

# G-SIG FORUM #53

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

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

**You may submit a notice or request for information in condensed form for the EXCHANGE! section (limit 50 words). EXCHANGE! notices run only once, but you may resubmit, within reason. We reserve the privilege to shorten and edit. Send your EXCHANGE! submission to [persch3@hotmail.com](mailto:persch3@hotmail.com).**



## Extensions...

Trace Germanic history back far enough and you'll realize that most of Western Europe was (and in some respects still is) very Germanic. Ancient Germanic tribes moved around, especially in the Age of Migrations (around 400-600 A.D.) to settle in Spain, northern Italy, France, the British Isles, and into what is now mainly Slavic nations of Eastern Europe. Of course, Germanic tribes had already dominated what are now Sweden, Norway, and Denmark. You can learn more about this by checking some past editions of this **FORUM**.

Many traditions may linger but the reasons they have lasted may be forgotten in the mist of time. One Germanic tradition may center on the plentiful use of cow's milk in daily diets. There are some "people groups" from other parts of the globe that have difficulty digesting cow's milk. But it is not a widespread problem for people of European descent -- a genetic trait, to be sure, one that is likely linked to those old Germanic roots.

Germanic extensions marked the face of ancient Europe. Burgundians settled up and down the Western bank of the Rhine River. Some historians say that you can imagine the old borders of the Burgundians as a Germanic people by viewing the locations of Belgium and The Netherlands, then drawing imaginary lines down along Luxembourg and Switzerland. OK, maybe that's a bit simplistic, but that did include much of the old Burgundian territory.

As ancient Prussians were forced out of what is now Poland, the Germanic people moved eastward. The Prussians were absorbed into other "people

groups” and generally lost their identity. Germans picked up the name “Prussia” only as a locator, reflecting the fact that they lived in the area once dominated by the non-Germanic Prussians.

Today, if an astute student studied Germanic areas outside of present Germany and drew lines accordingly, the territory would likely extend farther than the old borders of the Holy Roman Empire (which, during its existence, was considered a German empire by other nations). Add to this the fact that a substantial percentage of Americans carry Germanic heritage (estimates waver from 20 to about 30 percent), and you can really see how far that German influence extended.

If you trace your lineage far enough, you may find your tribal branch. Example: Hessians (the Hessen) are a sub-tribe of the Franks, and are believed to have been the Chatti tribe referenced by the Romans. The Chatti settled along the Weser River and especially around the current site of Fulda. Expansion brought them southwestward to the Rhine. The Franks, based initially along the northern coast of Germany and the Lowlands, eventually encompassed the middle and low reaches of the Rhineland. So if you can establish your tribal heritage, you may be able to track the advance of your ancestor in ancient days!

Just don't expect to discover his or her individual name.... GP



**IDEA!** Do a Web search or check with libraries on the subject of ancient Germanic tribes, their movements and achievements, and the outline of old German territories. If you go to Germany or establish contacts there, ask for a good historical atlas showing territorial borders and key cities over the centuries. Often times, used books (such as school atlases from the early 1900s) can be purchased cheaply and convey a wealth of information. Those atlases usually have extremely detailed maps. Even if they are in German, with a little help from a German-English dictionary you can probably decipher enough to understand what's on the pages.



## Along Illinois' Southwestern Edge

“Nothing beats a trip to the area your ancestors resided. Like Sarah Jessica Parker did [on a TV special], that is the way to go. I just couldn't get out of Illinois. Who would have figured my people's history was so rich with English beginnings in Illinois, although I am told they were probably German.” So says Marlene Olson ([genealogy777@yahoo.com](mailto:genealogy777@yahoo.com)).

“The English Shook name in 1790 was German Schuck that went to

Fredrick County, Virginia, and Pennsylvania, then to the territory northwest of the Ohio that became Illinois.... This Shook family has been taken back nine generations and I still haven't gotten out of the country.”

