

G-SIG FORUM #43

...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 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 persch3@hotmail.com.

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A special, longer format for this edition!

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Your Ancestor's Bones

Occasionally, news pops out of Germany about some ancient fossil that was unearthed. Along comes all the attendant speculation as to what the creature was, how it lived, circumstances surrounding its demise, and its age (usually in millions, even hundreds of millions, of years).

Take much of that with a grain of salt, as you wish. But it gives one pause. Did you ever think about the bones of your ancestors? I mean REALLY OLD bones?

Years ago I saw a TV documentary tracing the discovery of a very ancient set of bones in England. Scientists extracted a tiny amount of DNA material from the 10,000-year-old bones and tried to match it to people living in the area. One person was a direct descendant to that ancient pile of bones that once had been a man!

It probably made that "Englander" feel pretty special, maybe even haughty. I can't say what resulted from this revelation in subsequent years. But

imagine if YOU had been in this man's place and some ancient skull was found in Germany, with DNA that matched yours!

On one of my trips to my ancestral village in Germany, there was excavation work being done in an area where graves had lain for centuries. In the process of digging, part of a skeleton was uncovered. It wasn't exposed for long. Once the work was done, the unearthed material was re-deposited, then covered.

“How old do you think that skeleton was?” I asked a German friend. He surmised that it could have been a couple hundred years old at least, since that's when burials had stopped in that area. Then I asked another question: “If the person came from this village, and since the population was smaller than now, and since so many people were related back then, and since my family was part of all that, and since the site was used to bury prominent citizens, and since my ancestors held prominent roles in the village, could those bones have come from one of my ancestors?”

He slowly smiled. “Jah, it is possible, but hard to prove,” came the reply. “Maybe one day those bones will be dug up again and you can do a DNA test to find out!”

He seemed to take the idea in stride, almost comically. Then he added that although most remains from gravesites were exhumed and replaced by a new burial after 25 years or so, the practice waned and wavered during periods of duress. One such period was the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648), when entire villages went into hiding. It was dangerous enough to survive, let alone consider the dead from a generation before.

Still, those old bones never quite left my mind. I'm not sure what I would do if a DNA opportunity arose. It is not a great cost to do the test, but you've got to present a good sample of old DNA-laden material that will suffice for an accurate reading.

Deep down, I think I would like to keep things as they are. No test is really needed. I know my ancestral village. I realize a good number of the old families that are still in town are likely related to me. There are physical characteristics that are in common; even some ways of thinking that are probably shared genetically. These not dried-up, dirt covered bones but living tissue, living human beings that reflect even more about me than pieces from a forgotten burial site.

Still, it's nice to speculate that some bones of my ancient ancestors are still resting in the ground of old Germany. Chances are, yours are, too! If only those bones could speak...!

GP

Special note: *If you have personal experience with genealogical DNA testing on old bones, let us know your results.*

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Where this Takes us...

All this leads to an **assessment** of what you want in your study of Germany, your ancestry, and your history.

What is your **intention**? Do you want to simply trace your **bloodlines**? If so, do you trace just one – or two – or as many as you can? You’ve got to set a limit, don’t you? Well, you can if you wish. If information comes fast and furious for one line of descent, more power to you! Trace it for all it’s worth, with all the fun and surprises in store. But if you “multitask” your thinking into several lines of lineage, there might be more fun in your research. When you hit a wall obstructing your progress in one line, you can side step to another branch of your lineage and track it for a while until you determine how to overcome the first obstacle.

If your intention is to find the basic facts of dates (birth, baptism, marriage and death) your fact-finding may be much simpler than the researcher who craves to know what jobs his or her ancestors held, what positions they administered, what appointments they held, where they traveled, and the land they owned or supervised. I like flesh on my history. Knowing my ancestors lived in a certain house and worked as shoemaker, baker, vintner, or field supervisor gives me more satisfaction than knowing when they were married, although I like to find all the important dates (to round out my studies). Those dates can be significant in determining “who begat whom” and who was a brother or sister.

Genealogical studies seem bland unless I place my ancestors into the **situations** of the past. Example: I had two ancestors (apparently cousins to each other) who died in 1813. As a date goes, it means little to me, except that they each died within a month. If I were merely interested in dates of death, my research would end there. Case closed. Move on to another factor. Well, by digging (figuratively) into the facts of history, I realize that 1813 was a very bad year for Europe. War ravaged the continent. Then a name comes to light: Napoleon! This jiggles my memory on two little entries relating to the deaths of my two ancestors. They each died in military hospitals!

