

G-SIG FORUM #60

...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. (gahs-stl@att.net).

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.

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HECKER'S IMPACT By Gerald Perschbacher

What were the attributes of Friedrich Hecker? He was a German, freedom lover, nervous, determined, energetic, and dedicated. These words only partially describe Herr Hecker, who risked his life for ideals among Germans in the mid 1800s. There is a town named after him in Illinois, north of Red Bud. You've got to make a hit with people to make such a mark of honor.

In 2006, a translation of Sabine Freitag's research (*Friedrich Hecker – Two Lives for Liberty*) was put on the market in book form, distributed by University of Missouri Press, St. Louis. Steven Rowan was the translator of this 492 page English book. It traces Hecker's two lives—one as a young man in the German empire (falling more and more under Prussian influence) -- and one as a new American in the Land of the Free and Home of the Brave.

If you were a German nobleman in the 1840s, you would probably consider Hecker a *European troublemaker*. He was the type who made others think about their situation and how to change it. When rebellion and open opinions were circulating in Frankfurt-am-Main in 1848, he was involved. That was a strong but short-lived movement brought on by highly literate young people who dreamed of a land that offered freedom and opportunities in a new era of enlightened thinking. Revolt and change were filling the air.

As for Hecker who died in 1881, "He did not see direct democracy as an expression of radical popular sovereignty worth striving for, but rather desired a

popular sovereignty filtered through representation, restricted by the division of powers and basic rights,” says Freitag.

In an address I heard by Rowan, Hecker was exemplified as a Catholic-turned-Free-Thinker, a fighter who recovered from one Civil War battle and went to another called Gettysburg. Hecker became a journalist and speaker on subjects close to his heart. In later years he returned to Germany, by then under Bismarck, and made friends with former enemies of that failed 1848 Revolution.

Lansing Hecker, well known as an honorary German consul and respected for his efforts through the German American heritage Society, is a direct descendant of this freedom fighter. Since he knows so many details about his ancestor (including incidents inside this book by Freitag), it must make Lansing feel proud and sad at the same time, for that was the outgrowth of his ancestral heritage. Friedrich Hecker did not have an easy life, but there were highpoints.

Much the same can be said of each of our ancestors. Perhaps they were in the 1848 Revolution. Perhaps not. Maybe they lived in other areas of the German lands and faced diverse challenges that we are only beginning to uncover in our search of history. Maybe our ancestors were simply common folk, wanting to live and love in peace without negative intervention to alter the course. This is the thrill of our hunt!

If you have the opportunity to hold something old and directly related to your ancestors, enjoy the moment. I recall holding a letter from around 1610, written by an ancestor of mine, and feeling as though he and I touched hands for just a moment over the four centuries that separated us. So it is with any bit of research we uncover, much like the massive amount of information in the Hecker book. It brings ancestors “to life” in a literary sense.

Do you know the history of your ancestral village or region? What about German history? American history from the era your family arrived here? If you have an understanding of the historical (and even geographical) setting, you may unlock answers when you discover bits and pieces of what appears to be confusing information about your ancestors.

We may never have our ancestors written up in a big book like Herr Hecker. We may not even find all the basic facts on our ancestors from three or four generations ago. That’s doesn’t mean we should stop our research, completely give up, feel down, or reprimand ourselves for inability. Herr Hecker stood for some high ideals on the good side of humanity. This is what we, as genealogical and historical hunters, also strive to do. When something of note is found, we raise our flags, shout with joy, and march on to the next obstacle. Victories may be small, but as they total up, we can make magnificent progress.

Let’s learn from our ancestors as best we can. We are, in many respects, close to their way of thinking since we are their byproducts.

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Keep Up With Your Notes...since you are compiling many facts and ancestral names, organize and preserve the information. This is especially true of old photos which may have fading images. Scan them electronically! If you made a ton of little notes, compile them in a single, multi-page binder or at least organize your original scraps. Make your file understandable to others in your family, since the file may outlast you! We know things about Herr Hecker because some documents and entries were preserved. Your accumulation of ancestral information may be precious to future generations. Notes may be written on paper or may be preserved on audio tape, CD or DVD. Of these media, low-acid or archival paper is the best choice for longevity.

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WHO WAS TRULY FIRST?