Marlene uncovered roots in what are now Madison, St. Clair, Monroe, and Randolph Counties in Illinois. “My people were located at the beginning of Silver Creek at the Kaskaskia River in St. Clair County....”

Those old Germans liked to start churches. They also disliked slavery. One of her ancestors “had a paper from President Thomas Jefferson to stop slavery in the Illinois Territory. It is framed somewhere in St. Clair County.

Yes... there is nothing like bonding, creating memories, seeing your roots.”

When Marlene visits a court house for research, she explains that it is “much faster to go through deed books with indexes, marriage indexes, etc., to gather up all surnames faster.... Going with my older second cousin, we made eight cemeteries in one day because she was native to the county and knew where all the bodies were buried. It took many trips to get the family stories to match up to family history.”



## Treasure of Information!

It was news when the story aired on Dec. 17, 2009, on CBS (*60 MINUTES*) about a secret German archive with a treasure of information on 17.5 million victims of the Holocaust.

The archive is in Bad Arolsen, Germany, and contains 50 million pages of documents). Now this reservoir of information is open to the public:

[http://www.cbsnews.com/sections/i\\_video/main500251.shtml?id=2274705n](http://www.cbsnews.com/sections/i_video/main500251.shtml?id=2274705n)

is the site to check!



## Alsace & Lorraine

Some portions of old Germany are now inside the borders of other countries but may remain Germanic culturally and still employ many German traditions (including language). In a prior **FORUM** we investigated Strasbourg and its Germanic roots. Now let's look at Alsace and Lorraine (in German: Elsass und Lothringen).

These two territories did not consider themselves French. They knelt to the authority of that country gradually, finally being incorporated under the influence of the Kingdom of France soon after the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). In select cases, noble families in the Holy Roman Empire had to honor the King of the Germans plus the King of France! That made it rough when they had to take sides on an issue. Often, expediency determined their choice.

**In ancient days,** during the rule of the Romans, German tribes settled the area. Lorraine attracted the Leuci and Mediomatrici tribes for reasons lost to history. Soon the region was included in Rome's Belgium Province.

The Merovingian dynasty gained control of Lorraine when Clovis, the first King of the Germans, took power, around 500 A.D. When he died in 511, his kingdom was divided (in the German tradition). Son Theodoric became king of the portion called Austrasia (from the left bank of the Rhine River to the North Sea) which included Lorraine.

As time progressed, the term "Germany" was applied to the culture and language rather than a unified country by that name. By 1600, Alsace was a patchwork quilt of small territories owned by various noble families. It included the large city of Strasbourg, called an Imperial Free City since it had been granted this designation by the Emperor. Although that city was self-governed, an overseer was appointed by the Emperor to make sure taxes and obligations were made to the Crown. The Count of Hanau-Lichtenburg was that overseer and also owned a large portion of northern Alsace. His administrative capital was in Bouxweiler. Before 1618, Alsace was mainly Protestant.

As Spanish troops from the Catholic Emperor marched near and even inside its borders, Alsace was threatened in the Thirty Years' War. The lower half of the land was administered by the Hapsburgs. Contenders for the crown of the Holy Roman Empire, the Hapsburgs were not in favor of Spanish and French armies near or on German land.

**Three decades of war** ravaged the countryside, hindered many economies, drained the youth of two generations, and brought dreadful plagues that, at times, nearly wiped out entire towns and villages.

To settle matters, the French demanded control of Alsace and Lorraine and got it. Noble German families that held onto their land in those territories often set up a local administrative site while they called another town home in what remained of the weakened Holy Roman Empire.

Some historians emphasize that Bavaria, Westphalia, and other principalities became independent states due to the weakness of that empire.

To fill the voids resulting from decimated populations after the war, Catholic, Flemish, and Swiss settlers were invited into what had been Protestant-German lands.

