

G-SIG FORUM #82

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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Keeping the Dates Straight

Fred Held (fhheld@netzero.net) is librarian at the St. Louis North Family History Center in Hazelwood and seems eternally vigilant on the subject of Germanic background and genealogical research. Fred has a track record of activity with G-SIG, too. He truly "lives" his passion.

Fred shares wisdom with researchers. There are three matters regarding dates of which "the German researcher must be aware -- one is modern and the others are old," says Fred. "The German researcher must be aware that when communicating with cousins in Europe that their representation of dates in the 'slash' format is not the same as we use. In Europe the format is day/month/year, whereas we use month/day/year. It is advisable when communicating with your cousins you should avoid the slash format and use the format '23 Sep 2012' to avoid any confusion."

His point is well directed. A good number of researchers had to discover that fact on their own. The tip-off was the use of any number above 12 in the first two listings. If 13 or a higher number was shown, that immediately relegated that part of the reference to a day rather than a month.

Fred continues: "One old date issue relates to the fact that in the early days the first day of the year was not in January, but rather the first day of spring or March. Hence, the seventh month was September not July. September actually means the seventh month, October is eighth, November is ninth, and December is tenth. The problem is that the first month is now January, making these now two months later."

Hmmm. THAT is something ALL researchers should realize. He explains: "In the old German records it was common to see dates recorded as '7bis,' '8bis,' '9bis,' and '10bis' or 'Xbis.' These are not July, August, September, and October, but rather September, October, November, and December. The "Xbis" is understood to be either the Roman numeral or to stand for 'the Christ month.'"

The advice is crucial when studying old church records. I'll add that knowing the context before and after a specific entry makes it all the more valuable. That's because (at the whim of the dominant noble family of the territory) different jurisdictions in various German lands may have followed their own course of entry, which can sidetrack your understanding. I have seen old church and civic lists of information that were extremely careful in adding to the dates and entry details of families. You can tell by the change in ink and the formation of letters. The real added trick is to determine the dates of the changes.

Occasionally, when a person died, the exact date of passing was not listed. Why? If the person died outside of the community (perhaps due to emigration to America) but if news of the person's passing trickled back to Germany, the current pastor may have added a cross without a date to show the individual had died. If a researcher can examine the original copy of the church entry book and trace the entry dates used in that style of writing in other entries in that official book, then it could be possible to check against the listing of pastors over the years and single out the person who entered the information. Once that is done, any undated entry can be limited to the years of service by that pastor. If that pastor served a long time, there may be variations for entries made when he was an old man. When this can be surmised, then the latter part of his tenure would have been the likely period of entry!

Equally challenging is the formation of numbers. Penmanship varied, and with it the formation of numbers. Regional styles may be picked up by the astute researcher, too. Especially confusing are the usages of "1" and "7," each of those having a "hook" at the top -- but one is much longer, and usually "7" has a cross line midway up its shank. The number "4" may also cause confusion.

Back to Fred: "The second issue relates to the double dates we sometimes see in family trees. This comes about from the changing of the calendar from the Julian calendar to the Gregorian calendar by Pope Gregory in 1582." By standardizing among the Catholic population, he established what came to be known as the Gregorian Calendar or the Western Calendar.

Here's how it worked. "Because of not measuring the year accurately, the day Easter was observed kept slipping until it was 10 days later than it should be," Fred adds. "So they skipped 10 days in October 1582 to correct this and added the Leap Year procedure we now use to keep it in sync. However, the Protestants were suspicious that this was an attempt to move them back to the RC faith, so some areas resisted."

It was a natural reaction. German states sided along Catholic or Protestant lines, some Protestant areas split between Lutheran and Reformed. Most Protestant states wanted no hint of connection to Catholic rulers on any level, including use of "their calendar." Sanity returned as time progressed, since it

became a matter of secular economics, trade, and communication to adhere to a prevailing format for the calendar. The Gregorian version won adherents.

But not everywhere. The older Julian calendar was followed by the Orthodox nations (Greece and Russia in particular). Their calendar was off by 10 days when compared to the Gregorian version which had adjusted for "miscalculations." Those Orthodox nations finally tossed in the towel in the 20th century in favor of the Gregorian version -- by then a 13-day adjustment had to be made. So if you know of researchers studying those cultures during that time, give them fair warning.

To gain a fuller picture, Fred suggests checking out the website at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gregorian_calendar. "Parts of the world eventually followed suit (to Gregorian) in 1752, which is the year used by some genealogy database programs...Alaska (once part of Russia) didn't change until 1867."

Fred offers a puzzle: "As a mathematician, someone has to show me how removing 10 days makes it a new year, but it is the practice to represent years around 1752 as two years. Personally, I prefer to use the date as entered in the record, so I disable the double date feature in my database programs."

A lingering caveat: When reading "family books" compiled by Germans, be sure to understand which calendar version they used in the period you research. After all, you might as well be as accurate with your results!

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Is there a 'Johann' or 'Anna' in Your Past?

Ask Fred Held, and he will reveal keen insights in his role as librarian of the St. Louis North Family History Center in Hazelwood.

He says: "Many German researchers get confused by the fact that many males in the same family are named Johann (for example, Johann Jacob, Johann Friedrich, Johann Wilhelm, Johann Philipp) and females Anna or Maria (for example, Anna Catharina, Anna Sophia, Anna Josephina, Anna Gertruda). The fact is, this is not really the name (by which) they were known in the family, but a Christian name. (Use of) Johann and Anna in this case was following the German practice of naming the child for a Saint. The name the child was usually known in the family was the rufname (second name)."

He continues: "One story relating to this practice had its roots in the high infantile death rate. They named all the children with the same name so the Grim Reaper would not know which one to take."

