

G-SIG FORUM #36

...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. (www.gahs-stlouis.org).

This communication is a forum for genealogical, educational, and historical 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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Surprise in Germany

On an overcast day in the spring, I trudged through the old door of an official building housing the state archives of Hessen-Darmstadt. My search was aimed at old books that mentioned my ancestors in the 1450s.

Thanks to the assistance of two Germany researchers, I placed my request for the old documents. Then, I had to wait.

My German friends ushered me into the genealogical section a few doors down the hall. “You should ask if there is a file on your family,” I was told. I did as instructed.

“Perschbacher? Perschbacher...?” asked the volunteer as he scanned a list of surnames maintained on file. “Ahh...you are among the heirs of the Waldorf-Astoria,” he noted, pointing to a cross-reference to the name Emmerich (pronounced “EMMER-rish,” but also spelled Emerick).

I had never heard of this connection prior to that encounter.

As I pondered the impact, the volunteer scurried to the files to retrieve a folder on “Perschbacher.”

That folder held a variety of letters and notes from others with my surname, some of whom I knew. The file was not large, but it was nicely detailed and carried many facts. I photocopied most of the contents.

“How was this connection made with the Emmerich family? And where is the Astor connection?” I wondered aloud as my German friends assisted in the search. This is what we found.

John Nickolas Emerick left Germany for the United States in 1770. he became a wealthy fur trader. In 1783 he met John Jacob Astor during a prolonged sea voyage. The two Germans had come from the same general area and struck up a friendship. Astor became a partner in the fur business. Emerick became a wealthy landowner in Pennsylvania and New York, later owning a fleet of sailing ships.

In 1816, Emerick died unmarried. He willed his estate in trust for the descendants of his brothers Valentine and Christopher, whom he was not willing to bless with fortunes while they were living but remembered their heirs. Astor was to manage the trust and after 75 years distribute it to the heirs of those brothers in Germany.

Later, it was discovered there was land in New York City on which a large church had been built, and when that citadel was to be sold in the 1920s, it was discovered that the Emerick Estate held ownership of the land. This opened up the estate.

Indeed, Emerick and Astor were Hessen Germans. Emerick was from Gross Umstadt, while Astor was from Waldorf (hence the hotel’s name, Waldorf-Astoria). They lived not far from my ancestral village, and there is at least one connection I have traced between the Emerick family and Perschbachers. Supposedly, the estate was to be given to the Emerick descendants whether in Germany or America.

All sorts of legends grew up around this inheritance. Of course, it opened a multitude of ideas for me.

A few days after the initial discovery, I asked one of my relatives in Germany if she had heard about this. Indeed, she had. She indicated that a lawyer had come to the village of Schaafheim to review ancestral files. Much money was sent to a bank in Germany for possible distribution, she thought. However, the lawyer departed for America without any distribution.

Since then, I have casually researched the questions. Here are some initial conclusions:

Legends die hard, especially when large sums of money are involved. In one reference the amount of the inheritance came to \$175 million. There have been legal efforts by members of various families (all related to Emmerich) to claim only one percent of the inheritance, which would still be quite sizeable. Each attempt failed.

It seems that several legal efforts were made to free up whatever inheritance might exist, but only the lawyers seemed to benefit through pooled sums established by hopeful heirs.

I find diverse comments that the inheritance no longer exists, that it was merely a legend, that it still sits gaining interest, and that some day the heirs will be wealthy.

Toward the end of my trip to Germany, I asked one of my German researcher friends if I owed him anything for his time and travel. “Ach, nay,” he said with a playful smile. “But if you discover your inheritance, THEN you can remember me!”

It should make a great chapter in my book. GP

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Don't be an Easy Target...

The discovery I just revealed comes with some intriguing observations and good advice.

Don't be an easy target for genealogical money-makers. There have been as many as seven major attempts to put claims against the Emmerich Trust, and all failed. However, some individuals (well meaning or not) have realized an income by offering to research the topic or represent families. This comes after a base amount has been paid to “cover costs” and after a promise is in place that “more will be sent.”

Granted, there are many people who assist with research domestically and in Germany, and a fair payment for services rendered is justified -- no question about it. However, there are individuals (and companies) that pander to the “genealogically hopeful” who are willing to pay some significant amounts for information.

