

When Josef Meier established the Black Hills Passion Play, he transplanted a custom that his native German town had enjoyed for seven hundred years. Today, the pageant depicting the life of Christ lives on as a South Dakota tradition.

Meier was born 10 October 1904 in Lunen, Germany, where the annual passion play had been a centerpiece of the town's Easter observances since 1242. He first appeared in the Lunen Passion Play at the age of ten weeks, going on to play the baby Jesus a few months later. Principal roles in the play were handed down from generation to generation, and at age twenty-four Meier became the seventh in his family to play the role of Christ. In 1932, Adolf Hitler's constriction of religious expression in Germany provided the impetus for the entire cast to emigrate to America. Meier translated the play into English and directed the troupe as it toured the United States performing and scouting for a new home.

In 1937, he married Clare Hume, a Chicago actress who had joined the company in the role of Mary. Following a performance in Spearfish the next year, Meier discovered a large natural amphitheater with Lookout Mountain as its backdrop. Deciding to make Spearfish their permanent home, the cast members settled there, building a permanent set in the amphitheater in 1939.

In time, Spearfish residents came to constitute most of the cast of the Black Hills Passion Play, as Meier used only 28 professional actors for the largest of the play's 250 roles. Beginning in 1953, the professional cast members took the passion play to Lake Wales, Florida, for the off-season, returning to Spearfish each summer. The Black Hills pageant became a magnet for tourists, and Meier used his influence as its founder and star to have United States Highway 14A paved through Spearfish Canyon and to help build Lookout Memorial Hospital. He remained active in the community and in the play even after retiring from the cast in 1991.

Throughout his career, Meier won international praise for his portrayal of Christ. Three popes, the German government, and the state of South Dakota honored him. He died 31 January 1999, having played the role more than nine thousand times for ten million people.

by Joshua Garrett-Davis

Dakota Images



Josef Meier

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