

G-SIG FORUM #75

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 forum is for genealogical, educational, and historical information with fresh insights plus ideas on German traditions and ancestry. Gerald Perschbacher is *FORUM* compiler and coordinator.



What Your German Ancestors Encountered

By Gerald Perschbacher

What was life like in the Midwest when European immigrants settled there? You may have asked that question many times. Thankfully, there are glimpses into that cloudy past.

Writer Jim Merkel is researching the early advances of Germans who settled in the Midwest, especially around St. Louis. In the process, he became acquainted with the book, *Through Four Centuries* by Julius Horstmann and Herbert Wernecke, printed by Eden Publishing House, St. Louis, in 1938.

Imagine German immigrants coming to the Midwest in the early to mid 1800s. They had little knowledge of English. They didn't know the land, the climate, the customs, the foods, the diseases, and the people (in general, that is, unless they had friends or family who came ahead of them; many did).

On page 67, the book stated: "One day, in the autumn of 1831, there came to St. Louis four Indians from the Nez Perce, or Flathead country, in what is now Idaho and eastern Oregon. They had heard of the White man's 'Book of Heaven,' and their tribe had sent them across the mountains that they might bring it back with them."

St. Louis, serving as Gateway to the West, not only attracted thousands of people heading westward, but also attracted those heading east.

For decades the town had been a fur-trading center whereby western pelts and goods were bartered by mountain men, hunters, and pioneers. For some, it was as close to civilization as they wanted to be -- and they high-tailed it back west, once they did their dealing, bought some necessities, partied a little, and drank their fill. Some even enjoyed the luxury of a hot bath in a copper tub!

Back to the book. Those four Indians "were cordially welcomed and entertained by William Clark, governor of the Northwest Territory, and superintendent of Indian affairs, who had visited their country 25 years before, on his great journey of exploration, and the Catholic priests sought to teach them the Christian religion."

William Clark made his early career on the exploits of the Lewis and Clark expedition that mapped the Western United States which had been purchased during the administration of President Thomas Jefferson. When Lewis died, Clark gained more importance as an expert on the peoples he had encountered. He made St. Louis his headquarters. Once that took place, contingents of Indians came to visit. Usually they had requests for goods, food, money, and protection. Some complained about neighboring tribes that became unfriendly when different tribes moved into new territory and squeezed alongside other tribes long established in an area.

"The Indians were greatly disappointed, however, because they could not discover the Great Book they were seeking. Two of them died in St. Louis, and when in the spring the two survivors left again for their far away homes, the farewell address delivered by one of them voiced the whole pathos of their unfulfilled longing."

Notice that two of the Indians died. We may not know the cause, but it could have been disease, hunger, a fight, or more.

If you haven't "seen" Germans in this article, then sharpen your wit. What the Indians faced was similar to the societal set of circumstances that your ancestors may have faced. German immigrants were new to the area. They were not common to the eyes and ears of established citizens. So, those early Germans were "not normal"; they were different, strange, foreign.

You don't need to visit the past to understand how the situation played out. Example: Your house needs to be vacated due to repairs. You need to stay in a hotel for a week, maybe two. The hotel that is most convenient and that fits your wallet has just hosted people from a Third-World country where you heard that disease and "strange practices" were

common. Do you want to SLEEP in the bed that "they" slept in? Eat in the same restaurant? Drink from the same glass, even though it (hopefully) has been washed and disinfected?

Germans were shunned at first when they came to communities that were not Germanic. Let's realize that St. Louis was a Spanish town at first. European history shows how Holy Roman Emperor Charles V (of Spain) had major difficulties with German states in the 1500s. The Spanish had no great love for Germans even by 1800. In 1803 St. Louis was very French. Long-standing animosity brewed between the French and Germans for countless years over border disputes and cultural separation, even though both cultures traced their roots to Germanic origins, generally. When Napoleon rose to power, he dominated the German Rhineland and bled them of young men conscripted into his armies. The French disliked Germans even more than did the Spanish.

To keep history straight, we should add that the Spanish and French were competitive and at times anti-social toward each other. Old European practices were apparent even in the New World.

Anti-German animosity was not in every citizen's heart in the Midwest. But its influence was notable. What eased the animosity was the thought that perhaps Germans were good customers ready to buy supplies and were simply using St. Louis as a stopping point on their way West. No doubt, some did. Many didn't. Once that realization took root, English-speaking and French-speaking citizens had to decide how to cope. More than that--they had to co-exist -- peaceably, if possible.

Other references from that era indicate that Indians visited St. Louis regularly, sometimes in small bands. They might have slept in the outdoors if the weather cooperated, and milled around town until they either saw Clark on a tribal business matter or until they chose to head back to their people. For newly arrived Germans, there was no turning back. The vast majority spent their precious money on the trip over, a little land, and the dream of a bright future that they would not have had in over-populated Europe.

In many respects, Indians were not the only troubled people. Newly arrived Germans had almost as many serious difficulties in settling down and planning their future.

As expressions of their faith, a number of warm-hearted Catholics, Lutherans, and Protestants saw the plight of Indian visitors and reached out to them in kindness and peace. So did humanitarians and some free-thinking

people of the day. Those same groups of Midwesterners saw the ways Germans were ill treated and showed compassion. Not always, but occasionally.

Up to the 1850s, circumstances made St. Louis a “cold” boom town socially. After the swing from Spanish, then French, the site became part of the United States which was still an unpredictable venture in their minds. If you read old documents from those times, St. Louis skepticism was strong. Individualism was notable. The old families that had defended their holding in and around town were less prone to “be open” to others, including immigrants and Indians. Not many people thought about doing something special for them, outside of selling them boots, booze, and other necessities for their Westward trek.

