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The Land of Milk and Honey: Letters of Johann Bernard Meyer from America to Family in the Osnabrücker Nordland, 1835 and 1844

By Don Heinrich Tolzmann

Dr. Don Heinrich Tolzmann is the author and editor of numerous books on German-American history and culture. He has received many awards, including the Federal Cross of Merit from Germany, the Ohioana Book Award, the German-American of the Year Award, and the Outstanding Achievement Award of the Society for German-American Studies. He served as Curator of the German-Americana Collection and Director of German-American Studies at the University of Cincinnati. Currently, he is President of the German-American Citizens League of Greater Cincinnati and Curator of its German Heritage Museum. He also is historian for the Covington-Cincinnati Bridge Committee, the Steuben Society of America, and the German-American Hall of Fame. He has assisted in the production of several PBS programs, including: "The German-Americans" and "Zinzinnati Reflections."

Introduction

In the 19th century Cincinnati developed into one of the major destinations of German immigration to America. It also functioned as a gateway for further migration throughout the Midwest. Not surprisingly it became a German-American urban center, forming the so-called "German Triangle" along with Milwaukee and St. Louis. (1)

A large number of German immigrants to Cincinnati came from what is known as the Osnabrücker Nordland, which refers to the area surrounding the city of Osnabrück. This region is located in what today is Lower Saxony, but in the 19th century was part of the Kingdom of Hannover. From 1832 to 1866, a total of 60,630 people immigrated to America from this largely agricultural area. (2)

Contacts between places in this region and Cincinnati remain strong to this day. For example, the Kolping Sängerkorchor of Cincinnati has performed concerts throughout the Osnabrücker Nordland, and Heimatvereine from there have come to Cincinnati as well, often attending Schützenfest, Cincinnati's oldest German festival. And some time ago, I was invited to speak in Ankum for a program sponsored by its Heimatverein. I noticed a Cincinnati phone book on one of the tables, so I inquired about it, and was told that residents like to look up people with their names, and then get in touch with them. (3)

Hermann Welp lives not far from Ankum in the town of Nortrup. He has researched German immigration from the Osnabrücker Nordland to the Ohio River Valley, especially Cincinnati, and often speaks in the area on this topic. He has also spoken in Cincinnati at the German Heritage Museum and the Kolping Society. On 3 November 2017, Welp spoke on German immigration to America in the 19th century for a program in Quakenbrück sponsored by the Heimatverein there. After his lecture, a gentleman, Clemens Bernard Bröring, informed him



Map of the Kingdom of Hannover
Courtesy of Wikipedia

that he had two letters from Johann Bernard Meyer, the great uncle of his wife.

Due to their brittle condition and the fact that they were in the old German script, Bröring transcribed and typed them up in January 1997. He gave copies to Welp who then sent them to me, as I had translated and edited an article he had co-authored on German immigration. (4) Thanks to Bröring and Welp for making the letters available, so that I could translate and edit them for publication.

The Author and His Letters

Bröring's relative was Johann Bernard Meyer, the son of a farmer, who was born in Osteressen, a town in the municipality of Essen (Oldenburg) in the district of Cloppenburg in Lower Saxony. It is located between Cloppenburg to the north and Quakenbrück to the south, and Lönningen to the west and Vechta to the east. All of these towns are well known in the Cincinnati area as ancestral homelands for many of German descent. Meyer was born, according to Bröring, on 8 February 1810, but the death date was unknown. Since Meyer eventually moved to Milwaukee, I contacted the Milwaukee Public Library, and Tom Olson, Humanities Reference Staff, found 1847 as the date in question.

Meyer's first letter is from Michigan City, Indiana, which is located fifty miles east of Chicago in the northwest corner of Indiana. The letter indicates that he was with a group that first went to Cincinnati, but then split up. (5) His letter is dated 6 December 1835, and we can deduce from the letter that he most likely immigrated a couple of years prior to that date because of the information he provides about America. He did not stay in Michigan City long after having written that letter, since the second one (1844) indicates that he had moved to Milwaukee, and had been there for eight years. It is unknown why he headed for Milwaukee, and did not stay in Cincinnati, which would have made sense, since

many of his countrymen were there. But his short stay in Michigan City seems to indicate that Milwaukee was his ultimate destination.

