

# THE SURVIVAL OF GERMAN DIALECTS AND CUSTOMS IN THE SHENANDOAH VALLEY

(A Preliminary Survey)

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The first white settlers in the Great Valley of Virginia and adjoining sections of West Virginia came from the Palatinate region of Germany and Switzerland by way of Pennsylvania. The migration of Germans, from their area of first settlement in southeastern Pennsylvania, made the Shenandoah Valley virtually a southern counterpart of the so-called "Pennsylvania Dutch Country."

Adam Miller, the first recorded white settler, arrived in the Valley in 1726. Later, a group led by Jacob Stover, composed of Lutherans, Mennonites and Calvinists, settled in what is now Page county, and in 1730 Joist Hite brought sixteen families from Pennsylvania who settled in Frederick county. From these early pioneers a migration trend was established, and by the time of the War of the Revolution a large portion of the population in Rockingham, Shenandoah, Frederick, Augusta and Page counties, Virginia, as well as Pendleton and Hardy counties, West Virginia, were immigrants from Pennsylvania. It is not surprising that these people used the German language and spoke the Pennsylvania Dutch dialect.

During the eighteenth century the use of the German language and its dialect variants was not confined to the homes and to the informal life of the settlers. Church services of all predominantly German denominations (Lutherans, Reformed, Dunkers, Mennonites, Moravians and United Brethren) were conducted exclusively in the *Hochsprache* (Standard German). Business transactions were carried out in German as account books and numerous files of old correspondence of the period attest. German was used extensively in political campaigns. Congressmen from the Valley like Jacob Swope and Daniel Sheffey owed much of their success in political life to their knowledge of German. Other political candidates who were not familiar with the German language had their campaign pamphlets translated and they frequently used interpreters when addressing the people in Valley towns and villages.

In 1792, the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia, received a petition "of sundry inhabitants of German descent, of the county of Augusta, setting forth, that their ignorance of the English language, renders it impossible for them at present to become acquainted with the proceedings of the General Assembly, and praying that a sufficient number of the laws of this Commonwealth for their use may be printed in the German language."<sup>1</sup> As a result of this petition, a comprehensive collection of Virginia laws was ordered to be printed in German.<sup>2</sup>

German books, broadsides and newspapers as well as almanacs from presses in Pennsylvania and Western Maryland were widely sold through-

<sup>1</sup> *Journal of the House of Delegates of the Commonwealth of Virginia* (Richmond, 1792), 53.  
<sup>2</sup> *Akten, welche in der General Assembly der Republik Virginien pasziert warden sind* (Philadelphia, 1795).

out the Valley by itinerants and mail riders.<sup>3</sup> Military contingents raised in the predominantly German counties during the Revolutionary War used German as their language of command. German parochial schools were attached to most churches and, in the absence of any public instruction, they represented the first and only schools available to the children of the settlers.

This early period of exclusive use of the German language was followed by several decades of bilingualism in public and church affairs. In the towns where English and Scotch-Irish inhabitants lived side by side with their German neighbors the English language made the first successful inroads. Valley German leaders, notably Solomon Henkel, Ambrose Henkel, Johannes Braun, Daniel Sheffey, Peter Bowman and Peter Burkholder, tried to stem the tide through their efforts in teaching the *Hochsprache* and providing reading material to the population.<sup>4</sup> German printshops were opened up in Winchester, Staunton, New Market and Harrisonburg. A survey of German printing done in the Shenandoah Valley between 1789 and 1834 lists three newspapers and almost one hundred books and pamphlets.<sup>5</sup> Most significant among these publications were the German textbooks written and printed by the Henkel family in New Market.