Equally unsettling is the inaccuracy of information shared by these money-makers of ill repute. Some bait their hook by claiming your family has noble roots. Some claim your surname originated in a select region of Germany based on an assumption of the meaning of your name. Conclusions are offered in a polished and attractive manner. Some sources offer the information on an oversize certificate in lush colors and fancy borders, along with a Coat of Arms. That's another rub: a small percentage of German families have the right to claim or display their ancestral Coat of Arms. There are legal repercussions if this is

improperly used. There are recognized authorities that administer the records on noble families and their “Coats.” However, America does not follow with those legal traditions. Nobility is not recognized with special privileges in the States. So some money-makers feed off of that open market with wild information and tall claims. Most of it is, quite simply, meant to be offered for their profit – and not to benefit you!

What can be done? Use your best judgment. Ask advice from others who have been researching for a long time. If information comes too easily (and for a price), check out the validity of the details and the source.

And realize that sometimes, you might be hooked. OK, learn from it. Then avoid a similar temptation in the future.

I have heard claims that my ancestral line held noble positions. A certificate stating that fact was offered to members of my family. On my first trip to Germany, I asked experts about a noble connection. Several emphatically said it was not true. They smiled (some even smirked) when I noted that a company had researched the subject and made that conclusion. It did not take long for me to see that my German friends were correct.

It’s never too late to learn.

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Handy Books and More...

Marlene Olson (genealogy800@yahoo.com) has suggestions on some great resources for research.

. She says there are more than 8,300 sites for microfilm, microfiche, or books at the Family History site (familysearch.org) from Salt Lake Library. Use the keyword search: THE GERMAN CHURCH. To narrow the search, enter a county.

Marlene also suggests the book, *A Survey of American Church Records*, which reveals major and minor denominations before the late 1800s.) The book is by E. Kay Kirkham, genealogist, and was published by The Everton Publishers, Inc. Marlene says, “Churches are listed by state, county, denomination name of church, location by city & address, kind of record with years included, plus location of records.

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When was ‘Germany’ really Germany?

By Gerald Perschbacher

Researchers say their ancestors came from Germany, but if those ancestors predated the formation of Germany (1870-71), did they really come from Germany?

My answer is YES. Let me explain.

Germany is understood as a group of people with a common cultural heritage and language. It's a European way of thinking that escapes most Americans who have been in the New World for two generations or more. In Europe, governments (and nations) rise and fall, but the people and cultures continue. A close example is the collapse of the Soviet Union, while Russia continued -- a relatively quiet change because the Russian culture was re-eminent over that of the government. In America, the government is the culture.

The Holy Roman Empire was known as the German empire in a common understanding due to the language and culture. This was evident in the 1500s when German pride came forth and printing of books in German became prevalent. There was a strong nationalism defined by culture and common heritage, regardless of free cities, noble territories, and regions.

With the rise of federations (which came and went in German history) there were flashes of "nations" as we know the term today. Prussia and its growth is perhaps the greatest example of these. As a result, some people today think their families were Prussian, when actually they were German, and Prussia was simply a nomenclature for a governmental expression and Northern German way of thinking. There were variations of German cultures to the south and west of rising Prussia, and when those were included in Prussia (by trade or by boundary) the people in those areas tended to refer to themselves as Germans, not Prussians. There were enough similarities to bind them together under a Prussian union, but there were local strengths that stood even above that. I suppose it is a little similar to being an American but being a St. Louisan on top of that.

So it is proper to say we have a German lineage, even if the name Germany was not used as a country until 1871.

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EXCHANGE! *G-SIG comments, ideas, & requests:*

+ **Kathy Wurth** (kathyinwashington@hotmail.com) is compiling a list of emigrants from Osnabrueck who settled in America. She says “the Osnabrueck

Genealogical Society and the local Heimatmuseum in Versmold

... would very much be interested in what happened to family members who left Germany and perhaps would like to contact living descendants. You would not have to put dates in for living persons only state 'Still Living.'

If your software program would let you run an index of the names in the file, that would be great if you could attach that, also."

+ **Pat von zur Muehlen** discovered a Web site (in English and German) at: <http://www.die-waldmanns.de/index.htm> (which tells about descendants of Anna Engel Waldmann, protagonist of the novel *Ann Angel's Freedom*). Pat searched online and found the paperback book published by Lulu.com, 2007 (ISBN 1847537545, 9781847537546; 224 pages. The story is set in rural Osnabrueck at the turn of the 18th century, a time when old values are questioned. Might be an interesting "read" for genealogists!

+ **G-SIG Clusters** are "where the action is"! Meet and communicate with others who have similar aims in research and information. Learn from them. Share your successes. For details on existing Clusters, or to explore the formation of a new Cluster, contact Lisa at lmclaughlin@polsinelli.com) or Kathy at kathyinwashington@hotmail.com).

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