

The Pastor, Alfred Rutschmann

by Jackie Layne Partin

Charles Dickens opened his novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, with the words, "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times..." Thoughts of a new Switzerland in a new land was the best of times for thousands of Swiss emigrants in the mid-1800s. This short story depicts the worst of times, *murder*, for those colonists who came to Grundy County. I've already written about the first cowardly taking of life but not the second murder for the small colony. On **November 30, 1874**, an attempt to steal money from a store owner, Johannes Ulrich Baur, turned to murder the next day **December 1, 1874**, when he died from the gunshot wound inflicted upon him the night before. The whole colony was heart-broken, fearful and very much missing the motherland of Switzerland.

About a year after Mr. Baur was buried, a baby boy, Alfred Rutschmann was born **October 15, 1875**, in Zurich, Switzerland. His parents were Jakob and Pauline Rutschmann. The family moved to Grundy County in **1880** where young Alfred grew up, and in his teens sat at the feet of Rev. Charles A. Nussbaum for public school lessons and spiritual guidance. Alfred had a brother William born **1886** in Gruetli who eventually spent time years later with Mr. and Mrs. Nussbaum when they lived in St. Louis, Missouri.

Mr. Nussbaum was the pastor of the Lutheran Church in Gruetli for a few years in the **1890s**, and it was at that time that young Alfred became extremely interested in the thought of becoming a pastor. (*My husband's mother was a Schild and of Swiss heritage, and she always called the little church the Reformed Church when she spoke of it.*) Around **1894** Mr. Nussbaum moved to Missouri to take a job of pastoring at the First German Church of the New Jerusalem in St. Louis. Alfred was around nineteen and saw the opportunity to follow his spiritual tutor to Missouri, and by listening and learning, he could fill himself with the teachings in the Bible. Watching his mentor serve and apply pastoral duties could possibly lead him to the privilege of serving his own flock someday.

While in St. Louis, young Alfred ate meals with the Nussbaums, but he found himself a job to help out as any young man should have done. He worked in a broom factory; the money he made helped pay for his studies for the ministry. Around **April 1898** he left St. Louis for home, Gruetli, Tennessee, where he had accepted his first position as a pastor. The job, being at home, was exciting for Alfred; he was back with family, friends, people of the same religious beliefs, and on fire, full of zeal for the Lord. Alfred was experiencing "*the best of times*" spoken of by Charles Dickens.

Around one month after arriving back home to Gruetli, on Sunday, **May 8, 1898**, Alfred lay dead in the floor of the parsonage after being shot in the back with a shotgun while eating his Sunday lunch. That day he had done the one thing that made him the

happiest, preached a sermon from the small church's pulpit; he did what his teachers taught him to do, delivered life lessons to his flock.

Alfred Rutschmann

Minister and Pastor

(Oct. 15, 1875 – May 8, 1898)

**(Drawing of young Alfred –
courtesy of Nashville Banner)**



Chattanooga Daily Times – 11 May 1898 – "Minister Supposed to Have Been Killed by Moonshiners – From parties who returned yesterday from Tracey City a Times reporter learned further and fuller particulars in regard to the murder of Rev. D. Ruchman, the young pastor of the Lutheran (not Sweden-Borgian, as stated in yesterday's paper) church at Gruelti, the Swiss colony on the Cumberland plateau in Grundy county. The facts are highly sensational. Grundy county is infested by moonshiners – more so, in fact than either Polk or Bledsoe. It appears that for some time Rev. Ruchman had denounced the makers and sellers of "yaller corn" and "white lightning" not only from the pulpit, but whenever occasion required them as being the cause of considerable intemperance on the part of his flock. It is even alleged that Rev. Dr. Ruchman went so far as to expose and cause the arrest of some of the moonshiners by the revenue officers of the Nashville district."

"At all events, they took a strong dislike to him. Last Sunday he preached an unusually severe sermon against the moonshiners, and while sitting in his study at 2 o'clock of the same afternoon, he was shot from ambush by unknown parties, the charge of buckshot passing through the open window and taking effect in his throat, immediately under the chin, the bullets penetrating the juglar and spinal marrow and killing him almost instantly. Up to the present the assassin or assassins have not been apprehended, but the general opinion is that the work was done

by moonshiners who had a grudge against Rev. Ruchman for his active campaign against their interests.”

Sequachee Valley News (Sequachee, Tennessee) – 19 May 1898--“The tragedy is shrouded in mystery. No cause can be given for the shooting, and no clue can be had as to the perpetrators of the deed. Some four or five parties have been arrested on suspicion. Two of them have been acquitted and the others are to be tried tomorrow. Every effort will be made to get the guilty party, and if found he will be dealt with as he deserves.”

The number of newspapers that reported this story from New York, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Illinois and many other states was extraordinary. For those who think that moonshiners would not go as far as to murder a pastor for preaching Biblical doctrine on drunkenness, please read the following: *Morristown Gazette – August 17, 1922 – “Somerset, Ky., Aug. 17 – Two men are dead and another is believed to be dying in a hospital here tonight as the result of a gun fight last night at the close of a religious service at Mount victory, about twenty-five miles east of here. The dead are: Abe Nolen, **lay pastor** of the Mt. Victory church, and Ester Dykes, farmer, Ellis Richardson, a farmer was wounded. Officers were told that Dykes and Richardson, with several other young men, went to the church service, which was being conducted by Nolen, with the avowed intention of breaking up the meeting. They were unsuccessful, however, and departed.*

*One member of the congregation fearing trouble, obtained a shotgun and gave it to the pastor. On his way home Nolen, it is reported, met the two men, who are alleged to have fired on him. Nolen returned the fire. The pastor, who came here recently has been **active against moonshiners.**”* Interestingly in both stories, Alfred and Abe were newcomers to the pulpit they were filling at the time their troubles began. I beg to ask, “Had the old-time pastors backed down, given up of sorts, on this plague of sin? Then the new, zealous youth of the day came into the pulpits with overwhelming faith and determination to take back their congregants from the evil of alcoholism?”

To be fair within our discussion of what may have happened to bring about the shooting into the back of a twenty-two-year-old minister and pastor, we must say that the Gruetli colony was having trouble in their little church during the 1890 decade. Instead of sitting here telling you the whole story which is quite complicated, I will tell it using bullets; I am certain the reader will understand fully the problems. They are no different than current problems in denominations. There may have been some deep conflicting feelings amongst the flock, but I don’t believe it would have caused anything like murder to come about.

- The vast majority of church members voted to let the pastor go at the end of his contract.
- The pastor objected and made an effort to get the decision of Swiss Colony Church reversed by the synod.

- Headquarters tried to force the colonists to keep the pastor.
- The colonists voted to leave the synod.
- The church split and met at different times in the same building with permission from the school.
- Charles August Nussbaum was hired as pastor of one faction, and he also became the school teacher because he could speak German and English.
- During this period Nussbaum had great influence on Alfred who in turn highly respected him.
- Alfred returned to Gruetli and started preaching the word.



This one building served as a school and a church building.

Young Alfred's *"remains were interred in the village cemetery there Wednesday morning. Funeral services were held by Rev. C. A. Nussbaum. His funeral and burial were attended by a large concourse of people. A large crowd went out from Tracy City."* Without doubt, Alfred's funeral service was one of the most difficult for Rev. Nussbaum to officiate since the young man had lived so long in his presence in order to learn God's words, how to officiate as a minister and pastor of a church, how to represent himself as a servant of God to all mankind, or just to share a common meal in the Nussbaum home.

"It was the worst of times."