

G-SIG FORUM #21

...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 persch3@hotmail.com.

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Look for the Old and the New

Serious researchers of German heritage and genealogy are quick to point out that it is prudent to seek old sources of information along with new sources. Example: old one-of-a-kind files may be brittle to use and restricted to the most competent and respected researchers. But if a new book is released that is a compilation of old information, it could be a real treasure for you to utilize in the convenience of your home.

Any genealogical society or library worth its salt will have such books, perhaps even CDs, on subjects you could find enlightening. These may include maps, burial lists, immigration lists, and more. If you have not checked with the St. Louis Genealogical Society lately at www.stlgs.org/ (see address on last page of this *FORUM*), then do yourself a favor and find out what is available for purchase to help you along your path of learning.

Then there are new books that assess the progress of German heritage and immigrant realities. OK, so not all books are filled with revelations. But perhaps a few new ideas or twists on old information surface in the text. One of those might be just the thing you need to make better sense of your research.

Historian Robert Frizzell is known for his writings. I look forward to reading his book, "Independent Immigrants," the story of Hanoverian Germans in Western Missouri. I am told that the author includes portraits of families and individuals that nicely demonstrate the effort and risk met by pioneers in the New World. Sometimes authors like Frizzell make public appearances and may even be available for specific questions. This is yet another potentially great resource for you.

One source of information on Frizzell and others is the German Culture Center, that may be reached at gcc@umsl.edu . Larry Marsh is the coordinator. The center is located at UMSL, #50 TCC Building, One University Boulevard, St. Louis MO 63121--(314) 516-6620.

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Keep Momentum Building!

“I started with some basic information from my family's elders as to where certain ancestors were at certain times, as with the birth of the next ancestor in the chain. What I did not have, and what I've been wanting to find -- besides verification -- is more about the size and what I'll call the direction of the family -- plus more about earlier ancestors, particularly for the wives and mothers -- so as to flesh out some of the branches that were seemingly overlooked.” So says G-SIG's Gordon Seyffert (gordonseyffert@mac.com).

Involving older family members is always a wise starting point. Gordon Had a partial *Ahnentafel* (or "ancestor table"). He has some names, dates, places, and occupations (which were very important for confirming identity). “But there was no indication as to who the siblings might have been in each generation.”

Gordon only found a few names listed, and not all were traced directly to him. For a time, he thought his family could have married into the beer-famous Busch family, but it was not so.

In his research, Gordon learned that some ancestors were part of a guild, others were not. He theorizes that his ancestor may have sought to join a guild, thus obligating the ancestor to move away for an apprenticeship or the later wandering stage of the journeyman. Let me add that while I was in Germany, I saw some of the journeymen, dressed in older style clothing typical of their craft or century or so ago, working their way across Germany with special jobs as they plied their woodworking trade.

Gordon has been known to make a full day of research. It is not unusual for him to return home after some deep research in church books, then turn to his home computer for more information.

What is the success rate? “The odds would be better if more people read these records as I do, so that they had some earlier names and dates to share in their queries or family files. Many often know only the name and birth date of the patriarch of their family who crossed the Big Pond, and not the names and dates of the grandparents and/or parents, uncles and aunts, and possibly brothers and sisters left behind.”

As time progressed, Gordon has wondered about siblings of ancestors. Did they have children? If so, did they leave or stay in Germany? Is there any interplay between the history of the time/locale and the history of his family?

“These are the kinds of questions that, when answered (if only tentatively), lead to stories about the family that I can pass down to my children. Often the stories speak to the issue of why they might have left, and why they came here. That's much more likely to be remembered than the names and dates and places, which are unfamiliar to their ears and, by themselves, unlikely to be remembered once I'm gone,” he says.

Finally, Gordon is all for filling out the family tree. “I find it very satisfying to write in new names, dates, and places on my charts. That's only the preliminary step, of course. I still want to find the stories that pertain to these people, just as for the ancestors whose names and data I had at the start. But there's a sense of accomplishment that comes from discovering new people in the tree just on my own.

“For years, I told myself I couldn't do this, that I'd just have to be content with latching on to someone else's research. That was true, so long as I never made an effort. But my abilities grow with practice and with experience.”

