

TYPES OF GERMAN SURNAME CHANGES IN AMERICA

Our names are very much part of what defines us as a person.¹ The given name identifies us as individuals within the group in which we live and function. Normally, we are the only person identified by that particular name within the group. Most of us have given names that our parents liked for some reason or other, selected in a rather accidental fashion.

Our surname is, of course, anything but accidental. A person's surname, also called the family name, is the reference point which defines our relationship to society at large. It links us to the generations of our family which came before us as well as to our living relatives beyond the immediate family. The family name opens up vistas of ancestry, family history, national origin, religious background.

Originally all names, whether given or family, were based on meaningful words and were formed or bestowed on the basis of what they meant. Over time, changes in the language have frequently obscured the original meanings. This is particularly true of given names. In a surname the original meaning often remains obvious as long as the name stays within the language of its origin, e.g., names such as *Carpenter* and *Weaver* in English or *Zimmermann* and *Weber* in German tell us that the ancestor with whom the name originated was a carpenter or a weaver respectively. Even with less transparent names, a lingering knowledge about the meaning of the family name is handed down from generation to generation in most families.

Given that one's name is so much a part of what defines us as a person, most people would consider meddling with their names as the equivalent of an assault upon their personality. At least this would be the case in European countries.² But when a person moves from the country and language in which his or her name originated to a different linguistic environment, as is the case upon emigration, what is left of a name's semantic transparency is lost. Also lost is the link to the standard orthography in the original language. As a consequence the written manifestation of the name is desta-

bilized. The move to the new linguistic environment brings with it adaptations and, in some cases, drastic changes.

As a nation of immigrants, the United States has become home to millions of families whose surnames were no longer in harmony with the prevailing language or its orthographic rules. This is certainly the reason for a *laissez-faire* attitude towards name changes as observed by Howard F. Barker:

Changes of name have never been prohibited in this country and are rarely questioned by the law. Indeed, slight modifications are not recognized as changes, provided the same sound is retained. Given the considerable amount of illiteracy, especially in colonial times, and a continual pressure on foreign names to make them more American, numerous alterations have ensued.³

The overview which follows establishes a classification system for alterations to German names which occurred after the bearers of those names immigrated to America.⁴

In his book *German-American Names*, George F. Jones articulates the popular notion that the name changes originated with the captains of the immigrant ships:

When the immigrants boarded their ships at Rotterdam, the English captains had difficulty in writing their manifests or ships [sic] lists. Knowing no German, and unfamiliar with German dialects, the scribes wrote down the names as they heard them, sometime in the form of the English names most resembling the sound. In this way, *Theiss*, *Weiss*, and *Weidmann* became *Dice*, *Wise* and *Whiteman* [. . .]⁵

Although it is true that the ship lists frequently show the kind of spelling changes Jones describes, immigrants were under no obligation to use their names in the shape they had been spelled by the captain or his clerks after their arrival on American shores.⁶ Until the immigration process was formalized by channelling all immigrants through Ellis Island, which was not until 1892, immigrants did not receive an official immigration document. As to the misspellings, it is unlikely that the immigrants even remembered in what shape

their names had been taken down—if they could read at all. As H. L. Mencken⁷ observed, "[t]he early German immigrants had no very definite ideas about the spelling of their own names." Of equally little long-term consequence, as far as name spellings were concerned, was the act of putting one's signature under the oath of allegiance or signing the document abjuring the Church of Rome, as was required by law.⁸

An official act of somewhat more consequence was the registration of land purchases in the local courts. Here again, German surnames appear in all kinds of shapes, either perfectly German or totally Americanized, or in between. The American bureaucracy solved the problem by establishing the principle of *idem sonans*, that is, if different name spellings "sounded the same," a claim of an unbroken line of ownership was acknowledged.

Today, most scholars are in agreement that in the majority of cases name changes are likely to have occurred gradually rather than through an official act.⁹ Immigrants pronounced their names in much the same ways they had pronounced them in the Old Country. Their English-speaking neighbors picked up the names as sounds, possibly making a mental picture of a spelling according to the rules of the English language. When it came to writing the names, those mental pictures were put onto paper. As long as the bearers of the names still knew German and understood the spelling of their name, they would either correct the misspellings or just disregard them. But the time would come when the German language was lost within the family and the feel for what was correct in German spelling no longer prevailed. Sooner or later many would get tired of the constant need to correct. As a result, the world around them would settle on spellings that would be easy to write and remember for a person used to hearing and writing the English language.¹⁰ In most cases, and certainly in most cases where the Anglicized spelling produced a resemblance of the sound of the German original, it is therefore more appropriate to say that the names "changed" rather than "were changed." "Were changed" is

the correct wording only in cases of outright translation.

The following overview of changes that were most common uses the system and terminology designed by Einar Haugen¹¹ in his discussion of Norwegian surnames in America. Modifications and additions accommodate the developments that specifically concern surnames that are of German origin. Examples are taken from the author's files collected over a period of almost two decades, verified and augmented by checks on the PhoneDisc¹² system. Particularly illustrative examples are also taken from existing studies.

Haugen distinguished *retention* from *revision* and *substitution*. In the case of retention, the original spelling is preserved but pronunciation shows the influence of the English-speaking environment. Revision includes respelling, elimination of unfamiliar letter combinations, and abbreviating. In the case of substitution, no trace of the name's original orthographic manifestation is preserved. Haugen noted that "in practice these alternatives might overlap, since the orthographic revision could make a name coincide with a previously existing English name."¹³ Still, such cases do not invalidate the basic distinctions, which prove useful in bringing some order into what H. L. Mencken called "a dreadful mess."¹⁴

I. RETENTION OF THE GERMAN SPELLING

Not all German names changed or were changed. In the areas of the country that were settled when general literacy had already established a predominance of the written over the spoken medium, many names that are complicated even by German standards have retained their spellings. For the city of Milwaukee this includes, according to the city telephone directory, *Bauernfeind*, *Eineichner*, *Eisenhauer*, *Friedrichsohn*, *Harnischfeger*, *Heinzelmann*, *Neuenschwander*, *Pfannenstiel*, *Schumacher*, *Schwarzkopf*, *Schwerdfeger*, *Seidensticker*, *Sichlassenfallen*, *Stadtmueller*, *Uihlein* and many others.

