

G-SIG FORUM #93

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.

+++++

Cleaning Up... by Gerald Perschbacher (LL.D.)

By and large, Germans have a reputation for being people who are adept at cleaning. You may have heard the term "Scrubby Dutch" applied to certain groups of Germans (in St. Louis, the Scrubby Dutch even scrubbed their house's stone entry steps). Germans have the reputation of taking pride in their neighborhoods, homes, and places of work. "A place for everything, and everything in its place" was an adage that many Germans followed to the hilt!

So it became traditional to "clean up" other aspects of German life, including the keeping of records.

Churches in many parts of Germany retain old files and books on official acts: births, baptisms, confirmations, marriages, and deaths. In recent years many old files have been scrounged and organized, then entered onto computer systems for recall and printing. A similar process has taken place in various sectors when it comes to civil books dealing with taxation, land usage, large purchases, and positions held in the community. That is the "other set" of books that may provide special insights into ancestral positions of authority, education, and obligations.

Often this type of work is the bailiwick of one, two, or three people. That's logical, since too many hands in the work will probably cause disruption of material, confusion, and duplication of effort.

I've seen this throughout much of Germany. Files are being preserved, often away from the hands of casual citizens. Those files can be made available to researchers if they meet the criteria of German officials who hold the keys to the file room or archives. But users' needs usually must be specific and they are watched carefully. In some archives cameras are not allowed (even if flash is not used) and in select cases documents cannot even be photocopied.

Good reason for this, too -- since documents several hundreds of years old can be easily damaged due to thoughtless use. Old paper is not as supple and forgiving as it had been. Damage may occur when pages are flipped, bindings are

stressed, and hands float over the surface. Pressing an old book against the face of a copier will do little good to the spine and could crinkle or tear pages.

If you make a trip to Germany and want to research old documents, plan far in advance of your trip. Establish contacts months before you plan to be there. Ask specific questions about files relating to a certain family, an era, or line of work/position/location in the community.

As I research "over there," I rely heavily on digital photography. It's easy and cheap to take pictures of anything of seeming importance. Photographed pages can be enlarged on the screen once I return home, can be printed as hard copy, or can be stashed with little worry about space. Even so, I always like to have a backup system (either duplicate the files or print them out and use a comb-binding device).

This doesn't hold true just for a trip to Germany. You can do it in America and, if your camera is modestly sophisticated, you can even take pictures of on-screen information. Granted, it may become a little weird when recalled or printed due to screen polarization (so to speak), but usually the information is readable.

Here are some key tips to guide your research:

- + **Start out with a specific topic or name to search.**
- + **Stick to that as much as possible, but be ready to head on a tangent if you strike a rich vein of information. Let time be your guide.**
- + **Itemize everything; credit the source; and highlight copied material for the most important items (you could then condense those into a few sheets of most pertinent information).**
- + **When you advance your research, take extra copies of that most pertinent information with you for handy reference or to leave with others who may augment your findings.**
- + **Share with others while they share with you.**

Researching your ancestry does not (and SHOULD not) be a one-person task. Enlist the aid of family and friends, even distant relations you discover along the road of search.

Linger a while on that last point about sharing with others. Sometime, in the course of your search, you may stumble onto the names of other families that were on town lists, were somehow associated with your ancestors, or held positions of service or leadership that impinged upon your family. If you discover someone who is seeking those names, share what you can with them. They may reciprocate by sharing details they scrounged about YOUR ancestors!

Also, be shrewd when confronting "a leech." That's the person who wants to suck every bit of information from your countless hours of painstaking researching as if the opportunity was due them. If you share your findings, do it carefully, or you cheapen the process. This is precious information you have uncovered. Spoon

it out carefully to those who appreciate it, and you may advance their cause and yours!

Lastly, don't forget to do some "Cleaning Up." Keep your filed information current. Don't save dead-end information or inaccurate reports. In other words, be accurate. Some researchers gobble up every morsel of recollection, every tidbit of hearsay, and every assumption possible, stir it up, and come up with strange concoctions of family history. If you clean such items, keep them filed separately from THE TRUTH of your findings.

