

G-SIG FORUM #80

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 plus ideas on German traditions and ancestry. Gerald Perschbacher is *FORUM* compiler and coordinator.

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German Reality Check: 1902 by Gerald Perschbacher

Hunting online can be worthwhile. I'm not talking about eBay and other sales outlets, although they have their strengths. My subject involves free downloads of books and reports that can shed extremely interesting light on subjects close to our heart's desire.

Such was the case with the 168 page report:

http://www.archive.org/stream/americanethnogra01lear/americanethnogra01lear_djvu.txt

The report was printed in 1911. It referenced the results of a massive 1902 survey. Marion Dexter Learned directed the project.

The survey was divided by topics: *German Industries, German Occupations and Trades, German Agriculture and Rural Architecture, Old German Domestic Life, The Literary Life of the Germans, The Religious, Social and Political Life, The Speech and Conditions of the Territory, Old Colonial Roads, and Archaeological Collections*. Included in the report are maps, charts, and tables.

"The initial work began with the original German settlements of Lancaster County, along the Pequea and Conestoga Creeks, and extended into the other German countries of eastern Pennsylvania and to the western end of the state into Ohio," Learned explained. "In the township of Strasburg the survey was applied in its rigid form of house to house visitation throughout the entire township."

I can relate to the fourth topic, *Old German Domestic Life*, since it was (and remains) reflective of my past (and present) circle of family, friends, and acquaintances. The aspects of domestic life among those German Americans "was studied in its survivals to detail and an abundance of material was gathered which illustrates the tenacity of German customs in their resistance to all invasion of modern forms and modes of life." In one word: CONSERVATIVE. That's how Germans were reflected in the survey. Others might say they were "slow to change." People of a less kindly spirit might say those old Germans were "out of date and behind the times."

This "cultural census" of 1902 reflected intriguing results. In Strasburg Township there were 335 families. Of those, 242 were headed by men of German derivation, and 213 had wives with German heritage. There were 222 farmers, 37 laborers, 9 millers, 5 masons, and 5 carpenters.

There were shifts regarding smaller population segments. In Strasburg Borough occupations shaped up differently in descending order: 41 farmers, 21 carpenters, 14 painters, 12 laborers, and 12 tobacco workers. There were 7 cattlemen, 6 millers, 5 merchants (including storekeepers), 5 bakers, 5 butchers, and 5 bricklayers. On the list are 3 cabinetmakers, 3 druggists, 3 saddlers, 3 hotelkeepers, and 2 each as coach painters, shoemakers, miners, plasterers, blacksmiths, jewelers, insurance agents, dentists, tinsmiths, coachmakers, bank tellers, and coopers.

These statistics allow us to project a percentage of specialized workers that were in small German communities. These were the workers who made society functional.

The survey includes tabulations on surviving children. "The greatest majority of families had from 2 to 8 children. In the borough there were only 27 families with but one child each and 27 having two children each," Learned said. He went on: 26 had 3 children; 19 had 4; 14 had 5; 11 boasted 6 each; 3 had 7; 6 had 8 per family; 4 had 9 children; 2 had 10, and 1 family had 11. "These figures give no immediate alarm of race suicide among the German descendants of this region," Director Learned noted.

It was interesting to discover that most of the families with German roots did not know it. It was the census taker who could make the determination based on questions asked and the spelling of names. It was concluded that "this disparity shows...how completely the early German settlers severed their traditions from the Fatherland, the general laxity in keeping family records..., (and) the low grade of intelligence...." This was seen as a "desire on the part of the masses to live an obscure, uneventful life...."

Superstitions

played a role as late as 1902. "A considerable number of people still believe in the signs of the moon and observe them in planting, sowing, butchering, and the life." The report went on: "The most interesting survival of old superstitious folk customs is doubtless that of powwowing, called in Pennsylvania, German *Brauche*. Strange as it may seem, even the most intelligent people have been known to turn from the practicing physician to the powwow doctor for treatment, particularly in such ailments as burns, chills, and especially in cases of (severe malnutrition), the cure of which seems to be one of the specialties of the pow-wower." The report added that the pow-wowers in the township were at a ratio of one for every 50 people.

It stretched the point farther. "Two kinds of powwowing were noted. One consisting of rubbing the parts affected, and repeating the spell without further formalities; the other of using potions made of herbs, etc., in connection with the treatment." This type of folk medicine was frowned upon by educated physicians.

On matters of entertainment, people were asked about their stance toward dancing, attending theaters, playing cards, and visiting circuses. "The borough was relatively more liberal than the township in regard to social questions," said the conclusion. Hence, Germans Americans tended to be more conservative in rural settings.

