

G-SIG FORUM #70

...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 forum is for genealogical, educational, and historical information with fresh insights and ideas on German traditions and ancestry.

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Reasons for Hard-to-Read Church Records

Just about all American "school kids" who sat at a grade school classroom desk before 1965 had "penmanship" crammed into their lives. Legibility was paramount. Exercises in early grade levels forced children to form their letters in generally approved fashion.

In any old church record book from the mid-1900s and earlier, most entries are well written, some appearing artistic. You can tell when there was a new pastor for a church since the book of "Official Acts" of the congregation showed a marked change in handwriting form. This held true in Germany, too.

If handwriting skills were so important, why are so many church record entries poorly written?

As G-SIGer Wally Kern (wakern@sbcglobal.net) researched his heavily German native area of Frankenmuth, Michigan, he struck upon some interesting commentary provided by Anita Boldt. The information dealt with church records from 1856 to 1862.

Wally noticed that the commentary made life in olden days take on a special appreciation. He provided examples (on which I have elaborated):

+ **The books reflected relatively poor book keeping.** "But...when did that pastor find time to enter these records?" noted Anita, since the pastor did not have an office secretary. That meant he had to do his best to visit church members, conduct special ceremonies (weddings, baptisms, funerals, and confirmations) , and meet countless demands placed upon a clergyman. Scribbling entries on pages of the church book seemed to be the least of his

concerns. Handwriting occasionally appeared rushed, even sloppy. That poses a challenge for today's researchers and translators! On the other hand, more than a few pastors took pride in making the entries scripted works of art.

+ **Making the pages "artistic"** was especially difficult when we realize the pressures of a bygone era. Pastors (and priests) had a rushed life in the mid-1800s. There was no telephone, which meant they had to do most of their work in person or by letters. There were no FAX machines and no computer benefits. Some may say that this made life simpler. Indeed, it did. It was so simple by modern standards that few people today would even THINK about interfacing in that "primitive" manner.

+ **The pastor expended huge amounts** of time (and shoe leather) by walking to his visits. Few advance appointments were made. People were open to home visitation more so than today. In the mid-1800s it was expected that visitors would drop in unexpectedly. Some home-dwellers considered it a treat! In those cases, the surprise visit was a benefit to the pastor.

+ **Pastors hardly had time to sit in their church office**, if they even HAD an office. Many worked from small homes (called a parsonage, provided by the congregation). They were likely responsible to keep the office clean and functional. That meant purchasing the paper, ink, inkwells, pens and quills, blotters, and anything else necessary for the task of church-book entry. If a protestant pastor were married, he may have delegated these chores to his wife, and later to their children as they grew older. Sometimes we can wonder if those family members assisted the pastor in making book entries...!

+ **Pastors in olden days did not worry much about spelling.**

Dictionaries were precious, time was short to check errors, and surnames were not listed. Sometimes the people listed in the entries did not know how to spell their names! So it became the sole discretion of the pastor to look up older family entries and match the spelling, or (as is so often the case) simply spell the name phonetically. A name such as Bacher easily became Becker, Baker, or Barker. Schmidt may have become Schmit or Schmid. However, I'll add a special reminder on that change. In certain areas of Germany (notably along the Rhein River), writing it as "Schmitt" reflected a Catholic background while "Schmidt" reflected a Protestant (notably Lutheran) background. Still, if a pastor from another part of Germany (or one born in America) did not realize such differences, then he easily could have spelled the surname as he chose. The same relates to Meyer, Maier, Meier, and other variations.

+ **Little time existed for church record books** to be kept in prime order. The life of a pastor or priest was harried, day and night. Seriously ill parishioners took sudden turns and neared death. The pastor had to be there. Young children quickly contracted and died from what are now considered simple and easily curable diseases (such as scarlet fever and chicken pox). Accidents occurred. Pastors were expected to be at the bedside of the afflicted at the earliest possible moment. This included births, since a newborn may have had a troubled delivery and unexpectedly died in the process.



More Tips on Church Record Books & Pastors...