With Persistence of German Pronunciation

Names may retain their spelling but will

most likely be affected in their pronunciation. The relationship between symbol and sound is language-specific; German names transferred into an English-speaking environment will be pronounced according to the rules of English. There are very few German names which would be pronounced the same in both English and German. Most of those are one-syllable names, e.g., *Beck, Fick, Lind, Lipp, Mencken, Mett, Meyer, Misch...*

With Partial Persistence of German Pronunciation

German or near-German pronunciation may persist against the rules of English. "Individual families can make their wishes felt," Haugen¹⁵ observed. In Wisconsin, the Jung Seed Company uses the pronunciation [jʊn] in radio and television advertising. A community with a strong German heritage helps preserve unusual pronunciation habits. A woman from Hamburg, Wisconsin, told me with reference to the name *Euler* that "in our area, we said it like 'Oiler' but now that my parents have moved away and I have married I say 'Youler'."

Persistence of near-German pronunciation against what would normally prevail in an English-speaking environment is evident in the American evolution of the German umlaut sounds symbolized by <ü> and <ö>. English does not have these front rounded vowels. Alternative German spellings are <ue> and <oe> which, if transferred into English, will allow the pronunciation [i] and [ɛi] to be maintained with relative ease. Names so pronounced will be understood by native Germans; it is a pronunciation actually found in many German dialects. Hence, *Kuehn* (German *Kühn* or *Kuehn*) would be pronounced [kin] (like English *keen*) and *Goebel* would be [gɛɪbəl] (like English *gable*).

With Anglicized Spelling Pronunciation

Spelling pronunciation, or the pronunciation of the German name by giving each letter or syllable the sounds that are usual in analogous English words, rather than pronouncing them in a way that still reflects the original German pronunciation, will affect all names of

German origin. Some names may get by with minor changes, such as *Fischer, Frick, Keller*. Others become unrecognizable to a German ear, such as *Ueberroth* ['jubə, rəθ].

Spelling pronunciation takes care of the two German consonant sounds not found in English, [ç] and [x] are both represented by <ch> in German orthography. Spelling pronunciation produces [k] (as found in *ache* and *mechanic*) in names such as *Schlicht* and *Eichhoff*, or (less frequently) [tʃ], e.g., in *Koch*. The most audible change concerns the letter <z>, pronounced [ts] in German but [z] in English, as in *Ziegler, Zimmerman(n), Schmelzer*. In the case of vowels, spelling pronunciation replaces German [ɛ] by English [i] as in *Peters* and *Seemann*, and <eu> (German [ɔi]) by [u] in *Steuben* and *Euler*, to mention two of the most obvious changes.

With Translation Pronunciation

In the *Second Supplement to The American Language*, Mencken ridicules the "curious habit" of the people in the "somewhat decadent village of Potosi, Wis." who would preserve "the original German spelling" of the name *Schmidt* even though the pronunciation had changed to *Smith*.¹⁶ Decadent or not, the phenomenon is quite common, especially in the case of names based on appellatives which are cognates in the two languages. Hence, the name *Koch* is heard as [kɔvk] or [kɔʃtʃ], rarely as [kɔk] but most commonly [kɔk], that is, as though it were the English name *Cook*. The name *Freitag* has been reported as being pronounced exactly like its equivalent in English, *Friday*." Elda O. Baumann reports that in Potosi the pronunciation [mɪtɛr] is used for a name spelled *Muller*.¹⁸

The term "translation pronunciation" was suggested by George J. Metcalf¹⁹ in reference to the observation that certain German names that are phonetically close to English ones, will assume the pronunciation of those English names yet retain their German spelling. His examples are cognates, but it does not require a cognate relationship for a replacement to take effect. Joseph Schantz, an immigrant from Switzerland, laid out a town in western Pennsylvania in the year 1800 which he called Cone-maugh, after the river that flows by it. To his

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fellow citizens the name *Schantz* sounded more like "Johns," and it did not take long for this version to also be used in writing. In 1834 the borough and city was renamed *Johnstown*²⁰ in his honor. But all the while, the founder signed documents as *Joseph Schantz*, using the old German lettering no less.²¹

With Silencing of German Letters

Letters are silenced in names of German origin as they would be in comparable English words. Names beginning with *kn* such as *Knauer*, *Knieriem*, *Knobloch* (where the *k* is pronounced in German) but also those having the *kn* cluster medially, e.g., *Frischknecht*, drop the *k* in English.

A syllable-initial *h* is silenced in *Schonhoff* [ʃounɔf] (German *Schoenhoff*)²³ and *Schoenherr* [ʃeɪnɛr], also in *Gerhardt* [dʒɛrɪd]. In *Hofheinz* (also *Hofheins*), the *h* is hardly pronounced in German either but never lost in the writing because of the name's transparency.

With Pronunciation of German Silent Letters

In German, the letter *h* at the end of what is perceived as a syllable is not pronounced. In the English-speaking environment this perception is lost, and the letter is usually interpreted as the onset of the next syllable. So *Frueh\auf* becomes *Frue\hauf* in the name well known from truck mudflaps.

Another silent German *h* is the one that in older German was added to the letter *t* without affecting pronunciation (as in English *Thompson*). A spelling reform abolished this tradition in 1901 but names were generally not affected. Consequently, in names such as *Thiel*, *Thiessen*, *Thode*, *Bethke*, *Rothrock*, *Walther*, *Jungbluth*, *Wirth*, Americans interpret the <th> sequence as representing the sound [θ] as found initially in *thin*. In names such as *Schultheis(s)*, the *t* and the *h* are divided by the syllable boundary in German but combined as [θ] in English, also resulting in re-syllabification.