Alsace came under strict French control during Napoleon. It was fought over as late as the First World War. Some of its "de-Germanizing" trials have resulted in two basic reactions from citizens: compliance or resistance.

I say this because you may have to deal with both feelings when making contact with officials in Alsace or Lorraine. They may be skeptical of your motives and mistrust your comments. Some old records may be written in

French while others may be in German. Some files may be kept by the village while others are retained by the Catholic Church or even a Protestant church. Personal diplomacy is the keyword! GP



## More on Lorraine

Lorraine was formed a few decades after the death of Emperor Charles the Great (Charlemagne) who promoted the Carolingian dynasty. One portion of his land extended from the North Sea to Roman and was given to his grandson, Lothar. Before the year 900 A.D., this area became known as Lotharingia or Lothringen and later was simply called Lorraine.

A tribal Germanic confederation of the Alemanni used “-ingen” as their signature suffix. Hence, the word Lothringen stood for the land owned or belonging to King Lothar.

Due to the shifting power of noble families through marriages and alliances, Lorraine was under the rule of Poland’s Stanislaus the First in 1733. In 1766 it became a firm part of France and was reorganized.

As a result of German’s victory in the Franco-Prussian War of 1870, Lorraine and Alsace came under the flag of the united German nation. As a result of the First World War, both switched back to France.

I’ve got to add that the original borders of these two territories were not strictly maintained as they switched back and forth between Germany and France. Negotiations may have resulted in the divisions that went counter to earlier configurations. GP



## They Moved Out of Alsace

Historians and genealogists note the major emigration from Alsace. In the early 1800s, a high number of families were enticed into the promising area of Odessa in southern Russia. Being farmers, they knew how to domesticate the land and bring good yields. They wanted to escape the restrictions and demands of governments in Alsace. These people became the German Russians or Volga Germans. Nearly a century later, many of them opted to move to the Great Plains of North America.

Lorraine did not send nearly as many emigrants.

Researchers also note that a good number of former Alsatians (and some from Lorraine) took residence in Erie County thanks to its popular waterway via the Erie Canal which made western New York easily accessible. Some later migrated into Canada or states such as Ohio.



## Helen's Great Idea!

G-SIGer Helen Snyder ([hersnyder@mchsi.com](mailto:hersnyder@mchsi.com)) has a marvelous idea. It involves networking with societies in various parts of the country where you may have ancestral connections.

Through a genealogical society newsletter, Helen, who lives far from Fort Wayne, Indiana, discovered the Allen County Library. That society newsletter said a bus coach was being readied for a three-day experience at the library as a "shot in the arm" for ancestral studies. There was room for 50 genealogists.

Officials added, "If you have not yet been to the Allen County Public Library, do yourself a favor and join us for a visit to this user-friendly facility, said to be second only to the Family History Library in Salt Lake City. Check out the library website and catalog at [www.acpl.lib.in.us/genealogy](http://www.acpl.lib.in.us/genealogy)."

Yes, it is very wise to expand our horizons by contacting (or joining!) other societies that can assist with advancing our research. Personally, I have made contact with several genealogical and historical societies in various states in the U.S.A. and also in Germany. All seemed eager to assist either for free or at modest charge. Sometimes mere reciprocal action is all that is needed when THEY have a question!

GP

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### **Exchange! G-SIG Comments, ideas, and requests**

+ Still Available: *Venne in America* by Udo Thörner. *The 19th century Mass Emigration to America of Tenants and Small cottage Farmers from a Rural Village in the Region of Osnabrueck*. This book will help people with ancestry from Venne or who have ancestry in the old Kingdom of Hannover. Chapters cover the social, economic, and political conditions in that region and supply reasons for emigration plus what it was like to travel to America. Detailed listings run from 1830 –1900. Only \$28 from the St. Louis Genealogical Society or contact Kathy Wurth at [kathyinwashington@hotmail.com](mailto:kathyinwashington@hotmail.com).

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