MAX KADE INSTITUTE
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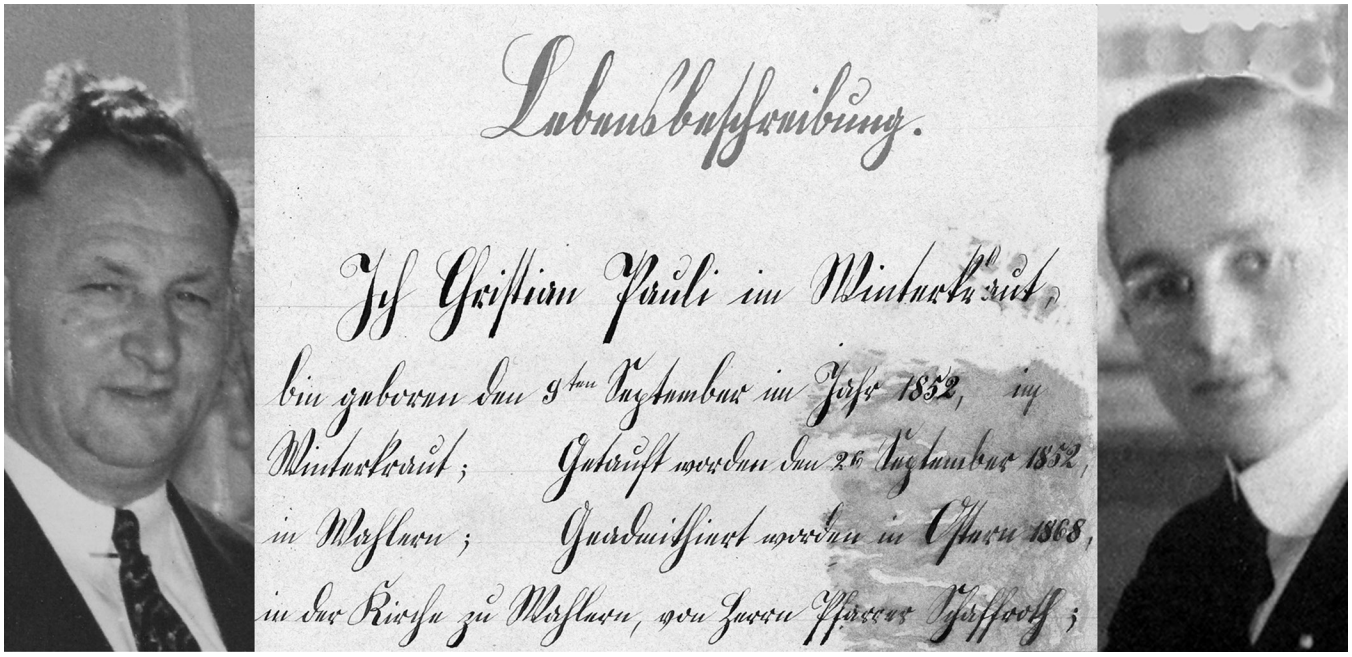
History Is Personal: Three Memoirs of German Americans in the Archives of the Max Kade Institute

Antje Petty



The stories of three German Americans (left to right): Otto Schroeder, Christian Pauli, and Theophil Stoerker

INSIDE

History is an intricate web of individual experiences, stories, events and—above all—personal perspectives. This issue of the Friends Newsletter highlights three German Americans who told their own life stories for posterity. Now preserved in the Max Kade Institute Archives, their records come in different formats and were created at different times and in different places—each one of them a piece in the mosaic of American history. What they have in common is an immigrant background and the German language.

Christian Pauli of Winterkraut/Wahlern in Canton Bern, Switzerland, started his "autobiography" in 1881, at the age of twenty-nine, two years before he emigrated to America, and continued until his death in 1914. Writing in the old German script in an eight-by-nine-inch notebook, he began with a retrospective of his childhood in Switzerland. For the most part, though, he chronicled his struggles trying to make a living as a farmer and to support a family in Moniteau County, Missouri. The original notebook is still in the family

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of Christian Pauli's descendants, who allowed the diary to be scanned for the Max Kade Institute's digital collection and also provided a transcription (modern German type) and an English translation. (See article by Antje Petty on page 8.)

Otto Schroeder was born in Cologne, Germany, in 1899, and emigrated to Napa, California, in 1926. Between 1986 and 1988, he sat down with a tape recorder and told his life story in German. The resulting eighty-six audio cassette tapes are now part of the Max Kade Institute Sound Archive and have all been digitized. Like Christian Pauli, Otto Schroeder also reflects on his childhood and the reasons for his family to emigrate. Like Pauli, his family also moved directly to a place in America where they knew people from home. For Schroeder, however, the immigration process was much more complicated than it had been for Pauli forty-three years earlier. Otto Schroeder was an engineer and inventor who made a career in shipbuilding. (See article by Julian Ging and Sandra Vollmer on page 11.)

Theophil Stoerker, born in 1897 in Illinois, was the son and grandson of German immigrants. Like his father he became a minister in the German Evangelical Synod of North America, in whose churches German was the language of worship and general communication. Reverend Stoerker was ordained in June 1918, shortly before the end of World War I, at the height of anti-German sentiments in America. In 1975 he decided to write down for posterity his experiences as a German-speaking pastor in the World War I era and self-published the story under the title "The Greatest Christmas Ever, December 25, 1918," a copy of which is now in the Max Kade Institute library. (See article by JoAnn Tiedemann on page 4.)

At the Max Kade Institute, we are grateful to the families who have contributed the stories of their ancestors to our collection and allowed them to become part of the narrative of American history. We invite all of our readers who have German-American documents or family histories to share them with the Max Kade Institute. MKI Librarian Kevin Kurdylo will be happy to answer your questions: mki@library.wisc.edu.

Greetings, Friends and Readers!

