

G-SIG FORUM #98

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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Surnames & Tribes in Germany

by Gerald Perschbacher (LL.D.)

General conclusions usually settle on the year 1000 A.D. as being the pivotal date around which European surnames gained in usage. That means if you are among the fortunate researchers to trace your surname as far back as possible, you can expect to hit a snag around 1000 A.D. At the same time, don't think that must stop your lineage.

You may think it crazy to even bring up the notion, but there is substance in it. Every genealogist worth his or her salt will hit walls and barriers that slow (or even stop) their progress in the linear hunt for recent ancestors in the range of great-grandfather/grandmother and earlier. Yet, mankind seems to like building walls and, yes, tearing them down. Just look at all the new construction and building removals that take place in nearly any large city or town.

The same can hold for family research. Got a wall? You can stand and cry. You can stare at it forever. You can threaten and curse it, but it will not move. Which leaves you two choices: (1) break through it or (2) go around it.

If your research does not allow you to find a "break-through" point, consider Option #2. This is where tribal thinking plays a major role. Instead of being frustrated as you stand staring at the hindrance, redirect your research around it by discovering which of the general areas of Germany your family may have called home. I'm not talking about a town or city. I'm talking about a group of people: a TRIBE.

How? Hints can come through old photos of your family and the way they dressed. Sometimes that is a tip-off to the general area of Germany they called home. Or maybe you have a document that has been handed down from several generations ago that identifies a general area of Germany. Why would your ancestors keep it? It may have shown their "old hometown" or its environs. Consider the use of language. Do you recall an elder relative using certain phrases in German or English? They may have been translated from one to the other and may reflect a manner of speech related to a location.

Body types and facial construction also can be aids. In some parts of Germany the citizens are taller than others. From studies, you may conclude that Germans in the north tend to

be taller (as long as war, illness, or poor nutrition were not factors). Rheinlanders have their own features (rounder heads, thinner lips, upright foreheads, etc.) while some Germans elsewhere portray other features (cleft noses, larger jaws, broader chests, etc.) Don't laugh. Entire lines of research were done in past generations on this very subject. Differences do not make one line of descent lesser or better than the other. But these could be silent telltale signs of tribal origin.

Unfortunately, "scientific" Germans during the rise of Nazism tended to say certain types of people with notable physical characteristics were better or lesser than other types. Stay away from that folly. Merely use physical appearance as a potential locator for your ancestry. Period.

Still, there are publications in various old and more recent books printed in Germany that show body types, head construction, and facial features that dominate in given areas of the land. At least one book from my ancestral area does this, with pictures to emphasize the points.

Germans tended not to move around a great deal since the year 1000 A.D. Many of them are still that way. The more recent exception was the division of the country following the Second World War. That resulted in millions of people leaving what became East Germany. Once that floodgate opened, it became unclear where most of those "refugees" would settle. But if you are tracing your family BEFORE that war, you will be much safer in making a good conclusion on your ancestral portion of Germany.

Look at yourself... your recent relatives in your direct line (parents, siblings, aunts & uncles) and look at the various people living in Germany in recent years. If you find some strong resemblances, you may be on to your ancestral ties to a region. Do not jump to conclusions; realize that what you think is a great assessment today may not hold up in a few months when more details cross your path. But give this method a try.

The people who live around St. Louis and parts of west-central Illinois look strikingly like Rheinlanders, Saxons, and Bavarians -- not all, but in general.

Once you have determined (within reason) the general area of your ancestry, then study the history of that area. You can take that back 1,500 years ago when Germany was far from being a country and was more like a dream-in-process. That dream was forming around tribes.

As I often have said, the early Germanic people were TRIBAL. If you can trace your lineage to a specific tribe, then you may be able to glean bits and pieces of information on the history and progress of that tribe via written records. In particular, from around 550 A.D. and back to the time of Julius Caesar, good records were kept on tribal exploits if they crossed the path of Roman soldiers. Thus, once a tribe has been found in your ancestry, track the tribe's history. It can be fun to surmise where your extremely early ancestors may have been!

Since Germanic tribes generally faded into the dim recesses of human records by the year 500 B.C., the only way to extend further is to couple with the Nordic/Germanic folk in the upper reaches of Europe. Even then, you may be able to swing back several more thousands of years if you follow the generally agreed track of migration for what we may call "Proto-Germanic people" who came up from the reaches of the Black Sea (and environs) and perhaps even into the Middle East, Africa, and elsewhere.

Of course, much of this is supposition based on historical conclusions and gene tracking via DNA testing. Some researchers have even claimed that the City of Troy was Proto-Germanic and the Hittites of Biblical record were Europeans who swung southward into Asia Minor (both Troy and the Hittites potentially carrying pre-Hessen genes). Again, hard to provide clinically beyond a doubt, but romantic at the least.