Examples: The truth of your family is simple: birth date, date of passing, baptismal date, marriage date, year of emigration, and perhaps a few other things tossed in (street address in Germany, town information, work positions, etc.)

The morsels, tidbits, and assumptions include: "Aunt Merci says Uncle Herman was a heavy drinker and was injured in an accident." It could be that your aunt remembered the two times he ever was drunk, and the accident took places years after he gave up the bottle -- such inclusion in your record must be carefully listed to avoid over-simplification or misrepresentation).

Keeping dead-end information may serve an indirect purpose of reminding you (or informing others) of unworthy paths already trodden. But keep the stuff in a separate file, tucked far back from the good, active findings.

+++++

In the 1930s...

Researchers have found that during the Nazi era, especially by about 1937, many families from all over Germany were requested to compile a four-generation genealogical chart (*Ahnenpaß*). If your family was among them, that chart may provide great details in your seemingly never-ending quest for more.

What did it show? Information in the chart was verified in original civil and church records. Since records of old were made due to laws and regulations, the chart became an official certificate from the government. That's not to say there were no errors or that the truth was stretched to suit someone's purpose, but at least the list should be taken as accurate unless errors can be proved.

You have to wonder. In the Nazi quest for racial "purity," some charts may preserve fictitious names or falsified background information of a type that remains hard to disprove. Such inaccuracies may have helped persons hold their positions in society or otherwise protected their "freedom" (such as it was back then under a dictatorship). Surviving samples may be thoroughly reliable. Others...well, it's best to test the information before fully accepting it.

The Family History Library has very few of these records. They are hard to find. Many were discarded after World War II, but some families still kept them.

(See: http://familysearch.org/learn/wiki/en/Germany_Genealogy.)

Some call it 'Dogged Determination'

...others say it is the sign of a "hard-headed Dutchman." Still others will say it is part and parcel of a researcher's tenacity. We're talking about hounding a subject to the Nth degree until you find an answer.

Since most genealogical researchers are amateur at best and occasionally part-time in most cases, interest levels can wallow around the ranges of "minor interest" to "now and then." Little wonder that not much is found, and what little is found was stretched over several years.

Perhaps disappointing results discouraged the researchers. Or perhaps they found nothing to keep their interest going. Many times, it's a matter of not knowing where to search, how to do it, or wanting to spend the effort needed for a string of results. Occasionally, costs arise -- the purchase of computer programs, hourly assistance from a paid researcher, or travel expenses to destinations where answers await.

The most successful researchers are people who take the label "hard-headed Dutchmen" as a compliment when it comes to dogged determination in finding answers. That's right. Seldom (if ever) did information fall into their laps. It took digging, nudging, squeezing, sifting, and synthesizing to condense what they discover into an interesting, even tantalizing form.

If you are in the majority of casual researchers but want to find more, here are some "EX-TIPS":

1) EXPLORE your options. Ask others about the options they used to find answers. Did they interview others for techniques? What about checking the findings of different people? Did they read how to improve their skills? Seek a mentor? Join a genealogical organization? Rely on new technology? The methods of discovery can vary, but in each case there is DETERMINATION, time, effort, and hard work involved.

2) EXPAND your scope. If you have not found the answers you crave, then find a new method of discovery. Ask others what they suggest. Act quickly on the idea while it is still fresh. And when you find bits of information, hunger for more.

3) EXPOSE your opportunities. Be honest with yourself. If you hate using online sources, either meet that subject head-on or avoid it. Seek other easy to find information (even though this may slow down the rate of progress). The best advice is to LIKE your method of research, so that investigation of your ancestry becomes enjoyment in itself.

4) EXPOUND on what more can be done. Share ideas with others on how your success was reached and what it meant to you. Be open to innovative suggestions and do not hesitate to ask for assistance now and then. GP

Got Maps?