With Simplification of German Sound Clusters

The clusters consisting of the sound [J] (the initial sound in English "shore," represented

by <sch> in German) plus *l*, *m*, *n* and *w* [v] are not found in English. As a consequence, names such as *Schlicht*, *Schmelzer*, *Schneider*, *Schwartz* are routinely pronounced by changing [f] to [s], i.e., [slikt] etc. Equally difficult to pronounce for Americans is the frequent German cluster [pf]. In names such as *Pfeffer*, *Pfersching*, *Pfister*, *Schimmelpfennig*, either the [p] or the [f] is silenced in pronunciation, the latter more commonly than the former.

With Re-syllabification

Re-syllabification occurs when a speaker is not familiar with the rules of syllable boundary that apply to German. For example, in German compound names whose first element ends with an *s* (often indicating a genitive) and the second begins with an *h*, the <sh> will be identified as standing for the English sound [ʃ], e.g., *Wollers\heim* in German becomes *Woller\sheim* in English. Re-syllabification also occurs through the pronunciation of letters which are silent in German, see **Pronunciation of German Silent Letters**, above.

With loss of Bi-syllabic Structure

In English, word-final *e* following a single consonant modifies the quality of the stem vowel, cf. *hat* vs. *hate*. In German, word-final *e* is pronounced. Consequently, the name *Bode* is bi-syllabic in German but will be interpreted as [boʊd] in English. Similarly, *Hase*, *Rothe*. Although their final *-e* does not affect the stem vowel, names such as *Heide*, *Olde* and *Schultze* will also be pronounced as one syllable if corrective measures (see **Respelling with an Eye to Preserving the Original Pronunciation**, below) are not taken.

II. REVISION OF THE GERMAN NAME

Respelling Necessitated by German Orthographic Symbols not Found in English

The Letter ß. The German letter ß (pronounced *es-tset*, German for "s-z", the letters from which it was originally composed) stands for the "sharp" *s* and is found in medial and word-final position. Americans normally did not recognize the letter or mistake it for a capital B.²³

Upon immigration, it was common to change the <ß> spelling to <ss>, an option that exists in German. Other possibilities, both also (but rarely) found in Germany, are the spellings <sz> and <hs> (the latter through a misinterpretation of the symbol when written in old German longhand). Hence, we find the name *Geißler* in America becomes *Geissler* (or *Geisler*) but also *Geihslar* and *Geiszler*, as documented by *PhoneDisc*.

The umlauts.²⁴ In German, the symbols <ä>, <ö> and <ü> represent vowel sounds that are phonetically quite different from the sounds that are represented by the same base symbols without the diacritic. Upon immigration, several alternatives are available for spelling names with umlaut symbols in a manner acceptable in the new homeland.

Spelling with the base symbol plus e. This alternative is possible also in German, e.g., when umlaut symbols are not available in telegraphic transmission or, more recently, E-mail. Occasionally, even German families have settled on this spelling rather than using the umlaut symbols in their names.

Spelling with the base symbol only. This option, applied only in America, will result in spelling pronunciations which are quite different from the German umlauts except in the case of German <ä> vs. English <a> where the correspondence may be close. Examples for the two options are *Kuehn* or *Kuhn* (German *Kühn*), *Goebel* or *Gobel* (German *Göbel*), *Jaeger* and *Jager* (German *Jäger*).

American families who choose to resolve the umlaut problem by using the base symbol plus *e* will be able to also preserve a pronunciation that is similar to the German. The problem is that these are not the pronunciations which a speaker of English would naturally produce when seeing the name written. So the *Kuehns* who, in the family tradition, pronounce their name [kin] will constantly have to correct those who say [kjun], as the *Goebels* will have to correct those who say [goub]. Over time, especially if families live in isolation from others with a similar name, there is a strong tendency to succumb to the "English" way of pronouncing their names, unless the spelling is changed

to reflect the "German" sound (see **Silencing of German Letters**, above).

Those who changed a German <ä> to <ae> burdened successive generations with problems arising from the fact that the sequence <ae> is so much rarer in English than is <ea>. As a consequence, names such as *Yaeger* (German *Jäger*) were frequently misspelled *Yeager*. In due time, this became the regular spelling; *PhoneDisc* lists almost 8,000 *Yeagers* in the U.S. but only a 1,441 *Yaegers*. Similarly, the American *Kreamers* and *Creamers* were all *Krämers* originally.

Continuing to use the umlaut diacritics. Americans will generally pronounce the umlaut symbols disregarding the diacritics, as in the brand name *Löwenbräu* (American English [louθnbrau]). However, in the case of <ü>, its continued use in longhand writing seems to have been picked up by people who were not familiar with the German symbol as <iï>, i.e., double *i*, resulting in spellings such as *Biittner* (German *Büttner*), *Kiibler*, *Kiihn*, *Liittschwager*, *Miick*, *Miihlbach*, *Miüller*, *Reimschiissel* and dozens more.²⁵ Obviously, this remarkable development which resulted in a symbol sequence not otherwise found in either English or German was not at all uncommon.

Respelling with an Eye to Preserving the Original Pronunciation

Respelling is the effort, either on the part of the bearer of a name or on the part of someone who hears it pronounced, to render the German pronunciation according to the rules of English orthography, or at least reasonably so. In most cases, the vowels are affected. For example, the sound of the German name *Bruckner* is preserved (and saved from the effects of spelling pronunciation) by spelling it *Brookner*. Similarly, that of *Fuss* by spelling it *Foos*. Only partially successful was the change from *Zug* to *Zook*; obviously, spelling pronunciation of the <z> had become established before the rest of the name changed its spelling. Of the **diphthong** sounds the ones most likely to require respelling to preserve their pronunciation are [ai] (spelled <ei> in German) and [oi] (spelled <eu> or <äu> in German). Examples of the numerous respellings are: *Heide*>*Hidy*,

Klein>*Kline* or *Cline*, also *Clyne*, *Kaiser*>*Kizer*, *Bäumeler*> *Bimeler*²⁶ *Neuhäuser*>*Nihizer*. The respelling in the latter examples is certainly due to the fact the [oi] became [ai] in the German dialects that predominated among the early immigrants. In many other cases the spelling <eu> is retained and subjected to spelling pronunciation, e.g., *Steuben*. Among the compound names, an example for respelling is *Izenhower* for *Eisenhauer*, even though the popularity of the name has preserved a near-German pronunciation even for the unchanged spelling.

