

G-SIG FORUM #85

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. (check the site at www.gahs-stlouis.org). This forum is for genealogical, educational, and historical information with fresh insights plus ideas on German traditions and ancestry. Dr. Gerald Perschbacher (LL.D.) is *FORUM* compiler and coordinator.

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Germans on the Big Screen: Actual or Contrived?

By Gerald Perschbacher

G-SIG's Pat von zur Muehlen (patvonzurm@msn.com) raises a valid point about Germans in motion pictures. When she heard about a film released as "historical drama," she wondered "how historical is it?"

The film in question is *Django Unchained*. Pat received a phone call from someone who wanted to know "how historically accurate the depictions in the film are." At the time, Pat had not seen it but made plans to take it in at a local theater. "Even after seeing it, I'm doubtful that I will be able to expound upon the role of Germans as plantation owners, slave owners, and supporters of the South in the Civil War. I made a general statement to the caller that the majority of German immigrants supported the North and were opposed to slavery. Yet I know there were some exceptions."

Agreed on all points.

My response: Wish I could provide more insights, Pat, but I am not familiar with the film. I will say this: "historical drama" can mean nearly anything, from complete accuracy in small and large details re: historical EVENTS as they happened; or a mere setting in history, with a bit of truth and a high degree of liberties. Since sensationalism sells movies, I doubt if this film is much of the former -- and it could contain a large degree of the latter.

Cinematographers since the First World War often depicted Germans as typecast, as if they were death-to-last Kaiser-Huns or Nazis out to win the final battle, unquenchably bloodthirsty along the way. There also seems to be the aura of "Master Race" in strength, cunning, and sinister methods. All of that "sells."

In my book, accuracy and realism are more interesting than trumpeted up notions. The REAL way in which Germans acted in those days most likely was radically different in a nice way. But, you say, THAT would not sell as well as the typecast mode. Since the makers and producers and distributors of motion pictures

are doing it for profit, it has been standard operating procedure for most films to be spun against Germans.

Sad, but seemingly true -- time and again. From the movie *Gladiator* set in Roman times right up to recent films, Germans often are the fall guys, the bad guys, the obnoxious wise guys, or the "I-never-want-to meet-you-in-a-dark-alley" type. (The same idea applied to Japanese men and Russians over the decades.)

During and after the Civil War, Germans generally were seen in an extremely bad light by people of the South since Germans made up such a significant portion of the Union army. And, yes, they at times were ruthless during the war. How ruthless may have been up to the mind of the beholder, tainted with his or her private political bent.

Unrealistic anti-German sentiment was strong in St. Louis and outstate Missouri during the early months of the American Civil War. That's because Germans comprised the majority of soldiers in initial militia units formed to keep the city and state in the Union. Example: On the first day of hostilities (the bombing of Fort Sumter), prominent citizen Arnold Krekel of St. Charles County, Missouri, started recruiting. On that very day, one of my ancestors signed up for what became known as Krekel's Dutch and protected trains, bridges, and rails from being taken over by anti-Union sympathizers. My ancestor was not alone. Many others in his unit were German by birth or heritage. (*For more on Krekel and his German troops:* http://www.callawaycivilwar.org/resources/LivHist_CW_05.pdf.)

What was the dynamic reason Germans stuck with the Union? The reasons may be numerous, but I will mention a few. Germans came to America because it was America, and any major shift from that line of thought made them take a defensive mode. Also, in Europe, wars abounded over all sorts of reasons and the Germans who came to America wanted to avoid that -- even if it meant going to war to stop the idea of war! Third reason: Many Germans liked freedom in the New World. They were convinced that freedom was in store for slaves, too.

As with every nationality or ethnic group that settled in America in significant numbers, the English-speaking "old timers" were skeptical. Often they believed ANY foreigner was not to be trusted.

