

G-SIG FORUM #15

...from the German Special Interest Group. G-SIG is an effort of the St. Louis Genealogical Society and the German American Heritage Society, St. Louis.

This communication is a forum for educational, historical and genealogical information with fresh insights and ideas on German traditions and ancestry. Gerald Perschbacher, Group Leader for G-SIG, serves as *FORUM* compiler and coordinator.

If you would like to include a notice or request, please submit your information in condensed form for the *EXCHANGE!* section (limit 50 words). *EXCHANGE!* notices run only once, but you may resubmit. We reserve the privilege to shorten and edit. Send your *EXCHANGE!* submission to germansig@stlgs.org.



Who was “German”?

By Gerald Perschbacher

That question surfaced early in history. Well before the fall of the Roman Empire in the 400s, Germanic peoples were entering the empire. These were tribes of various sizes, the largest being perhaps 100,000 people, according to historians. Those with such size fielded about 15,000 fighters to claim lands formerly held by Roman soldiers.

The tribes held only a few things in common. They came from Northeastern Europe (Baltic lands) and migrated southwestward. No one knows the exact reason. Some have attributed the moves to poor crop yields and pressure from other peoples to the east such as the Huns, Slavs, or other Germanic tribes.

Some of those tribes might have had a similar language in general, but differences ran quite deep in accents and dialects. Certain tribes shared a degree of common lineage, such as the Franks and one of their large clans, the Hessens (Hessians). Swabians, Burgundians, Chatti (one of the oldest tribes), and many more also were similar in physical features such as an abundance of blond-hair, tall stature, strong, and blue eyes.

Interestingly, the Celts often had similar physical characteristics, which leads some experts to wonder if there was a common ancestry in very ancient days. Regardless, German tribes were credited with pressuring Celts to move westward, thus forcing them into military encounters with the Roman Empire. Julius Caesar was their main nemesis.

As time progressed, Germanic tribes formed alliances, merged, or hacked at each other. Some tribes were fiercely independent. Others, such as the Goths, loved to move across the span of Western Europe. Certain tribes settled down and expanded slowly as their numbers increased. This is true of the Franks, who flourished up and down the Rhine River.

So, who was a “German” in those ancient days? Basically, anyone the Roman officials called German. Their written records applied the name to a negative image of European barbarian. In a certain way, Romans used the term “German” to mean “those barbarian people who are generally blond, tall, blue-eyed, and from the Northeast.” Since Germans in those halcyon days wore odorous animal skins and upheld few virtues

of hygiene, I doubt if many Romans wanted to venture too close to determine the differences in tribes.

Today, if you converse with people from Germany, be aware that they consider their home to be Deutschland. They also use the term “German” to refer to the ancient tribes, rather than people today. Of course, they tolerate our use of “German,” but freely slip back to their own way of speaking when with friends.



WHAT’S IN YOUR SURNAME? By Gerald Perschbacher

Not sure where your family originated in Germany? Perhaps the best answer is in the surname.

Experts have concluded that certain sections of surnames may reflect a regional origin. Not all experts agree, but there is enough consensus to give you a head start.

For example:

- + “Auf dem” often was applied to names in Westphalia.
- + “—er” is a common ending in southern German and is added to a place.
- + “—el” is a suffix common to southern Saxony.
- + “—atz” and “—nick” are suffixes found in Wendish areas (Slavic); this does not mean your family is automatically Wendish; Slavic people may have added the suffix to a German name.
- + “—diek” is also common in Westphalia (such as the name Griesediek).
- + “—bacher” is particularly favored in southern Germany and along the Rhine.
- + “—brugger” is Swabian
- + “—ay” is common in Hessen-Darmstadt, where Meyer is spelled Mayer; Swabians may use “—ai” instead.
- + “—gen” is favored in the lower Rhineland, especially in Franconian areas;
- + “—icke” and “—ecke” endings may be derived from Hessen and Thuringia.
- + “—lin” is Upper Rhenish and also in areas of the Palatinate and Alsace.
- + “—ius” is a Latinized version; perhaps of Catholic background or attached to a name when Latin was the prevailing official language (1500s or earlier).
- + “—je” is East Frisian.
- + “—ner” has been used among Bavarians and Austrians.
- + “Zsch” as a prefix or suffix has Saxon and Slavic influences.

Generic applications also are common. They usually follow a prefix name of a village or town: “—burg” and “—berg” are common throughout Germany; “burg” refers to a fortress or residential castle (Schloss); “berg” refers to a village. Unfortunately, “—mann” is so widely used that it is not a regional suffix.