Greetings from the Max Kade Institute! This has been another productive semester for MKI, with much activity both at the Institute itself and across the state through our outreach programming. Kevin Kurdylo and JoAnn Tiedemann, a retired professional librarian who has given generously of her time to assist with important work in our library, have been busy processing donations of books and other materials, including family histories such as those featured in this issue of the Friends Newsletter. MKI Associate Director Antje Petty, in addition to her work on campus, has been on the road presenting in Kiel, Oshkosh, and Davenport, Iowa; she also co-led a very successful workshop for genealogists in partnership with the Wisconsin Historical Society. My own outreach work, much of it centered on the Amish in Wisconsin, has recently taken me to Muscoda, Milwaukee, Franklin, Appleton, and

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Genealogy Workshop: "Finding Our German Ancestors in Europe"

Saturday, February 23, 2019, 9:00 a.m. – 3:00 p.m.
UW–Madison Memorial Library, Room 126, 728 State Street, Madison
with Antje Petty / Co-sponsored by the Wisconsin Historical Society

REGISTER ONLINE at www.wisconsinhistory.org
Registration begins December 14, 2018, and is first come, first served.
Limited to 75 registrants!
Fees (including lunch): $36 for members of the Friends of MKI and WHS; $40 for non-members

Session I "All I know is they were from Germany"
Before you can conduct meaningful family research in Europe, it is crucial to know where your ancestors lived at a certain time. This session offers advice on how to identify ancestral hometowns in the context of Central Europe's complex territorial history.

Session II Lives lived and documented
Vital records are usually the first ones we try to find when researching our ancestors in Europe, but people's lives were documented in many ways. Whether our ancestors owned land (or not), paid taxes, attended a school or a church, joined the military, had a business or a bank account, were members of a guild, club, or community organization, etc. —chances are, they left traces that can help us discover their stories.

Session III Finding documents from German-speaking Europe
This session is an introduction to finding historical records from German-speaking Europe, online and off. It will include tips on how to do archival research as well as on how to navigate and use the ever-growing online selection of German and other European historical documents and genealogical resources.

Session IV Working with historical German documents
You found a family document. You made a copy. But now what? In this session you will learn strategies to efficiently interpret historic German documents, even if you do not speak the language and cannot read the script.

For more information contact Antje Petty (apetty@wisc.edu / 608-262-7546 or Lori Bessler (Lori.Bessler@wisconsinhistory.org / 608-264-6519)

The Society for German-American Studies 43rd Annual Symposium
"German in America: Words, Sounds, and Images"

Madison, Wisconsin, 11–14 April 2019.

Mark your calendars! For the first time in its history, the Society for German-American Studies will hold its annual symposium in Madison, Wisconsin!

The thematic focus of the Symposium will be the diverse expressions of German culture in America, past and present. Topics will relate to this country's German backgrounds in texts, music, and visual culture, as well as in education, religion, politics, journalism, commerce, and other areas. Some presentations will focus on specifically linguistic topics such as structural and sociolinguistic aspects of heritage varieties of German in America.

Location and program details will be posted at a later date. Check mki.wisc.edu or sgas.org for updates, or contact Antje Petty (apetty@wisc.edu / 608-262-7546)

"The Greatest Christmas Ever": A German-American Pastor's Service on December 25, 1918

JoAnn Tiedemann

Rev. Theophil Stoerker at work in the dining room of his boarding house in New Albin, IA, 1918. Not only was the dining room his "office," the after-hours town telephone switchboard was also in the room, providing boarders with the opportunity to know what was going on in town!

The exhibit "German Iowa and the Global Midwest," created by the University of Iowa was on display in the Max Kade Institute's gallery on the fourth floor of the University Club in late spring. That, along with the conclusion of the four-year centennial of World War I, brings to my mind the stories my grandfather told and wrote about his experiences as a newly-ordained pastor in the far northeastern corner of Iowa in the final year of the war. What follows are excerpts from his personal story.

My grandfather, Rev. Theophil Stoerker, son and grandson of German immigrants, was the son, son-in-law, brother, brother-in-law, cousin, and father of ministers ordained in the *Deutsche Evangelische Synode von Nord-Amerika* (German Evangelical Synod of North America), which was founded in October 1840 by a group of six German Protestant clergymen from the area around St. Louis, Missouri. (The [German] Evangelical Synod and the [German] Reformed Church in the United States merged to form the Evangelical and Reformed Church in 1934. A further merger with the Association of Congregational Christian Churches in 1957 formed the present-day United Church of Christ.)

Theo Stoerker graduated from Eden Seminary (at the time in Wellston, a suburb of St. Louis), and was ordained on June 2, 1918. The president of the Synod had assigned him to serve as the first resident pastor of St. Peter's German Evangelical Church in New Albin, Iowa, a town of about seven hundred. Before he left his home in Hartsburg, Missouri, his father, Rev. Conrad Friedrich Stoerker, shared from a newspaper the May 1918 "Language Proclamation" of W. L. Harding, Governor of Iowa. Commonly known as the "Babel Proclamation," it pronounced the following "rules":

1. English should be the medium of instruction in all schools, "public, private and denominational,"
2. Conversation in public places and on the telephone must be in the English language,
3. All public addresses should be in the English language, and
4. "Let those who cannot speak or understand the English language conduct their religious worship in their homes."

The pastor arrived in New Albin on Friday, June 26, and was met at the town's railroad depot by the treasurer of the congregation. While the treasurer said he was aware of the governor's proclamation, he did not seem particularly concerned and told Rev. Stoerker that the service on Sunday would have to be in German, because "we have only German song books."

