

G-SIG FORUM #20

...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 .

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HIT THOSE BOOKS!

While the power of the computer and Internet is monumental, that power contains only a percentage of knowledge that has already been (or is now) in print. At a certain point it behooves each researcher to “hit the books.”

Exactly which books do you “hit”?

It depends on the subject. If you are researching an era (such as the late 1800s) and want to know the circumstances of life in Germany and America at that time, it could be worthwhile checking with a knowledgeable librarian and institution that could direct you to current and old books on the subject. Glean a basic understanding of the German and American cultures of the era, and then continue your research into other questions.

Dr. Roger P. Minert, an expert on the subject of German history and genealogical subjects, has compiled various books on select subjects close to his heart. These include: “Deciphering Handwriting in German Documents: Analyzing German, Latin, and French in Vital Records Written in Germany” and “Spelling Variations in German Names: Solving Family History Problems Through Applications of German and English Phonetics.”

He also has produced “Alsace-Lorraine Place Name Indexes: Identifying Place Names Using Alphabetical and Reverse Alphabetical Indexes.” Along with it is an entire series with much the same title, only with the location being changed. These include books on Baden, Bavaria, Brandenburg, Braunschweig, Oldenburg and Thuringia, East Prussia, Hanover, Hesse, Hesse-Nassau, Mecklenburg, Palatinate, Pomerania, Posen, Rhineland, the Kingdom of Saxony, the Province of Saxony, Schleswig-Holstein, Silesia, West Prussia, Westphalia, Württemberg, even Switzerland. Some were in association with other experts.

There is also a new series under the theme, “Atlantic Bridge to Germany.”

These are authored by Linda M. Herrick and Wendy K. Uncapher. There is “Alsace-Lorraine: Atlantic Bridge to Germany,” published by Janesville Origins, 2003, 192 pp., index, maps; “Baden: Atlantic Bridge to Germany,” Janesville Origins, 2004, 152 pp., index, maps; and “Pomerania: Atlantic Bridge to Germany,” Janesville Origins 2005 238 pp., maps.

You might choose to check “German Church Books: Beyond the Basics” by Kenneth L. Smith, Rockport Picton Press, 1993 (0897253825), 223 pp., index. The work has dozens of illustrations, samples of German church book entries from the 1600s and 1700s, plus helps.

I have researched hundreds of books on various German subjects, covering the Great Migrations of the Germanic tribes prior to 400 A.D. right up to life in the 20th century. Still, I am amazed at all the resources that I have still not consulted. I’ll add another category: atlases. “Serious atlases” is the way to categorize the books that excel in detailed, scholarly maps. Sometimes available in stores or at sales dealing in used books, these usually are not costly items.

While in Germany, I took time to visit several bookstores dealing in used books. These were small establishments run by owners dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge more than profit. Several atlases used in German schools before 1925 were common in those shops and cost the equivalent of \$12 each. Later it became clear that perhaps the most recent “great era” for printed atlases was from 1800-1955. Some of the old German maps were translated and printed in the United States, so keep searching!

Very old, antique atlases can be very expensive, but this applies to books printed in the 1700s and earlier.

So, bug your library. Ask for more books on your subject. Consult experts. Check online for new offerings in your field of study. Hit the books!

(Thanks to Kathy Wurth for forwarding select information used in this article.)

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HIDDEN IN THE NAME

What can you glean from a surname?

Sometimes you can tell the locality of origin. If the last name is Ohmmann, it might be derived from a locality along a river or by a town with the name or prefix “Ohm—“ and, of course, “—mann” is German for “man.” If the last name is “Hess,” it is likely the name was derived from the Hessian area. If the surname is Odenwald, it was probably connected with the Odenwald forest. “Mos-“ or “Masch-“ as surname prefixes may have related to marshy land.

Names can reflect jobs held by ancestors. “Meyer” (with spelling variations) relates to a farmer, possibly a dairy farmer, or to someone who operated a farm. If “Herzog” is the name (pronounced “HAIRTS-zog”) it may not relate to royalty or leadership being in a person’s genealogy as much as the family’s service to the Herzog.