The appearance of English-speaking revival preachers and the founding of Methodist and Baptist congregations in the predominantly German counties forced the German denominations to accommodate younger members who preferred English to the vernacular of their parents by introducing English services. By 1830, the German *Hochsprache* was beginning to lose out to English as the foremost church and public language. Henkel's ABC Books appeared in a bilingual edition and Braun translated the Heidelberg Catechism into English for his Reformed congregations. The last solely German book was printed in New Market in 1834. From that year on even the annual reports of the Lutheran Synods and the Reformed Classis appeared in English. The three major religious denominations, the Lutherans, the Reformed and the United Brethren had switched to English for their official transactions by 1840. This language transition was frequently accompanied by convulsive, internal struggles and many a congregation split up over the language issue.<sup>6</sup>

Only the more tightly-knit sectarian groups of Mennonite and Dunker background managed to preserve German as their exclusive church language for another decade or two. By the time of the Civil War, the German *Hochsprache* had all but disappeared from the Virginia pulpits.<sup>7</sup>

For a while it seemed as if the German dialect spoken by the Valley Germans would remain the principal language for home use. Still in 1866, the Baltimore *Catholic Mirror* in an article on the Shenandoah Valley observed: "In many portions the German language is yet the vernacular."<sup>8</sup> The dialect being much closer to the thinking and to the mentality of the

<sup>3</sup> Klaus G. Wust, "German Books and German Printers in Virginia," *Rockingham Recorder*, II (1958), No. 2, 24-29.

<sup>4</sup> Klaus G. Wust, "Johannes Braun (1771-1850)—Ein geistiger Führer der Virginia-Deutschen," *Europa und die Niederdeutsche Welt*, XIX (1955), 120-123.

<sup>5</sup> Klaus G. Wust, "German Printing in Virginia, A Check List, 1789-1884," *Society for the History of the Germans in Maryland, Reports*, XXVIII (1953), 54-65.

<sup>6</sup> For the Lutheran see Socrates Henkel, *History of the Evangelical Lutheran Tennessee Synod* (New Market, Va., 1890) and Charles W. Cassel, *History of the Lutheran Church in Virginia and East Tennessee* (Strasburg, Va., 1930). Frequent reference to the language situation is made in J. Silor Garrison, *The History of the Reformed Church in Virginia* (Winston-Salem, N. C., 1948), and Abram P. Funkhouser, *History of the Church of the United Brethren in Christ, Virginia Conference* (Dayton, Va., 1921).

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Harry A. Brunk, *History of Mennonites in Virginia, 1727-1900* (Staunton, Va., 1959) and D. H. Zigler, *History of the Brethren in Virginia* (Elgin, Ill., 1914). Eight articles on the Mennonites in Virginia were recently published in *Mennonite Life*, XVIII (January 1963), pp. 18-42.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted in the *Rockingham Register and Advertiser*, February 9, 1866.

rural population stood a much better chance to survive the transition than the standard language which had always been a kind of second language to these Palatine and Allemanic peasants.

In spite of the widespread and common use of the dialect throughout the Valley, its gradual decline has been evident since the middle of the 19th century. In 1907, Dr. John Wayland observed that "As one generation has succeeded another, the circles in which the German language and customs are preserved have steadily narrowed . . . at the present time about five percent of the German families in the Valley still use the German language . . . most of these are to be found in the western sections of the counties of Rockingham and Shenandoah . . . and it is limited almost without exception to the familiar intercourse of the home circle." The eminent Valley historian considered the dialect doomed, for he wrote, "Another generation or two will almost certainly witness its utter extinction."<sup>9</sup> H. M. Hays, writing on the dialect in Virginia, also implied its limited future in 1908, "the language once in common use throughout the northern part of the Valley . . . is still spoken to some extent by the older inhabitants."<sup>10</sup>

Possibly the decline of the dialect and the predictions of its extinction resulted, in part, from a recognition of the criticism directed against its use by various non-German sources. One of the most explicitly strong written statements against the dialect came from Oren Morton, a Pendleton county historian, who wrote in 1910, "In this locality we find people with a century and a half of American ancestry still clinging to a speech that is merely bastard German. These people cannot read the German bibles remaining in their homes, nor can they read German script. Yet they . . . teach their children to use a mongrel jargon that has no literature and no written form." He charged that the dialect was "a handicap to children," that it created an "artificial and needless barrier," that it "narrows the intellect" and "fosters an air of self-depreciation," and he concluded that it was a "retrogressive practice."<sup>11</sup>

The extinction of the dialect has been predicted for a half century, and printed statements over thirty-five years old claim, "The English language has replaced the German . . . until it was a rare thing to hear a German word spoken."<sup>12</sup> It is interesting that in 1962 the dialect is still spoken by hundreds of people in the Valley.