A number of **consonant** sounds likewise needed to be respelled in order to preserve the original German sound in the English-speaking environment. Quite common is the spelling <Y> for German <J> in initial position, representing the sound [j]: *Jäger*>*Ya(e)ger*, *Jahraus*> *Yahraus*, *Jungfleisch*>*Yungfleisch*, *Jüngling*> *Yuengling*, *Joder*>*Yoder*.²⁷ In syllable-initial position <z> for German <s> is found: *Siebold*>*Ziebold*, *Kaiser*>*Kaizer* or *Kizer*, *Neuhäuser*>*Nihizer*. Others, such as <v> for German <w> (*Jungwirth*>*Yungvirt*, *Schwartz*>*Svartz*, *Winkler*>*Vinkler*) are rare and possibly influenced by languages other than German and English.

Also originally the result of respelling is <gh> where German has <ch>. We frequently find this in compound names ending in *-baugh*, German *-bach*. The German spelling <ch> represents the sound [X], the velar fricative not found in English. However, the early scribes, many of whom were of Scots-Gaelic extraction, knew the sound from Scots names such as *Laughlin*²⁸ and applied the respective spelling.²⁹

A particular challenge faces persons whose German name was bi-syllabic and ended in *-e*, e.g., *Bode*,³⁰ *Goethe*, *Kade*, *Thode*. In English orthography, an *-e* following a single consonant is not pronounced but merely determines the shade of the stem vowel, as in *hat* vs. *hate*. A solution frequently employed that preserves the **bi-syllabic character** of the original name with a minimum of change in the pronunciation, is replacing the *-e* with a *-y*. Adding the *y* to the *e* or replacing it with *-ie* will have the same effect. As a consequence, we find names

such as *Bodey*, *Goethie*, *Kadey* and *Kadie*, *Langey* and *Langie*. Names with more than a single letter between the stem vowel and the final *e* retain their bi-syllabic structure more easily but will often add a *y* just to make the pronunciation quite clear, or because an *-ey* or *-y* ending looks more comfortable as an English ending than just *-e*. *Bethkey* (German *Bethke*), *Willkie* (German *Willcke*),³¹ *Keehney* (German *Kühne*), *Langie*, *Langey* (German *Lange*), *Rippley* (German *Rieple*).

"Dutchified" Names

The spellings of many of the names going back to early immigration reflect the pronunciations of the names in the dialects spoken by the immigrants. This was generally the Palatinate dialect which was gradually accepted in Pennsylvania and developed into what is today known as "Pennsylvania German" ("Pennsylvania Dutch" in the earlier notation). Donald Herbert Yoder used the term "Dutchified"³² to characterize the dialect-based spellings. For example, German [i] and [e] before [r] (and certain other sounds) is pronounced [a] in the dialect, as reflected in *Harshbarger* (German *Hirschberger*) and *Spangler* (German *Spengler*). Names spelled with <ü> or <ue> in German are spelled with <i> in Dutchified names if the German sound was [Y] (the "short" ü), e.g., *Guengerich*>*Ging(e)rich*; if it was [Y] before [r] it became [ε], e.g., *Zuericher*>*Zercher*, if it was [y] (the "long" ü), it became <ie> or <ee>, e.g., *Kuefer*>*Kieffer*, *Keeffer*). The [ai] sound, spelled <ei> or <ey> in German names, became [ɔi] and accounts for *Moyer* for German *Meyer*. Among the consonants, a widespread change is [b] to [v], as reflected in *Hoover* (German *Huber*). *en* in medial or final position routinely became *a*, as in *Lookabaugh* from German *Luckenbach*.

Respelling to Bring Orthography in Line with Spelling Pronunciations

The English language does not have the sounds [ç] and [x], both represented in German orthography by <ch>. In most cases, spelling pronunciation results in [k], as found in *ache* and *mechanic*. But the spelling <ch> for

the sound [k] is not widespread. Hence, the pronunciation tends to lead to the more familiar spelling <ck> (as in *luck*, *packer*). Examples are *Rickenbacker* for German *Richenbacher*, or *Eickoff* for *Eichhoff*.

Respelling of "Resolved" German Umlaut Vowels

As discussed earlier, the umlauts spelled <ü> and <ö> can be spelled <ue> and <oe> in German, and often are in German names upon immigration. This allows for the pronunciations [i] and [ɛ], respectively, close enough to the original German sounds. However, again it is not a "normal" way of spelling the sounds in English. The tendency is towards a more common English spelling. Hence we find *Bame* (also *Bahme*) for *Boehm* (German *Böhm*), *Gabel* or *Gable* for *Goebel* (German *Göbel*)³³, *Keehn* for *Kuehn* (German *Kühn*), *Free(h)ouf* for *Fruehauf* (German *Frühauf*), *Yingling* for *Yuengling* (German *Jüngling*).

Respelling Reflecting More Common English Orthography

The tendency to settle for a more common rather than a rare English spelling is repeated in the treatment of <el> found in unstressed syllables of German names. English has the spellings <el> (*model*) as well as <le> (*uncle*) but in the names of the earlier immigrants and still quite frequently later, the German spelling is routinely changed to the more familiar English <le>: *Engel*>*Engle*, *Goebel*>*Gable*, *Nagel*>*Nagle*, *Dunkel-berger*> *Dunkleberger*, etc.

For the sound [f], the spelling is <sch> in German but <sh> in English. Elimination of the "superfluous" *c* results in changes such as *Schultz*>*Shultz*, *Schwartz*>*Shwartz*, *Pfersching*>*Pfershing*. After *t*, because of the idiosyncrasies of English orthography the same sound is spelled <ch>, resulting in *Fritch* from German *Fritsch*.