On Saturday morning, the treasurer visited Rev. Stoerker at his boarding house to inform him that the church board had met and decided the next day's sermon was to be in English. In

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Dear Sir

New Albin Iowa, January 13th 1918

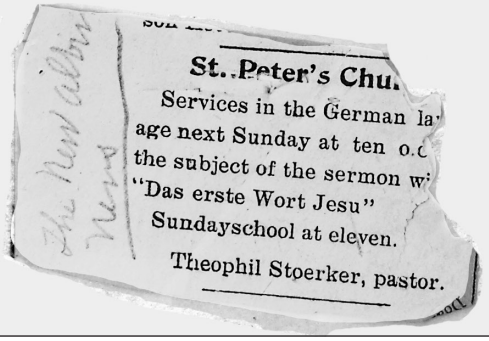
Allamakee 1/15/19-G

Hon W.L.Harding.

Des Moins Iowa.

Dear Sir-.

I beg to hand You, a clipping from a Paper published here. When Your order forbiding the use of all Foreign language in Public, this German Church for a short time obeyed the order, but are now advertising the fact that their Services will be conducted in German. This order was obeyed for some time, when the Germans met on the Street, or in public places, but recently when two or more meet German is about the only language eeused. Has this order been revoked, or was it a war measure to terminate at the close of hostilites. A wealthy German Farmer, a few days since when in the Post Office, made a sluring remark of the President. This Man has been up before the Board for disloyal remarks before, and for selling a One thousand dollar Goverment Bond at a discount that He was compeled to purchase, This Bond was not sold because He needed the money. These Germans are more bitter and out spoken and unloyal than before the War closed. The late Election shows where the German Republican vote went. Your majority was greatly reduced because You were 100 % loyal. This was true not only in Iowa, but in all States, all loyal Men were either defeted or elected by greatly reduced makorities. We should cut out all foreign language from our Schools and Churches and stop the effort to Germanise America.


The New Albin
News

St. Peter's Chu
Services in the German la
age next Sunday at ten o.c
the subject of the sermon w
"Das erste Wort Jesu"
Sundayschool at eleven.
Theophil Stoerker, pastor.

Very Truly Yours,

A.W. Baldwin

Image courtesy of the State Historical Society of Iowa, Des Moines, Iowa

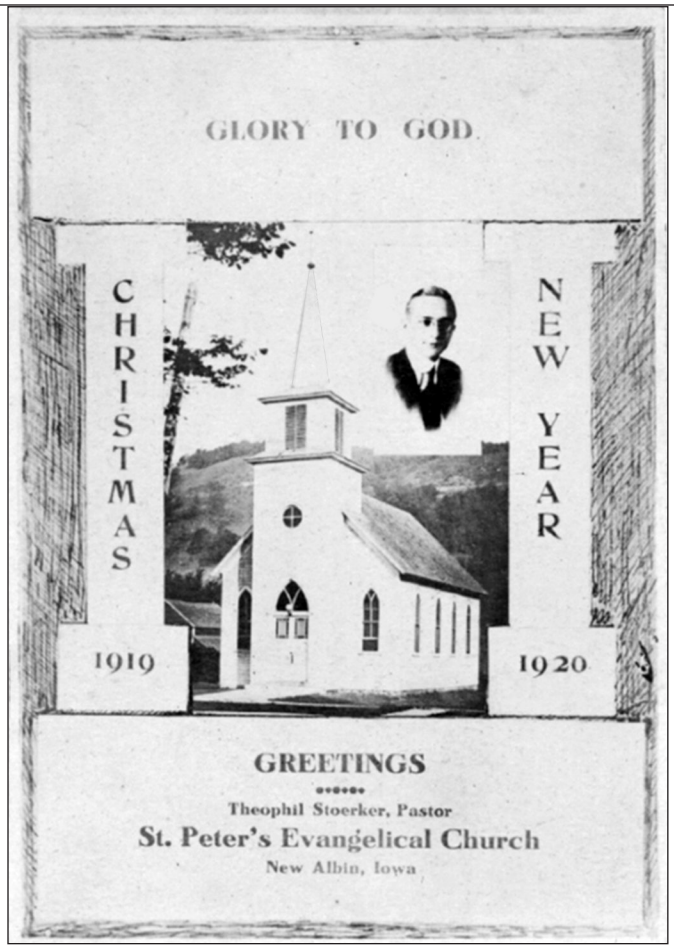
Letter from January 1919 (although the writer's "corrected" date says January 13, 1918, the notation for the reply is 1/15/1919, and the letter refers to "before the war closed," so it can be assumed the writer mistyped the year that early in the new year) addressed to Iowa Gov. Harding, showing the announcement of Rev. Stoerker's services in German, and listing several other "offenses" by German-speakers in New Albin. It concludes, "We should cut out all foreign language from our Schools and Churches and stop the effort to Germanize America." (On December 4, 1918, after the war had ended, Harding rescinded his "Babel Proclamation," which had required all communications to be in English.)

Continued from page 4

the afternoon, the patient treasurer returned to say enough members of the congregation had talked to the board members that their decision had been reversed. The new minister had one sermon in German, that he had preached four times, and one in English which he had preached three times. Knowing that the congregation had really no choice but to accept his appointment—it was not a matter winning a vote of approval —he decided to wait until Sunday to decide which sermon he would preach.

On Sunday morning, Rev. Stoerker walked to the church and found the members of the congregation lining the walkway from the street to the church door. He felt their warmth and curiosity and greeted them in the same fashion. At the threshold sat an old man, who, after a moment to inspect the new pastor asked, "*Predigen Sie heute deutsch?*" (Will you preach in German today?) "*Sehr wahrscheinlich,*" (Very probably) was the response from my grandfather. "*Gut, dann geh' ich 'rein.*" (Good, then I will go in.) The man arose and, followed by the members assembled along the walk, entered the church.

At a congregational meeting after the service it was decided that the language of the services would alternate, German one week and English the next. Rev. Stoerker sensed this was not quite in keeping with the governor's proclamation, but kept quiet. English hymnbooks were ordered for church and Sunday School, with the latter to be conducted entirely in English. The congregation had also determined that $50.00 per month was a fair salary.



Christmas 1919 postcard showing St. Peter's German Evangelical Church, New Albin, IA, created by their first resident pastor, Rev. Theophil Stoerker (also shown).