Even women did not escape the dark shadow cast on Germans. On the silver screen, Marlene Dietrich, the ultimate German "vamp," often was pictured as strong willed, liked to engage in plots to further her exploits, had loose morals, and at times could have shot a lover rather than make peace. Much of that was atypical from her real personality. Research reveals that she was at least nominally Lutheran early in life, married a Catholic, supported Jewish friends who were at risk, and even engaged in a degree of espionage for the U.S. government during the Second World War. But these factors and her compassionate side did not fit on the silver screen very well, since it did not make money for motion-picture moguls.

Here's another example of adaptation for the Big Screen. Elvis Presley was partially German on his father's side. His German roots were traced to Johann Valentine Pressler (Valentine seems appropriate for a "lover" like Elvis!) who lived from 1669 to 1736. Wine-maker Valentine and wife Christina were from Niederhochstadt (now in Rhineland-Palatinate). As time progressed, the family name changed. But does anyone think of Elvis as being part German? Besides, Germans aren't the type who are expected to "rock" around the stage or be amorous. War seems better suited (an old Prussian instinct?). Hence, the present age has a problem when looking back at "German-anything."

Where there were strong German-based communities (such as St. Louis and outlying counties on both sides of the Mississippi) anti-German sentiment dwindled in time. It must have been shocking for the German Army and people in Europe to realize that many of the American troops who fought to break the Nazi grip were German in ancestry. Imagine how you would feel if you were a German "over there," and you heard that General Eisenhower (of German ancestry) was heading your way with his huge army!

Few Americans bad-mouthed Ike. That's one of the POSITIVE aspects of being German!

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Thanks to One Book!

By Gerald Perschbacher

It only takes a spark to get a fire going...and in the case of genealogy, it may only take a book to set a fire of interest that leads toward discovery!

The book looked simple enough. No, let's call it downright mundane. There it was for sale on a "used book" shelf. Unpretentious cover. Nothing fancy. No pictures inside. But the title indicated it was an index of the complete 1850 U.S. Census of California. Hmmm -- that set me thinking.

"Would one of my ancestor be listed?" I thought. Recent discovery had indicated he was in California by mid-1850. Could it be possible...?

I flipped through the listings. Problem was, I had no idea of the county in which he had lived. Every county was listed, with entries alphabetically shown for each. So, I flipped through county after county until...there he was!

I bought the book. Why? It showed the others who lived in the same county. In fact, it showed them by country of origin. Many of them were German! It also indicated the state of residence before heading for California. Missouri was more than amply represented with Illinois having a nice share, too.

Germans everywhere! Missourians in abundance! This was a reference piece that could lead to good studies on German impact in California for 1850.

More than that it also reflected the degree of German influence during the Gold Rush of 1849-50.

One thing the book did not show: the order in which the families and individuals were entered for the census. An idea began burning in my mind: what if I downloaded the actual census pages before and after the entry for my ancestor? By so doing, I could find the names of his neighbors and -- just perhaps -- the name of the people or person who traveled with him from St. Louis to what is now the Sacramento area.

Within a couple days (and with a little help from friend Adam) I had access to the pages. Interesting. There was the listing for my ancestor, improperly transcribed as "John Pirschbacher" on another list. Yes, I found the entire list entered in typed form with a few bits of information on county of origin and type of work. I keenly checked the entry for John in both places.

He was listed as coming from Germany. I knew that. He was around 10 years old when he came to America in 1833. By mid-1850, there he was in California! I have surmised that the mining operations of St. Clair County held his interest and possibly provided a job as he grew into manhood. There was a legend of a silver mine in St. Clair County, and perhaps John was impressed by the thought. So when the gold strike was made in California -- at John A. Sutter's mill -- John and who-knows-who headed westward.

As for John's job, the census said, "officer of Capt." Hmmm. "Capt."? Then I looked at the list of more than 18 people who lived at the same location in the census. Atop the list were "Capt. John A. Sutter" and his family. Several others listed around John were blacksmiths, carpenters, a cook, and other retainers. Best to my knowledge, the location was Sutter's Fort.