Now the plot deepens – that’s how I think about those past lives, for these were active humans, my own blood, living life as it came – and went. So, I study the era. Napoleon controlled the Rheinland, including my ancestral area. He and his armies drafted nearly every able-bodied man once the dictator reshaped the map of Europe in the early 1800s. The draft was mandatory, worse than the

enlistment in the American Civil War (when a good number of draftees were able to pay for another person to serve in their stead). Not so in Europe. That's mainly because Napoleon organized armies, saw many of his soldiers die or be severely wounded in battle, then built another army as boys grew to manhood -- fresh fodder for war.

My two ancestors were caught in that maelstrom. One was older than the other. I wondered what advantages the older might have held. Not surprisingly, soldiers who had served in a few major battles tended to be elevated to officer positions. It came with experience and longevity. So I can surmise this might have been the case. What gives credence to the idea is that the elder of the two died in the military hospital in Danzig in early 1813, the exact time when Napoleon's army was high-tailing it out of Russia (shades of the *1812 Overture* by Tchaikovsky!). Many of the most able-bodied and seasoned German soldiers in Napoleon's army were directed to Danzig to hold the site for their emperor. This also provided a rear guard as Napoleon and his remnant army skirted across Central Europe in hopes of regaining his hold on France, which was beginning to foster rebellions against him.

More research. Remember, I am looking for *situations* which my ancestors faced. I discover an obscure reference to sorties sent beyond the fortress walls of the military compound in Danzig. In one major test of the Russian's strength, Napoleon's military commander in Danzig sends several hundred of his troops, many of whom were German, into the city to scavenge and assess. Nearly half are killed or wounded.

Five days later, my elder ancestor died. While death-delving disease was rampant in various sectors of the army bottled up in Danzig, I do not stop there. A little more studying reveals that bullets were made of lead. Not properly attended, a wound easily resulted in gangrene. The length of time from being shot to dying from gangrene was several days, perhaps five in many cases. Bingo! An interesting conclusion is made. Could my ancestor have been among those on the big sortie, wounded, and then taken by death as a result? Hmmm.

Of course, I will probably never know, this side of heaven. But the search is inwardly rewarding. It brings history to life. More than that, it brings the challenges of my ancestors to mind. In a certain respect, the genes we shared experienced those events. In that regard, "I was there," in a manner of thinking.

Exciting? Sure! Just to think about what a family experienced can bring a thrill and a rush of excitement. Supposition? A bit, now and then, can make your research more enjoyable. Just don't go out on a limb and begin sawing as you sit on the wrong side!

GP

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Too Many Bones?

Don't become *victim* to a mountain of bones.

A date, a place, a name in an entry, are "bones" from the past. They simply lay there, awaiting discovery. More than that, they await application.

If you claim to be researching your family history but only deal in the dry bones, you may have become an *accumulator* rather than a *researcher*. Here's the difference: an accumulator goes after the hard, cold, sometimes mundane facts of who, what, where, and when. Good facts, to be sure, but if the search ends there, woe to the researcher. The person may be able to boast of nothing more than "I have traced back my lines to the 1700s" or "I know when each of my ancestors for six generations lived and when they died." That's fine as a start -- don't get me wrong. But simply gathering the basics isn't the best use of research. *Apply* the information. *Massage* it into historical context. It might open your eyes to nuances that will *enliven* your study.

With a little research into an *era* of your family, you may be able to say much more than "they lived and died here and there." You might conclude, "They lived through famine or plague...war or rebellion...the highpoint of the noble family's rule or the speedy decline of prosperity."

Too many dry bones heaped tall may one day come falling down, making your head spin in confusion. "Why did I spend all that time for just this?" could be your moan. Make your research interesting, as never before, and you could gain fresh insights.

It's up to you.

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When You Hit a Brick Wall

A sigh: "I just can't find my ancestral village in Germany!"

A complaint: "No one can tell me when he was born."

A frown: "There is no record of when she came to America."

Do you know the experience? You've probably heard it voiced by several people. Another one is, "How can I read that old script?" Or "I don't know German. Can someone translate this?"

There are several ways to find answers. First of all, don't expect them to fall in your lap on some sunny day when life is fun and free and you are anticipating that the silver lining around the single cloud in the bright sky will be cashed in for a high return. Answers are to be found, not brought to you like free apple pie from the sky.

I've been there and faced most of the questions you have. After I realized the information would not come tumbling freely, I checked around. Rather than starting in a vacuum, I sought others in my family who had made headway on these questions. We pooled our information and, little by little, more facts came to light. Glean what you can from living relatives, old photographs with notations on back, entries in family Bibles or family ledgers. Record anything and everything that seems pertinent and even little facts that don't. My oldest uncle said he knew why our ancestor came to America in 1833: "He was a stowaway on his uncle's ship." On my first trip to Germany, there was a lack of information in one of the entries for that ancestor. German historians did not know why it was missing. Then I mentioned the comment about my ancestor being a stowaway. They answered as though a bright light had been turned on: "Jah! That could be the answer!" Keep those past little comments handy (and in mind).