Further experiences of this fresh, new pastor included meeting the local newspaper publisher and printer, a German immigrant, but also chairman of the local Council of Defense; being taunted during his evening walks by groups of boys yelling anti-German epithets; and being asked to read four-minute patriotic speeches provided by the Council of Defense at each week's church service (he declined). Then there were the popular songs of the day being sung at the local ice cream parlor by the same young people who were in the church's Sunday school, including one with the line, "If you don't like your Uncle Sammy, then go back to your home o'er the sea." ["Don't Bite the Hand That's Feeding You," music by Jimmie Morgan, lyrics by Thomas Hoier. It was revived during World War II.]

Grandfather was reported to the county as a minister preaching in the German language and received a summons to appear September 13, 1918, before Judge Murphy in Waukon, the county seat of Allamakee County, Iowa, where New Albin is also located. He was allowed to be accompanied by two members of his congregation. Norwegian, Swedish and other German pastors were also present at the meeting where a Rev. Dr. J. C. Orth (President of the German-American Patriotic Associa-

tion) explained how their work was a violation of the governor's proclamation. He stated that "German Kultur" was responsible for the atrocities now occurring, and that the pastors would be required to sign a loyalty declaration stating that German authorities were responsible for the declaration of war that the United States had long strived to avoid, that the duty of every person residing in the United States was to assist in the war effort, that peace terms as defined by the United States would have to be unqualifiedly accepted by the enemy nations before cessation of hostilities, that all public addresses with any reference to the war shall be presented in accordance with the above, and finally, that any address made in a foreign language must first be made in English and no one would be allowed to hear the foreign language presentation if he had not heard the English first.

While most of the ministers signed the agreement, they also asked if they might be permitted to alternate weekly services, one in English and the next in the other language. This was denied. Finally, Rev. Stoerker approached Judge Murphy and introduced himself. The Judge was surprised to see such a young man at the meeting and asked where he had been born. When the reply was, "Staunton, Illinois," the judge confirmed, "Then you are a citizen of the United States." Rev. Stoerker went on to say that he didn't think there was any law that could require a congregation to lock its church doors during worship to keep out those who had not heard the English address, first. The signees of the loyalty declaration were told they would receive a certificate entitling them to preach in their native tongue under the conditions of the declaration, but Rev. Stoerker never received one.

Members of the church board and Rev. Stoerker decided that St. Peter's Church would alternate Sunday services in German and English, the Sunday school would continue to be conducted only in English, and the Sunday school members would sing one song in English for the German services. The sermon would be twenty minutes in German, preceded by a five-minute outline in English. And so it continued for seven weeks until Armistice Day, November 11, 1918.

The town celebrated all day; church bells rang; in the central square the Kaiser was burned in effigy that night. The trains passing through town no longer carried munitions; instead they were bringing soldiers home. In the church congregation there had been no casualties. In 1975, my grandfather decided to write down what he had experienced during his first months as a new pastor. After fifty-seven years, a failed peace, and another world war, he still called Christmas 1918 "The Greatest Christmas Ever." And it was only all these years later, when researching the historic context of his personal story, that he discovered a church newspaper article from May 1918 noting there was no actual federal or state law that expressly prohibited religious services in German or any other language.

JoAnn Tiedemann is a fourth/fifth-generation German American, German teacher, and former librarian. She has been a member of the Friends since 1993 and currently volunteers in the MKI Library.

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The Autobiography of Christian Pauli of Winterkraut

Antje Petty

On May 3, 1883, Christian Pauli, age thirty, left his hometown of Winterkraut/Wahlern in Canton Bern, Switzerland, to emigrate to America. With him he carried a diary, his "autobiography," which he had started two years earlier "to record the most important events and circumstances precisely and truthfully." The hard-cover notebook itself was specially made for him "by Johann Nidegger in Kein," and had cost two francs. A scan is now in the Max Kade Institute's digital collection.

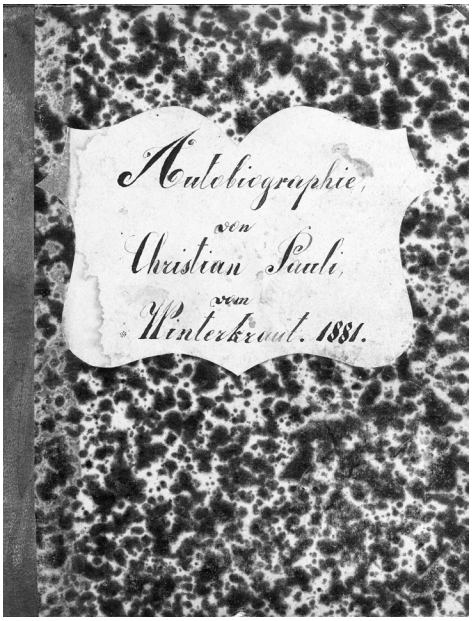
"The Autobiography of Christian Pauli" is a fascinating and poignant account of one individual's personal struggle as he tried to build a life for himself, first in his native Switzerland, and later in America. Pauli began by recounting his childhood "starting from birth" (September 9, 1852), and wrote his last entry on March 29, 1914, the day he died.

Pauli decided to emigrate after years of frustration and failure in Switzerland. The last straw came in the form of a lawsuit over the ownership of his small farm. Six years earlier, he, his sisters, and a cousin had purchased the homestead in Winterkraut that had been in their mother's family, only to be sued over the purchase in an inheritance dispute. At the same time, tragedy hit when Pauli's beloved sister Kathrina died after childbirth and her newborn son, Pauli's godson, passed away soon thereafter. Finally, in the summer of 1882, the lawsuit resulted in the worst outcome possible for Pauli's family: they were forced to sell their stake in the farm and had to leave the property.

