

Bemassikeh History



The missionaries, Pastor Craemer and Pastor Baierlein were asked by Chief Bemassikeh to “*teach my people the truth*” (Kikinoama mindanishinakemi iu tebueuin). Chief Bemassikeh was unhappy with the revivalists who were working among his people and looked to Craemer and Baierlein for spiritual help. Bemassikeh was chief of the Ojibway or Chippewa tribe at Shim-gua-gonsh-kom on the Pine River. In the spring of 1846, he spent 10 days visiting with Pastor Craemer in Frankenmuth. Apparently he was pleased with the work Pastor and Mrs. Craemer were doing with the Indian children from various tribes in the area, because he agreed to send his two sons to the Indian school.

In July of 1847, one month after Missionary Edward Baierlein arrived to help with the Indian mission Chief Bemassikeh again visited Frankenmuth and invited Baierlein to return his visit. Baierlein visited Bemassikeh’s village in the autumn of 1847. Bemassikeh suggested Baierlein make his home among them. The following May, with the help of several of the Frankenmuth colonists, Baierlein built a log house. The thirty-foot by twenty-foot house served as a dwelling for the mission, school, and church. Baierlein named the mission “Bethany”, and it became his home and workplace until 1853 when he accepted a call to a mission field in East India. Missionary Baierlein, a graduate of the Mission House in Leipzig, Germany, was the most successful Indian missionary of his day. He gained the confidence of the Indians and instructed and baptized both children and adults. He composed a speller and a reader in the Ojibway language, and translated hymns and Bible stories which he then had printed in Detroit. The Indian camp consisted of about 100 persons, with 20-24 children attending the school.

Missionary Ernest Miessler took over the work of Baierlein in 1853 and at Bethany until 1860. Then the mission was moved to Isabella County near Mount Pleasant, where the government established an Indian reservation.

Miessler followed the Indians to the reservation and continued his missionary efforts until 1869, when the mission was closed.

Baierlein relates the following which took place during the fourth year of his six year stay with Chief Bemassikeh in Shim-gua-gonsh-kom (the place of small pine trees): “*The old Chief Bemassikeh often spoke of the fact that he would soon go to his fathers and to the fathers of their fathers, and yet when death did come, it came unexpectedly. He was kindly disposed toward Christianity and wanted to become a Christian himself but the struggle within himself had not yet come to an end. However, even in the throes of death he remained kindly disposed toward the Lord, for he commanded his wife and children to become Christians. His men buried him amid great sorrow, and for a long time after they ate their meals at his grave.*”

When Frankenmuth celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary in 1920, a 73-year-old Indian, Philipp Gruet, expressed his thanks for the kindness shown to them by the Frankenmuth pioneers.

In 1983, through the work of a committee headed by William (Tiny) Zehnder Jr., a Chippewa Indian Memorial was dedicated in Memorial Park. The words on the stone read: “*Dedicated to the Indian people of the Chippewa nation who made their home in what became the Frankenmuth area, and to Chief Bemassikeh who greeted the German Lutheran Missionaries and settlers in 1845 and urged them ‘To Teach My People the Truth’.* May the spirit of their endeavors be with us and their descendants for all time”. The memorial includes a large arrowhead stone, a large circular stone representing the sun, and a smaller stone representing the moon. These markers and their surroundings show the close relationship the Indians had with the earth and all its creatures.



Researched & Compiled by Bavarian Inn Lodge
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