

G-SIG FORUM #49

...from the German Special Interest Group. G-SIG is an effort of the St. Louis Genealogical Society (www.stlgs.org/) and the German American Heritage Society, St. Louis, Mo. (www.gahs-stlouis.org).

This communication is a forum for genealogical, educational, and historical information with fresh insights and ideas on German traditions and ancestry. Gerald Perschbacher serves as *FORUM* compiler and coordinator.

If you would like to include a notice or request, please submit your information in condensed form for the *EXCHANGE!* section (limit 50 words). *EXCHANGE!* notices run only once, but you may resubmit. We reserve the privilege to shorten and edit. Send your *EXCHANGE!* submission to persch3@hotmail.com.

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GERMAN PRISONERS IN OUR MIDST

Take time to read David Fiedler's book, *The Enemy Among Us* (available at book stores such as Barnes & Noble and online at Google Books). If you are at all like G-SIG's Karl Daubel (KDAUBEL@aol.com), the book will trigger a keen interest.

It's clear that Mr. Fiedler has become active in G-SIG for obvious reasons, once you read the book. He researched a bit of obscure history by tracing the experiences of thousands of German and Italian prisoners of war (POWs) who were interned during the Second World War.

Karl had the chance to hear the author and took notes. There were some 15,000 German and Italian prisoners of war held in Missouri during the war. These men were captured in North Africa and Italy. They started arriving about 1942.

You may wonder: Why in Missouri? Karl reports: The government and military wanted it so that they would be a minimal threat in several ways. They were too far from the coast to try an easy escape -- and if they did escape, they would be distant from important facilities where they could sabotage local life and the war effort. They were placed in rural

areas so that they would not upset the city dwellers. Also, camps needed a fair amount of land for the prisons.

Karl goes on: If the prisoners were kept in Europe it would be necessary to have more soldiers there to guard them. We would have to ship food and supplies for the prisoners and their guards. It was easier to bring them here and have local labor run the camps.

There were four camps in Missouri: about 5,600 Italians at Camp Weingarten west of Ste. Genevieve; 5,000 at Fort Leonard Wood; 4,000 at Camp Clark; and 3,000 at Camp Crowder. The camps were typically laid out so that each individual sub compound held 1,000 prisoners. Each of these had the prisoner barracks, officers club, mess hall and other prisoner facilities. Adjacent to these was the Camp or Prison administrative area with military Headquarters, barracks, hospital, fire department, laundry and other support buildings.

The setting did not smack of chain gangs. These prisoners lived a very good life. They fixed up their own barracks with rugs, curtains on the windows, blankets on the beds, hung Christmas decorations, and had mascot dogs. They worked on non-war activities such as the bakery, mess hall, station hospital (many had medical and dental training). They performed maintenance on their own buildings, worked on local roads and drainages, and operated the local sewage plant. The men were paid about 10 cents per hour for this work, paid in script or coupons. This could be spent in their canteen for daily need items including tobacco and candies (especially chocolate). Their canteen was considered to be identical to an Army Post Exchange.

Why pamper the prisoners? In the big picture they learned how to live in the USA and they would be motivated to exercise good behavior. It turns out that many wrote home about their good treatment and as a result many soldiers took the opportunity to surrender in battle, to come to the better than combat life, and live in a US prison. This gave us the opportunity to teach them democracy and peaceful behavior.

Prisoners were involved in 36 hours of sandbagging at Ste. Genevieve during the 1943 flood. They proved invaluable. As a result of the good relationship, another program was started where the prisoners were sent to 19 agricultural camps to work on farms as the American men had left to fight the war. These prisoners backfilled the labor force. Amazingly, the farm camp in Boone County was the Sigma Phi fraternity house on the Columbia campus. There was a fence around it but they also were allowed

to attend church and the movies in town. They behaved very well because they were treated as human beings.

For recreation, prisoners had soccer teams and other sports with uniforms, and were given trophy prizes. They had art and craft shops. They did art and craft work for local people. After the war, some of them came back to the U.S.A. to become citizens.

Near the end of the war a real dilemma arose. Italy switched from being allied with Germany and became an American ally. Therefore the Italian prisoners were no longer POWs. They were allied soldiers and were given uniforms, but they were not allowed to go home until war's end.

In 1947 and 1948, during repatriation after the war, some prisoners were involuntarily put to work upon return to Europe. They had to help repair war damage. For some, it took a while to get back to their home.

Author Fiedler tells of two German prisoners who escaped while working on a farm at night. They crossed the river into Illinois, slept in ditches, and traveled at night. They lived by eating green corn from the field. In about 10 days they managed to make it to Waterloo, Illinois, and became VERY disenchanted in the effort to escape. So, the men went to the highway and tried to hitchhike back to camp. Someone picked them up and took them to the local Sheriff's office. The sheriff made sure they got back to camp safely.

Thanks, Karl, for sharing your notes. And thanks to David Fiedler for preserving an intriguing aspect of Germanic history that took place right here in America!

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GET A PLACE & SIT RIGHT DOWN...

Who did what? Where did they come from?

When did they come here? Why?

How did the family branch out from here?

Who is the genealogist in our family?

No matter what shade the questions take, they are still there, at times haunting us in sleepless moments or occupying our minds as distractions. Often the questions pop up when we cannot do much about them. Know the feeling?

Here's a simple suggestion: Have a party. Find a neutral spot (a good, clean place where precious papers can be spread out for viewing

without danger from dirt, small table surfaces, or spots of grease – so be cautious about doing this in a restaurant or on a kitchen table after lunch). Invite your family. That’s right, as many as you can attract. Ask each member to bring things reflecting the past of their particular family branch.