The German cluster <tz>, pronounced [ts], is just as easily rendered if written <ts>: *Shults* from *S(c)hultz* and *Shwartz* from *S(c)hwartz*. In the case of <tz> in *Schultz* (and in *Pfal(t)zgraf* as well as others), the sound of the German name is preserved (because of the phonetic charac-

teristics of the dental sound [t]) even if the letter *t* is dropped entirely and the names spelled *S(c)huls* and *P(f)alsgraf* in English.

Respelling Reflecting Simplified Pronunciation

The simplified pronunciations noted in **Simplification of German Sound Clusters**, above, have often resulted in the actual elimination of the "superfluous" letters. In the case of [J] becoming [s] (preceding *l*, *m*, *n* and *w*), we find the resultant spellings *Slicht* (or *Slict*) from *Schlicht*, *Smidt* and *Smelzer* from *Schmidt* and *Schmelzer*, *Snider* (frequently *Snyder*) from *Schneider*, *Swartz* from *Schwartz*, as well as many others.

From the simplification of [pf] with retention of either the one or the other component result the doublets *Hassenplug/Hassenflug*, *Palsgraf/Falsgraf*, *Peffer/Feffer*, *Pers(c)hing*³⁴ /*Fers(c)hing*, *Pister/Fister*, *S(c)him(m)elpennig*, *S(c)him(m)elfennig*.

Elimination of the silenced <h> is found, in addition to various other typical respellings, in *Huffines*, from *Hofheinz*; see also **Silencing of German Letters**, above.

Elimination of "Superfluous" Letters

German orthography employs consonants, especially double consonants, to indicate that a vowel is short. In other cases, certain consonants are present for etymological reasons. Transferred into English, these graphic symbols may no longer be required or meaningful. Hence, in the case of *Schimmelpfennig*, the double consonants protect the "short" character of the <i> and the <e> in German but do nothing for the pronunciation in English that the spelling *Schimelpfenig* could not also do. Likewise, in spite of, e.g. *hitchhiker*, the English language does not easily allow two *h*'s to stand next to each other in names.³⁵ Hence, people in this country having compound names of German origin containing *h+h* because the first element ends and the second begins with *h*, are constantly fighting a battle to prevent one *h* from getting lost. Examples are *Bachhofer*, *Bochholt*, *Buchholz*, *Fleischhauer* which all have American variants with one of the *hs* missing.

The "superfluous" letter most routinely dropped is one *n* from *-mann* as the base element in compounds: *Bachman*, *Haldeman*. The process is, of course, supported by the fact that it results in the English translation of the German word. Equally "superfluous" is one of the word-final *ss* that were *ß* in German in names such as *Ziegenfuss*, that will become *Ziegenfus*.

Clipping

German surnames tend to be longer than English ones. This easily leads to clipping part of the name off in everyday life. There may also have been a desire on the part of the immigrant to shorten the German name, especially if it is burdened with difficult spelling. Clipping affects the first part of a name more commonly than the second part: *Lautenbergef*>*Lauten*, *Lebenschweiler*> *Swiler*³⁶, *Rosenbaum* *Ross*(!), *Schrecken-berger*>*Berger*, *Seiden-spinner*>*Seidens*³⁷, *Swartzenbaugh*> *Swartz*³⁸, *Veitenheimer*> *Veit*, *Wildschuetz*> *Wild*.

Partial Respelling/ Translation

A large number of German surnames are compound names, consisting of a base word (often a name in its own right) and a determining element. In America, both of these can undergo changes but typically, only one of the elements is affected, e.g. in *Eisenhower* (German *Eisenhauer*), the base word is respelled whereas the equally un-American determiner remains unchanged. In this case, the respelling is just that, i.e., *hower* is not an English word, but in most cases respelling actually results in an English word which tends to be the translation of the changed element.

Examples for changes of the first element are, *Applebaum* (German *Apfelbaum*), *Brownstein* (German *Braunstein*), *Goodweiler* (German *Gutweiler*), *Newmeyer* (German *Neumeyer*). The second element is changed in *Baumgarten* (German *Baum-garten*), *Messersmith* (German *Messer-schmidt*), *Steinway* (German *Steinweg*), and *Haudenshield* (German *Haudenschild*, a so-called "imperative" surname). Whether the first or the last element changes seems to be determined solely by which of the elements in

the German name is closer in sound to the respective English equivalent, e.g., in the case of *Apfelbaum*, *Apfel* is more similar to *apple* than *Baum* is to *tree*. *Mann* is closer to *man* than any other German-English corresponding pair and hence the element first and most frequently changed. Along these lines it is possible to establish an hierarchical order and predict, in a given example, which one of the elements is likely to be changed and which one is not.

III. SUBSTITUTION

Substitution results in surname forms that look completely English. Nothing in their spelling suggests their German origin. Yet an important difference presents itself when these names are seen side by side with the German names they replaced. Some are quite different in their spelling but their "meaning" is the same. These are the names that were consciously translated. Others also are, technically, the translations of their German counterparts. But they look quite similar to their German counterparts and in fact, simple respelling played the major role in their reshaping. Most of the latter changes result in linguistic cognates.

Substitution by Meaning: Translation

New names resulting from translation have only their meaning in common with the German names they replaced. Their spellings are completely different. To bring about the change, a conscious act was required, either an act of power on the part of an outside agent or agency, or an act of will on the part of the name bearer.

Changes imposed by outside agents seem to have taken place at the time of early German immigration. It is reported that "[w]henver William Penn could translate a German name into a corresponding English one, he did so in issuing patents for land in Pennsylvania; thus the respectable *Carpenter* family in Lancaster are the descendants of a *Zimmermann*."³⁹

In many situations and at various times in American history, German immigrants or their descendants found it desirable to hide the connections to the ancestral homeland which their

surnames betrayed, by having their names officially changed. Many such changes were enacted in response to anti-German sentiments during World War I. In general, however, translation was not very widespread and actually unusual in the wake of the German mass immigration during the 19th century.⁴⁰ Barker observed that "translation is an active factor for change only when little change in sound is necessary,"⁴¹ i.e., primarily in the cases of "conversion" discussed in the following section.