Investigations by the authors indicate there are no fewer than three hundred and fifty dialect speaking adults in the Valley region. A settlement of approximately one hundred baptized members of an Old Order Amish congregation is well established in Stuarts Draft and nearby is a congregation of nearly a hundred adult members of the Beachy Amish sect. Together, these "plain people" total over four hundred, including infants and children. The dialect is common among these tradition-loving sectarians of Augusta county.

In nearby Rockingham county, three congregations of Old Order Mennonites are located in the Dayton area. One congregation has over two hundred members, another about a hundred and fifty, and the third nearly a hundred adult members. The dialect persists among the older members of these groups, but not among the younger generations.

Dr. Ellsworth Kyger, professor of German at Bridgewater College, has

<sup>9</sup> John W. Wayland, *The German Element of the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia* (Charlottesville, Va., 1907), 102.

<sup>10</sup> Heber M. Hays, "On the German Dialect Spoken in the Valley of Virginia." *Dialect Notes*, III (1908), 263-278.

<sup>11</sup> Oren Morton, *A History of Pendleton County* (Franklin, W. Va., 1910), 137.

<sup>12</sup> John W. Wayland, *A History of Shenandoah County, Virginia* (Strasburg, 1927), 513.

tape recorded a number of dialect speaking people of non-plain religious affiliation. He has a list of about a hundred and fifty dialect speaking residents, the largest proportion of whom are members of Lutheran congregations.

Although the Amish and Beachy Amish in Augusta county represent the greatest concentration of people in the Valley who understand or speak the dialect, the authors have also found several other communities in which the dialect is still used by older residents. In the Dayton-Hinton section, where a heavy concentration of Old Order Mennonites live; in the Bergton-Criders neighborhood of Rockingham county, and in the Jerome-Orkney sections of Shenandoah county, quite a few elderly residents converse in the dialect and some of their children also use the language. The majority of the people in Propst Gap and Brushy Fork in Pendleton county, West Virginia, still use the dialect in the home, and it is still spoken by some residents in northeastern Highland county, Virginia. A few older residents who can speak the dialect can also be found in areas such as Timberville, Bridgewater, Park View, and in other communities scattered throughout Rockingham county.

The dispersion of the dialect in the Shenandoah Valley is unlike that of Pennsylvania. According to Dr. William Frey in an article titled, "Who Speaks Pennsylvania Dutch and Where?"<sup>13</sup> it was estimated that at least

<sup>13</sup> *The Pennsylvania Dutchman*, Lancaster, Pa., Vol. 1, No. 7 (1949).

three quarters of a million people in southeastern Pennsylvania can speak or understand the dialect. He noted that the Amish, Mennonites and "Plain" sects represented only a small portion of these people. In the Valley area, the "Plain" sect represents the majority of the dialect speaking people and if the dialect persists in any meaningful way to the turn of the century, it is most likely that it will be among these conservative, self-segregated people.