In his book, *Milwaukee* (1871), Rudolph A. Koss lists some of the early residents of the city. He mentions Meyer, spelling his name as Meier, as having arrived in 1836. According to Koss, Meyer established himself as a German baker on Wisconsin Street, and later acquired a brewery. This coincides with what Meyer writes in his second letter. It also indicates that Meyer was one of the early German residents of Milwaukee.

Koss provides some further details. He writes that Meyer acquired the brewery from a Württemberger by the name of Reutelshöfer who established the first German brewery in Milwaukee. Meyer's father-in-law, Franz Neukirch, then acquired the brewery from Meyer, and was responsible, according to Koss, for laying the foundations for Milwaukee's fame for its Lager beer. (6)



Milwaukee, Wisconsin (1858)

Courtesy of Wikipedia

According to Martin Hinz, the first brewery in Milwaukee actually was the Lake Brewery, which was established by several non-Germans in 1840. Koss writes that it brewed a top-fermented British-style ale. In 1841, a German, Hermann Reutelshöfer, established the second brewery. However, this would have been the first German brewery in Milwaukee. Later on, Meyer acquired the brewery, and in 1844

his father-in-law Neukirch acquired it from him. (7)

So from the information we can gather about Johann Bernard Meyer we can deduce that he was an enterprising businessman, and one who clearly had become an accomplished and successful German immigrant a little more than a decade after arriving in America, and then settling in Milwaukee.

Letter from Johann Bernard Meyer to Hermann Gerhard Vahrman, dated 6 December 1835

Michigan City, 6 December 1835

Dear Brother-in-law,

Since you have waited so long, but in vain, for a letter from me, so you will now finally get one from me. First I hope you all have been in good health, and I hope that you will read my letter in good health as well. Its lateness is due to the fact that I am far off in a distant land where I do not find any Germans and didn't know how and where I could send a letter. I am in a new town, Michigan City, which is almost two years old and 400 miles from Cincinnati. I am alone and work as a baker, earning 16 Reichsthaler monthly (1 Reichsthaler equals 100 Grote), and this coming summer, will make 25 Reichsthaler monthly. (8) And, food and beverages are the best in the world. But one thing is lacking. Yes, there is no Catholic church here, and there are not many in America. To be sure, many churches are built, but there is a lack of priests, so people go to church and hold their own services. Conditions are improving, as priests travel from one place to the other, so that people can have now confession and communion.

Werner Meese and Niekamp live near Stallo, and have written they were suffering from a cold fever. When I left Cincinnati, Vennemann and A. Vennemann and the others remained there. (9) The land here is quite fruitful and does not require fertilization and is covered with thick and high stands of trees. However, they can quickly be cut down, and the land made good for farming, especially if only half the woods are cut down, and the remaining land plowed over with oxen. The land can then be seeded, and it will bring forth a bountiful harvest. I am telling the truth that

one can really get a large farm established in a short period of time. With some money you can buy some land, and if not lazy, can cut down the trees, get wealthy in a short time, and keep whatever you earn. Expenses are few and the income is ten times greater than where you are. Here one has everything in abundance. Pigs, sheep, cows, and horses are seen in great numbers. This is great compared to the conditions with your slave state, where you all have to work for others, especially the wolves who eat up everything, so that you can hardly save anything. (10) O, I thank God that he has brought me out of that slave state into this land, where the milk and honey flow. Yes, it is so, milk and honey flow here. (11) The bees make their nests in hollow trees and make so much honey that it is easily found. And so much milk. The cows graze in grass that grows so high. And do they give milk? Yes, indeed they do. I saw that cows in your area nibble on such short grass on the meadows, and do give some milk, but here the grass grows as high as their ears, and certainly do provide us with milk. And, so there is actually a surplus of everything here. I have seen fat pigs in herds as large as 1,000 being driven to market by farmers. And what makes this even better, is that you don't have to feed them on the way to the market, since the pigs graze in the woods and get fat on acorns, nuts, and grapes, etc. Enough said. Milk and honey do flow here. It is indeed the land that God promised to the Israelites.

