

Unexpected Bonanza—Stories of My Ancestors

My aunts talked often about my great-grandparents who in the mid-19th century emigrated to Cincinnati, Ohio. I listened with eager interest and developed a strong desire to know more about the lives of my ancestors. All four of my paternal great-grandparents came from a small cluster of three villages—Grosskahl, Grosslaudenbach, and Edelbach—deep in the interior of Spessart Forest, in what is now the northwestern corner of Bavaria.

I made five trips to my ancestral homeland over a period of eight years. I speak enough German to get by and met many people, including proprietors of guest houses where I stayed, who were tremendously helpful in my quest—introducing me and referring me to valuable sources such as local historians and museum curators. In addition, I found a wealth of written material in nearby bookstores, municipal centers, and museums.

I also set out to “feel” my roots. I joined the annual “witch tour” in Gelnhausen on the northwestern border of the forest, a guided tour which wound its way through the narrow streets from the court house where the interrogations took place to the dark cellar of the tower where the alleged witches were held. I toured the Grimm brothers’ enchanting boyhood home in Steinau on the northern edge of the forest. I hiked the old trade routes. I ate delicious bratwurst broiled on the grill of an old community bake oven in Blankenbach, a short distance south of my ancestral villages. I visited the sites of old glassworks just outside of “my” villages and the ruins of a robber-knight’s castle about six miles farther south.



Tower where witches held, Gelnhausen

Every day was an eye-opener to another world I never imagined. I learned about serfdom and the heavily structured rules and obligations our rural ancestors lived under. The overlord had control over practically all aspects of the people’s lives. The villagers were serfs—bonded to their lord. Without permission, there was no relocating from one village to another, or looking for better employment elsewhere. Farmers, and workers such as miners and glassworkers, were all serfs. The lord determined if they could marry or not. In time, this determination was passed to the village elders, who could be extremely strict. Did the prospective groom have in their opinion the means to support a family? Was the applicant a shoemaker and the community already had enough shoemakers? Since his sons could be expected to go into the same trade, the application could be denied.

I learned of the arbitrary mandatory labor for the lord when the peasants had their own fields to take care of. There were inheritance laws. In this area of Germany, peasants were required to divide their (lease-held) land and possessions equally among their off-spring. Over time, this resulted in smaller and smaller individual land holdings. Taxes and fees were many and burdensome and could be added to unexpectedly for special collections such as for wars being fought. I learned of severe restrictions in hunting and fishing and the gathering of wood in the lord’s land, no matter how bad conditions were. Punishments for poaching were unsparing, such as a year’s hard labor, or for repeated offenses, exile to a foreign land with no hope of return, such as being sold to The Netherlands for populating penal colonies in Australia.

I discovered how few options poor villagers had during times of war and famine and during the height of the witch persecutions. During the worst of the witch frenzy (1560-1670), many of the villages in my ancestral homeland saw 5-10 percent of their population burned at the stake. In 1631, the Thirty Years War (1618-1648) hit the forest, bringing more death and torment. Of the population in Spessart Forest, 75% is estimated to have perished during this war.

One of the goals in my research was to find the homes of my two great-grandfathers. I had old addresses from birth and death records, but these didn’t match the current addresses. I tried several places, including the local post office, without success. Finally, I contacted the mayor of the Kleinkahl community which includes my three ancestral villages. She referred me to a local historian, Hans Rosenberger, whom I contacted and arranged to meet with. Hans was absolutely the right person. He obtained copies of old plats from the tax office and before I came, had identified the homesteads of my two great-grandfathers. Hans took me to the two homes, which were largely rebuilt but on the original foundations. It was very stirring to contemplate the actual places of my roots.

I share surnames with a good percentage of the local population, which fed my hope of finding relatives where we could establish a common ancestor. Then it happened, not once but twice! Johann Fix was one of my great-grandfathers. The proprietors of the guest house where I was staying in Edelbach invited over the “oldest Fix around.” Paul Fix brought with him a family tree that an American soldier stationed in Stuttgart had put together many years before. Paul and I did indeed have a common ancestor, going back six generations. Although I struggled with the dialect, we had an enjoyable time getting to know each other. The owners of the guest

house kindly set two glasses of wine before us, adding to the enjoyment. And the American soldier? He turned out to be my third cousin and lives in Iowa. I have since met him also.

Gessner was the surname of one my great-grandmothers, and was a particularly prevalent name in the villages. I made a “cold stop” at a small Gessner winery in an adjacent village. It paid off. They referred me to an aunt, Anna Maria Kilgenstein nee Gessner, who was the keeper of family records. And bingo. Once again, going back six generations, we found our common ancestor.

Totally unexpected though were the personal stories I learned about my ancestors. Hans Rosenberger, who had helped me find my ancestral homesteads, had a copy of an archived record from 1650 that listed my farthest-back known Wüst/Wuest ancestor, Peter Wüst, at the time he acquired the leasehold of a farmstead. This acquisition of property established the presence of the Wüst family in the village of Grosskahl for the next 200 years, up to the mass emigrations of the mid-nineteenth century.

The leasehold Peter acquired consisted of 8 ½ morgen (about 5.3 acres) of farmland and 9 morgen (about 5.6 acres) of meadowland, plus a house and courtyard. Acquiring a farmstead at this time conformed to what was happening after the end of the Thirty Years War in 1648.