There are likely to be far more people in the Valley who can speak or understand the dialect than investigations have so far revealed. It would be a conservative estimate to claim that at least seven hundred people can speak or understand the dialect today. There is a strong reluctance among some people who were "raised Dutch" to reveal it, particularly after they move into the towns and cities. For example, when the writers told a middle aged man, "We understand you can speak the dialect," he said, "How did you find out? I've been trying to hide it for twenty years." The writers have been in homes where children under ten years of age respond to every command or suggestion given them in the dialect, yet they will not speak it. There is a stigma associated with being "Dutch" and the younger people attempt to avoid ridicule. During interviews the dialect has been referred to variously as "Goose-Latin," "Slop-Bucket Dutch," "Tongue-Tied Latin" and "Dumb Dutch." Little wonder that people able to speak or understand the dialect avoid its use among non-dialect speaking peoples, and it is understandable that the dialect seems to be extinct.

Yet there is no way the dialect can be handed down except through the home, for few, if any, of the people who speak the dialect in the Valley have read or even seen the dialect in print. Most informants claim it is not a written language, despite the fact that Pennsylvania German dictionaries have been available for nearly a century and a sizeable dialect literature has been published for a long time.

The writers agree with all those predictions of the past which claim that the dialect is a dying language. We differ, however, when the date of extinction is foretold. Certainly it has persisted longer than had been

imagined by the early writers, although their error is understandable because the people who speak the dialect today almost always live in neighborhoods that are inaccessible and often isolated. Many of the informants have stated that they seldom travel to the towns and cities. Some have not visited the major shopping centers of the Valley, such as Harrisonburg or Staunton, more than a dozen times during their long lifespans. Nor did the early writers seek out the dialect speaking peoples in those out-of-the-way mountain gaps and valleys. It has been these "lost" people who have perpetuated the dialect—certainly not the town and city residents—and it is precisely among the isolated peoples where the dialect has a chance to survive this and perhaps another generation.

Dr. Kyger, who is working on a linguistic analysis of the dialect, reports differences in the dialect as it is spoken in the various geographic areas of the Valley. This may result from a lack of communication between the various Dutch speakers in the Valley, or it could result from differences in the language use between the various sections in Germany from which they migrated.

The writers have interviewed nearly a hundred persons of German ancestry in six counties of the Valley. It has been found that many of the traditional Pennsylvania German beliefs, customs and practices have had widespread acceptance and use in this region.

The reader will be interested to learn that many of the rural-agricultural people still plant by the signs of the moon and place great stock in the signs of the Zodiac. A large percentage of the rural population frequently turns to the Hagerstown Almanac for such guidance. Rural farm folk still make their own soap in iron kettles, and in the fall of the year it is not uncommon to make apple butter. Others continue to dry corn, make apple snitz, and do typical domestic tasks characteristic of yesteryear. The home remedies so common among the people of southeastern Pennsylvania can still be found here in the Valley—herb tea, "greasing" and "measuring," and even some of the occult cures which call for special words and rituals. Certain days still have special meaning for some of the older residents: On *Ascension Day*, sewing is taboo; fried cakes are made on *Shrove Tuesday*; the dandelion is eaten on *Maundy Thursday*; and some few people even continue to sprinkle ashes on the cattle on *Ash Wednesday*. Gone, but still remembered, are New Year Shooters; but the "belsnickeling" still survives in a number of neighborhoods, although it is occasionally referred to as "Kriss Kringling."<sup>14</sup>

Although the information has been obtained primarily from elderly residents, who often glory in the past and honor yesterday more than today, it must be stated that there also has been noted a marked tendency away from these old customs, beliefs and practices which were predominant throughout the history of the Valley. It should be noted, however, that the survey by the writers has generated considerable renewed interest in the customs of the past. Certain practices of the present, such as soap-boiling and apple butter making, as organized by some church groups as money raising or foreign mission projects, can be traced directly to the old customs.

In the not-too-distant future, the dialect, the superstitions, folk medicine, unique domestic activities and observance of special days which were so characteristic of Pennsylvania German culture will have faded from actual existence. It will have resulted from the cultural assimilation which is one of the elements of modern mass society.

<sup>14</sup> For Christmas customs in the Valley see Klaus G. Wust, "Deutsches Christfest und der Weihnachtsbaum in Virginia," *Washington Journal*, December 9, 16 and 23, 1960.