On Saturday, March 10, 1883, we baked at Winterkraut for the last time; I, my mother, [sister] *Grith* [who had divorced her husband] *and her 2 sons were still there.* […] *On Maundy Thursday, March 22, 1883, Christili Roggli of Stühlene came and took from us the last good cow we had. Oh no! No more milk or butter ever again! Oh, we are miserable!* […] *We: I, Christian Pauli, my mother, Grith and the kids,* […] *moved from Roggli's house at Winterkraut to Scheurried, and we thus left our home where we were born and had grown up and spent our childhood and youth, gone forever, on Monday, April 9, in the year 1883. This was a very hard fate for us, especially for my mother. Oh, God! Oh, Jesus! Oh, sadness, Oh, heartbreak.**

Pauli immediately headed to the provincial town of Schwarzenburg to inquire about options to emigrate to America and *[o]n Saturday, April 21, 1883, I signed an agreement with the two Leuenberger brothers, the emigration agents in Bern, at the Hotel Bären in Schwarzenburg, to go to Missouri in America. Josi Sime, Fritz Gasser, Chr. Burri and a certain Bucher also signed at the same time. From Bern to California, Missouri, it costs 290 francs for 1 person including a bit of luggage, via the steamship* Normandie.

In great detail, Christian describes his last, hectic days in the "Heimat," as he got ready for the big journey.



Christian Paul's autobiography, begun in 1881

He bought a "nice pocket watch for 33 francs," got himself a shipping crate and some new clothing and paid off his remaining debts and taxes.

On the morning of May 3, Chr. Schuhmacher and Fr. Ruchti came by to get me, then, oh, then, I had to say goodbye to my dear mother and sister Grith, oh sorrow! Thus, on Thursday, May 3, 1883, I left my homeland. At 1 o'clock in the afternoon, I was at the train station in Bern, on Friday we were in Paris, on Saturday, May 5, in Le Havre in the morning, on the ship at 8:30 AM. On May 14, we arrived in New York, oh, how busy the New York harbor is, 100 and 1,000 ships can be seen standing and sailing. How many people there were. On the ship Normandie *there were over 1,700 people. In Europe and America, we stopped a total of 42 times; we traveled for 14 days, 5 days on land and 9 days on the water. On Friday morning at 4 o'clock on May 18, 1883, we arrived in California*

[Moniteau County, Missouri]. *The distance between Bern and California is 1,987 postal hours or 5,960 miles.*

On the day after arrival I helped cheesemaker Fritz Rohrbach make a fence. That was the first work I did in America.

And thus began Christian Pauli's life in his new homeland. Pauli threw himself into his work, laboring as a farmhand around the county. The harshness of the first Missouri winter caught this Swiss immigrant by surprise: *On New Year's Day in 1884 I was bored because it snowed the whole day and was very cold, very cold. On Saturday morning, January 5, 1884, the temperature was 35 degrees below zero. Oh horrors, the whole week was horribly cold.*

Almost a year after his arrival, Christian Pauli fulfilled his dream, and purchased his own farm: *On Saturday, April 26, 1884, I bought a farm from Aenißen Hatsch* [Anderson? Hodge]. *On Monday, April 28, 1884, we had the purchase executed in California. Fritz Rohrbach was there to interpret and to make sure that the purchase was executed properly, and then gave me the money for Jos. Burri's note, 209 dollars. I bought the farm for 250 dollars, I paid 150 immediately, and I owed 100 over the next 3 years, interest at 7%. The farm is 160 acres large, so per acre it was 1½ dollars. I moved into my own home for the first time on Monday, May 5, 1884.*

Pauli immediately wrote home and urged his mother and sister Grith to join him: *At first they were unsure, because they saw the great difficulties posed by such an enormous voyage, but the hope that we could be with each other once again moved them to finally come to America. On April 25, 1884, they held an auction and sold everything they couldn't take with them, cashed in their money, and on May 1, 1884, Mother and Grith and her two sons departed from our dear homeland, Switzerland, and began the journey to America, in order to see me again, and so that we could live with one another again. But ach! The sweet reunion was never to be.*

On the 5th day on the ship, Thursday morning, May 8, 1884, our mother died; she fell asleep quietly and comfortably, she has now completed her hard pilgrimage on this earth, the good woman, Oh, Mother, farewell forever! On the day after she died, the 6th day on the ship, Friday, May 9, 1884, Mother was put into a coffin and dropped into the eerie black depths of the sea; Oh, Mother, how did it end this way?

My sister Margritha and her two sons Fritz and Johann arrived safely in California on Sunday, May 18, at 4 o'clock in the afternoon […]. *It was nice weather when they came, but they did not like my house at all. They did like the trees.*

Pauli had to invest a lot in his farm. *On Thursday, October 2, I bought from Vendul Schumacher a* [second] *mare, 16 years old, for 53 dollars. These two horses were the first horses that I, Christian Pauli, bought as my property. I also bought a plough, and in California I bought an old wagon for 17 dollars and supplies for 23 dollars total. So, I hitched up the wagon in California and drove home—that was the first time I ever drove my own wagon with horses.*

Keeping the farm going was a challenge, however. In his diary, Pauli details his mixed successes with growing grain and raising farm animals. He is jubilant when he was finally able to bring wheat to the mill for the first time (September 1886). But the chores were never-ending, and he and his sister had a hard time keeping the farm going. Many years of bad weather, soil erosion, and various mishaps contributed to bad harvests, and Pauli had to take out more loans. Eventually, in 1888, after disagreements with his sister and her new husband, he decided to sell the farm to them and leave town.

Pauli headed west, in the hope of finding new homestead land and making a fresh start. He traveled in railroad boxcars and on foot, worked as an itinerant farm laborer, and as a lumberjack; he stacked ice blocks and panhandled, but after six months, he had no prospects and returned to Missouri.

I suffered a lot, experienced a lot, heard a lot, and saw a lot, and all of my suffering and hard walking with the carpetbag on my back was for nothing, there is no more public land to be found off of which a family could live, all of the homestead land is worthless, absolutely worthless, there is nothing but weeds and piles of stone where everything burns up in the summer. Many of the farms that have already been taken have nothing valuable on them. How will it be on the ones that are not taken?

