Our names are very much part of what defines us as a person. 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. 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 destabilized. 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.

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

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' 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 [. . .].

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. 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
German Surnames

their names had been taken down—if they could read at all. As H. L. Mencken 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, Neuenchwander, Pfannenstiel, Schumacher, Schwarzkopf, Schwerdtfeger, Seidensticker, Schlassenfallen, 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," Haugen observed. In Wisconsin, the Jung Seed Company uses the pronunciation [jun] 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 [ei] 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 [gëbol] (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 [ju:bə, rath].

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) [tf], e.g., in Koch. The most audible change concerns the letter <ü>, pronounced [ts] in German but [z] in English, as in Ziegler, Zimmermann(n), Schmelzer. In the case of vowels, spelling pronunciation replaces German [e] by English [i] as in Peters and Seemann, and <eu> (German [zi]) 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. 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 [kouk] or [k2tf], rarely as [kuk] but most commonly [kuk], 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. Bau- mann reports that in Potosi the pronunciation [mitɛr] is used for a name spelled Muller. The term "translation pronunciation" was suggested by George J. Metcalf 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 Cen- maugh, after the river that flows by it. To his
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 Johnstown20 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 [ſouɛnʃ] (German Schoenhoff)22 and Schoenherr [ʃoɛnherit], also in Gerhardt [ʤərhardt]. 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 Frueh(auf) 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., Wollersheim in German becomes Woller<em class="caps">s</em><em class="caps">h</em>im 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 [boud] in English. Similarly, Hase, Rothe. Although their final -e does not affect the stem vowel, names such as Heide, Olde and Schulze 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 Geisler (or Geisler) but also Geihsler and Geiszler, as documented by PhoneDisc.

The umlauts. 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 pronunciations which a speaker of English would naturally produce when seeing the name written. 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 [gوب]. 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 [louνbrαιu]). 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 ⟨iː⟩, i.e., double i, resulting in spellings such as Biittner (German Büttner), Kihler, Kühn, Liittschwager, Mück, Mühlbach, Müller, Reimschüssel and dozens more. 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 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 Fos. 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,
While the spelling in the latter examples is certainly due to the fact the [oi] became [a] 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 Eisenhower 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, Jahrnaus> Yahraus, Jungfleisch> Yungfleisch, Jüngling> Yuengling, Joder>Yoder. In syllable-initial position <z> for German <s> is found: Siebold> Ziebold, Kaiser>Kaiser, Neuhäuser>Nihizer. Others, such as <v> for German <w> (Jungwirth> Yangvirt, Schwartz> Swartz, 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 and applied the respective spelling.29

A particular challenge faces persons whose German name was bi-syllabic and ended in -e, e.g., Bode, 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 Willicke), Kühne, Bethkey, Bethke, (German Lange), Richley (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 Palatine 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" 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 [e], e.g., Zuericher>Zercher, if it was [y] (the "long" ü), it became <ie> or <ee>, e.g., Kuefer>Kieffer, Keeffer). The [au] sound, spelled <eu> or <ey> in German names, became [ei] 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 [ε], 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), Keen 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, Schwarz>Shwartz, Fersching>Pershing. After t, because of the idiosyncrasies of English orthography the same sound is spelled <ch>, resulting in Fritch from German Frösch. The German cluster <tz>, pronounced [ts], is just as easily rendered if written <ts>: Shults from Schultz and Shwartz from S(ch)wartz. 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 character of the dental sound [l]) even if the letter t is dropped entirely and the names spelled S(ch)uls and P(f)alzgraf 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, Snyder (frequently Snyder) from Schneider, Schwartz 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, Pfalzgraf/Pfalzgraf, Persching/Persching, Fister/Fister, Schimmelpfennig/Schimmelpfennig.

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 <c> 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. 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, Rosenbaum Roos(!), Schrecken-berger>Berger, Seiden-spinner>Seidens, Swartzenbaugh>Swartz, 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), Good-weiler (German Gutweiler), Newmeyer (German Neumeyer). The second element is changed in Baumgarden (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]henever 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."40

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.  