As for language shifts, one man who was interviewed for the survey spoke his original German tongue with the same dialect which he had learned in Germany. But his English carried an Irish pronunciation. Why? He admitted that he worked in his father's distillery, alongside an Irishman. Hence, the young man fashioned his use of English toward the pronunciation of the Irish American.

In the case of food types, apple butter (*ladwerck*) was made and eaten in the country more than the city in a ration of 3 to 1. Sauerkraut was one of the most preferred dishes. Cheese was highly favored.

Taking the entire report into consideration, one thing becomes clear. Germans settled well in the new land but did not forget their preferential virtues or shortcomings passed from preceding generations. As remembrance of their German point-of-origin diminished, their German way of living continued. Perhaps not on the same level as in Germany, but it continued to be buoyed by the prevailing population that was ingrained with German practices and ideals. The community became the perpetuating force.

It is similar in other enclaves of German settlement. In its early history, New York City was very Germanic. As settlers became financially stable or sought other occupations by moving westward while the coastal population expanded, that "German-ness" spread with them. If German American settlers resettled in German enclaves, their Old World traits lingered longer. If they settled among the Irish or other types in the New World, then they borrowed some of their traits while adapting to their environment.

In the Midwest, Milwaukee and eastern Michigan still boast communities with deep German heritage. Frankenmuth is one such community in Michigan, prone to proudly hailing its German ways in faith, daily life, and intonations in the English language.

In Missouri and Illinois, German American population centers are still close to Old World ways in frugality, hard work, honesty, and inner strength. St. Louis County, for example, counts its small municipalities by the dozens. Occasionally there are petitions to combine some of them to strengthen urban services such as fire and police protection. Often physical merger talks about boundaries fail. In a certain respect it reminds historians of old Germany, divided by hundreds of small territories governed noble families endowed with feudal practices. In another respect it reminds historians of freedom-loving propensities that seem adherent to a German way of thinking.

If you know your first German settler's American community, do a search or ask library experts and researchers if there is a survey on that area. Maybe census records have been studied and condensed. Such reports may provide special insights to the ways in which your ancestor adapted to his or her new homeland!

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Getting to Know Germany

by Gerald Perschbacher

We've all got to admit it. We will never understand what our ancestors accomplished and what they faced in their toils and tribulations unless we get to know old Germany. "Carved out of the heart of central Europe, Germany more than any other country on the continent has forever been accessible to foreign domination," wrote LaVern Rippley in the book, *Of German Ways*, Gramercy Publishing Co., New York (1970).

That's the initial premise researchers must realize. Germany's present location was--and remains--the crossroads of Europe. This has carried blessings and curses. The placement makes Germany a central arbitrator for trade, commerce, and, unfortunately, for the movement of armies. This could be the reason that, as Germany was being formed in 1870-1871, its leaders decided to have a strong standing army in order to defend its borders.

"Germany has only one natural boundary, the Alpine range with Austria," Rippley added. "Yet paradoxically Austria is the only country on Germany's frontiers that is culturally, linguistically, and ethnically identical to her." Well, I would hedge on the word "identical" and use a safe word: "similar." The author credited Germany's location for making it a melting pot far before the U.S.A. was a dream. If anything, it was a tribal melting pot for much of the land's existence, which stretches back 2,000 years ago if you read Roman history accounts of the Germanic tribes along the Rhine, which was a sort-of border in that nearly forgotten era.

If you verify that your ancestors came from the area north (or south) of the Main River, then keep this in mind: "The Main River is a kind of Mason-Dixon line in Germany," said Rippley. "Those who live north of it consider themselves more cosmopolitan, industrial, and hard-working. South of the Main and west of the Rhine, the people, their lives, and their architecture are different." Rippley credited a portion of this to religion. Southern Germans and many (but certainly not all) Rhinelanders are Roman Catholic in belief. Over the decades they dressed more conservatively and modestly. This slant carried over to social habits and politics. If you wonder how religion settled in, read on.

It was 1555 and the Peace of Augsburg had taken hold as a compromise between German-Lutherans following Reformation ideals and the Catholic Emperor Charles V who wanted to hold his Holy Roman Empire together (hoping to mollify the Lutherans since their forces were necessary for defense as the Turks were threatening in the East). To bring peace, the Emperor agreed to *cuius regio, eius religio* (he who has the territory determines the religion). This made for certain peculiarities as years progressed, forming a stronghold for Lutheranism in Hessen-Darmstadt, an area that dipped into what normally would have been Catholic territory south of the Main. Of course, as years progressed, various rulers allowed Reformed Protestantism and other beliefs to infiltrate.

