

From a small-town church to the ends of the earth . . .

Oberndorf, Austria, is a village (population today of about 5,000) on the German border, a dozen miles north of Salzburg.

In 1818, the assistant priest at the parish church (coincidentally named St. Nicholas!) was 26-year-old Joseph Mohr. The organist was 31-year-old Franz Gruber, a teacher in a nearby village.



St. Nicholas was torn down in the early 20th century due to damage from floods.

Preparations for the Christmas Eve service – an important event in the life of the village – came to a sudden halt when the organ was found to be broken and unfixable before the midnight service. The planned music would have to be changed, due to its dependence on the organ accompaniment.*

Joseph had written a Christmas poem, *Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht*, a couple years earlier (at another church). He pulled it out of his files and asked Franz to set it to music.

The result was an anthem for two soloists (Joseph & Franz!) and choir, accompanied by a guitar.

Organ builder and repairman for the region, Karl Mauracher, maintained the St. Nicholas organ. He found out about *Silent Night, Holy Night*, and took a copy with him, sharing it



on his travels. At the same time, two touring families of folk singers added it to their repertoire, taking it beyond the Austrian borders.

One of those families, the Rainers, introduced the carol to America in 1839 – performing it at the Alexander Hamilton Monument outside Trinity Church in New York City. Twenty years later, the pastor of that church published the English translation that we know and sing today.

By the turn of the 20th century, missionaries had spread the carol across the world. Today it's found in over 300 languages and dialects.

And to think it all started in a small-town church's Christmas Eve service!



Oberndorf, Austria, today

* There's apparently some debate as to the state of the organ. Some say it wasn't broken; Joseph simply decided to have Franz set his poem to music.