Everyone earns ten times more than in your area. For example, a tailor gets 10-12 Reichsthaler to make a skirt (the material costs 8-10 Reichsthaler), a pair of pants brings 2-3 Reichsthaler, and a vest brings the same, and so on. No one works here for free. Sometimes I have earned 12.5 Grote per hour, and that was enough for me. When I left home, many said that I should tell you about America. But how can I think of everything. You can see from what I have written that this is a good country, and is the land of Canaan. Those who want to know more should come here. They will find out if I am telling the truth, or not. But I will not tell anyone what to do.

They will have to learn by themselves and consume what they can here. Brother-in-law, I have to say that I have been unable to provide for your oldest son Gerhard Heinrich, but I should soon be able to do so. But things do not go that swiftly when you are in a different country, where you cannot understand what is said, and you have to look them straight in the eye to be sure of what is being said. Yes, I can make out what is meant, even when people talk of all kinds of things. Finally, I would not be adverse to hearing from you, and letting me know about your health. And, yes, do send greetings to my dear mother. She should not worry about me any more.

(Here ends what remains of the letter)

**Letter from Johann Bernard Meyer to his Mother,
dated 12 June 1844**

Milwaukee, 12 June 1844

Dear Mother,

As I have written several times and gotten no response, I find it necessary to write and inquire how you, my dear Mother, and all my relatives and acquaintances are doing. I hope that this letter finds you, dear Mother, in the best of health. In the past eight years all has gone well and business has been good. First, I have a bakery and an inn with all the necessities to run them. They are housed in a three-story building measuring 20 x 36 feet, and two rooms are rented for 74 Reichsthaler per annum, earning interest as well. Second, I have a beer brewery housed in a 3.5-story building measuring 20 x 40 feet. This also earns rent from rooms, bringing in 125 U.S. dollars per annum. And, third, I have also purchased a house lot for 600 Reichsthaler, and rent half of it for 24 Reichsthaler per annum; the other half is for my house.

I married an 18-year-old girl three years ago, who had only been in America for four years. She had no wealth, but is modest, virtuous, and more beautiful than all the money, diamonds, and jewels in the world. We have two children, the oldest is two, and the other 9 months, and both are

good looking and healthy. I am lacking in nothing except you, dear Mother, and as Father is no longer alive, I ask that you come over to me, so you can spend the rest of your days nicely and comfortably here. I have everything you could possibly need on earth, and thereafter our dear Lord will come to your assistance. So, I say again, come and do not be afraid. It will only take about 30 Reichsthaler once you arrive in America to get to Milwaukee, Wisconsin Territory. (12) After your arrival, people in New York can tell you how to get here. I did so, and you can follow in my footsteps. I would not write and ask you to come if I did not feel that you would be better off here than where you are now, where you have spent your whole life working like a slave. Can you write me and let me know when you can come, and how all my relatives and acquaintances are doing?

When I arrived in this city about eight years ago, there were only four houses here, and now it has become a rather large city. There were about fifty whites, and at least a thousand Indians, or savages as they are called in Germany. (13) I made a good living as a baker, earning 1 Reichsthaler daily during my first year, 36 monthly in the second year, and 40 monthly by the third year. And meals and the washing of my clothes were also covered. Additionally, I worked three nights each week, earning 1 Reichsthaler for each night. All of this made for a small amount of savings. Later on, I purchased the house lot for 600 Reichsthaler, and then had the good fortune of earning 500 in the next two months by working day and night. It is not as some say that the geese fly around here already cooked and ready to eat. But those who do not work will not eat. There are now plenty of Germans who have been here for some time, but have nothing to show for it, and can only beg for help. (14) And those that get into mischief then sneak away going from one city to the next to escape getting caught. (15)

The first year was bad enough for me. But Job who lost everything was then rewarded bountifully. And so I eventually crawled my way upwards and thank God for this, especially for the health

He has granted me. I have at least 4,000 Reichsthaler and hope, without bragging, dear Mother, that I can take care of you as well as anyone in Essen, or elsewhere.

