



Book Review: *Wooden Shoe Hollow: Charlotte Pieper's Cincinnati German Novel*, edited by Don Heinrich Tolzmann, review by Elfe Vallaster-Dona, in *Yearbook of German-American Studies*, 39(2004), pp.157-159.

After reading *Wooden Shoe Hollow*, a historical novel that illustrates the German-American life in Cincinnati around the turn of the twentieth century, one has to agree that this book has been out of print too long. This book is a reprint of a historical Cincinnati German novel written by Charlotte Pieper in 1951. The colorful book cover shows a German immigrant family standing in front of a half-timber family home which is reminiscent of northern Germany as well as some parts of Cincinnati. Two wooden shoes or clogs, which were primarily a work shoe and appear to be roughly carved, dominate the picture. Readers can see the actual wooden shoe used in the design of the front cover of the book on display at the German Heritage Museum in Cincinnati, Ohio.

The novel, set in Wooden Shoe Hollow, a location on the northern edge of present-day Winton Place, illustrates the arrival of German immigrants to that rural, fertile area and documents their lives. The reader experiences the ups and downs of immigrant life through the main character, a young German woman, Rica Heber, who has emigrated from Osnabrück, Germany, and lived in this area around the turn of century. Already the first few sentences draw you into the story which describes actual people and real places:

Grossmutter Betz had come to Rica Heber out of the mist and smoke of a gray morning at the Osnabrück railway station. A tiny black bonnet was tied primly under her enthusiastic little chin. The word Amerika shuttled past her lips many times, but it was the first mention of the name which

drew Rita to her side with breathless expectancy. "You are going to America, too?" she asked. (13)

As this young girl learns the different customs in a new world and deals with her own history she left behind in Germany, the reader will understand how a town in Germany, Osnabrück, and a little farming community in Cincinnati can share a common bond.

The geographic location, *Wooden Shoe Hollow* in Cincinnati, is not merely used as a convenience for telling a story in some fanciful setting, but Cincinnati is portrayed in this rich historical novel as an essential part of the life of the time. The reader almost feels that he is living in that time period. The editor of this edition, Don Heinrich Tolzmann, contributed valuable background information to the novel. Much has been added to the current edition of 2004 if compared to the novel's first publication by the author, Charlotte Pieper, in 1951. Don Heinrich Tolzmann, long known as president of the German-American Citizens League of Greater Cincinnati and curator of its German-American collection, has included several major parts to the original novel in order to make the novel a true historic document of Cincinnati's German heritage. Readers of the re-published version have now access to many materials, such as historic maps that help researchers locate the places referred to in the novel in Germany and Cincinnati, 36 pictures of street signs, churches, relatives of Charlotte Pieper, the Pieper family home, German cemeteries. Genealogist might find the complete index to new materials useful and a page-locator note section of the story will illustrate lesser known terms or places found in the novel. Don Tolzmann even researched some names of the novel by looking up what was written about them in different newspaper articles of the time. What makes this historic novel even more interesting to today's reader is the information provided by Tolzmann about families who still live and work in greenhouses and flower shops in Wooden Shoe Hollow. Tolzmann points out in his introduction: "Today, many of the family businesses have made the transition from the vegetable to the garden business, and these are the places where many Cincinnati residents go to get flowers, plants, seeds, shrubbery, trees, garden equipment, etc." (xxviii). *Wooden Shoe Hollow*, which was once the gardening district of Cincinnati developed by German immigrants, is still today showing traces of that heritage. The city of Cincinnati was not just used as a backdrop for Charlotte Pieper's novel, but the city was described in detail to provide a vivid picture of what life might have been like in early Cincinnati history.<sup>1</sup>

The true relevance of a historical novel is how it affects a particular reader. Following the publication and book signing of *Wooden Shoe Hollow* in April of 2004, a lively discussion and exchange of letters ensued about the significance of the novel. Residents of Wooden Shoe Hollow, pastors, and other residents of Cincinnati shared stories of that old German settlement and their German immigrant past. Even readers in Germany tried to obtain a copy of the book.<sup>2</sup> The re-publication of *Wooden Shoe Hollow* once again illustrates that the relationship between literature

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and society is meaningful. If a book can motivate readers to discuss their own stories of how their families are connected to the area, it is worth the modest price.

<sup>1</sup> For more information about novels that used Cincinnati as a setting, see <http://www.cincinnati.library.org/booklists/?id=cincinnati.fiction>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.geneasearch.com/queryview.htm>.