A few years ago, I bought a copy of “German-American Names” by George F. Jones (Baltimore Genealogical Publishing Company, 1998 (0806314818); it is now in at least its third edition). After consulting it on a daily basis as I sat in my easy chair, night after night, various ideas were pondered. I dissected several surnames, absorbed the

informative section in the front of the book, and thought some more. Eventually, I felt inclined to write the author.

My letter was sent to the publisher with a second envelope inside (unsealed and stamped so they could check the contents and forward without cost). My cover letter asked that my letter be forwarded to the author.

It was, and Mr. Jones soon replied by letter.

His book is timeless. I encourage you to check out a copy at a library or buy one new at a bookstore.

The book traces German history and thinking, if you play around with the entries and gather bits and pieces of information. It can help you think “like a German” of old. Author Jones has about 18,000 entries, listed alphabetically.

Not all names have an easy explanation. At first, Mr. Jones believed “Perschbacher” was derived from the old German word for peach, but he discounted that when informed that the name predated the introduction of peaches into Germany. He then surmised it could have been derived from “Peter” as a Slavic variant. That, also, was discounted when more information was supplied. Eventually, we both learned something from the letters that crossed between us.

When you check such a book, don’t take it as the complete answer you need, unless you can verify by at least one other reliable source. Remember that no single book carries all the wisdom on the subject of surnames. But each one could help us get closer to the answers!

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SERIOUS ABOUT RESEARCH?

Whether you are after genealogy or history, you can learn from the book, “German-English Genealogical Dictionary,” by Ernest Thode (Baltimore Genealogical Publishing Company 0-8063-1342-0).

If you do not have command of the German language, this book can serve as a translation tool to help with German documents. Simple to use, it contains thousands of German terms, offers concise translations, and includes symbols. The book was completed as a genealogical assist. It reflects terms and usage from church records, civil registration records, family correspondence, genealogical journals, passenger lists from ships, and emigration records.

If you’ve got a handy German-English dictionary, you can translate documents by using both books and some brainpower.

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DIGGING UP LEADS

Be on the search for information at all times!

That seems to be the drive behind Joy H. Roberts from Chandler, Arizona, (jhrob@extremezone.com) who recently wrote: “My father was a minister of the

Evangelical and Reformed Church, and his church in Cincinnati sent him to Eden Seminary in St. Louis. My mother and her St. Louis kin were Evangelical Lutherans, Missouri Synod. My father arrived from Bramsche, Germany, in 1910. By that time, Bramsche was part of Prussia. Hence, he was (Prussian) E and R. My mother's kin arrived from non-Prussian Hannover, and non Prussian Pfalz in the 1830s to 1860s. So that fits with her being a "Missouri Lutheran."

"However, the plot thickens. Perhaps someone in St. Louis knows the answer... What Church would you attend if you were German Reformed, Pfalz, which was not yet Prussian?"

After a little thought, I responded: "As for the E&R church in St. Louis, there would have been several possibilities. I suggest you contact officials at Eden Seminary's library, notably Dr. Lowell Zuck. His e-mail is: lzuck@eden.edu He is a retired prof at Eden, and is keeping the UCC archives going. He might be able to provide several great insights.

"You could contact Scott Hall at the St. Louis County Library (main branch, on Lindbergh). He works in the genealogical section. Scott came to the library recently, after having been at the Eden library. About two years ago he did a masterful display for the Eden library, dealing with UCC and E&R churches in St. Louis."

It remains to be seen as to the results of Joy's work, but she's keeping active in her search. Persistence often pays dividends.

Gerald Perschbacher

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GERMAN SOLDIERS AND EADS BRIDGE

Pat von zur Muehlen, Prussian Cluster facilitator, recently noted: "More than 30 years ago, while taking visitors from Germany on a tour of St. Louis, we passed Eads Bridge. I began to relate some of the history of the bridge, but was interrupted. Almost with tears in his eyes and with deep-seated anger and resentment, a young German man related that his father was stuck on a train that was stalled on this bridge while en route to a POW prison camp in a western state. The train was stalled for more than 24 hours during a St. Louis heat wave. It's an incident that I'll never forget and when I remember it I also remember the millions imprisoned by Nazis who did not return to their families as this German soldier did."