German citizens have had more than their share of opinions that entered their language (and dialects) practically as proverbs. *Ordnung ist das halbe Leben* (order is half of life) is one of them. A variation on that phrase is *Alles in Ordnung* (everything is in order or is in its place). *Wohlerzogen hat nie gelogen* (a person's good up-bringing never deceives). Rippley went on to

add *Kein warum ohne darum* ("no why without its because") and *Erst besinnen dann beginnen* ("first think, then begin"). It is likely that our German ancestors handily used those phrases -- which reflected their mindset in the past.

The matter of nobility intrigues researchers. First of all, the legalities and benefits of noble status went out the window in 1917. While titles still survive, any degree of power and authority are a matter of private feelings or personal wealth rather than enforcement by law or army.

Initially, there were two types of nobility: by letter (*briefadel*) or by very old ancestry (*uradel*). The first often ended with the death of the person who had obtained noble rights through purchase or special benefit. *Uradel* could not be removed and formed the backbone of noble inheritance. Do you wonder if you are of noble blood? A German told me, "If you have to ask, then you aren't." Most families do not lose sight of their noble status, so unless your ancestors fumbled that heritage and forgot to pass the news along, then you probably are not noble -- or perhaps there is a smidgeon of nobility through distant marriages, but hardly enough for you to lay claim to the smallest silver spoon from the noble table!

Seems as if every genealogist is on the search for their *Wappen* (family crest). If your family truly HAS a fully recognized *Wappen*, then information should be contained in official books and records on the subject. Large universities have books on the subject. These contain verified, recognized, and legalized *Wappen* connected to family lineage. If you wish to dig, then check: http://www.genealoger.com/german/ger_nobility.htm and library resources.

Be aware that there were *Wappen* for town hierarchies (burghers) and *Wappen* referenced by peasants to signify their allegiance to a noble family. There were even associations that allowed its members to use the same *Wappen*. Leading families in Frankfurt-am-Main often were divided between the Limpurg and Frauenstein lines (each with its own stock Coat of Arms), but experts at the archives in Frankfurt are unsure how this was obtained--by marriage, by vote/approval, or by purchase. Sadly, too much paperwork was destroyed in bombings of World War Two to verify.

Don't get hung up on nobility. If you find it, OK. If not, no matter. Your family still lived through many of the events and circumstances that the wealthiest and most influential families experienced. Their ancestral land was a common bond between peasant and duke, administrator and holy man, young and old.

As you trace your lineage, look for phrases that your family employed. Find adages that they apparently upheld. Discover religious principles that they followed. And keep your eyes wide open for special gems of information.

In between your times of progress, settle back and learn what old Germany was all about in daily life and seasonal challenges. This will put you closer to the circumstances in your family's past.

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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 submission to persch3@hotmail.com.

USED BOOKS pop up at estate sales, flea markets, online, and at malls dealing in antiques. They also are common in used book stores. If a store near you deals in used books, hand the proprietor a short "wanted" list by topic or title and include your name, phone number, and/or e-mail address. If the shop owner knows what you want, he or she may find it!

HINT: don't EVER give up doing a web search. Online "digging" can result in a depth of insights and knowledge. Use variant spellings of surnames. Enter different mixes of words in short phrases. These eventually may bring results. Whatever you do, remember how you did it, then share the ideas with others (in person or through a future edition of *G-SIG FORUM*)!

WONDER WHAT IT MEANT? Many researchers have old family documents that list lines of hand-written details or facts, but haven't the foggiest idea what it all means. If you have a phrase in German (or poorly written English) "ask a friend." In fact, ask several, the more the merrier. Ask them to offer ideas on what the letters or words are -- and see if any friends hold the answer to insights. If you are short on friends at present, then keep a photocopy of the document handy when you attend a gathering of genealogical researchers. Show the experts what you have. Even before you take any of these steps, try every angle of deciphering by yourself. Single out the handwritten letters by "breaking the code" of a word or two, then watch for those "known" letters as they appear in questionable words. With a bit of practice, you may hold the key to your own dilemma!

LAZY? Then don't expect much to fall into your lap when it comes to family information. Got a telephone? Of course, you do. Use it to contact people who may be helpful. Start with older members of your family but draft a list of pertinent questions you can ask. Jot down their responses. I'll never forget how well this worked when my father and his twin sister plus their elder brother got together for a two-hour visit. I recorded their comments based on a written list of questions I prepared. We hit pay dirt with this one: "How or when did our family come to America?" My elder uncle chimed, "Pop always told me that our ancestor was a stowaway on his uncle's ship!" No one else at that gathering had heard of such a thing! In my four research trips to Germany, that bit of information has solved many dilemmas of why partially recorded information is found in old church and civic entries in Germany dating to the early 1800s. Historians in Germany have scratched their heads numerous times until they were told my ancestor was a stowaway. "JAH!" they replied. That tiny bit of knowledge made the difference.

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