Says Fred, "By far, the most common Christian name is Johann (males) and Anna" derived from Johanna, "or Maria (females), but others may be used. The researcher needs to know another version for Johann is Hans, with spelling

variations of Hanns and Hanß, or the Latin form of Joannes. Another version of Anna is the Latin form Annae. (Please note: many researchers will translate Johann as Johan and Anna as Ana, because they failed to understand the bar over the letter “n” means that letter is to be doubled.)"

Researchers in Germany add more details. If the local church was dedicated to a saint, then most of the children baptized there would carry the name, reflecting village traditions and encouraged children to "grow up like your namesake." Yes, the second name was the one by which people were known, with occasional exceptions. One of them is the name Johannes, which usually superseded the Christian name. However, there are instances of "Johann Johannes."

Fred adds some thoughts. "The name Johannes is a special case. With Johannes there will usually be no rufname. Confusion comes when the name was in the records in the Latin form Joannes, which could be used for Johannes or Johann. When the information gets translated by a researcher from Latin, it may get translated as Johannes whether there is a rufname or not present. However, if there is a rufname following the Christian name it should be Johann."

You may have had a "Johann" in your ancestry and may not know it. Perhaps a translator converted Johannes and Johann to "John." That type of exercise only weakens our grip on family history. If this applies to your situation, check the older, original files as much as possible!

Fred clarifies: "Not all regions of Germany used the Christian-rufname-surname naming practice, but it is common enough that researchers must be aware of it. Even in areas where the practice was common it does not mean that the Christian name will always be used. I have seen records where a person was baptized as Johann Georg, but his marriage record listed him simply as Georg. The converse is also true -- a person baptized with no Christian name may have one attached." An example is when a person baptized Jacob becomes Hans Jacob on his marriage record.

"Because individuals were known in their families by the second name, this created confusion when these individuals came to America where we use first-middle-surnames. Many immigrants therefore reversed their Christian and rufname to become first and middle names. In my family my GG-grandfather, G-grandfather, and G-aunt all did this (Johann David to David John, Christian Friedrich to Frederick Christian, and Anna Maria to Mary Ann)."

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CHANGE! Adding or dropping one letter in a surname can impact your results; when doing name searches, consider multiple spellings! Phonetic spelling also can reap strange results. Example: A family's place of origin was heard as "Meta" but really was supposed to be "Nidda," a town in Hessen territory.

German Headlines, 1920

Marlene Olson (genealogy777@yahoo.com) likes to electronically dig around for news articles from old papers. She shares these as the opportunity arises. So it was that she shared from the *Belleville News Democrat* dated in May of 1920. "On December 11, 1919, Frank Pretzlik of our city shipped a big box to his folks in Dusseldorf, Germany," says one article. In the box were several items: 50 pounds of flour, 50 pounds of lard, and some things you would never expected being mailed in that era: five hams, nine sides of bacon, and 15 pounds of summer sausage.

We don't know how well the food items kept before delivery. But the 12 pairs of socks, five pairs of shoes, dress goods, and three shirts for men's plus seven union suits probably all arrived in fine fiddle.

Why were these items sent? The economy of Germany was literally on the skids in 1920 due to runaway inflation and reparations that burdened Germany as the main loser in the First World War. The value of its currency bottomed out and left German society with heartaches and headaches -- and no way to save for the future unless investing in such things as precious metals. The depression that shadowed Germany soon was to be matched by the severity of the Great Depression that dumped rich nations into the doldrums of financial discontent without a foreseeable solution.

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Names Reflect Your Ancestral Past

No two ways about it, names had a purpose. It wasn't just for registration realities. It wasn't just to track a family. It was to indicate the labor and position of your early ancestors as a reflection of who they were and what they did.

So a Meyer (Meier, Maier, Myer, etc.) was a farmer, or someone who WORKED on a farm, or someone who was RESPONSIBLE for the function of a farm. A Meyer wasn't necessarily someone in a leadership role as much as someone who was expected to perform.

A Schaeffer (also with various forms of spelling) was a person who dealt with sheep. This could possibly have been a shepherd, someone who sheered sheep's wool, someone who prepared the raw wool for practical use, or someone

who worked beside the main shepherd. In effect, if the person "smelled like the sheep," then he or she was a "shepherd."

Additions were made to such basic surnames. If a farmer lived in a boggy area, he may have been given the practical name of "Farmer by the Marsh" (Maschmeier). If there was a farm near a stand of Linden trees, the farmer may have been known as Lindenmeyer ("Farmer by the Linden Trees"). Communities that sprang up near the farm may have granted a suffix to the original name: Meyerhof, meaning a location. People nearby might have been Meyerhofers.

Surnames may have been selected by the head of a family. That could have happened as local officials pressed their communities to list all the families by names. If a surname did not exist, one would be selected or assigned. If the family head did not want to choose a name, an official chose it, wrote it down, and that was it. As towns rose to prominence in the 1300s, having a hold on the names of citizens meant obligatory service could be rendered to society.

Most often names were applied by others outside the family. There were times in European history when town officials or area magistrates were told by the lord of the land to register all the families. This would enhance taxation, special privileges, and service to the ruling family. As such, names worked much like Social Security Numbers do today. I'm glad our ancestors did not carry numbers in place of surnames!

Although, some did carry numbers. You may find a community wherein there were three contemporaries named Johann Georg Schmidt, differentiated as Georg III, Georg IV, and Georg VI. Let's say these men were not closely related but were distant cousins. Georg III was not the father of the other two. These men would have been given their names by reason of birth dates. So Georg III was older than the other two, and a Georg V died very young, so there was a gap that developed. I have seen the numbers run as high as Georg XIVth! Sounds like a noble title, but it was merely a practical application. GP

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