+ **While the general church membership had special holidays** like Easter and Christmas, the pastor had to work on those days. He didn't spend time on church books when he had to construct a holiday sermon!

+ **In pleasant weather months** in the 1800s, the pastor often hitched his own buggy to a horse and made his rounds or simply rode in the saddle. In the winter he hitched the horse to a sleigh. This meant more time in preparation. Precious moments were needed in caring for and feeding the horse. The buggy needed upkeep, too, such as greasing its bearings and keeping its varnished appearances presentable. If someone in the church didn't do this, then it fell to the pastor. After all, his horse and buggy often were church property!

+ Anita pointed out that Pastor Volz, who served his Michigan community for 40 years, **also had to "clean the barn,** feed the animals, and bring straw into the barn for bedding them. His family usually had a couple cows, some chickens, and a big garden or orchard for fruit. Each needed special attention.

+ **If the pastor depended on his wife** to shoulder more and more duties, that might have been OK until she bore her first child. Then motherly tasks prevailed. "Usually they had a big family themselves," Anita added. Also, "she usually was the president of the 'Ladies Aid' (considered an honor). They would meet at the parsonage." The life of a pastor's wife was more complicated than today. In the mid-1800s, "There was no electricity. Clothes had to be washed on a scrub-board and hung outside on a clothes line...."

+ **Not all church-book entries were made immediately.** Pastors seldom carried a notepad with them to jot down small details. If a person died at night and the home did not have a clock (or it was set inaccurately), then the time of birth could have been wrong. Usually times were not recorded but days were important. Pastors took the word of families as to exact times, if that were necessary. Often pastors did not write down the entry for several days, making mental note until he prepare his notes for Sunday worship. Then he entered the information on the pages of the church book.

One of the worst situations facing a researcher of old church books is the poor, acid-laden paper used in some cases. This affected its endurance and made it brittle. Many times this affected the ink and turned nice, black entries

into faded grey. Inks were a problem, too, etching their way onto the back side of the paper, bleeding through and conflicting with words written there.

Sloppy pens made for thick and thin letters and numbers. In cold weather, ink reached its freezing point, which meant some pastors chose to write with lead pencils. More than not, this made for faint entries from the beginning, fading more as time and paper dictated.

Wally summarized the challenges: "The pastor entered data into his books whenever he had some time...perhaps every couple of weeks....We all strive for perfection in our search of data but some of that just may not be out there."

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Pastor in Germany Were 'Locked Down'

It was common practice for pastors to be "locked down" to a region. Why? The ruling family of a territory -- whether the then-present head was a *Landgraf*, prince, duke, count, or knight -- was responsible for all that transpired in the territory. That included the spiritual well-being of the population. Hence, the German ruler determined the type of religion for the territory, which most often was Catholicism, Lutheranism, variations of Calvinism (or Reformed), or a partial blend of these. In 1817, to mark the 300th anniversary of the Protestant Reformation and to allow for the King of Prussia to partake Communion with his wife, areas under Prussian rule combined non-Catholics under the category of "Evangelical."

Men were chosen to be pastors. Territorial rulers had "lookouts" who found the best candidates for higher education and leadership. They had to be from families of high standing. Especially in the case of Protestants, a ruler may have paid for part or all of the student's education, which before 1800 involved the use of Latin and German for potential priests and pastors. Latin was the official language of state documents.

Upon graduation, the new theologian was placed in communities of the ruler's choice. Protestant pastors worked their way into the job through practical experience. Some rulers, especially among the Hessen people, demanded that the graduate obtain experience as a teacher or theology and basic knowledge, then eventually were assigned a pastoral calling completely controlled by the ruler. That's where the pastor stayed until the ruler announced another move.

With priests, it became a matter of church officials basically doing much the same. A priest was to minister to the people on behalf of the Holy Church in Rome. However, a lot of "adjusting" and influence was levied by regional rulers. Some even became archbishops (as in the case of Trier, Mainz, and Speyer).