Germans have told me that “Schmidt” verses “Schmitt” in the Rhineland may be the difference between denominations; Schmitt tends to be used in Catholic areas, Schmidt in Lutheran.

To discover more, check any reliable encyclopedia of names and sift through the facts yourself.



THEY ACTUALLY SIGNED THEIR NAMES!

By Gerald Perschbacher

While researching in Germany in 2005, I was privileged to investigate documents in the Schaaflheim Rathaus (city hall of Schaaflheim) since it was generally accepted by local historians that my surname appeared with regularity in that collection. But no one could say how many references.

Hans Doerr of Dieburg and my friend Eicke Meyer of Schaaflheim joined my daughter Debbie and me in the hunt. Just in case you ever face a similar opportunity, let me report how this worked.

We maximized the time by each sifting through a set of records, some in large books, others in string-tied bundles. The earliest document was from the 1500s. The latest was from the 1700s. Books were huge and too cumbersome to photocopy. So I had my 35mm camera (you could use a digital version) and plenty of film.

Every time a page was discovered with mention of my surname, I photographed it. Then I asked my German friends to give a quick translation while I had my audio cassette tape recorder running. "Ah! I have found a Perschbacher!" said Eicke. Then Hans would echo the same from another book. Debbie found some choice documents, too. It was a hectic 2 hours of research. The results: about 150 pages of documents were photographed and about an hour of commentary and translation were preserved on tape. I knew that upon my return to America, I would have the film developed and converted to disc as a set of prints were made. That way, I could continue my research nearly half a world away.

Hans was reading a document, then started laughing. "Here is one of my ancestors, who married a Perschbacher! We are cousins, Gerry!" he exclaimed. I recall seeing that the marriage took place in the 1700s.

Eicke could hardly contain himself when he uncovered many pages of references to our surname. Many of these book-bound records had been individual sheets, stitched together by hand to a leather cover. Most documents dealt with taxes, the sale or purchase of land, and contributions to a hospital. I spent most of my time taking pictures.

Debbie was having great fun with folded documents. She learned how to recognize the handwritten version of our surname. Then, quite unexpectedly, she opened a document and watched a small, folded piece of paper slip out. "I think this has our name on it," she noted. The paper was dated in the early 1600s. Hans read it with delight. "You have found something significant, Debbie," he said. "This is a bill for services rendered by Pastor Johannes Perschbacher. This is in his hand writing, and here is his signature."

We knew this ancestor had been a Lutheran Pastor and was eventually pastor to the Count of Hanau in Babenhausen during the Thirty Years' War. He survived the war, confrontations with enemy troops, and the occasional outbreak of plague that claimed many lives. Here was his note! I wondered if he had imagined it would be read hundreds

of years later by two of his descendants. Hans said no one had known that note existed, and it offered a tiny bit of historical insight for the entire community.

Then Hans informed us that most of the documents Debbie was examining were written by the person who signed them. He said it was common practice. I asked if everyone in those years could write. He said no, it was a special privilege and meant that the person had an education. We discovered several more documents dealing with land purchases, each signed by a Perschbacher. As I recall, we copied about five signatures of different ancestors, dating to the 1500s.

When Debbie and I held such documents in our hands, it was like the passing of the baton of history from a long-past generation to present descendants. It was a bit eerie. It was truly humbling. It was altogether fascinating.

What the four of us discovered that day was continuity. Times changed, counts and empires came and went, the city wall and gates crumbled and new houses were built using rocks from the old wall as their foundation. In spite of all that change, here was a family that left hints of its impact. Here were delicate slices of daily life that had even survived beyond the strong, residential castle in the village. Here were wisps of the past, alive again in our very hands and thoughts.

Now those documents have sprung to life once more, as you read this little story. That's the fascinating thing about family histories, regardless of the century.

May you have much success in uncovering your family's little gems!



NO MENTION?

Can't find your ancestors mentioned in the vital records of the old German village or town where they had lived? Maybe there is a simple explanation.

Experts note that around 1849 German states officially began to enter vital records on all residents. Prior to that, some states avoided making such records in favor of church entries. However, in German states that had a religious preference, records were not always entered when there was a marriage of mixed religions.

Officials realized the need to record vital records for the sake of conformity. There were also legal considerations. So a civil marriage was to be recorded along with any marriage that took place in a church. In later years, it became a practice to have the civil marriage performed by an official of the Standesamt (office of vital records).

Recorded among those vital records were births, marriages, and deaths.