Write to me if you know where others are from our area, as I would like to hear from Meese and Niekamp and G.H. Windhaus. They should be in America, but where? That is what I would like to know, and also who else is here from our area. Write to me and let me know, and if someone else wants to come to America, then I would advise them to come to Milwaukee, Wisconsin Territory. This is a good place for day laborers and craftsmen and the land is also very good here.

We have a German and English Catholic church, four pastors, of whom two are Germans, and also a German Catholic bishop, so the religious conditions are good, like in Germany. German and English schools are also here, and highly regarded. (16)

In closing, I hope that you will tell my sisters, brother-in-laws and other relatives, as well as your pastor, his mother and sister, and others who ask about me, that I do not regret coming to North America. In short, it is heaven for all those who work hard, and want to spend the rest of their lives here. But unfortunately there are many who do not make good use of the Lord's blessings, or even misuse them. Oh, for such people it would be better if they hadn't come to America, but rather would have spent their final days in Germany. Your loving son,

J.B. Meyer

Conclusion

Although only two letters of Johann Bernard Meyer have been preserved, they do contribute to our understanding of German immigration history. First, they show that Cincinnati served as a destination, as well as a distribution center for migration elsewhere in the Midwest. Its significance is underscored by the fact that Meyer describes Michigan City's location in terms of its distance from Cincinnati. It was therefore considered a locational point of reference.

Second, Meyer provides a glowing image of America, describing it as "the land of milk and

honey," and as "the land of Canaan." Such words of praise, however, are qualified by other comments he makes. He writes, for example, that "things do not go that swiftly," and that geese do not "fly around already cooked and ready to eat." So he does temper his remarks, but writes that he has no regrets in coming to America, stressing that it "is heaven for all those who work hard, and want to spend the rest of their lives here."

Third Meyer's letters provide insight into the content of German immigrant letters. In Meyer's case it is a successful German immigrant writing home to members of his family in the Osnabrück area. He conveys his positive views of America and details about his life in Milwaukee, contrasting them with conditions in his homeland, which he describes as a slave state. So he makes a comparison to life in the Old and New worlds, leaving little doubt, as to where life is better in his view. And his description of life in America includes interesting information about Milwaukee, and his business activities there, such as his acquisition of a brewery.

Finally, the fact that Meyer's letters recently turned up is a good indication that there likely are more of them waiting to be found, and they will no doubt help sharpen the focus of the images that they convey about life in the Old and the New Worlds. (17)

Notes

1. For the history of German immigration, settlement, and influences in Cincinnati, see the following books of the author: *Cincinnati's German Heritage*. (Bowie, Maryland: Heritage Books, Inc., 1994), *German Cincinnati*. (Charleston, S.C.: Arcadia Pub. Co., 2005), and *German Cincinnati Revisited*. (Charleston, South Carolina: Arcadia Pub. Co., 2011).
2. For immigration statistics for the Osnabrück area, see: Antonius Holtmann, "Basic, Reliable Information about Early Emigration from the Osnabrück area (Landrostei) in the Kingdom of Hannover to the United States During the 19th Century," "Translated by LaVern J. Rippley. *The Palatine Immigrant*. 34:1(2008): 20-28. There are several studies of the immigration from the region, see, for example: Udo Thörner, *Venne in America: The 19th Century Mass Emigration to America of Tenants and Small Cottage Farmers from a Rural Village in the Region of Osnabrück*. (Osnabrück: Arbeitskreis Familienforschung