Only the history of the individual family can determine whether a *Carpenter* or a *Taylor* family descended from immigrant ancestors named *Zimmermann* or *Schneider*. In a few cases, however, a translated name may not exist as a family name in the English-speaking world. For example, the names *Silknitter*, *Ironcutter* and *Turnipseed*, are not listed in the *Dictionary of English Surnames* by Reaney and Wilson and can safely be considered translations of the German names *Seidenstricker*, *Eisenhauer* and *Rübsam(en)*, respectively, on the basis of this evidence alone.

One of the reasons behind translating is the desire to gain a name that causes no stumbling or offense in an English-speaking environment. It may, however, also lead to a name that is not all that attractive, as the name *Turnipseed* from the German *Rübsamen* shows.

Substitution by Sound: Conversion

As the discussion of **Translation Pronunciation** (above) indicated, there is a strong tendency to change the pronunciation of German surnames to similar sounding English ones, a process known as "conversion."⁴² The name *Müller* changed to *Miller* by the thousands because it already sounded very much like *Miller*. Similarly, the name *Schild(t)* changed to *Shield*, *Weber* to *Weaver*, etc. Often the similar sounding names are cognates, as they are in these cases, but they do not have to be, as the examples *Graf* to *Grove* and of Margaret *Mitchell* (born Margaret *Moeschl*) indicate.

Again, in cases like these it is no longer possible to use the surname as an indication of German ancestry; only research on the in-

dividual family will discover that the change occurred. But also again, there are exceptions. The name *Wag(g)oner*, although it looks very English, clearly indicates German ancestry because the word *waggon* (*wagon* in American English) was not borrowed into English from the Dutch until the 16th century, far too late to become productive in forming surnames in Great Britain.⁴³ All *Wag(g)oners* therefore have a *Wagner* as an immigrant ancestor.

Beyond Respelling: Groping for Meaning

Names are often respelled in order to provide a suitable English spelling for a German sound. So the name *Böhm* (or *Boehm*), pronounced so as to rhyme with *came* in Pennsylvania German and also in the English rendering of the German umlaut sound) frequently became to be spelled *Bame* in this country. But the process is likely to continue beyond the simple act of respelling. Although *Bame* looks English enough, to be comfortable people like a name to have "meaning." The sound of *Bame* will quickly bring to mind the phonetically close word *beam*. Indeed, there are many Pennsylvania German families by the name of *Beam* that trace their ancestry back to an immigrant named *Böhm*. According to *PhoneDisc*, the name *Beam* holds a commanding lead in the U.S. over *Bame*.⁴⁴ Interestingly, there are variants that still retain the German *h*: *Bahme* and even *Beahm*.

The importance of the factor "meaning" in the adaptation of German names to the American environment is obvious when the history of the name *Böhm/Beam* is compared to that of *Göbel/Gable*. In both cases, the same vowel sound is the source. In the case of *Gable*, the product of simple respelling was a meaningful word, so no further development took place. In the case of *Bame*, the change of the vowel had to be pushed a little further to arrive at a meaningful product, hence *Beam*.

To what extremes the groping for meaning principle can be carried is evident in the name *Birckenbeuel* (meaning 'hill of birch trees') which went through the stages *Perkapeal*, *Pirkeypile* and *Porcabile* until ending up as *Porcupine*.⁴⁵

Folk Etymology

The preceding example is a simple example of folk etymology, defined in *Webster's Third* as "the transformation of words so as to give them an apparent relationship to other better-known or better-understood words." Most products of folk etymology are compounds.

The German name *Rübsam* (also *Rübsamen*) means 'seed of the turnip' and is originally a nickname for a farmer growing turnips. Most occurrences in this country, according to *PhoneDisc*, are in the forms *Rubsam* and *Ruebsam*. The latter allows the pronunciation [ribsam] which is close to the German original and will immediately bring up the concept of a name composed of the elements *reap* and *some*. Indeed in parts of Pennsylvania, the name *Reapsome* does exist.⁴⁶ Mencken reports on the *Todenackers* in Pennsylvania who live on as the *Toothatchers*.⁴⁷ Another Pennsylvania name is *Pennypacker*. This is not originally someone who packs pennies but, as the German original *Pfannebecker* indicates, a maker of roof tiles. *Kirchthaler* is a Palatinate name, meaning 'person from the village of Kirchthal' or 'person from the valley with the church.' In the Pennsylvania German dialect, this is pronounced ['kariç,dəlar] suggesting, with a shot of folk etymology added, *Cashdollar* — a name found 231 times in U.S. telephone directories, according to *PhoneDisc*.⁴⁸

Substitution by an Unrelated Name

Haugen reports for Norwegian immigrants that simply abandoning an Old World name and adopting a completely unrelated English one is "not particularly common."⁴⁹ Nor was it for German immigrants. Examples are not easily available for the very reason that the change was made: The intention was to become unrecognizable.

A New Name with a Link to the Old One

Those who made a drastic change often tried to at least preserve a token of allegiance to the name they abandoned. Frequently this was achieved by selecting or constructing an English-looking name that would have the same ini-

tial letter or letters as the abandoned German one. In his desire to adopt an appealing stage name, *John Deutschendorf* changed his name to *John Denver*, and *George Birnbaum* reappeared as *George Burns*. Closer to his original name was the choice of *Charles Zwick* who had his name officially changed to *Charles Z. Wick*, known to many as the director of the U.S. Information Agency under President Reagan. A more sophisticated example is that of *Charles Cist*, Henry Miller's partner in the printing of the German version of the Declaration of Independence whose birth name was Karl Jakob Sigismund Thiel. He composed his new surname from the initials of the original names, with the first one of the given names anglicized.⁵⁰

IV. OTHER CHANGES

German surnames underwent a number of other changes triggered by the new linguistic environment that they encountered on the American continent. That new linguistic environment was not always an English-speaking one. Germans were among the early settlers in Louisiana when the predominant language was still French. Gallicised names found on the "German Coast" include *Chance* (German *Schantz*), *Chauffe* (German *Schaf*), *Leche* and *Laiche* (German *Lesch*), *Oubre* and *Ouvre* (German *Huber*) and others.⁵¹

By the same token, hibernization occurred in areas predominantly Irish. Where names beginning with *O'* or *M(a)c* were common, some German names lent themselves easily to change. Hence, we find *O'Dekoven* (from German *Ödekoven*),⁵² *McAfoos* (from German *Muckenfuss*), *McEnheimer* (German *Mückenheimer*).