Directly after the war, the Archbishopric-Electorate of Mainz, wherein most of Spessart Forest lay, was desperate to rebuild its tax base. Because of the extensive loss of life, it needed new settlers. Mainz offered generous tax incentives for two years to new immigrants and the chance to acquire the leasehold of a farm property. Assigned a property, the applicant had to show diligence in restoring the house and barns associated with the property, and bring the land back to fruition. The test period was two years. Those who came in 1648 would thus be eligible to acquire their leaseholds in 1650, like my ancestor Peter Wüst. A large number, if not most of the new immigrants to the forest, came from Alsace, in today’s eastern France. Wüst was a common name in northern Alsace before and after the war. It is therefore probable that my Wuest ancestors originally came from Alsace.

Anna Maria Kilgenstein, my new-found relative, introduced me to Lothar Schultes, who had done extensive research into the Gessner



Kaspar Scheinast's house

history, Gessner being a name in his family. Lothar informed me of the story of ancestors in my family tree who had a glass factory in the outskirts of Grosskahl. These were ancestors through my great-grandmother Magdalena Gessner, namely her great-great grandfather Johann Adam (Hans) Hubert and her great-grandfather Kaspar Scheinast, who was Hans Hubert’s son-in-law. Kaspar’s brother David Scheinast was also a co-owner of the factory, as well as being a son-in-law of Hans, the two brothers having married sisters. The principal owner of the factory was Hans.

Lothar Schultes had in his possession a 1982 publication on the history of glass manufacturing in the Spessart, a publication which contained significant detail of my ancestors’ factory.

In 1761, Hans Hubert, along with his two sons-in-law, petitioned the Schönborn Counts for permission to establish a glassworks and to sublease three morgen (a little less than two acres) of land for their factory. The Schönborn Counts leased much of the area containing my ancestral villages from the Mainz Archbishopric. The petition was accepted and permission granted. Lothar took me to see the site of the factory, just barren ground now, but nevertheless fulfilling to actually see.

About five years after being established, things started to go downhill. A couple years before, a new foreman, and perhaps partner, Franz Hoffer, a skilled glass manufacturer, had come into the firm. Hoffer appears to have been ambitious and unscrupulous. Manufacturing of glass required a lot of potash and the foundry could not make all of its own potash. It was dependent on local farmers who made potash (ashes from burned wood) in their spare time for extra money. All of a sudden and inexplicitly, the local farmers refused to sell any more potash to the foundry. The glassworks headed toward bankruptcy. Meanwhile, Hoffer had applied for permission for his own foundry, probably without the other men’s knowledge. The authors of the 1982 publication speculate that Hoffer had secretly gone to the farmers asking them to stop selling potash until he had his own foundry, with the promise of higher prices for their potash.

Hans Hubert and his sons-in-law could not hold on to the business and ended up selling it to Hoffer as part of a bankruptcy action. The sellers received enough funds however, that they were far from destitute. My ancestor Kaspar Scheinast established a successful cement-making business next to his large home. Hans Hubert owned a mill which he most likely went back to. David Scheinast started his own mill in a neighboring village.

And Hoffer? For whatever reason, Hoffer failed to get going the foundry that was now in his name and went to work as the plant manager for another glassworks farther north.

One of the most exhilarating experiences I had was to hold in my hands the school record books from the time of my great-grandparents' childhoods, from the 1820s and 1830s, almost 200 years ago. Some books were missing, including those that would have contained the grades for my two great-grandmothers, but I was able to follow the grades for my two great-grandfathers through the years in 10 different categories of instruction and deportment. My great-grandfather Andreas Wüst had a little trouble reading when he started school, but soon started improving, and had mostly exemplary grades. My other great-grandfather, Johann Fix, didn't have the stellar grades that Andreas had, and, I'm sorry to say, didn't get very good grades in general deportment. He gradually matured, however, both in deportment and in his studies. It was very satisfying to see some human aspect of these two great-grandfathers whom I never met. My paternal great-grandparents all died before I was born.



*School Records of
Author's Great-
grandfathers*

I again have Hans Rosenberger to thank for being able to see these books. Several years before, he had managed to salvage many of the school's records when they were in the process of being destroyed.

One of the customs of the area, as in many areas of Germany, is the *Bildstock*, a type of memorial, generally made of sandstone and similar to a column in appearance. In one of the books of local history I bought was a chapter describing the custom of the Bildstock, with several selected Bildstöcke (the plural) and the events behind them described in detail.

I was startled when I came to the description of a Bildstock in the memory of Sebastian Gessner. My great-grandmother Magdalena Gessner had a brother named Sebastian. I subsequently verified through birth and death records that indeed the memorial was for my great-grandmother's brother. A wooden cross has replaced the original sandstone Bildstock, which had eroded.



Memorial for Sebastian Gessner

One day in 1892, long after his sister's emigration to the United States in 1847, Sebastian was out with his wagon and oxen. He was under the wagon tending to a stuck or broken wheel when something spooked the oxen, causing them to lurch forward. Caught under the iron-rimmed wheel, Sebastian was killed.

I was very excited to learn these stories. During my years of researching the area's history, I learned volumes about how the lives of the inhabitants had been. Now I had also found how much a living part of this history my ancestors were.

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