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Prussia and Russia

G-SIG's Prussian Cluster is an example of progress. Participants glean information and apply it.

Prussian Cluster facilitator Pat von zur Muehlen explains how *Schwarzmeerdeutsche* (Black Sea Germans) were Germans who settled in Russia at the invitation of Catherine the Great. These Germans were distinct from the Volga Germans who immigrated to Russia at the same time. "They settled in what is now Ukraine and on the Crimean Peninsula," she says. "The first German settlers came from West Prussia and arrived in 1787. Germans from western and southwestern Germany arrived later along with some Germans from the Warsaw area. Among them were the Mennonites who had received a personal invitation from Catherine the Great. The Mennonites were known to be capable farmers."

Basically, when Catherine the Great (who had a German heritage) acquired Turkish land north of the Black Sea (now Ukraine) she issued the invitation for Prussian Mennonites to farm the soil of the Russian steppes. Thereby, they would be free to worship and would be exempt from military service. Many years of successful farming followed. However, with the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, private ownership of land ceased. Many farming families returned to Germany. Others remained, facing relocation to very harsh areas of Siberia.

The Prussian Cluster discovered that there are three categories of Black Sea Germans: Bessarabian Germans, Dobrujan Germans, and Bukovina Germans. Cluster participants were encouraged to check into each at:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bessarabian_Germans

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dobrujan_Germans

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bukovina_Germans

As for the Mennonites: <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mennonites>

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***'Where do I Start?'** by Gerald Perschbacher*

G-SIG's Barb Larson was wondering how to start a serious search of her German ancestry. She had a bit of information that connected her lineage to Meppen, Germany, but she did not know what to do from there. These are the suggestions I offered. Several of these points may help you in similar efforts. You would not necessarily need to follow the ideas in order.

First suggestion: Check items and resources online. Here is one on history: en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meppen (of course, there will probably be more -- and of deeper scholarly nature -- if a detailed search is enacted).

Second suggestion: If you can make contact with people who have plowed ancestral ground in your area of Germany, they may offer ideas and names of contacts. See what can be found (familytreemaker.genealogy.com/users/).

Next, become acquainted with the history of that area. This may help you in future research (such as, "Why did they leave in a certain year?", etc.).

Meppen is an old site, but not the oldest. It traces its official status as a town to c. 900 A.D. While it is considered Saxony today, find out what territory it was in when your ancestors departed.

Another idea: Study some of the history of Germany to see how Meppen and Saxony were part of the larger picture.

Then establish a contact in or near Meppen. Perhaps you can do this via e-mail or through a Web site. Many German cities have historical societies. Perhaps there is a university nearby with a history department. Maybe church officials can help. Write your questions in simple English. Use short sentences. Ask for the basics. Keep to three or four questions. (You can always ask more, after you establish contact.) Search online for Babel fish translator or something similar, then translate your message into German. You can highlight and convert the reply into English. Do not hesitate to ask if the contact knows English. Some can read it OK, but they prefer to write in German.

Next idea: Cast your request far and wide. You can do this by phone, mail, or e-mail. Make at least 2 or 3 new contacts every week until you receive an encouraging reply. Then concentrate your effort where progress is being made.

Lastly, send a request to me for G-SIG FORUM. I can place it in the *EXCHANGE!* section (limit 50 words). In the notice, merely ask the basics.

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Coins, Please!

If you are like many people, you don't have to be a coin collector to enjoy the history behind coinage. That's especially true of Germany.

I took my own advice on this subject and attended a large coin show held in downtown St. Louis. Dealers came from many states, each setting up their cases and displays on tables. The majority dealt in American coins. But a good number of others offered coinage issued by what are commonly called "German States," pre-1870.

Even the casual observer could have learned something. German coins were plentiful from the 1500s on up. Variety is diverse, as are thickness and weight. Symbols often related to counts and dukes. Coinage changed upon the death of a noble leader. It is a strange feeling to see a coin that originated from the territory where your ancestors had lived. It makes a person wonder if relatives had once held that very same coin!

The coins can tell a story, of sorts. Really, it takes some good books on the subject to unlock the information represented by a coin. By asking around, you probably could find several good sources of information about German coinage. Certain books on this subject preface entries with historical information well worth knowing. How can you find these books? Check with coin experts. Ask a librarian. Search online.