A common phenomenon in Colonial surnames, including English ones, is the ex-crescent *-s*, e.g., *Ames* (from *Oehm*)⁵³, *Myers*, *Snyders*. One may think of Dutch influence where adding the patronymic *s* to names is common, e.g., *Meyers*. Barker used the term "ornamentation" for lack of a better one.⁵⁴ He applied the same label to the spreading fad of doubling the final *l* in names such as *Russell*<*Russel*. The change actually signals the switch of the stress to the second syllable. It is widespread also in names of German origin including but not re-

stricted to those of East Coast Jews, e.g., *Engell*, *Handell*, *Himmell*, *Kreidell*, *Markell*, *Vogell*. Often the stress is switched in speech without a corresponding change in the spelling, e.g., *Glickel*, *Markel* may be stressed on the second syllable.

V. CONCLUSION

Name changes still take place but they are minor ones. The son of a recent Swiss immigrant by the name of Grüter who spelled his name *Grueter* in America, has decided to just use *Gruter*, without difficulties so far. But it is no longer advisable to be unconcerned about the consequences of a name change. As Howard F. Barker put it, paraphrased and quoted by Mencken:

"[t]he surnames of the American people have been greatly stabilized by the wholesale registration introduced by World War I. Many of

the conscripts rounded up for that war had only the vaguest idea of the spelling of their names, and not a few were uncertain as to what their names were, but by the time they were discharged every man had a name that was imbedded firmly in the official records, and he had to stick to it in order to enjoy any of the benefits and usufructs of a veteran. On the heels of this came the general spread of life insurance, a powerful stabilizing force. [...] Then came the automobile registration. Automobiles not only changed the face of the American landscape; they also went a long way toward stopping changes of family names. Automobile titles soon constituted a formidable body of property records. [...] Every million cars meant another million families named for good. After some years came Social Security. [...] By 1940 American nomenclature was vastly more stable than it had been in 1910, or even in 1920."⁵⁵

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NOTES

¹This overview is based on an extensive yet possibly still incomplete collection of name changes compiled by the author. A "dinner talk" version was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society for the History of Germans in Maryland on April 18, 1995; a full-fledged book version is scheduled for the near future. We use phonetic transcriptions (in square brackets, []) for the benefit of our readers in Germany who may not be able to guess the pronunciation of a name in the U.S. Pointed brackets (< >) are used for actual orthographic features, otherwise, letters are simply printed in italics. Those readers who are not familiar with these conventions may safely ignore them; care was taken to explain all pronunciations and technical terms.

²Goethe expressed it this way: "A man's name is not a cloak that merely hangs about him, and which, perchance, one may safely twitch and tear, but a perfectly fitting garment, grown over and over him like his skin, which one cannot scratch and scrape without wounding the man himself." *Goethe's Autobiography. Poetry and Truth From My Own Life*, 356 (Part II, Book 10).

³Barker, "How the American Changes His Name," 101.

⁴The many and often curious changes which German surnames underwent in this country have repeatedly attracted the attention of scholars as well as laypersons. Oscar Kuhns calls his study of 1902 "the first treatise of the kind in America," but only five pages are actually devoted to the discussion of German surname changes in America. H.L. Mencken, in his cursory but fascinating manner, provides a wealth of material especially on 479-85, 4th edition of *The American Language*, and 407-13 of *Supplement II*. Invaluable are two unpublished academic theses which are the only systematic treatments so far of German surnames in the American environment. One is the doctoral dissertation of 1938 by Elda O. Baumann on the German surnames in the small Wisconsin city of Potosi, the other a 1958 masters thesis by Frederick W. Hilbig which discusses the Americanization of German surnames on the basis of evidence lifted from city directories across the country. Al-

though written with a different goal in mind, an overwhelming record of name change possibilities is available in John Leighly's *German Family Names in Kentucky Place Names*.

⁵Jones, *German-American Names*, 53.

⁶Actually, we do not even know when and by whom the lists were written. Glazier and Filby (*Germans to America*, vol. 42, X; also in the preface to the other volumes) claim that "[although the manifests provide significant information about nineteenth-century immigration, we know little about the compilation of these lists; we do not know who made the lists originally, or if there was any uniform standard applied in collecting the data at the various ports. Some evidence suggests that the lists were compiled first by shipping agents at the port of embarkation and initially contained the names of all prepaid passengers; the names of additional passengers were added on board, after which clerks copied the lists before depositing them with U.S. authorities at the port of debarkation."

⁷Mencken, *The American Language*, 483.

⁸Mencken, *The American Language*, 482.

⁹So already Oscar Kuhns, "Studies in Pennsylvania German Family Names," 320 ("sometimes"); see also Donald Yoder, "Dutchified Surnames" (cited after Mencken, *The American Language, Supplement II*, 410): "the immigrants and their descendants simply learned to spell their surnames as they themselves pronounced them."

¹⁰Yoder, however, suggests that it was actually the immigrants and their descendants themselves who brought the respelling about. See preceding note.

¹¹Haugen, *The Norwegian Language in America*, 201-05.

¹²Installed in a computer with CD-ROM drive, the two discs list the names, addresses and telephone numbers of (it is claimed) 80 to 90 percent of all residences in the U.S. The actual percentage is probably lower, and the list contains many errors in the spelling of the names, but it is nevertheless an invaluable tool for the study of names.