Pictures—bring plenty of family snapshots, the older the better. Bring a tape recorder or video camera, a tablet of paper and pen or pencil for handwritten notes, even a laptop so that precious comments and observations can be captured and retained. Honor the eldest in your family by asking them what they recall about the previous generation(s).

Years ago, I set up such a gathering with my father, his sister, and his older brother. No one had asked the questions before: *What is the earliest thing you remember? Why did our family come to America? How and when?* There was a proper pause after each question to allow for discussion.

“A stowaway on his uncle’s ship,” my uncle noted. “Our ancestor was a stowaway on his uncle’s ship. That’s what Pop told us. I don’t know any more than that. But he always told us that’s how it happened.”

When we asked about my grandmother, my aunt chimed, “I still have the little woolen coat she wore when she was three years old. That’s when she left Germany. There was a large crowd at Ellis Island on that day in the 1880s, and because she was only three, no one noticed when some immigrant accidentally stepped on the edge of her shoe. Her father kept pulling her along, so her foot came out of the shoe. After it was too late, they discovered she only had one shoe. That’s how she walked until she settled here in the Midwest—with one shoe on her foot.” There was a brief pause. Then my aunt added, “I think I still have that shoe someplace....”

Not to be left out, my father looked at his brother and said, “I remember when the buggy tipped over. I was on the ground watching you being pulled along the road, then the horses stopped.”

My uncle was surprised as he replied, “You COULDN’T have remembered THAT. You would have been about six months old...!”

Dad interrupted with a laugh. “Well, I remember it, plain as day.”

“Somebody must have TOLD you that story,” my aunt added.

“No, I SAW it. I remember seeing it as clearly as the nose on your face,” Dad reiterated. “I saw what I saw, and that’s what happened.”

Then we asked questions to the slightly younger generation. My cousin remembered when my father came walking down the street, heading

home from the Second World War. “I was the first to see him coming. I ran and told everyone!”

Great comments. Marvelous memories, recorded and remembered.

Only about 10 relatives were in the room, and we chatted for at least 90 minutes before we slowed down. It was the last time the elder generation met and reminisced. I’m happy to say that my two children were there, impressed with the experience and educated on their family’s past. Those “kids” are now adults making their own special memories. But no one can rob them of that precious time with their elders.

Follow up: My aunt sent a packet to me a short time later. In it was the old woolen coat of my grandmother, her wedding veil, and the wedding announcement. My aunt never did find the shoe!

As for my father’s early recollection? Truth be told, I recall being carried toward a bassinette—when I was about six months old...!

Like father, like son.

Ask questions as soon as you can. In the process, you might find out some things about yourself!

Gerald Perschbacher

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FAMILY GATHERINGS...ROUND TWO

The idea of another family gathering came a couple decades later. It was precipitated by a cousin and his three teenage sons who were driving from Arizona to St. Louis to meet with anyone in the family who wanted to see them. They were discovering their heritage.

Fortunately, a local cousin and I were able to make arrangements for a large meeting room on a Sunday afternoon preceding a major holiday. My local cousin sent out e-mail notices to a nice list of relatives and encouraged them to spread the word. We asked for RSVPs and started final plans.

I agreed to make a presentation on the last five centuries of our family, gems of information unearthed in researching my historical novel on Western Civilization, Germanic people, my family’s village, and my bloodline. Everyone was invited to bring items of family interest, photos, documents, and artifacts of significance.

Lots of things to see. Lots of things to say. Hours of warmth as a family.

Each of us moves up the ladder as our elders die. As we approach the top rung, don’t forget that we also have a responsibility to convey what we know to those who are younger.

Well, Dad, I guess I'll have to keep telling your story about the buggy...and my uncle's story about the stowaway...and my aunt's story about the shoe—as I hold up Grandma's old woolen coat! GP

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SUCKER FOR HISTORICAL MAPS!

You can spend hours of research on visuals if you are a sucker for HISTORICAL MAPS. I've obtained atlases printed in varying years from the late 1800s until the present, and comparing visuals has enhanced my enlightenment on "things German" and the history of our ancestors.

All of that is part of our history, too. They faced the historical challenges of their eras. Now we carry the succeeding genes and face our own situations.

Watch for good historical atlases. Such maps trace the rise and fall of empires, nations, and cultures; the movement of ancient tribes; trade routes, terrain, battles, and much more. Several series of top-quality maps tracing German history were printed in color on German printing presses and have still been the basis for reprints on American presses over the past half-century. If you can find a copy of *Historical Atlas*, compiled by William R. Shepherd, go for it! I've seen the 1956 eighth edition (originally distributed by Barnes & Noble). If you find a similar edition, buy or borrow it for reference. It's worth it! GP

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EXCHANGE! G-SIG comments, ideas, & requests:

+ **If you can read German**, you might find the following site interesting: Osnabrücker Familienforschung at <http://www.osfa.de/> .

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Want a printed copy of G-SIG FORUM by mail? Send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to: St. Louis Genealogical Society, Attn. Ed Schmidt; #4 Sunnen Dr., Suite 140; St. Louis, MO 63143. **Not yet on the e-mail list for the G-SIG FORUM?** Write to germansig@stlgs.org. (Note: All copyright privileges for this FORUM are reserved by the compiler; no item is to be duplicated or distributed without permission.)

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Have great ideas for the G-SIG FORUM? Submit your material to persch3@hotmail.com or mail it to: StLGS, Attn: G-SIG, #4 Sunnen Dr., Suite 140, St. Louis, MO 63143.