Territories decided their coinage based on trade and the influence of their leading noble family.

In talking with collectors of German coins, it became clear that their passion is based on history. They seek a connection to the past. The value of most "German States" coinage is low, except for an occasional rare gold piece or prized silver coin. That means you could own a few pre-1900 German coins for a tiny outlay.

The rise of free cities also is captured in coins. Frankfurt on the Main, for instance, was declared a free imperial city long ago and, therefore, had the right to mint its own coinage. On the coins' surfaces in the mid 1800s, written in German, is the declaration of the city's free status. Even someone who has only a general idea of their ancestral site can enjoy seeing coins from large free cities in or near their family's area. Some larger and more valuable coins from free cities traveled far into the adjoining countryside, especially if those coins were made of precious metal.

If you have the occasion to visit a coin shop or show, ask about coins from "German States," and see if you can have some fun!

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From Old Wittenberg...

G-SIG's John Wittenberg (jwittenberg@raiins.com) is searching for his roots. One day, in a short conversation, he asked about his surname. He knew there was a town named Wittenberg in southeastern Missouri. He wondered if his name was derived from there.

"Not likely," I told him. "The town originated in the mid 1800s, generally long past the era of families taking surnames from their surroundings. There is a better bet that your name originated from Wittenberg, Germany, which is quite older."

Let's ponder that idea.

Many Germanic surnames originated from locations or lines of work. Surnames relating to work were probably used in old villages to differentiate one Hans from another. Hence, Hans der Schmidt (black smith) was known for metal work. If Michael worked as the village baker, he may have taken the name Backer. The surname "Wittenberg" would have been employed when a family LEFT that village. Hence, "Conrad from Wittenberg" could be differentiated from "Conrad the Backer" or "Conrad from Oldstein."

There are cases where an "—er" ending had been added to a name. If someone carried the name "Wittenberger," it could mean their family was among those who had longtime ties with the community. Perhaps their family had been *Burghers*, holding leadership roles in the town or village. However, it just as easily could mean the family had moved away from their town of origin.

"Wittenberg" could be a shortened version of "Wittenberger," the latter of which may have been derived through patronymics. The sons and grandsons of a prominent man called "Herr Wittenberg" might have been called "Wittenbergers."

"John, if you trace your ancestry back far enough, it mostly likely will end up in Wittenberg, Germany, remembered as a university town and as the seat of power for the duke in the 1500s and later," I noted.

Perhaps the real challenge is tracing John's lineage between St. Louis and the old town of Wittenberg!

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Is That Really German?

Are Cook, Bower, Farmer, Smith, and Tanner German names? Perhaps. These could be English translations of German originals. As immigrants were registered in

America, some may have wanted the transformation to show their new life in the New World. Or perhaps officials who were registering the immigrants took it upon themselves to make the changes. What does this mean for researchers today? Simple: if Cook is the name and you suspect German heritage, check under Koch. If Bower or Farmer, check Bauer. If Tanner, look for Gerber. There are always derivations of Miller and Meyer to investigate, along with Smith-Schmidt-Schmitz. This may take some digging, but results could be worthwhile.

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

+ **From Carol Marlo** (carolandjoemarlo@yahoo.com): “My German roots are from ancestors who came here through Texas and New Orleans from the Rhein area. One branch came from Miesenheim b. Andernach on the western shore of the Rhine River, and the other from Wuerges, near Bad Camberg east of the Rhine in Hesse.

+ **From: Christel Handel** (ckhandel@mac.com): Learn German! Classes are formed each year; check into this very soon! Classes are held at St. Louis Community College at Forest Park. There are classes for beginning German, intermediate, and advanced. For those 65 or older, tuition is only \$ 10. For details, call Jennifer Schaber at (314) 644-9376.

+ **WANTED: hardbound book**, “The German Church on the American Frontier, 1840-1866,” by Carl E. Schneider, printed in St. Louis in 1939. Contact Gerald Perschbacher at (314) 317-4175 (persch3@hotmail.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 persch3@hotmail.com
or mail it to: Attn: G-SIG, #4 Sunnen Dr., Suite 140, St. Louis, MO 63143