Back in California, Missouri, Pauli tried to revoke the purchase agreement for his farm and eventually bought it back from Grith and her husband. However, only two years later, he sold the farm once more, and travelled west again (this time all the way to Oregon) in another vain attempt to find homestead land. Once again he did not succeed and returned to

Missouri, where in February 1891 he purchased another farm in McGirk, Moniteau County. In his diary he writes: *Home, home, above all, above all in the world!—but all alone—lonely and abandoned—God stand by me!*

But Pauli did not have to live alone much longer: *On the day before Fastnacht, Monday, February 13, 1893, I married Anna-Maria Fahrni, before Pastor Umbek in California. After the wedding we had our picture taken, I took my little lady home, we didn't get home until nighttime, under rain and darkness, the road was very bad on that day, it had been iced over. Now my single days are over! Forever! Now I've gotten married, too! Oh how happy! Oh how happy! Oh how happy!*

In December 1893, their daughter Emma was born, the first of seven children. Unfortunately, making a living on the farm continued to be a struggle. Christian Pauli had to take on more and more debt. In 1900, he sold the farm, paid off some of his debt, and bought cheaper, lower-quality land in the neighborhood: O*n April 26, 1900, I bought a meager, overgrown farm, 60 acres, for 825 dollars from John Pace near McGirk, Missouri.* But his problems continued. *We had a very hard time here at first, we couldn't grow enough, we had to buy almost everything we needed on credit at the store.*

After years of ups and downs, Christian Pauli slipped further and further into debt. *Oh misfortune after misfortune, unlucky accounting. In the year 1911 we were more than 3,000 dollars in debt, to more than 20 locations. Yes, more than three thousand dollars in debt, it's enough to make you crazy***.**

Wedding photo of Anna-Maria (Fahrni) and Christian Pauli, 1893

In the last pages of his autobiography, Christian Pauli includes a detailed year-by-year ledger of his income, expenditures, profit, and debts. He started the accounting with the year 1874 in Switzerland and stopped with the year 1910, remarking that after 1910 he was no longer able to maintain an exact account. A general sense of unhappiness and self-doubt permeates his writing in those years. In the end it was all too much. On March 29, 1914, Christian Pauli took his own life. His last entry in his autobiography read: *He was 61 years old, the good-for-nothing.*

* All translations are by James Doing, who transcribed and translated the entire diary for the Ross-Barnhart family. The Max Kade Institute thanks the family for adding the transcription and translation to our archives.

The Otto Schroeder Recordings: A German Immigrant's Life Story in His Own Voice

Julian Ging and Sandra Vollmer

Otto Schroeder (left) with his daughter Ilse (center) and his wife Selma (right); undated. Courtesy of the Napa Valley Historical Society

His life was full of ups and downs, including a picture-perfect childhood, family tragedies, and a groundbreaking invention. Otto Schroeder, born in 1899 near Cologne, Germany, emigrated to Napa, California, in 1926. Between 1986 and 1988, confined to his house because of ill health, Otto decided to preserve his life's story by recording himself. The resulting eighty-six cassette tapes are part of the Max Kade Institute's audio collection. For nine hours and forty minutes, we hear the voice of Otto Schroeder speaking in German with the occasional English expression sprinkled in. The tapes (now digitized) were compiled by Otto's nephew Werner [last name unknown] who also provides context and commentary at the beginning and end of each tape.

Otto grew up on a farm in Elben, a little town sixty miles east of Cologne. Throughout the recordings, he fondly recalls that period of his life. He especially remembers traditional holiday celebrations such as Christmas and Easter: *At Christmas and at Easter, all the young men from our farms returned home from their military service and showed their gala uniforms—they looked wonderful. I have to say, there were tears in my eyes when all the men were standing around the altar [...] Together they went to the first mass on Sunday morning when everyone was in church. That was so beautiful to watch.**

When he was 12, Otto's sheltered life came to a sudden end when his father died of blood poisoning. Otto recalls how the whole family went into mourning, but the death of his father had more dire consequences. The morning after the funeral, Otto's half-brother Dietmar, who was the eldest son from a previous marriage, appeared with their father's testament. He showed it to the rest of the family, and (as the supposed sole heir) proceeded to throw Otto and his siblings out of the house. His mother initially was allowed to stay in a small upstairs room, but she chose to leave with her children. According to Otto, Dietmar had changed their father's testament so that Otto and his five siblings were not mentioned in it. He recalls the day when he and his family left their home—a day full of sorrow and shame:

And we were standing there in front of the door when [my mother] said: "come to me, children, first I have to see if all of you are here." And [Otto's brother] Jacob responded: "I won't leave! I belong here!" […] Dietmar listened to Jacob and told him: "No! You also have to get out! Get out all of you! All of you get out of here! You will not stay here." Well, we didn't have any choice. So my mother said to us: "Take each other by the hand and let's go around the house so that nobody can see us."

A pastor took pity on the family and let them stay in his house until

they found a new place. The loss of Otto's father made their life a misery, but a ray of hope appeared two months later when Otto was offered an engineering apprenticeship. This meant the world to him. According to the recordings, he told his mother: *Mother, now I feel that I am becoming human again, that someone needs me, that someone wants to make something of me.*

The apprenticeship was the beginning of something bigger, and Otto eventually received a degree in mechanical engineering from Ilmenau Technical University.** He got married, and in 1926 he and his wife Selma immigrated to the United States. After spending fifteen years in San Francisco, they moved to Napa, California. As a talented engineer, Otto had a succesful career in the Basalt Rock Company's Napa shipyard. His biggest accomplishment was to invent a method that accelerated the production of steel pipes. Whereas the company originally produced eight pipes a day, Otto's invention allowed them to produce one pipe every minute! His technique revolutionized pipe manufacturing and ultimately brought him international renown. Otto spent his last years with his wife Selma and his daughter Ilse in Napa, where he died at the age of 92.