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Back to Surnames

Between 1000 and 1300 A.D. last names (surnames) gained usage, but not everywhere and for everyone. Noble families and famous bloodlines grabbed the early surnames. So if a prominent family was known by the environs, its most important ancestor may have been called Karl von Bad ("Carl of the bathing area" where there were mineral springs for health). His attendants may also have been known as "of Bath" so they, too, may have carried what eventually turned into a surname, even though they were not related.

This was played out with the use of Koenig ("king"). Just because someone has that surname today does not mean he or she had a king in their lineage. They may just as easily been an ATTENDANT to the king -- perhaps even a serf of the king. Much the same may be said of Schmidt and its derivatives (Schmitt, Schmied, etc.) which may have connected ancestors to the job of blacksmith or the assistants to the blacksmith, or someone who lived near the blacksmith. Get the idea? Surnames initially had a purpose. They locked people to a location, association with others, or a position in society.

You may think that surnames were implemented to differentiate people socially. Not always. Administrative reasons made surnames applications viable in order to track citizens.

There were two big factors influencing the widespread use of surnames: taxation and military service. Emperors and kings needed both to function: lots of taxes and enough soldiers to defend the territory. Lists were needed for that. First names were not enough. Surnames were applied. A third factor could have been "building projects" whereby serfs and other underlings were forced into work at the whim of their master. Please keep in mind that before 1300 A.D. the general population was beholden to the territorial "owner." That made as many as 95 percent of the population serfs, laboring freemen, and farmers with the remainder being people of special service and individuals in administration (except for a tiny sliver of nobility at the top and an even smaller segment of royalty over them).

Some people were given surnames after they moved from an area. Hence, a person with the first name of Peter who lived in Hamburg and did not have a surname may have moved to Lippe where he was given the name Hamburger or Hamburg for taxation purpose and for service to the landed nobility. If he then moved to Coburg, he may have carried the initial surname or may have been given another one based on the previous city (and been called von Lippe with no connection to nobility or higher status).

Confused? Welcome to the reality of early surnames!

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Expect Progress...among Jews!

We've got to admit there are times when surnames simply cannot provide ancestral details. That's when an organization like Family Tree DNA - Gene By Gene, Ltd., comes into play (its headquarters: 1445 North Loop West, Suite 820 Houston, Texas 77008, USA.).

One big project for the organization is to assist all Ashkenazi Jews to link with their heritage. It's a particularly poignant challenge for this branch of the human race since most of them cannot break the 1700 barrier. This is notably the case if Eastern Europe was their ancestral area.

Technology opened a fresh vista in ancestry with the German Jewish DNA project. This pushed the potential of tracking Jewish ancestry in Germany back to the 1600s. For more details see: http://www.familytreedna.com/public/Jews_of_Frankfurt/default.aspx?section=goals

Experts are concentrating on a series of population centers including Frankfurt-am-Main, Mainz, Worms, and other population points. As more DNA results are known, the accuracy of tracing blood lines can be enhanced.

An expert at the website says, "Frankfurt is special. Thanks to the database known as "Ele Toldot," it is possible to reconstruct family trees for all Jews who lived there following the Black Plague in 1349."

The same website experts says that Worms and Mainz (not too far from Frankfurt) were "very early Rabbinical centers, and families from early Worms were the ancestors for many of the later Jews of Frankfurt; Guggenheim, Wertheim, Oppenheim, Bach(a)rach, ... just to name a few." The Eel Toledo records for all of the early families of Frankfurt as well as from other sources are now in the database.

"Even though this project focuses on the Jews of Frankfurt, their trail isn't limited to this area. Famous rabbinical families came and went. But often one son would remain. This is true of Luria, Treves, Epstein, Horowitz, Katzenellenbogen and Speyer/Spiro to name a few. I have researched records from Hamburg, Amsterdam, Prague, and even Padua in an effort to track down a direct line male 'Y' ancestor of a Frankfurt line. It is evident that Jews moved... and they moved a lot! So that's why I am hopeful that there will be other similar projects for other regions." (FYI: G-SIG is sharing this information as news rather than an endorsement.)

There is a special request. "We have had to make this a join-by-request-only project because too many people do not read our criteria for membership. Please do not request to join unless you have: (1) one of the surnames that appear on our list (unless you think we've omitted one that should be there) AND have an oldest known 'Y' (direct line male) ancestor who lived in Germany or Alsace, OR (2) have a DOCUMENTED pedigree that shows that your family lived in the Frankfurt area before 1700. We will also entertain requests from anyone from a very famous rabbinical line that has a documented pedigree back to at least the 16th Century even if they have no knowledge that their family lived in the Frankfurt area."