Not satisfied, I contacted several archives and libraries knowledgeable on the subject of Sacramento, Sutter, and his fort. More details came trickling in, but I won't bore you with small details. What remains to be verified is the meaning of his job. Was he a "police officer" in the sense of enforcing Sutter's rules? Or was John Perschbacher an official in charge of various duties relating to Sutter's property or even the fort?

Interestingly, Sutter basically lost his wealth. Miners stole his cattle and horses, dug up his land, and did little good for him in their wake. Sutter moved back east, a man full of rich memories but little in the way of financial riches. For years he fought for rights over his 49,000+ acres of land granted by the Spanish before California became a territory (then a state) of the U.S.A. Regardless, the record clearly shows that ancestor John Perschbacher was there slightly before statehood was granted. A true pioneer!

More digging brought the realization that there were as many as three categories of prospectors who were active in California's gold fields. The "Forty-

Eighters" who were more or less locals in and around Sacramento and other places up and down California. Next came the "Forty-Niners" who were prospectors coming from other states and far-off countries such as Australia! The last category doesn't have a name but simply are defined as the late comers who arrived past the days of gold and who were generally disappointed by the realization.

Most fascinating was the evidence that Sutter generally wound down his interested in the fort and it fell into disrepair under succeeding ownership. One file I have found mentions that John Perschbacher's slightly younger brother went to the Sacramento area to open up a store with John in 1852. John headed to the gold fields. Makes sense that he made that move when Sutter's fame and fortune were on the decline.

What triggered initial interest in Ancestor John was his younger brother, Adam, a Civil War soldier who changed the spelling of his name and was rejected by Federal officials when he applied for his army pension. He was accepted when he corrected the spelling from Pershbaker to Perschbacher. With this as the lead, I hunted online for variant spellings. A separate story told previously.

Keep hunting. Consider which books or documents or archives may hold information for you. Find some way to make contact and keep the fire of interest burning bright. Think creatively as you ponder the facts and project beyond!

Who knows? Given the large number of Germans from Missouri and Illinois who headed westward in 1848-50, perhaps our ancestors made the trek together!

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Issues in German Research

By Fred Held, Librarian St. Louis North Family History Center (Hazelwood)

Scheduling of Children's Names

In several cultures it was the practice to name the children according to a schedule. Probably the most used schedule in the German culture is as follows:

1. First Son - Paternal Grandfather
2. Second Son - Maternal Grandfather
3. Third Son - Father
4. Fourth Son - Paternal Grandfather's Father
5. Etc.

1. First Daughter - Maternal Grandmother
2. Second Daughter - Paternal Grandmother
3. Third Daughter - Mother
4. Fourth Daughter - Paternal Grandfather's Mother
5. Etc.

Whenever a duplicate name occurred in these patterns, the next name in the series was used. If a child died in infancy the name was often reused for the next child of the same gender.

If this practice is being used, it can be a tool to determine the parents of the mother and father. In the areas of southern Germany where I've researched, I've found this practice most prevalent in the 17th century. The primary clue this might be practiced is when a second or third child shows with the same name.

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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.

FOR AN APPRECIATION of the German timeline for America, go to:

<http://www.germany.travel/en/ms/german-originality/heritage/timeline/timeline.html> . You'll find some interesting facts and details about your ancestral people and perhaps be able to apply insights to your ancestors.

KARL DAUBEL (KDAUBEL@aol.com) has a marvelous suggestion: "check these out and share as appropriate. The library at BYU holds many Family Search topics. This PDF is a collection of some neat things; 32 pages long and can be saved. Some Alsace Lorraine materials are here, too." Try your hand at this site:

<http://net.lib.byu.edu/fslab/researchoutlines/Europe/GermansToAmerica.pdf>

"The link above comes from this link which is equally interesting, browse it.

http://lib.byu.edu/sites/familyhistory/research_outlines/ ."

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