George Ball (gwb35@sbcglobal.net) was hopeful. He thought he had discovered one of the first Germans to settle in St. Louis. Says George, "In your G-SIG Forum #58, I was particularly interested in your section on Elihu H. Shepard and your comment that 'I cannot find reference to the name of the first (German) or when he (or she) came' to St. Louis."

George continues: "I am working on my late first wife's genealogy: Susan Links Ball (1937-1989). Her paternal great-grandparents were Christian and Eva Herbel Mehl. As her obit states below, he was St. Louis' first shoemaker.

Philipp Christian Mehl was born in Hawn (Hahn?) or Nassau, Germany, on May 17, 1817, and came to America in 1842. He departed from Bremen, Germany, on the ship named *Favorite* and arrived in the Port of New Orleans on June 12, 1842, at age 25 with occupation of "Shoemaker" shown. [Sources: "New Orleans Passenger Lists, 1820-1945" and "Castle Garden (NYC)" port of entry record]. He married **Eva Margareth (Margaret) Herbel** in St. Louis on April 13, 1844, according to the *Missouri Marriage Records, 1805-2002*.

"Christian died of softening of the brain at age 63 in his St. Louis home located at 1249 South 3rd Street on March 9, 1881, as recorded in the *Missouri Death Records, 1834-1910* and in the attached Register of Deaths in the City of St. Louis, March 1881. He was buried in *Holy Ghost (Old Picker's) Cemetery*.

NOTES: (1) Previously we knew him only as "Christian Mehl"; however, two records refer to him as either PHILIPP CHRISTIAN MEHL or PHILIP CHRISTIAN MEHL. *The Missouri Marriage Records, 1805-2002* and the actual handwritten marriage record (the Mehls being one of 18 listed) uses the double "p" version. The single "p" variation is used in the *Missouri Digital Heritage: Naturalization Records, 1816-1955*; this record spells it 'Philip,' So now we know his full name!"

"(2) The City of Hahn is in the Frankfurt area of Germany as is Nassau. The 1860 Census shows Christian's birthplace as Nassau, the 1870 Census shows

Prussia, and the 1880 Census (his last) again shows Nassau. [Remember this name NASSAU for when I talk below about his probable brother **Charles Mehl** who had the City of Mehville in South St. Louis County named after him.]

“While doing research at the Missouri Historical Society Library... I came across a reference to Christian Mehl as one of 12 ‘incorporators’ (investors, owners?) of the *South St. Louis Mutual Fire Insurance Company* that was chartered in 1859 with a capital [infusion/investment] of \$200,000. If the 12 ‘partners’ were equal investors, that would have meant each put in nearly \$17,000 to start this company. Was this “our” Christian Mehl? Did he have this amount of wealth from being a shoemaker? Another mystery.....

“Eva Mehl was the first one buried in the family plot in the New St. Marcus Cemetery on Gravois Road purchased by her son, John A. Links, Sr., when she was interred on August 7, 1912, in Gravesite #1. As noted by Susan on the envelope containing Eva’s 1910 photo and 1912 Obituary, her father told her that his Grandmother Mehl died from pneumonia contracted while shoveling snow off the roof of their home and bakery at 8th and Ann in St. Louis.”

(Note: If you would like more details on this branch, I’m confident George will be happy to oblige. Just send an e-mail his way.)

Now, for my reply: Great work, George! You are doing a masterful job of piecing facts together. Here are more observations based on subsequent research. As with so many sources, there are weaknesses. The Shepard information is based heavily on his own recollections and documentation, which was, evidently, limited.

I’ve been uncovering more details. There were Germans in St. Louis as early as 1817, and possibly before. One of them was Henry von Phul, who migrated from the East Coast and settled in St. Louis as a businessman. He was a merchant, and since St. Louis was becoming the Gateway to the West at that time, he made the most of the opportunity. I plan to mention more about him, since I have a friend in Germany who has completed a good amount of research on that ancestor of his. Von Phul was involved in local government in several ways. He was considered the first prominent German in St. Louis, but that does not mean there were not earlier arrivals. If there were, they just didn’t make the impact he did.

So, your case for 1832 is not earlier than von Phul’s appearance. Now, I’ll address another point re: the FIRST SHOEMAKER in St. Louis.