Did you know that <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2408591/American-ethnicity-map-shows-melting-pot-ethnicities-make-USA-today.html> is a fun and informative site to visit when it comes to ethnicity? The maps are enlightening and the text is informative. Here are a few points about Germanic heritage worth review and commentary:

"By far the largest ancestral group, stretching from coast to coast across 21st century America is German, with 49,206,934 people. The peak immigration for Germans was in the mid-19th century as thousands were driven from their homes by unemployment and unrest."

Comment: Other sources may attribute a higher number than 49,206,934. It is hard to judge the definition of "German" and if it includes "Germanic peoples" such as Swedes, Norwegians, Danish, etc. If the definition is "people from Germany" then this may exclude Alsace and Lorraine if they were considered French territories for the purposes of this assessment. My point: be watchful of sweeping statements.

"The majority of German-Americans can now be found in the center of the nation, with the majority living in Maricopa County, Arizona, and according to *Business Insider*, famous German-Americans include Ben Affleck, Tom Cruise, Walt Disney, Henry J. Heinz and Oscar Mayer."

Comment: This list is not exclusive. Many more can be added. What about people who are partly German? This could include Jewish-German lineage, people of German-Polish stock, even Russian-German backgrounds.

"Indeed, despite having no successful New World colonies, the first significant groups of German immigrants arrived in the United States in the 1670s and settled in New York and Pennsylvania," *although a little research may show that Rheinland Germans might have been involved at Jamestown, which pushes German influence in America back to the early 1600s.*

"Germans were attracted to America for familiar reasons, open tracts of land, and religious freedom -- and their contributions to the nation included establishing the first kindergartens, Christmas trees, hot dogs and hamburgers."

If you consider yourself "entry level" on revealing your German ancestry, sites like this are a fun way to begin. For those who need nurturing in their early efforts, the sites can be conducive in feeding their hunger for more. But at a certain point, such sites will be milked for all there are worth and researchers will long for good, solid, meaty facts far beyond what the site offers. GP

+++++

Making Choices for the Future

Researchers often learn quickly to make good choices about the information they uncover. They keep the items of greatest importance. That "stuff" may fill a single folder or countless binders, even boxers. The degree and amount of material relates directly to whether a genealogist is after a few ancestors or as many as possible.

Keeping tabs on the past, however, is almost as important as keeping tabs on the future. WHAT future? The future of your collected material!

Have you given serious consideration to the future disposition of your collected files? If not, then start the process.

It isn't unusual to hear that Grandma had a nice, big, well detailed file on the family and ancestors, only to discover that, upon her death, the file was destroyed. While cleaning her belongings out of the apartment where she died, the file was tossed in the trash. Maybe it was done purposely ("I've wanted to pitch this stuff for years," someone might say; or this also can be heard: "We should have been more careful when we went through her things"). Either way, gone is gone. It won't return. And unless a backup file was available or given in portions to other relatives, it is very likely beyond reconstruction.

Keeping information on flashdrives, computer discs, CDs, or other forms of retrieval may only last as long as the test of time and the change in technology. It remains to be seen if time can sometimes weaken encoded information. Changes in technology may doom the information to the disc as its casket with little (if any) means of retrieval on antiquated systems that no longer are available.

Advocates of printed material will vouch for that as the main form of preservation for your precious files. As for where it all goes upon your passing depends on how well you have planned. Some people turn their files over to genealogical collections. Some hand it to their offspring or to other relatives, especially one or two who are deeply interested. They become caretakers of the information for another generation and beyond.

Make your selection wisely. It may impact your children's children -- and theirs, too.

GP

+++++

Want to get yet on the FORUM email list? Write to germansig@stlgs.org. (All copyright privileges for this FORUM are reserved by the compiler; no item is to be duplicated or distributed without permission.) **Do you have great ideas** for the *G-SIG FORUM*? Submit your material to: persch3@hotmail.com. Need a printed copy of FORUM? Send your stamps & request to: Attn: G-SIG, #4 Sunnen Drive, Suite 140, St. Louis, MO 63143.