More details may be available by phone: (713) 868-1438 | Fax: (832) 201-7147

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Shifting from French to German

Library researcher Larry Franke of St. Louis, Mo., is all in favor of German heritage but for various reasons has concentrated some outstanding work in the field of French ancestry. Let's take a look at some items he recently encouraged researchers to investigate. (See: <http://www.stlmag.com/St-Louis-Magazine/January-2013/Louis-Louis-Loo-Ey-Recovering-Memories-of-St-Louis-French-Heritage/#.Us3oP6iELMM.facebook> .

The site says that the St. Louis area was basically French until the "Anglos" started settling there in 1803. A decade after that, British settlers became the majority. What with wars and different views on Europe plus colonization, there was a wedge driven between French and British settlers.

The French were founders of the city. No doubt about that. But the French camp was divided, too. There were the wealthy gentlemanly type and others. There were young aristocrats who due to their situations came to the New World to strike it rich, lose themselves in the wilderness, or work their way up the social and economic ladder. Another group came down from French Canada with interests toward being beaver trappers and woodsmen.

The site was said to be distinctively French, regardless of a person's walk in life. The French in America liked fiddle music, dances, Catholic beliefs, devotion to the Mass, merriment and festivals, betting on horse racing and other endeavors, and a type of living that seemed lifted from medieval Folk legends. Plainly put, they were practical, frugal, and fun-loving.

Let's extend the thought. Soon after the British take-over came the German influence (initially Lutheran and Protestant Reformed in beliefs) but that did not gain a strong hold until the 1830s at the earliest. This meant St. Louis was a melting pot, even with a sprinkle of Spanish practices tossed into the cauldron. Interestingly, these were people of western European origin. So when our German ancestors settled in St. Louis, they had an inkling how to relate to the others. They carried over their European practices.

Since St. Louis was a combination of the major European powers of the era, we could expect there were Old World animosities against certain people. While there may be some truth to that, it should be quickly noted that settlers in St. Louis came here to GET AWAY FROM the antagonisms and animosities of Europe. Settlers wanted a fresh chance on life and a "go" at personal success.

Imagine the streets of early St. Louis! It was a blend of French, British, Spanish, and German cultures. Add to that the realization that St. Louis was the central location for the administration of the Indian nations. Indians visited the city to obtain food, goods, and benefits. They camped where they wanted, begged when they wished, and were an obvious non-blended people who (in the main) didn't care a fig about the Europeans...unless there were benefits for the Indians. European settlers used the old French dialect but peppered it with Native American words that seemed better suited.

Back before 1800 the citizens of St. Louis measured land in *arpents* (one packet of land containing 37,000 square feet). Early citizens could not move around four arpents without finding grapevines. Yes, the French in early St. Louis liked wine as much as their fabled counterparts who remained in France.

The site adds, "You couldn't travel four arpents without finding charming grapevines, but the French were scathing about their quality and preferred to make their wine from other fruit."

As Germans settled in and Frenchmen lived with the influx (or moved westward to avoid it) St. Louis became cosmopolitan. Politics and representation became more important. Citizens

were due to have rights, regardless of the language they spoke, the type of clothing they wore, and the habits they employed. Although it seemed at times that St. Louis was a conglomerate of French, German, English, and even a smattering of Spanish culture and mindsets. Churches were built along with taverns, hotels, and stores. Interestingly, each new wave of settlers followed much the same course: newcomers took on odd or hard-labor jobs with low-end pay, eventually worked into a middle-class motif, and finally reached the higher levels of social status.

Variety served the growing community very well.

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Tips:

Did one of your ancestors head westward for the Gold Rush of 1848-1850? Learn about the foibles, fun, frolic, and failures connected with the experience. Check (and download) the pdf: http://www.dot.ca.gov/ser/downloads/cultural/mining_study.pdf

Spread out your search for ancestors. Enlist partnerships with relatives, even distant ones, and share a few items you have found while encouraging your relative to share some things they found but that you did not know. Repeat the recipe and you could be baking a pretty nice cake!

Get involved in a G-SIG Cluster. Share your discoveries with others in the Cluster and absorb their ideas on personal success with their searches. Never avoid asking for help or added insights and you may begin to plow ground rather than digging small holes of success.

Keep active online. It seems that every month new information, options, resources, and opportunities for discovery become active online. Set aside free time to lose yourself in online exploration. If you do not go online, ask a relative or friend to do it on your behalf while you reciprocate with some other act of kindness!

For what it is worth, have some fun exploring body types at: <http://www.fitnessstreats.com/2011/05/european-womens-body-types/> and facial types at: http://www.humanbiologicaldiversity.com/Race_Face_Plates.htm
(this is not an endorsement but is merely provided for interest and edification).

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