

# G-SIG FORUM #92

From the German Special Interest Group: G-SIG is an effort of the St. Louis Genealogical Society ([www.stlgs.org](http://www.stlgs.org)) and the German American Heritage Society, St. Louis, Mo. (check the site at [www.gahs-stlouis.org](http://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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## First the Franks Rose to Importance

By Dr. Gerald Perschbacher (LL.D.)

Many people with German heritage have no inkling about the grand history that traced the rise of their lineage. Maybe the lack of knowledge is an "anti-Old World" mentality that seems to have been ingrained into the American psyche. Settlers who came to America saw it as the New World with fresh opportunities their families seldom (if ever) had in Europe. Therefore, the past was set aside for the sake of the present and especially the future. The "forward look" greatly overshadowed "recollections."

We need not be critical of it. That's simple the way it was. Unfortunately, that is the way it remains for many people who feel they are lucky to just know the names of their grandparents or great-grandparents and a little tidbit of their past.

**Well, times are changing.** Genealogical discoveries are advancing. Interest is booming. With this movement comes a desire to learn the circumstances of history that tracked alongside our ancestors.

To uncover the far reaches of Germanic history, it is best to get in the proper frame of mind. Think TRIBALLY. This is not uncommon in concept to the tribes of Africa or the tribes of American Indians. Now, take that thinking to the German sector of more than 2,000 years ago.

German tribes were expanded family groups with a common lineage and culture. These were amalgams of family clusters that intermarried or held bonds of commonality in language, traits, etc. Some of those tribes grew large, others remained small. Some were absorbed by more prominent tribes. When war or disaster decimated a population or disease rendered too many survivors infertile,

nearby tribes may have invited the remnant into a special association which resulted in thorough assimilation.

**There were dozens of Germanic tribes** that speckled northern Europe, then spread thanks to trends in moderating climate (which later shifted to harsher climates), longer growing seasons, and successful population growth that mandated migration. Movement also resulted from failed crops and the urge for survival, which is one significant reason the Germanic tribes spilled across the Roman border which was mainly traced by the Rhein and Danube rivers around the year 260 A.D.

Some German tribes moved extensively. The Goths came out of Scandinavia and the Baltic Coast, swung widely through Eastern Europe to the Black Sea, then eastward to the Mediterranean lands. The Goths divided into the Visigoth (western Goths) and the Ostrogoths (eastern Goths). They continued their expansion as they willed, often overcoming lesser opponents and occasionally large armies. Their advance was less for the reason of conquering for plunder and more for the reason of survival.

The tribes gradually settled down and consolidated their expanses. Among consolidated clans that formed tribes was one that did very little moving. This was the people called the Franks who along the Rhein, divided between Salian Franks (who lived near the salty sea) and the Ripaurian Franks (who lived along the fresh water of the Rhein farther inland).

From the Salian Franks around the year 500 A.D. arose Clodwig (also called Clovis or Louis) acclaimed first King of the Franks. He was kingly in many aspects: totalitarian, rude, crude, and out for his own gain. Yet, many people related to those desires and, sharing in them, unified their interests under his banner. Clovis engaged troublesome tribes that were left with the sober realization of being conquered by him at great personal loss to their tribes or bowing before his crown as fiefs. Thus grew the first true Kingdom among the Germans.

**If you have ancestry that can be traced back** countless years to the Germanic area near the Low Countries by the northern coast, then you may be part of that lineage. If that is the case, then their history echoes your ancient ancestral history.

That was credited as the Merovingian line of rulers. What followed next was a switch to the Ripaurian Franks as kings, which considered the rule of Karl der Grosse (Charlemagne in French) around the year 800 A.D. to be its Golden era. Thus the Carolingian line was firmly established.

Many books have been written about Karl der Grosse (Charles the Great) and he has a rare distinction to be acclaimed as the legendary leader of two significant nations: Germany and France. Indeed, both countries traced their rise to the rule of this man. Both nations honor him as a revered political patron. What separated the two national groups was a leaning toward Latinized techniques (and language) on the west side of the Rhein (which became France) and a proudly Germanic tradition (and language) on the east side that gripped people firmly to the old ways of the German tribes.

**Charlemagne** (as he is widely known in America) was quite capable as ruler. His "active mind gave attention to all matters, great and small. His untiring diligence, and his surprising swiftness in apprehension and decision, enabled him to dispatch an amount of business perhaps never undertaken by another monarch, unless by Frederick II of Prussia, or by Napoleon Bonaparte. He was simple in his own attire...and he demanded simplicity in his followers, and scoffed at his courtiers when their gorgeous silks and tinsel, brought from the East, were torn to rags in the rough work of the chase." So wrote Charlton T. Lewis in the late 1800s as he compiled "A History of Germany from the Earliest Times" (The Bradley Company, Publishers).

But the Franks were not to dominate Germanic politics forever.

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## **Then came the Saxons**

**By Dr. Gerald Perschbacher (LL.D.)**

Following the passing of Karl der Grosse, the kingdom which had expanded massively to encompass much of the heart of Europe, was divided among his heirs in the German custom. "The idea of a Christian empire which should unite the whole Western world -- that grand conception of Charlemagne, supported by the Catholic Church -- was destroyed by this partition," said Lewis. Those kings who followed were not blessed as well with leadership ability.

**If your ancestry is traced to most** of what is now Germany, France, the Low Countries, and even northern Italy, you may have a good bit of this

Germanic once-tribal lineage in your blood. What the people faced in that era may well have been what your ancestors witnessed! So, read about it. Think about what it was like.