The upshot of this little article is that the **WAYS** in which records were kept may have varied between regions, in accordance to the will of the ruler as it was manifested through local leaders he appointed. Keep this in mind while researching and it may help to explain the differences from one part of the old German empire to another. Those old practices died hard.

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Types of Books to Search

In Germany, church record books were considered special property. As families dwelt in a community for centuries on end, their family heritage was preserved in the church record books. This wasn't the only important set of books. The local community had secular books dealing with land usage, large purchases, taxable references, elections, court cases, and locally appointed jobs.

Let's linger on that last subject: locally appointed jobs.

It wasn't unusual for a baker to bid for the rights in his village or town. Depending on the size of the community, he may have held a monopoly under the rule of the Burghers (the prominent leading families of the community). Those Burghers may have been responsible to an elected *Burgermeister* or the appointed *Schultheiss* (empowered and selected by the leading noble family of the territory). Either position was nearly equivalent to today's mayor.

In the 1800s, German records indicate that farmers bid to transport emigrants from their town to a major point of transport such as a port. Sometimes this was bidding process involving the community as a service to the people. This also implies that it was a taxable job and that records had to be kept to please higher authorities. Farmers were listed by name and location, which can be a source of research information.

Occasionally the legal record reflects court actions brought against some of those people who won the "bid." They held the community monopoly and became the target of disgruntled bidders who failed to achieve their victory. So they brought legal assertions against bakers for baking a bread loaf too "light" or for misusing material approved by the community.

Keeping record books became a mandated necessity for nearly all German communities after 1500. In my experiences, there are notable similarities between the secular entries and church book entries in Germany. Each set is detailed under its chosen category. Births, deaths, baptisms, and marriages are mainstream for church records. Names often are listed by family groups. As for tax records, pages were set up under individuals rather than families. In all record books there are additional entries made when updates were necessary.

If a person bought land one year, then sold it the next, an update was added to the first entry. If the ink for the addition was of poorer quality than the original entry, it could easily fade away. Or unless the researcher understands the updating process, wrong conclusions can be drawn on where the final outcome of the entries really was leading.

In old church books, inked crosses appear in family listings. This implies death, and dates of passing are added. These updates are very important to our overall understanding.

Our gratitude rests upon those bygone "enterers" who maintained the record books. Our thanks to those who preserved the books, too. And continued thanks can be shared with those who help us understand the entries and the genealogical "gold" they contain.

If you have not had the opportunity to become acquainted with old record books from the 1800s and earlier (either in America or in Germany), take the opportunity when it arises. There are various archives with online sources that can provide that experience. Seek and find!



Exchange! G-SIG Comments, ideas, and requests

You may share your discovery or offer ideas for others in this section (limit 150 words). We reserve the privilege to shorten and edit. Send your *EXCHANGE!* submission to:

persch3@hotmail.com.

+ **Dr. Albert Jabz** of G-SIG (ajjabs@aol.com) says people should focus "their attention on the matter of the German-American Internment of World War II. Due to extensive research and examining the evidence concerning this unjust incarceration, I wrote the Foreword, on "Faith Overcoming Fear When You Are Labeled an Enemy" in a book (*Shattered Lives, Shattered Dreams*) which has already been nominated for consideration as a Pulitzer Prize (Cedar Fort, Inc). This important book, by Russell Estlack, is recommended reading for a persistent injustice issue that has been deferred for too long a time."

+ **Kate Worland** (kate.worland@gmail.com) reported: "My great-great-grandfather was killed at Camp Jackson (in St. Louis) in 1861. His name was Johannes Heinrich Juengel (or Jüngel). He is mentioned in books on the subject. I have details on this including: copy of his grandson's German journal of the event (also one in translation), copy of his death certificate, location of his property on Grand Ave., his intention to leave for Germany the next day, the results on his family." Special Note: The Camp Jackson Affair involved many German volunteers who wanted to keep St. Louis on the side of the Union.

+ **Congratulations** to Tom Schwarztrauber (itshockey@gmail.com) who has been having the time of his life with his ancestral lines relating to the birth of America. He has made some phenomenal connections to important Americans in those early years.



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