Barker observed that "translation is an active factor for change only when little change in sound is necessary," 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 Rübsamen, 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." 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 Wea-ver, 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 individual family will discover that the change occurred. But also again, there are exceptions. The name Waggoner, 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. All Waggoners 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. 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 Beam, 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 Perka-peal, Pirkeypile and Porcabile until ending up as Porcupine.
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 [ribsa:m] 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 ['karç,dalur] 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." 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 initial 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, hiberization occurred in areas predominantly Irish. Where names beginning with O' or Mac were common, some German names lent themselves easily to change. Hence, we find O'Dekoven (from German Ödekoven), McAfoos (from German Muckenfuss), McEnheimer (German Mückenheimer).

A common phenomenon in Colonial surnames, including English ones, is the ex-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 Grüter, 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 regimentation 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."

—Jürgen Eichhoff
The Pennsylvania State University

Sources

Barker, Howard F. "How the American Changes His Name." The American Mercury 36 (1935), 101-03.

German Surnames


Palatine Patter. The Newsletter of Palatines to America. Columbus, OH.

PhoneDisc USA. Discs 1 (Residential East) and 2 (Residential West). Bethesda, MD: Digital Directory Assistance, Winter 1994. [Regularly updated versions available.]


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. Although 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.
German Surnames

2The American Language, Supplement II, 407.
3The Norwegian Language in America, 202.
4The American Language, Supplement II, 409-10.
5Metcalfe, "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 [frigat], to his knowledge no one has pro-
nounced the name like the English name for the weekday.

6German 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.
7Metcalfe, "Translation Pronunciation [. . .]," 268-70.

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

8Green, from trail dust to star dust, 20-22.
9Baumann, *German Surnames in Potosi*, 97.
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.
11Metcalfe, "Translation Pronunciation [. . .]," 268.
12The city gained a place in the national consciousness
through the flood that swept it away in 1889 after the break
of the Conemaugh dam.
13Green, from trail dust to star dust, 20-22.
14Baumann, *German Surnames in Potosi*, 97.

As 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
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17Metcalf, "Translation Pronunciation [. . .]," 268.
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Josef Strauß who during a visit of New York was robbed of,
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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 to-
gether. 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 Biüt-
tner, a player for the Chicago Cubs. (I owe this first exam-
ple to my former Madison colleague, Donald A. Becker.)

27Surnames beginning with Y are practically non-exis-
tent in German; exceptions are non-native names and acci-
dental spellings.
28The name is generally pronounced [lafl In] today but
the original pronunciation was [lafln]. See Kenyon and
Jones, *German-American Names*, p.26, and Mencken, *The
American Language: Supplement II*, 408.
29A deliberate change by a later immigrant, *Dellenbach to
Dellenbough*, 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 [boudi].
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 Pfoer-
sching 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 nomen-
clature will not easily allow a double h. Hence, the name
Churchhill There are exceptions, though. In addition to
Churchills, *PhoneDisc* lists thirty-six Churchhills in the
United States.
37Barker, "How the American Changes His Name," 102.
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. Wag-
ner.
44Beam 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 *Bane* into *Beam*
in the eastern U.S.
46Several in Lancaster, PA. Also in Little Germany, Perry
County, PA, where the tombstones in the Ludolph Church
cemetery provide the translational spelling Reapsam.
47The American Language, 479. *PhoneDisc* does not yield
either *Toodenacker* or *Toothatcher* for anywhere in the U.S.
(sorry, Herb); it does list *Toothha(c)ker* and *Toothbaker*.
48A friend with whom I discussed Cashdollar mentioned
that he had heard there was a name *Americandollar*, a folk
eytymological rendering of the German name *Mergenthaler.
Again, *PhoneDisc* does not list this name; it's likely to be a
joke (sorry, Don).
49General James A. Garfield's ancestor Friedrich Pfoer-
sching immigrated to Pennsylvania in 1800. See Mencken,
*The American Language*, 480.
51Deller, *The Settlement of the German Coast of Louisiana*,
94-105.
52Hilbig, *Americanization of German Surnames*, 33.
54"How the American Changes His Name," 103-03.
55The American Language: Supplement II, 461.