Governing officials realized benefits in having vital records. When it came to taxes, it was a fine means to trace a person and their descendants. It wartime, it was handy for the draft. –GP



SIT DOWN AND WRITE IT by Gerald Perschbacher

“Gee, Uncle, you have some great stories about the Depression. You should write them down,” is probably a common request by family members. However, how many

people sit down and write their recollections? How many even flip on a tape recorder or video recorder to preserve their memories?

Encourage them to do it. Set up a time and show up at their homes, if necessary, with a recorder in hand and two hours to spare. Come prepared with select questions such as, “What is the earliest memory you have?” or “What did (a certain relative) look like, sound like, etc.?” Ask about occupations, projects, trips, opinions, achievements, and recollections about important moments in history (such as those relating to a war or disaster).

A few years ago, I wrote my recollections. I’ll update the document as time progresses. My “story “ runs about 100 typed pages. You could take on a similar project for yourself. If you cannot write, get a recorder. Or ask a member of your family to help. You can have fun by getting several relatives together and holding a conversation about the past. Memories can be jogged in the process and more information can surface.



IT HAS BEGUN

It’s true. I have started my historical novel on my ancestry and the German village where my lineage has been traced.

The effort did not spring suddenly. It was derived from more than five years of intense research and two trips to Germany, the gathering of hundreds of pages of information from countless sources, the copying of a large number of ancient documents, and the purchase of numerous books and maps in German or English.

This book will cover epic events from the fall of the Roman Empire to modern Germany. In a certain sense, it will be the history of Western Europe and early America.

Progress in the first month was very pleasing: the book broke the 35,000 word mark. This is only on the first two sections. At this writing, I plan on eight more sections.

Some of you who have encouraged this effort or who knew it was coming, please be patient. Check future notices. Hold back from asking about when it will be printed. Right now, I want to write it first.

All of this leads to my encouragement for YOU to write down YOUR research or at least categorize it in a logical fashion for your family to enjoy. --GP



ABOUT LAUENBURG & PRUSSIA...If you had ancestry in Lauenburg, consider this: Lauenburg switched from being a possession of Electoral Saxony to the Duke of Brunswick-Lueneburg-Celle. When the Duke died in 1705, Lauenburg went to Hannover. After Napoleon, it was traded to Prussia in exchange for East Friesland. Prussia gave it to Denmark in exchange for Swedish Pomerania, which Denmark had gotten in return for Norway. In 1864, Lauenburg came back to Prussia as part of the annexation of Holstein!



EXCHANGE! Comments, ideas, and requests from those in G-SIG:

+ If your interest runs deep into all things German, then watch for results of the St. Louis German/American Committee. Nearly 20 organizations are involved in coordinating their schedules and events in conjunction with each other. Organizations are involved with singing, education, culture, heritage, sister cities, and more. G-SIG aims to mainstream with this collaborative association. You will hear more in the future.

+ The German Culture Center at the University of Missouri—St. Louis offers presentations and information. Coordinator is Larry Marsh who may be reached at (314) 516-6620 (gcc@msx.umsl.edu).

+ The links leading to the *Westliche Post* obituary index are now available from 5 different pages on the web.
<http://www.slcl.org/branches/hq/sc/indexes.htm> (Indexes)
<http://www.slcl.org/branches/hq/sc/sc-findaid.htm> (Guides and Finding Aids)
<http://www.slcl.org/branches/hq/sc/sc-news.htm> (Historical Newspaper Holdings)
<http://www.slcl.org/branches/hq/sc/sitemap.htm> (Site Map)
<http://www.slcl.org/branches/hq/sc/res-pro.htm> (Research Guidelines and Procedures - Photocopies)
For more details, contact the Special Collections Department at the St. Louis County Library, 1640 S. Lindbergh Blvd., St. Louis, MO 63131-3598 (314-994-3300).

+ “Most of the St. Louis Almstedts are from my great uncle Henry--and we have done family history over the years. Through a German contact, I have information on the ALMSTEDT FAMILY IN Germany (Hildesheim, Almstedt, Everode, Klein Freden etc.) and wondered if anybody...was doing Almstedt research (also STROTTMANN---same area) and hit that old "brick wall"?

Charles Almstedt <cralmstedt@yahoo.com>

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Want a printed copy of G-SIG FORUM by mail? Send a self-addressed, stamped envelope to: St. Louis Genealogical Society, Attn. Ed Schmidt; #4 Sunnen Dr., Suite 140; St. Louis, MO 63143.

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Have some great ideas for the G-SIG FORUM? Any topics to suggest? Want to share your findings in order to help others in their search?

Then submit your material to germansig@stlgs.org
or mail it to: StLGS, Attn: G-SIG; #4 Sunnen Dr., Suite 140; St. Louis, MO 63143.