In 919 A.D. the Saxon emperors arose and would fashion the Holy Roman Empire of the Germans unlike any previous rulers. Lewis noted, "The Saxon tribes of the North, in the tenth century, were the most warlike and powerful branch of the German race. While the empire was in the hands of the Franks, the Saxons regarded it as the sovereignty of their conquerors; and all their strong love of independence turned against the cause of German unity." To the south were the Bavarians who, due to their mountainous region, had arisen under their own king. What happened next is intriguing.

**"The Saxons loved their duke,** and were proud of him," Lewis explained. I shall add that a "duke" was a derivative title for one who led a portion of a German tribe into battle, then returned to civilian life after victory. By the year 900 that had changed and the concept of a duke for a larger population took hold among the Saxons. When their Duke Henry was elected to be the Emperor, the Saxons boasted that they had become equal among the major tribes and thus considered "the empire as their own country" (Lewis).

At that point it became obvious that the Holy Roman Empire (whose Emperor had been crowned by the religious authority of Papal Rome) had shifted to being an ultra-Germanic empire. "Henry was the first emperor chosen and accepted by the whole German people as their king, and he is often called distinctively the founder of the German Empire."

**In that era the Saxons** covered the plains from near the Rhein all the way to the Elbe River, and from the North Sea to the Hartz Mountains. And this then-leading tribe of Germans witnessed something else that redirected history. There was a drift away from the power of the Church in Rome.

At Henry's coronation, The Archbishop of Mainz offered to sanctify this appointment "according to the ancient custom in the empire of the Franks" but Henry "humbly declined the honor, pleading his own unworthiness. The ecclesiastical chroniclers do not clearly explain his motives; but there can hardly be a doubt that he had resolved not to be, in any respect, dependent upon the Church, and wished in the most solemn manner to declare that priestly

consecration was not the source of royal authority nor essential to its exercise" (Lewis). Call it an early example of the division between Church and State!

**So, trace your lineage** as far back as you can. Once the line breaks between two generations, then transfix yourself to the tribal traditions. By so doing, you may glean a keen understanding of the rise of your family and the circumstances under which they labored and lived.

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## What about Lorraine?

There was still dissent in the German ranks. Swabia, Bavaria, and Lorraine did not bow the knee to the Saxon leader because they had no part in his election. This was an ancient German tradition -- to elect your leaders -- and some experts will say it has been ingrained into American politics to the present day.

**Henry held sway over the Thuringians** and nominally was the head of the dukes of other tribes. Wisely, he did not intrude into their regional affairs.

Seeing this, Duke Burchard of Swabia honored Henry as his leader in the year 920. Thus, feudalism to the Saxon became part of Swabian life. However, Arnulf, leader of Bavaria, took refuge among the Hungarians. Henry met him and by friendly persuasion obtained his allegiance.

Lorraine remained apart. Said Lewis, "Its nobles were noted for fickleness and want of faith; they had shifted their allegiance to and fro, between the Eastern and Western kingdoms, so as ultimately to obey neither. Their duke, Gisibert, was the very embodiment of their fickleness. He had once, when a fugitive, been hospitably received by Henry in Saxony; but now he adhered to the French king, Charles the Simple." When war seemed to draw near, Lorraine switched to the German side to avoid it.

**It was this switch to Germany** at the time of Henry that resulted in Lorraine being fully incorporated into the German empire. It stayed there until 1734!

Through all these shifts and changes, Germany grew. So did your ancestry. If you don't check into the history of past eras, you are missing a bunch of interesting stuff that will enhance your research -- and may even increase your understanding of what you find genealogically!

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## RootsWeb WorldConnect

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

RootsWeb offers RootsWeb Surname List, Message Boards, Mailing Lists, and WorldConnect. None are specific to German research, but may be used for research anywhere.

**<http://wc.rootsweb.ancestry.com>**

### **RootsWeb WorldConnect is a collection of family trees**

submitted by fellow researchers (and is fraught with all the errors of patron-submitted data). This service is free to submit and does not require an expensive subscription to access. The family trees are submitted in GEDCOM format.

The submitter has options that may be used to display their family data to other researchers. These options may change at any time.

To begin, the data displayed will automatically be “cleansed” from 1930 on. You may choose to display the living with a given name of “Living” and proper surname or not display them at all. You may also choose to display associated data.

The original GEDCOM is stored as sent and is not modified in any way. Only the presentation of your data is modified. The GEDCOM may be retrieved exactly as uploaded (this makes it an ideal free off-site backup of your data).

**Others may search** for family members that may exist in the massive database system currently consisting of nearly 500,000 databases, 6,000,000+ surnames, and 700,000,000 names. The searcher should make an effort to contact the submitter with the email address that is shown on the page in graphic form (so it cannot be harvested by SPAMers), because they may have more up-to-date information or would at least like contact with their cousins.

The search engine interface is very flexible. The user can select to use any of the parameters in any combination. For example, the user may choose to find all the people born in the village of “Eppingen” in Germany (6,594 hits) or all the Smiths married in Warren County, Missouri (18 hits). (Please remember the original submitter must have supplied these data.) Surnames may be “Exact,” “Soundex,” or “Metaphone.” In addition, the user may choose to use “Fuzzy Search” (Soundex) on all other fields.

Consider posting your family tree, so your cousins can find you. View my video on the subject at <http://tinyurl.com/69nwvb7>.

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