, Silent Night, Holy Night, has been translated into more than 100 languages and many dialects. It is sung in magnificent cathedrals, churches large and small, in places and in homes, in concert halls, on the land, on the sea and in the air, around camp fires, at huge open-air concerts attended by thousands, by opera stars, even by old men and babes and loving friends.

It is played on every kind of instrument from gum leaves and musical saws to grand organs as well as on guitars for which it was originally written.

The version sung in English usually has only three verses - the first, second and last of the original *Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!*

Legends and myths have become part of the carol's story and history.

One of the most famous events associated with Silent Night Holy Night was during the World War One truce of 1914 when, on Christmas Eve at Ypres, as midnight approached, the sound of *Stille Nacht! Heilige Nacht!* drifted across from the German lines to the British trenches only metres apart.



This memorial plaque in Oberndorf, Austria salutes the composers of the world's most famous Christmas carol, Fr. Joseph Mohr and Franz Xaver Gruber.

Responding with carols of their own, the British then vacated the safety of their trenches and mixed with the Germans in no-man's-land, where for hours they fraternised until the high command of both armies forbade such conduct and so the slaughter resumed.

Another such event took place during the same war in the village of Glasberg in what was then Bukovina, now Romania when, after plundering the villagers by the first wave of invading Russian troops, a new company of Russians composed numerous of seminary students commanded by an officer joined the villagers at Christmas Midnight Mass, and to the accompaniment of balalaikas, the Russians and the villagers for a short while forgot the war and atrocities and together in unison sang Silent Night.

Following its first performance on Christmas Eve 1918, the Silent Night carol was for some time temporarily lost to the world. When it was eventually revived myths were woven

about its debut, with it music being mistakenly ascribed to various composers, such as to Franz Joseph Haydn, to his younger brother, to even Beethoven and to Mozart despite repeated protests by the real composer, Franz Gruber.

The first recognition of the true authors was not made until 1854, when the director of King Frederick William IV's Royal Court Choir in Berlin, researched and traced them.

However, it was not until the discovery in 1997 in the Carolino Augusteum museum in Salzburg, of a manuscript written by Father Joseph Mohr in 1820, on which he had written the year "1816" and signed it at the bottom and wrote in the top right hand corner "Melody by Franz Gruber" that the identities of the real composers of both the lyrics and the melody of the carol were put beyond all doubt.

FR JOSEPH MOHR

Joseph Mohr was born on December 11, 1792, in the city

of Salzburg. The exact location of his birth is not known, however he was the illegitimate son of Franz Joseph Mohr, who came from the Austrian village of Mariapfarr. When aged 29 years the father joined the army of Salzburg.

He deserted Joseph's mother Anna Schoiber, but gave the child his name.

Young Joseph grew up living with his mother, who worked as a knitter along with other member of his family cramped together in a single damp second floor room in Salzburg.

Joseph's mother was even charged and fined nine florins for having given birth to an illegitimate child.

A townsman named Franz Joseph Wohlmuth adopted Joseph as his godson.

When Johann Hiernie, then the choir master of the Salzburg cathedral heard and was impressed by young Joseph singing voice, he helped with his education, the boy's family living in abject poverty.

Hiernie encouraged Joseph to become a priest and so the youngster entered the Salzburg seminary and on August 21, 1915 he was ordained a priest.

His first posting was as the assistant priest at Mariapfarr from 1815 to 1817. Mariapfarr was his father's birthplace and his grandfather lived nearby. Father Joseph spent his first Christmas there with his grandparents.

Young Father Mohr was inspired by the liturgy at Mariapfarr, which included a lot of the German language. It was here that in 1816 Father Joseph Mohr wrote a poem, which was later to become the famous carol.

Then, in 1817, he was sent to the new parish of Oberndorf. There he and the parish priest, Father Joseph Kessler introduced the German language into the Mass but the church authorities forbade this practice and the parish priest was removed.

His replacement was a strict traditionalist and he and Father Mohr were immediately at odds, even complaining to headquarters about Father Mohr's guitar playing in the church, among other things.

The authorities supported Father Mohr which led to his parish priest responding by spreading evil rumours about Joseph's childhood, which

alienated many of the parishoners from Mohr, including his friend Franz Gruber.

Father Mohr left Oberndorf in 1819, and until he became the parish of the Alpine ski resort at Wagrin in 1837, he served at eleven other parishes.

At Wagrin he formed a close bond with the people and spent all his money establishing a centre for the aged and on educating the youth of the area. He died on December 4, 1848 just a few days short of his 56th birthday and was buried in the local churchyard.

There was hardly enough money to cover his funeral. It was said of him that he was born in poverty and died penniless. The townspeople, however, built the Joseph Mohr school near his grave as his memorial.



FRANZ GRUBER

Franz Gruber, who wrote the music for Silent Night, was born in the Upper Austrian town of Unterweizberg, on November 25, 1787, making him five years older than Father Joseph Mohr.

Franz's parents were linen weavers. Their house no longer exists. His father wanted him to learn a trade, but the youthful Franz was attracted to music and studied the organ and violin.

In 1807, he got his first job as a school teacher in Arnsdorf, near Oberndorf, and soon became the school's headmaster and organist. From 1816 he also became the organist at St Nicholas church at nearby Oberndorf.

In 1829, Gruber left Arnsdorf for Berndorf, and eventually settled in Hallein in 1835, where he acted as choir-master until his death on June 7, 1863. He was then 76 years of age.

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