- Osnabrück e.V., 2008), and Jürgen Vortmann, *Auswanderer aus dem Kirchspiel Bramsche 1730 bis 1930*. (Bramsche: Rasch Verlag, 2012).
3. In Ankum I spoke about the life and work of Heinrich Rattermann (1832-1923), a native son of the town. He was the well-known German-American historian who served as Editor of *Der Deutsche Pionier*, a historical journal published in Cincinnati by the German Pioneer Society. For information on him, see: Mary Edmund Spanheimer, *The German Pioneer Legacy: The Life and Work of Heinrich A. Rattermann*. 2nd ed. Edited by Don Heinrich Tolzmann. (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2004).
 4. See: Hermann Welp and Monika Thölking, "Off to New Shores from the Osnabrücker Nordland in the Early 19th Century," Translated and edited by Don Heinrich Tolzmann. *The Tracer*. 35:4(2014): 98, 112-16.
 5. See the letters of a German immigrant from the Osnabrück area who came to America in 1834 and settled in southeast Indiana: Antonius Holtmann, ed., *Ferner thue ich euch zu wissen... Die Briefe des Johann Heinrich zur Oeveste aus Amerika, 1834-1876*. (Bremen: Edition Bremen, 1995).
 6. Rudolph A. Koss, *Milwaukee*. (Milwaukee: Schnellpressendruck des Herold, 1871), pp. 49, 118-19. Franz Neukirch was from Hesse-Darmstadt, according to: Wilhelm Hense-Jensen, *Wisconsin's Deutsch-Amerikaner bis zum Schluss des neunzehnten Jahrhunderts*. (Milwaukee: Im Verlage der Deutschen Gesellschaft, Druck der Germania, 1900), Vol. 1, p. 21. Thanks to Tom Olson of the Humanities Reference Staff, Milwaukee Public Library for the following information he found about Meyer's wife and family. Meyer's wife, Charlotte, died as a result of a fall in 1897 at the age of 86. Her funeral took place at the home of her son Carl Meyer at 276 Eleventh Street in Milwaukee. Her other son, John Meyer, was killed in the Civil War while serving as captain of a Kansas regiment. She and her son Carl were buried in the Forest Home Cemetery in Milwaukee, but there is no record of her husband being buried there. This information came from Charlotte's obituary: "She Meets Death at Pine Lake," *Milwaukee Journal* (25 June 1897). Olson also found a reference to Johann Meyer as having died in 1847, but could not locate any further documentation. Meyer's son Carl was married to Anna Goldsmith (b. 1850), and that they had five children: Max Bernard Meyer (1877-1940), Hans Julius Meyer (1879-?), Walter E. Meyer (1881-?), Paul Gerhard Meyer (1882-1954), and Marie Josephine Meyer (1886-1978). Further genealogical research would be required to ascertain if there are any descendants alive today.
 7. See: Martin Hinz, *A Spirited History of Milwaukee Brews & Booze*. (Charleston, S.C. : The History Press, 2011), p. 8. Maureen Ogle describes Meyer's acquisition of the brewery in greater detail, noting that Reutelshöfer's brewery was on the brink of financial ruin: "The would-be beer baron went hunting for an infusion of cash, and to his everlasting regret, found salvation in the person of John B. Meier (sometimes spelled Meyer), also a German émigré." Reutelshöfer wanted a mortgage, but Meyer presented him with a contract to buy the brewery, which Reutelshöfer signed. Apparently he didn't understand he was signing a bill of sale, as it was in English. Meyer then ordered him to vacate the brewery, as he had now taken ownership of it. So Reutelshöfer took him to court, requesting \$2,000 in damages, and asking the brewery be returned to him. However, by that time, Meyer had already deeded the brewery over to Neukirch, so the case fell into the area of lost causes, and Meyer only had to pay \$150 in damages. See: Maureen Ogle, *Ambitious Brew: The Story of American Beer*. (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2006), pp. 14-15.
 8. A Reichsthaler was the equivalent of one U.S. dollar, and Grote the equivalent of U.S. pennies. See: Holtmann, *Ferner...*, p. 167.
 9. Franz Joseph Stallo came to America in 1831, and founded a settlement north of Cincinnati in Auglaize County that became known as Stallstown, but after his death from cholera in 1836 was renamed Minster. Stallo was from Damme, which is located northeast of Osnabrück. German immigrants from there and elsewhere in the Osnabrück area were attracted to Stallstown/Minster. Stallo's nephew, Johann Bernard Stallo came to America in 1839, settled in Cincinnati, and became a well-known lawyer, legal scholar, and a diplomat. See: Jürgen Kessel, *Johann Bernard Stallo (1823-1900): Ein deutsch-amerikanischer Jurist, Schriftsteller und Diplomat*. Oldenburgische Familienkunde, Jahrgang 2016. (Oldenburg: Oldenburgische Gesellschaft für Familienkunde, 2017).