Otto's stories have a unique flavor, the result of a rich life filled with triumph and sorrow as well as German and American experiences and traditions. This cultural mix is also reflected in Otto's language as he frequently inserts English expressions and constructions when recounting his stories in German. This includes sentences like "und I don't know was noch alles" as well as the frequent use of "well."

However, what stands out most when listening to Otto's recordings are his character and expression of emotions. He tells his stories as if he were reliving them—rejoicing, for example, when he remembers the advent of Massey-Harris grain binders, which made harvest work on the farm so much easier, or shedding tears over his father's death. He opens up and shares his deepest thoughts. In this way, he takes the listener on an authentic and very personal journey through his life.

There is much more to tell about Otto's life. In the recordings, Otto talks about his military service during World War I, the legal battle between his mother and Dietmar, as well as the suspicious death of his patent agent. After listening to all of the stories together, we agree with Otto's nephew Werner when he states that "Our Uncle Otto's recollection of his fateful life [. . .] is a story of love, wisdom, and strength."

Julian Ging and Sandra Vollmer are students at the University of Freiburg in Germany. Julian Ging is a German linguistics student and Sandra Vollmer studies English and Spanish. As part of an internship at the Max Kade Institute, they listened to the entire set of Otto Schroeder's recordings and created a content log.

NOTES

* This and all subsequent quotes are translations from the original German audio source by the authors of this article.

** This information is according to the article "Who is Otto Schroeder?" by Mary Clark in the *Dane County Historical Society Newsletter*, Winter 2006.

Continued from page 2

Marshfield.

We were especially happy to have welcomed two interns to MKI this fall, Julian Ging and Sandra Vollmer, who are students at the University of Freiburg. Julian and Sandra worked mainly on materials from our sound archive and produced an article on one set of recordings made by Otto Schroeder (see page 11).

Another highlight this season has been the release of a new set of pages on our website related to language (language.mki.wisc.edu). Some years ago we received a large grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services that enabled us, among other things, to digitize our North American German Dialect Archive as well as the audio interviews made for the *Dictionary of American Regional English*. Our new webpages feature a number of sample clips of German-American dialects and short essays on German-American linguistics. The site links to the full *DARE* recordings, which are hosted on the UW Libraries website, but we will be adding selected clips to our own site also.

Looking toward the spring, we invite you to mark your calendars for the Annual Symposium of the Society for German-American Studies, which will take place here in Madison, April 11–14, 2019. We hope to see many of you at the symposium, which will feature presentations on a wide range of topics related to German-American studies.

Warm regards to all our Friends for a healthy and happy holiday season!
—Mark

Transitions from Rural Germany to the Midwest in the 19th Century

William G. Thiel

Multiple forces coalesced in creating the conditions that led to the great German migration of the nineteenth century, when many of our forebears immigrated to the USA and, in particular, to the Midwest and, more particularly, to Wisconsin. Often they were *Landbevölkerung*, people of the land who, when transplanted to the Midwest, turned again to the land and often became farmers in their own right.

In Germany they were generally referred to as *Bauern*, peasants, a broad term not defining an economic class but, rather, a social stratum of people who lived on the land. Some were *Großbauern* (farmers owning a lot of land), others were *Kleinbauern* (small farmers). There were *Kätner* or *Kötter* (cottagers, who had dwelling rights, but did not own their cottage or the land it was on); *Heuerlinge* (*Kätner* who paid the rent they owed their landlords by providing services, especially at harvest time); *Landarbeiter* (workers, often in basic trades); and *Tagelöhner* (day laborers). Others were *Gesinde* (servants), *Knechte* and *Mägde* (unmarried men and women laborers who usually lived on the farm they worked for).

In most German agrarian regions, a section of each landowner's land, mostly meadows and forests, was open to be used communally, the so-called *Allmende*. Here all owners shared resources according to long-established rules and traditions, and the landless population had use privileges, too. Varying by region, the *Allmenden* provided food, fuel, lumber, pasture, and more for everyone.

By the mid-nineteenth century, however, the age-old social and economic systems were changing rapidly. Life became especially difficult for those peasants who could not make a living from the land alone. The following agrarian developments were contributing motivators for rural Germans to emigrate.

1) In the eighteenth century a century-long process of land reforms began all over Central Europe. The goal of this *Flurbereinigung* was to consolidate small tracts of land, cultivate more land, improve labor efficiency, and thus increase productivity. In northern states such as Schleswig-Holstein, the process was called *Verkoppelung*. Here communal lands, which had often ringed a village, were redistributed to be cultivated by a single owner. Not surprisingly, it was the *Großbauern* who were the primary beneficiaries. Eventually, the changes destroyed the longstanding social and economic order of the *Dorfkommune* (village commune). Not only did the farms of the *Großbauern* become separated from one another, but the *Allmende* was now divided between individual landowners who restricted or eliminated access for the landless classes. As a result, a combination of lack of resources, low wages, and top-down social and legal repression prevented the landless farmers and laborers, as well as the *Kleinbauern*, from remaining—or becoming—economically independent.

Claus Johann Thiel shocking oats, 1916

2) One major underlying issue was the difficulty in either owning land in the first place or being able to purchase additional land. As land was passed down in families, there was little if any of it available for a would-be farmer to purchase, and if there was land to buy, it was only to be had at exorbitant prices. In areas where *Realteilung* was practiced (meaning that upon a man's death, his land was split equally among his children), and where nobles parceled out land among their peasants, the sizes of farms were too small to support a family. In the eastern territories, controlled by a few very large estates, peasants were allowed to purchase land

at different times. However, legal and social barriers, in addition to cost alone, prevented this from happening on a large scale.