This could be true, although it depends on definitions. In the 1830s and later, Germans were to list a craft or “job” when they came to America. They had to do the same when they left Germany. Some just said “day laborer” when they left the Old World but took on a specific job when they came here. Shoe making was in demand in St. Louis since pioneers would make it their last stop in the “civilized world” until they headed West. Extra shoes were always a

wise purchase. Those shoes were made on order, per person. Now, here's the catch: Many German farmers listed their winter-time occupation as shoemaker, which really meant they spent the cold months working in leather (which they may have provided from their cattle). It was a natural thing for farmers to make shoes, from what I have discovered.

So the ancestor you mentioned as the first shoemaker in St. Louis may have actually done that, or may have just listed that, or may have been a farmer who was a seasonal shoemaker.

When my family arrived in America, my direct ancestor and his cousin both took the occupation of shoemakers in 1833, and they would have been welcomed in St. Louis because of demand. However, they apparently did not stay with it long. Once they had obtained funds, they purchased land and tended to become farmers, which is what they knew how to do in Germany. Did shoemaking make a person wealthy? Hardly, unless they organized a shop and turned out bunches of shoes upon order, which is doubtful (although not impossible—indicators should be uncovered before making that conclusion for an individual case).

By the way, go back to the 1600s and you will find that Johann Wilhelm Perschbacher was the apothecary in Frankfurt-on-Main (a job that surfaced in the descendants in Frankfurt even in recent years). Again, my ancestral village is about a 20 minute drive southeast of Frankfurt. From a high point in the village, the industrial smoke stacks of Frankfurt can be seen—which is the type of thing you discover when you go “over there.”

You probably will find more about the Mehl family by searching the files in the basement of the Eden Seminary archives in Webster Groves, mornings until 11 a.m., M-F. The cemetery records and related church documents (many about the UCC – United Church of Christ) are stored there (old German Evangelical congregations).

Now, a word about investors. It is probably likely that just as many past businesses had equal and unequal investments from shareholders. Often one person held the largest percentage of the company and was the top officer. The second largest investor held the vice chairmanship or vice presidency. So on, down the line, with usually three investors to make a business (or corporation). Equal? I think that might be stretching facts unless you have more indicators. So, how much might an investor have put into a company? Sometimes there was a minimum investment. If investors are listed alphabetically, then placement on the list of owners may be immaterial. If the listing is not alphabetical, then the amount of investment per person may be indicated by their position on the list. In the case of the Mehl family investment, it may be that a \$500 or \$1,000 investment was the minimum.

Lastly, the name Philip was commonly spelled with an extra “p” at the end (Philipp). This often was dropped as American officials entered the name as they would have wanted it spelled. Sometimes a second “l” was add in the middle (Phillip).

One more thing on names, if and when you converse with a German “on holiday” (or vacation) in America. Listen closely to how they pronounce their names. Learn the pronunciation and ALWAYS use it in their presence. This is the polite and proper thing to do. No one wants their name mis-pronounced, so gain mastery over the guttural sounds and special nuances of the German language. In so doing, you will at least capture a little sense of the past, too.

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Exchange! G-SIG Comments, ideas, and requests

+ Nancy Besemer in Arizona (Motoman1@aol.com) is interested in the Odenwaldkreis. She is searching for a book by Ella Geig on that subject and would appreciate insights you may be able to provide. She has found several hundred ancestors from that area, even one born in the late 1400s.

+ Jim Merkel didn’t think he was writing a book, but that’s what resulted. After a decade of South St. Louis interviews, he was able to compile *Hoosiers and Scrubby Dutch*, reflecting on the old days in that solid residential area of yore. It’s a trip back to the era when men swept fresh grass clippings out of their portions of street curbs and women scrubbed their marble and limestone front steps every week. He tells once-secret tales and the story of a dentist who moonlighted as a murder. When other folks moved into the area from the poor south, the word “Hoosier” took on a shady meaning. Here is a slice of old German ways and thinking as they clashed with down-home Hoosier manners. I’ve got to add that one of the impressive things I notice when I visit the Rhineland is that the old Germans still sweep and scrub their walkways and steps...so maybe we’ve lost a bit of quaintness and neatness from the past. If you are interested in the book, check with Left Bank Books at <http://www.left-bank.com/event/jim-merkel-hoosiers-and-scrubby-dutch>; you may also call (314) 367-6731 (West End) or (314) 436-3049 (downtown St. Louis).

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