10. Meyer is exceptionally harsh in referring to his homeland as a slave state, but his description of it provides insight into the depth of his discontent with the socio-political conditions there. Regarding the causes of immigration see the article by Welp and Thölking, footnote no. 4, Holtmann, *Ferner...* pp. 7-26, Vortmann, *Auswanderer...* pp. 13-30, and Don Heinrich Tolzmann, "Understanding the Causes of German Immigration: The Context of German History," in: Don Heinrich Tolzmann, ed., *Das Ohiothal - The Ohio Valley The German Dimension*. (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), pp. 3-19.
11. Regarding the positive to glowing image of America, and Cincinnati in particular, see: Don Heinrich Tolzmann, "The German Image of Cincinnati before 1830," in: *Ibid*, pp. 21-37.
12. For insight into what Milwaukee was like when Meyer got there, see: Kathleen Neils Conzen, *Immigrant Milwaukee, 1836-1860: Accommodation and Community in a Frontier City*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976).
13. For a discussion of the German interest in American Indians, see: Glenn Penny, *Kindred by Choice: Germans and American Indians since 1800*. (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2013).
14. For histories of the Wisconsin Germans, see: J.H.A. Lacher, *Wisconsin's German Element: J.H.A. Lacher's Introductory History*. Edited by Don Heinrich Tolzmann. (Baltimore: Clearfield Co., 1999), and Richard H. Zeitlin, *Germans in Wisconsin*. 2nd ed. (Madison: State Historical Society, 2013).
15. Meyer makes an interesting comment here, reminding us that Frederick Jackson Turner wrote that one of the functions of the American frontier was that it functioned as a safety valve for malcontents to escape problematic situations. For a discussion of the historical debate on Turner's Frontier Thesis, see: J.A. Burkhardt, "The Turner Thesis: A Historian's Controversy," *The Wisconsin Magazine of History*/ 31:1(1947): 70-83.
16. Mayer's reference to a German bishop is meant to refer to Johann (John) Martin Henni (1806-81), a Swiss-German, who was appointed Bishop of the Diocese of Milwaukee in 1843. Prior to this he had served as pastor elsewhere, including Cincinnati where he was pastor of the Holy Trinity Church, the first German congregation there. In Cincinnati he founded and edited *Der Wahrheits-Freund*, the first German Catholic newspaper in the U.S. See: Martin Marty, *Dr. Johann Martin Henni erster Bischof und Erzbischof von Milwaukee. Ein Lebensbild aus der Pionier-Zeit von Ohio und Wisconsin*. (New York: Benziger Brothers, 1888), and Peter Leo Johnson, *Crosier on the Frontier: A Life of John Martin Henni, Archbishop of Milwaukee*, (Madison: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1959). Henni published an interesting work that illuminates the early history of German Catholics in the Ohio River Valley in the 1830s: *Ein Blick in's Thal des Ohio: Briefe über das Wiederaufleben der Katholischen Kirche im fernen Westen der Vereinigten Staaten Nordamerika's*. (München:F. S. Hübschmann, 1836).
17. By way of comparison, see the following articles of the author dealing with immigrant writings: "A German Immigrant Letter from Cincinnati, 1841," *The Palatine Immigrant*. 20:4(1995): 200-05, and "The Land of Opportunity, An article on America by a German Immigrant in Cincinnati, 1924," *The Palatine Immigrant*. 43:1(2017) 25-27. Also, see: Walter D. Kamphoefner, Wolfgang Helbich, and Ulrike Sommer, eds., *News from the Land of Freedom: German Immigrants write Home*. (Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1993).