

Christian Barthelmess: Soldier, Musician, Photographer

Christian Barthelmess was born on April 11, 1854 in Klingenberg am Main, the son of police brigadier and later court scribe Christian Barthelmess and his wife Katharina Zeis. He was the second of five children, and grew up in relative poverty. He did, however, receive a sound school education and was also very gifted musically. The municipal archive of Klingenberg contains a "Record of Persons Settling or Leaving Klingenberg between October 1, 1866 and September 30, 1867", and he is listed under item three: "Barthelmess Christian – 13 years old, single – no fortune – North America. The travel expenses were sent from North America."

A German with almost the same name - Christian Barholomus – was living in Fort Union, New Mexico at that time. He served with the U.S. Mounted Rifles and was relieved of his military duties there on June 30, 1860. He may have been the person who paid for Christian's travel expenses, and it could have been his family that the young Christian stayed with – firstly in New York and then in Irontown, Ohio. He seems to have worked in Ohio for a while in a sauerkraut factory and also as a baker, and according to the family tradition he apparently baked his own wedding cake.

His further movements only become clear after 1876. On November 15 of that year he was conscripted by Lieutenant Forbush of the 5th Cavalry Regiment in St. Louis, and he joined the 6th Regiment on December 17. Barthelmess made a note of these and other details in English in his "soldier's handbook". He saw a great deal of action until he was retired on July 17, 1903. His cavalry days ended on November 14, 1881 in Fort Apache, Arizona Territory. He was drafted a second time on the following day, initially as an infantryman in the old line regiments 13, 22 and 2 at Fort Wingate and then at Fort Bayard, New Mexico, Fort Lewis, Colorado, Fort Keogh, Montana and Fort D.A. Russell, Wyoming. He fought outside his country from 1898 to 1900 in Cuba and from 1900 to 1903 in the Philippines.

His musical talent resulted in him becoming a member of the military bands of all the regiments in which he served, usually made up of 16 men with a band-leader. He was so talented that he soon became "chief musician" of whatever unit he was in. He also founded and ran several male-voice choirs and numerous different instrumental ensembles, which gave concerts and also performed for dance events held by the military community.

Along the Western Frontier where he served, Barthelmess developed a keen interest not only in purely military matters but also the customs, mores and lifestyle of the Indians. He documented all this of his own accord in hundreds of photographs, some of them commissioned by the government. Only a few of these pictures were taken in his studio in Fort Keogh, Montana Territory, where he was stationed from April 1888. Most were taken in

the open air, amid natural scenery. This was unusual for that time, and it made Barthelmess into one of the most important chroniclers of the way people and life looked along the Frontier in the last quarter of the 19th century. For instance, an album assembled by him personally, with handwritten additions, in Fort Keogh in 1904 bears the title "Thirty Years in the Army. A Story in Pictures Without Words", and it ends with the words "Finis Coronat Opus! Laus Deo!"

His camera no longer survives, so its make remains unknown, as does the exact time he purchased and learned how to use it. He was already taking pictures during his second spell of military service, however, from 1881 to 1886 in Fort Wingate and Fort Boyard. Today his pictures are an important part of collections at the National Museum of Natural History, the Smithsonian Institution, the Montana Historical Society and the Range Riders Museum in Miles City, Montana. The latter was established by his son, and is run today by his grandson Bob Barthelmess.

His photographs of the geographical-topographical Grand Canyon Expedition of 1887/88 were a sensation, and his reports on Navaho Indian ceremonies published in the German-language newspaper "Der Westen" in Chicago prove the extent of his interest in anthropology, influenced greatly by Dr. Washington Matthews, a local physician. Many of his pictures have been lost for ever. He noted this himself in his album in 1904: "The plates of 1½ Years in Cuba, especially the Plates from around Santiago together with 3 large boxes of Photo Goods, were stolen out of the Store house in Fort Thomas Kentucky, while serving in the Philippines."

Barthelmess retained his connection with Klingenberg, as can be seen from the dedication on a photograph at the municipal archive there showing him conducting a small US Army choir: "To my friend Anton Hepp in memory of the man who blew the trumpet of Säckingen [to wish him farewell], Christian Barthelmess 1880". He also seems to have spent the spring and summer of 1892 in his old homeland as part of a special furlough, because several photographs of Klingenberg and its surrounding area exist on cardboard at his photo studio in Fort Keogh.

On April 12, 1886 Barthelmess was married in Silver City, New Mexico to Catherina Dorothea Hansen-Ahlers, who had immigrated in 1881 to the USA from Flensburg. Twenty years later, on April 10, 1906 (one day before his 52nd birthday), Barthelmess was buried under some rubble during excavation work at Fort Keogh and died at the scene, only a few metres away from his photographic studio of 1888 which he had run single-handedly ever since his retirement in 1903. After Fort Keogh was abandoned by the army in 1908, his grave was moved to the National Cemetery of the Custer Battlefield National Monument, near the famous Little Big Horn battlefield in south-eastern Montana.

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