There were other German prisons in our area. These were captured soldiers shipped to the United States, and sent to the Midwest since this was the farthest place from the coasts and potential escape.

I heard about one man who worked at a local publishing company. Years ago he related how he had been in a tank corps and was about to be caught. As I recall the story, Russians got him, then he somehow made it into American hands, later being sent to the U.S.A. After the war, he was allowed to stay legally and became a citizen.

A tough way to get to America, but it's a story with a happy ending.

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NOW WITTENBERG IS GONE— BUT NOT FORGOTTEN

Germany isn't the only place where old towns have vanished. It happened in southeastern Missouri, too.

About two years ago, I heard of the book, "Wittenberg, Missouri: In touch with the past" by Mary Beth Mueller Dillon. She had inherited 200 glass-plate negatives that contained photographs of the town, some dating to the 1890s. Many were from the first half of the 1900s. Once contact had been made with Mary Beth, a teacher, it became clear why she was so interested. It was a quest for knowledge and for family connections.

Wittenberg was one of seven founded by Saxon Lutheran immigrants in East Perry County in 1839. These were the forerunners of The Lutheran Church—Missouri Synod.

Mary Beth gathered comments and photos from (and about) former residents. More than 500 visuals went into the book. The first printing was depleted almost immediately. A reprint has now been made, spiral bound, with color. (The author lives in Indiana and may be reached at mary2075@sbcglobal.net or (317) 244-7513.)

Dillon, whose great-grandfather, grandfather and father all hailed from Wittenberg, was at the Lutheran Museum in Altenburg on Saturday to sign copies of her book.

Today, what had been a bustling river town of several hundred people is down to a couple rickety buildings and a pleasure boat entry point at a nice little park setting on the Mississippi River. The town officially disbanded.

It was due to rivers. When the Mississippi was restricted by dams and runoff water was channeled down the river due to man's method of controlling nature, severe flooding finally spelled the end to Wittenberg.

Friends of my family rented a house in town and we often visited in the summers of the 1950s. It was a quaint, somewhat rundown, little town then, on its last leg, but still an interesting place to stay. In the early 1970s, a notable flood knocked down that house and several others, thus bringing an end to the idea of surviving in Wittenberg.

With so many German connections in the book, it might help with genealogical research, and will also help us all understand how succeeding generations settled into American life, carrying some old customs.

Short History of Wittenberg, Missouri

- + Established in 1839
- + At its peak, had nearly 400 residents
- + Floods in 1927, 1973, and 1993 destroyed many e businesses and homes in town.
- + In 1969, Wittenberg's one-room school was closed.
- + By legal decree, its five residents were allowed to disincorporate the town.
- + In 1994, the Perry County Lutheran Historical Society, Inc., placed a large marker on the location of the former town church.

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

+**John L. Maurath** (maurath1@juno.com) suggests contacting "ShtetlSeeker" at <http://www.jewishgen.org/ShtetlSeeker/> which pinpoints towns on a map -- even towns that no longer exist. It was devised by Jewish genealogists. "ShtetlSeeker" has a soundex type system, that will give you variations in spelling, to help narrow the search. EXAMPLE: John looked for the small village of Unzhurst in the northern Black Forest (Schwarzwald) of Baden. Unzhurst was incorporated into the larger town of Ottersweier, a southern suburb of the city of Buehl. ShtetlSeeker shows exactly where Unzhurst is located.

+ **Steve Hafliger** (Steve sews@aol.com) or (773)478-6703 is researching Johanes and Heinrich Hafliger /Haefliger. His ancestors left Switzerland and arrived sometime after 1850 through New Orleans to St. Louis. Eventually moved to Christian County in Illinois. "Where might I begin to look to find the boat, where they ended up, and naturalization paperwork?"

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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