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Tom Schwarztrauber (itshockey@gmail.com) has made major discoveries in his ancestry. You may be fascinated to know what those are. Drop Tom a line and ask. Maybe he'll share some tips!

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Hoping to Find it in Bremerhaven

In the 1880s, one of the ports of choice for emigrants departing Germany is known as Bremerhaven (which translates to Harbor of the City of Bremen). Bremen has a rich history as a free city-state, with connections to Lower Saxony and the town of Nordenham.

The port was necessary since Bremen is recessed away from the sea coast. If a free city was to function on its own, it maximized every avenue for business and income.

It's importance has risen in the past century. But even if it hadn't, Bremerhaven would have been known as one of the last major city areas seen by the ancestors of many German Americans today.

Several people in G-SIG have studied the subject and tried to research information from related sources. Occasionally someone reports that they will be visiting Bremerhaven and intend to research in the files that are kept there.

First of all, don't expect to simply walk up to an official in a depository of books and files and expect the whole world to be at your fingertips. In

fact, you may do almost as well by researching some of the identical files from the comfort of your computer keyboard at home.

Kathy Wurth, a G-SIGer who regularly has traveled to Germany, says, "The link for the German Emigrant Database...may be a little misleading for some folks....It is my understanding that the reconstruction of these lists is from the U.S. ships lists. They are just building a database from that. I know we have had quite a few people anxious to get to the emigration museum in Bremerhaven for this reason but the records they have there are the same as what we can get here." Her main contact person in Germany agrees. Kathy offers this link:

<http://hotel432.server4you.de/passagierlisten/index.php?lang=en&=>

http://www.genealogy.net/vereine/maus/auswanderung/quellen_de.pdf
(in German)

Karl Daubel lived for a while in Germany. He also agrees. "Do your research here in the U.S.A. Do not expect to make a major discovery in Bremerhaven. If a person does, then they are just very lucky, in my opinion.

"My recollection is that it is a little bit of surviving German information with a major part from U.S.A. records. The German records were kept only for a short time. Sort of like a storage area and the new stuff came in the front and the older records were trashed out the back. They only had so much room for record keeping and no sense of future needs. Besides, the wars make it difficult."

Karl says to note: Deutsche Auswanderer-Datenbank: German Emigrants Database. He then offers more tips:

"Home page. Not much to look at. Go to the next link after this."

<http://www.dad-recherche.de/hmb/index.html>

Several pages will explain some details:

<http://www.deutsche-auswanderer-datenbank.de/index.php?id=55>

<http://www.deutsche-auswanderer-datenbank.de/index.php?id=51>

<http://www.deutsche-auswanderer-datenbank.de/index.php?id=54>

At one site, some interesting background information is offered. "It is extremely difficult to make any accurate statistical and social evaluation because the sources are so scattered and non-standardized." If you simply center on Germany, it's worth knowing that "historically relevant sources are scattered across some 3,000 archives and libraries. "Much of the original data on the emigrants in their home towns and villages have been lost."

Thus, "the passenger manifests of the emigrant ships take on special importance. They contain a mass of serial data which lends itself very well to electronic evaluation." Indeed, the connection may yield a good amount of information.

Even if you are not sure of your ancestral departure site, you may want to learn more about Bremerhaven. There were other places from which emigrants sailed from Germany. But we'll save that subject for a future edition!

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New but Full of Ideas

G-SIG's Dorothy E. Johnson (dorothy.e.johnson@boeing.com) is a relative newcomer to ancestral research, but she is gung-ho on the subject. Recently she went into a "preservationist" mode. She wants to save the memories of the only surviving brother of her departed father. That uncle turned 90 and has some tales to tell about serving off the West Coast on the light cruiser *USS Phoenix*.

"He has told me a couple stories that I don't think he has shared with anyone else," Dorothy admitted. "I would love to share my dad's WWII story (drawings) with him and talk to him about more WWII stuff."

Fortunately, he has a sharp mind. The recollections would be little nuggets of history to preserve.

"We just mailed him a DNA test, so hope to get the test done soon." Right on! Never put off something of this type that may be important to you and your family.

Still, Dorothy can feel as if not enough progress is being made in early years of family history, notably in the Civil War. She is attempting to trace the steps of her great-great-grandfather Benjamin. But no pension files were uncovered.

She contends: "The archivist said that file was either (1) never transferred from the Veterans' Administration to the National Archives, or more likely (2) the file is at the National Archives but has been misfiled (rare, but happens). No additional info on the minor other than the guardian. This info comes from pension index cards on Ancestry.com and Fold3.com."

She goes on. "I think this means I could look on Ancestry.com and Fold3.com for derivations of Benjamin's name in hopes of finding something misfiled. What do you think?"

I encouraged her to "keep plugging...! Never say never! Once a person served in the Union Army, there has to be some trace of his record."

Widen the search, says I. "Late last year I stumbled upon the mention of one of my ancestral Civil War soldiers as being one of five wounded in a battle during the war. He was mentioned in a book printed in recent years! So you see, there is information that floats around...bits and piece that need to be strung together."

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Exchange! G-SIG Comments, ideas, and requests

+ Spend time playing online with variations in name spellings, key phrases relating to your ancestors' type of work, and events that may have taken place in their lives. Check into areas where they lived in America and you may find a hint on where they came from in Germany. How? If they had close friends or were involved in baptisms, check the information on those other people and see if perhaps those entries show the name of a German town. It could be YOURS!

You may share your discovery or offer ideas for others in this section (limit 150 words). We reserve the privilege to shorten and edit. Send your submission to: persch3@hotmail.com.

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