If you don't have a command of old German, don't let that severely deter your progress. Find someone who knows German fluently and can assist with translating key phrases and paragraphs from entries written in old script. Where can such a person be found? Check your neighbors, friends, contacts at universities, high schools, churches, a museum or archive, social circles, and German-related organizations.

Once found, don't use the person as a crutch. Employ the ability as a resource. Offer reasonable payment or make a trade-off in favors.

Finding the ancestral village or town may take a good degree of "doing." Usually researchers trace their ancestors to the point of arrival in America, then hit a wall. Here is a suggestion: contact as many distant relatives as possible who still carry the surname you are tracing and ask if they have any knowledge of the ancestral town's name. If they aren't sure, ask if they know where their ancestors lived once in America, even where they attended church. Make contact with church officials, historians, or genealogists in those areas. Present your dilemma and ask for help.

Finding the birthplace of an ancestor may be equally tricky, even if it involves an American location. I have found that local genealogical organizations and historical societies are prone to offering help in searching their files for people who live far away. It's a simple and painless process.

Let's say your family roots have been traced to Ohio. You know your ancestor traveled to southern Illinois in the 1850s, and you know it was by land. You do a little studying and find that the National Road connected the East Coast to St. Louis. Check some books or do an online search to compare the old track of the National Road along present highways. Start asking simple questions to societies along that path. By so doing, you may stumble into a real goldmine of

information, including copies of obituaries or news articles. The degree of success may directly relate to the oddity or commonality of the surname.

If you feel alone and defeated, seek support. Build interest in your “cause” by drafting at least another relative, making it a true family affair. Groom the person in the same interest, and you have doubled the ability to find answers! It’s the old adage, “Two heads are better than one.” If no one in your immediate family is interested in research, then form an alliance with others who share your goals. If they help you, then you will help them.

Sponges are wonderful devices for soaking up spills. Some genealogists seem to be like sponges; thirsty to soak up any bit of information they find and hold it tight. But a sponge also can be rung out to release its contents. So, also, a genealogist should be willing to gladly share findings with others in need.

More advice: Learn about Germany. This can be done online and through books. Choose the period when your ancestor departed from Germany. Learn what you can about that era. Study the emigration regulations. Learn ways regions were governed. Discover the interaction between villages and town, noble families, and large free cities (which was a special category obtained through imperial decree). In effect, walk in the shoes of your ancestor.

Study daily life. Today we enjoy supermarkets as our food source. How did your ancestor in old Germany fill her plate or top off his stein? Which foods were seasonal? When did famines strike? What common jobs did villagers hold? Were people prone to travel great distances? How did a family prepare their move to America? Did they sell most of their worldly goods? What would they have kept for the trip?

What clothing was popular at the time your ancestor? Was it heavy due to severe cold weather? What about schooling? How many people lived in a house? What fears did the people harbor?

Amid some of these findings, you may uncover the reason(s) why your ancestor came to America. It might have related to crop loss, famine, overpopulation, the military draft, taxation, or loss of wealth. Once you realize the situation in Germany AT THAT TIME of departure, you may be able to discern evidence in records you search. GP

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

Let’s pause to see how ***EXCHANGE!*** can advance your study.

Here is an example of an entry:

+ **Carol Schlueter** (cannmueller@gmail.com) seeks information on the family Heller from Basel, Switzerland, immigrated about 1834, first went to Baltimore and then to Monroe County, Ill.

Carol is a seeker, like you. Her situation is unique by reason of the surname and locations, since every individual is different. She is using **EXCHANGE!** to generate more visibility in her search. Does she rely only on this notice? I sincerely doubt it. **EXCHANGE!** is one of many options.

Pursue multiple options as you research. Issue the same question to several sources and wait for replies. Any variance in responses may shed new light on the subject. Or change the question. Example: “Is anyone studying families that left Switzerland to come to America in 1834?” That may trigger a researcher to respond.

One grand way to maximize your potential is to connect with a **G-SIG Cluster**. Each Cluster brings together a small bunch of people with common interests. Interested in a Cluster? Contact:

Lisa at lmclaughlin@polsinelli.com) or Kathy at kathyinwashington@hotmail.com).

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Have great ideas for the G-SIG FORUM? Submit your material to persch3@hotmail.com or mail it to: StLGS, Attn: G-SIG, #4 Sunnen Dr., Suite 140, St. Louis, MO 63143.