¹³Haugen, *The Norwegian Language in America*, 202.

¹⁴*The American Language, Supplement II*, 407.

¹⁵*The Norwegian Language in America*, 202.

¹⁶*The American Language, Supplement II*, 409-10.

¹⁷Metcalf, "Translation Pronunciation [. . .]," 268. Bernard J. Freitag, President of the German Society of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia assures me that whereas many people including some families related to him pronounce the name [fritag], to his knowledge no one has pronounced the name like the English name for the weekday.

¹⁸*German Surnames in Potosi*, p.100. The pronunciation may have started as an American rendering of the German umlaut [y] but its continued existence, in spite of the spelling, is remarkable nevertheless.

¹⁹Metcalf, "Translation Pronunciation [. . .]," 268-70.

²⁰The city gained a place in the national consciousness through the flood that swept it away in 1889 after the break of the Conemaugh dam.

²¹*Green, from trail dust to star dust*, 20-22.

²²Baumann, *German Surnames in Potosi*, 97.

²³As happened to the German parliamentarian Franz-Josef Strauß who during a visit of New York was robbed of, among other things, his passport by three prostitutes. For a while, the New York Police Department was unable to return the passport to his rightful owner because the German Consulate General did not recognize the name read as "Straub" as being that of the visiting dignitary. See *Der Spiegel* 13/1971,25.

²⁴The umlauts are treated here as requiring respelling because of their graphic representation and because all three umlauts, <ä>, <ö> and <ü> can then be discussed together. Of course, their German acoustic value is absent in the English language and thus requires adaptation, which may result in respelling also.

²⁵Many may still be familiar with the name Larry Bittner, a player for the Chicago Cubs. (I owe this first example to my former Madison colleague, Donald A. Becker.) *Reimschißel* was reported by F.W. Hilbig, *Americanization of German Surnames* [...], 41. Now, examples can be found easily by checking *PhoneDisc* for German surnames with <ü>, replacing the <ü> with <i> in the search command. For example, *PhoneDisc* lists *Miüller* no fewer than 103 times, *Mück* forty-nine times, *Biittner* twenty-six times.

²⁶The descendants of Joseph Bäumeler who founded the communal settlement of Zoar, Ohio, in 1817, spell their name *Bimeler*. See *Zoar. An Ohio Experiment in Communalism*, 70.

²⁷Surnames beginning with *Y* are practically non-existent in German; exceptions are non-native names and accidental spellings.

²⁸The name is generally pronounced [laflɪn] today but the original pronunciation was [laxlɪn]. See Kenyon and Knott, *A Pronouncing Dictionary of American English*, s.v. Also Jones, *German-American Names*, p.26, and Mencken, *The American Language: Supplement II*, 408.

²⁹A deliberate change by a later immigrant, *Dellenbach* to *Dellenbaugh*, was reported for Buffalo, N.Y., by Gerber, *The Making of an American Pluralism*, 201.

³⁰Ken Bode, the moderator of PBS' "Washington Week

in Review," makes the extra effort pronouncing his name [boudi] while others use [boud].

³¹Mencken, *The American Language, Supplement II*, 412.

³²"Dutchified Surnames," see Mencken, *The American Language: Supplement II*, 410.

³³Clark Gable's ancestors were indeed immigrants by the name of *Göbel*. There was no English evidence except the American name for the entry *Gable* in Hanks and Hodges' *Dictionary of Surnames* (personal communication by the author).

³⁴General John J. Pershing's ancestor Friedrich Pfoersching immigrated to Pennsylvania in 1749. See Mencken, *The American Language*, 480.

³⁵In English, the name formation process just like in German resulted in situations where a first element ending in an *h* would be linked to a second beginning with the same letter, as in *church* and *hill*. However, English nomenclature will not easily allow a double *h*. Hence, the name *Churchill*. There are exceptions, though. In addition to 4,794 *Churchills*, *PhoneDisc* lists thirty-six *Churchhills* in the United States.

³⁶Mencken, *The American Language*, 485.

³⁷Barker, "How the American Changes His Name," 102.

³⁸Gerber, *The Making of an American Pluralism*, 201.

³⁹Mencken, *The American Language: Supplement II*, 411 (Mencken's source could not be verified.)

⁴⁰The same observation is made by Haugen: "translation was not a common practice among the Norwegians." *The Norwegian Language in America*, 204.

⁴¹"How the American Changes His Name," 102.

⁴²"Conversion [. . .] amounts to the adopting of a more familiar, similar-sounding designation." Howard F. Barker, "How the American Changes His Name," 101.

⁴³Hanks and Hodges, *A Dictionary of Surnames*, s.v. *Wagner*.

⁴⁴*Beam* does exist as a surname in England, according to Reaney and Wilson. However, it is rare and not likely to have provided the "pull" that changed *Bame* into *Beam* in the eastern U.S.

⁴⁵*PalatinePattern* (1995), 6.

⁴⁶Several in Lancaster, PA. Also in Little Germany, Perry County, PA, where the tombstones in the Ludolph Church cemetery provide the transitional spelling *Reapsam*.

⁴⁷*The American Language*, 479. *PhoneDisc* does not yield either *Todenacker* or *Toothatcher* for anywhere in the U.S. (sorry, Herb); it does list *Tootha(c)ker* and *Toothhaker*.

⁴⁸A friend with whom I discussed *Cashdollar* mentioned that he had heard there was a name *Americandollar*, a folk etymological rendering of the German name *Mergenthaler*. Again, *PhoneDisc* does not list this name; it's likely to be a joke (sorry, Don).

⁴⁹*The Norwegian Language in America*, 205.

⁵⁰*Dictionary of American Biography*, vol. 4, s.v. *Cist*.

⁵¹Deiler, *The Settlement of the German Coast of Louisiana*, 94-105.

⁵²Hilbig, *Americanization of German Surnames*, 33.

⁵³Mencken, *The American Language, Supplement II*, 409.

⁵⁴"How the American Changes His Name," 103-03.

⁵⁵*The American Language: Supplement II*, 461.