3) Other developments were improvements in agricultural science as well as the beginnings of mechanization of farm operations. While both greatly improved productivity, they lessened the need for farm labor at a time when there was a population explosion, resulting in greater competition for fewer jobs at lower wages. This was one of the factors that precipitated the change from the former commune system to a farm-based market economy in which large-scale operations became predominant and smaller farms inefficient. And as large-scale farming became more attractive to the *Großbauern*, they were less inclined to enter into leases and other arrangements whereby peasants could gain access to the land base and support themselves, even if only on a subsistence basis.

By the mid-nineteenth century, reduced economic and social status combined with an overall population increase, political upheaval, and improved transportation led many in the *Landbevölkerung* to look across the Atlantic. In America, huge tracts of potential farm land were available, affordable, and thanks to the Congressional Survey System, for the most part, legally secure. In America, even a landless German farm laborer could save enough money to purchase his own property. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the greatest opportunities to purchase land were in the Midwest.

Once they had relocated to states like Wisconsin, immigrants found they could engage in the same forms of farming and animal husbandry that had occupied them in their homeland. Settling close to each other, they created new German-American communities. For a generation or two, new land kept opening up for their children and grandchildren to farm.

Ironically, the German peasants' experience with the *Verkoppelung* phenomenon, which had forced them to live without communal support, now helped them adjust to American-style farm management. In the Midwest—where there was neither a village-based communal system nor dictates from landowners or ruling classes—they had to be independent and fend for themselves. In addition, early exposure to a market-based, "moneyed" agricultural economy in Germany now helped German immigrants with the business of farming in America.

At the same time, the immigrants came to the new country with their skill sets intact, versed in the techniques of cultivating land and raising livestock for market. Early experiences with land rotation and small-plot management now led them to be generalists who did not over-exploit the soil, as did their contemporaries in the Midwest, the Yankees, who farmed land for wheat until it played out and then moved on.

Had the German population not grown so rapidly, had the *Verkoppelung* not withdrawn access to land resources from peasants, had it been easier for the peasantry in eastern German states to own land, had the market economy not encouraged major landowners to dispossess their peasants, had modernization of agriculture occurred at another time, then, perhaps, the massive wave of resettlement to the Midwest would not have occurred. For Wisconsin, these German peasants were an excellent fit. They cultivated the land, helped set the stage for a stable agricultural economy, and thus significantly contributed to the development of the state.

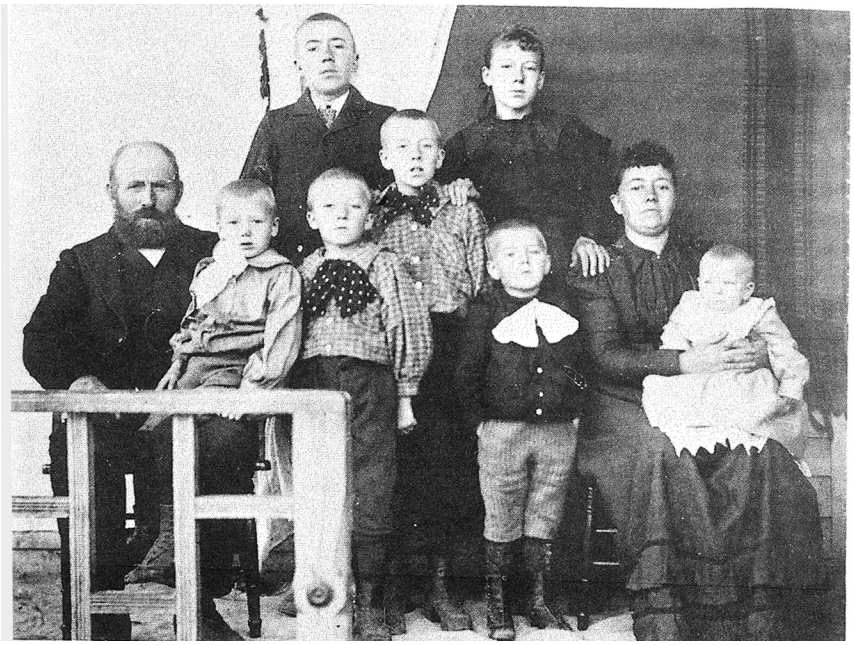
William G. Thiel is a retired lawyer and local historian from Eau Claire, Wisconsin. This article is adapted from his yet unpublished manuscript Leaving Süderhastedt: The Impact of the Change from Communalism to Modernism, *an emigration study based on the 1840 census of Kirchspiel Süderhastedt, County Dithmarschen, Holstein.*

Thiel Family Immigration Story

William G. Thiel is the descendant of immigrants from the District of Dithmarschen in Schleswig-Holstein who came to America in the mid-nineteenth century. His great-grandfather Claus Johann Thiel (1840–1915) had seven siblings. Born to a *Heuerling*, Claus Johann and his brothers were all *Knechte* on farms throughout Süderdithmarschen. In 1864, the second son, Peter Hinrich, immigrated to America and settled in New Holstein, Wisconsin. He was followed by brothers Hans Matthies in 1867, and Hinrich Jacob and Claus Johann in 1868. Then the four brothers pooled money to send for their parents, Claus Johann (1812–1906) and Hannah (1818–1878) and their

four younger siblings, Johann Christian, Margaretha Catharina, Andreas Nicolaus, and Herrmann who all came to New Holstein in 1870.

Like many other immigrants, Claus Johann Thiel was poor, but skilled in animal husbandry, as a butcher, and in grain farming management, which served him well in his new homeland. He and his brother Hans Matthies bought eighty acres of timbered land in the Town of Rantoul, nine miles north of New Holstein, where each founded his own original forty-acre farm. At the time of his death in 1915, Claus Johann's farm had grown to 120 acres and supported his large family, including fourteen children.



Claus Johann Thiel family, autumn 1895. H. Hinrich, Anna M. C., Ernst F. Claus Johann, Johann E., Otto B., Herman (Harry), Maria D. holding Edward F.

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