

The following is an English version of an article originally titled “Fortbestand des Kirchwesens unter den Auswandern in Amerika: Der besondere Fall der St. Pauls Gemeinde in Wheatland, Iowa.” It was published in *Wittgenstein*, the periodical of the Wittgensteiner Heimatverein in Germany in the December 2016 issue (pp. 144-152). Many of the early settlers around Wheatland and most of the founders of St. Paul’s church were natives of the village of Wunderhausen in what was then the county (*Grafschaft*) of Wittgenstein-Berleburg.

Continuities in Church Life among Emigrants to America: The Special Case of St. Paul’s Church in Wheatland

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Most of the emigration from Germany and from Wittgenstein specifically took place between the years 1850-1880. In comparison to emigration in the 18th century, the principal motives at this time were primarily economic rather than religious. The pressures of a growing population and relative poverty drove an unknown number of Wittgensteiners to seek a new life. Of course they found much in the New World that was new: new political freedoms, new economic relationships and new forms of church life.

With respect to the latter, the differences were stark. Today it is generally acknowledged that religiosity is stronger in the U.S. than in Europe. The measurement of “religiosity” is inherently subjective which makes comparisons difficult, but a variety of data support this generalization. For instance, the WIN-Gallup International organization reports data from self-descriptions of personal adherence to religion in multiple countries. A study in 2005 and another in 2012 estimated that religiosity in both Germany and France was ten percentage points lower than in the U.S.² Social scientists have long been skeptical of self-reports of religiosity defined as church attendance. For instance, a team of American sociologists derived estimates of actual weekly attendance in 1993 of little more than 20 percent compared to typical self-reports of 40 percent in many surveys.³ Survey research by Gallup in 2004 estimated weekly attendance at church services in Germany of less than ten percent.⁴

It is even more challenging to compare religiosity between the early 21st century and that in the 19th century. Nevertheless, certain objective differences are clear and they suggest that church life in Germany in the earlier century was more intense than it was in America. The rulers of Wittgenstein—the Counts of Sayn-Wittgenstein—were early converts to the Calvinist/Reformed faith and Count Ludwig the Elder (1532-1605) decreed that his subjects would do likewise.⁵ With the exception of a handful of Jews, Sinti, Roma⁶ and a few Countesses who came from Lutheran backgrounds, the populace was confirmed under the strict Heidelberg Catechism. An important proclamation of laws by Count Ludwig in 1579 known as the *Wittgensteiner*

¹ I am grateful to the staff and members of St. Paul’s Church for their support and access to the archives.

² Global Index of Religiosity and Atheism. <http://www.wingia.com/web/files/news/14/file/14.pdf>

³ C. Kirk HADAWAY, Penny Long MARLER und Mark CHAVES, What the Polls Don't Show: A Closer Look at U.S. Church Attendance. *American Sociological Review*, (1993), Vol. 58, pp. 741-753.

⁴ Religion in Europe: Trust Not Filling the Pews. Gallup. 2004. <http://www.gallup.com/poll/13117/religion-europe-trust-filling-pews.aspx>. WIN-Gallup International and Gallup are actually independent organizations.

⁵ Walter SCHMITHALS, Die Einführung der Union im Kirchenkreis Wittgenstein. In 150 Jahre Landkreis Wittgenstein 1816-1966. Sonderdruck des Wittgensteiner Heimatvereins e.V. (1966), pp. 99-114.

⁶ Sinti and Roma are the preferred designation these days to what used to be called, pejoratively, “Gypsies.”

Landrecht prescribed many details of religious practice in line with those of Zwingli and other leaders of the Reformed movement.⁷

It was only under the rule of King Friedrich Wilhelm III of Prussia in 1817 that the Lutheran and Reformed churches were united into a common Protestant church [what we call a denomination]. However, the churches in the small villages and town of Berleburg largely continued their usual customs. The Synods in Wittgenstein reported that they had nothing against this Union as long as nothing had to change in their church services.⁸

Not without some controversy, the sociologists Roger Finke and Rodney Stark have attempted to measure the level of religiosity in the 19th century in America.⁹ I find their work credible and useful.¹⁰ Their objective was to determine the level of religious “adherence” in various parts of the U.S. This roughly corresponds to the proportion of adults who were active in a church. For the country as a whole in 1850, their metric was 37 percent. The state of Pennsylvania—which happened to have a large population of German stock—was right on that average of 37 percent. Catholic Maryland had a high value of 42. The old and prosperous state of Virginia (“The birthplace of Presidents”) was below average at 31.¹¹ Whether these American church-goers were more or less *pious* than their European counterparts, we really can’t say. Nevertheless, it is clear that emigrants from Germany did not find an all-encompassing religious atmosphere in the New World.

Back in Wittgenstein, one was rarely more than a mile or two from a village church. Some nominally Christian children may have avoided confirmation, but only a few. In the American borderlands, in contrast, there were often many miles between churches. Children were often born and the dead buried with no intercession of a religious body. While most families may have possessed a Bible, children often received no formal instruction in any denominational discipline.

The American Constitution supposedly guarantees the freedom of religion and proscribes the establishment of any specific religion.¹² Today, all American congregations, parishes, churches, etc. are member-supported in contrast to Germany where the main denominations are still supported by taxes; individuals may opt out of paying the church tax—as more and more do. So-called “free churches” exist that do not depend on state support. One unsentimental model looks at the relations between churches or denominations as one of market competition. In the period 1850-1880 that interests us here, the German Reformed Church in America was one of those competitors. Their congregations were well-established in the older cities of the east coast such

⁷ Das Wittgensteiner Landrecht nach dem Original-Codex von 1579, bearbeitet und herausgegeben von Wilhelm Hartnack. Sonderdruck des Wittgensteiner Heimatvereins e.V. (1960).

⁸ Eberhard BAUER und Johannes BURKHARDT, Überblick über die Geschichte des Kirchenkreises Wittgenstein. In *Die Kirchen des Kirchenkreises Wittgenstein in Wort und Bild*; Johannes Burkhardt, Andreas Kroh und Ulf Lückel (editors.) (2001), p. 35.

⁹ Roger FINKE und Rodney STARK, *The Churching of America 1776-1990*. Rutgers University Press (1992).

¹⁰ My academic field was also sociology.

¹¹ FINKE und STARK, p. 68.

¹² In practice, established (tax supported) churches were still common throughout New England and Virginia until the 1820s. I recommend the unblinkered history of American church-state relations by Philip Hamburger, *Separation of Church and State*. Harvard University Press, 2002.

as New York or Philadelphia. However, they had to compete with others on the still-expanding frontiers. There were never enough ordained ministers who could preach in German (and were willing to leave the relative comforts of the eastern states). It was difficult to raise enough money to pay a minister or to build any kind of meeting house. “Proper” churches such as the German Reformed Church faced other competition in the form itinerant preachers who would roll into a town, give long emotional sermons, “save” a few souls, take up a collection, and then pack their tents and move on.

It was into this strange and unfamiliar world that emigrants from Wittgenstein often arrived. Certainly their experiences varied so it is risky to assume a “typical” case. Rather than attempting to do that, we will look here at what is clearly an unusual case of continuity in practice and organization between church life back in Wittgenstein and on the American frontier of the 1850s and 1860s. Very specifically, we focus on the small village of Wunderthausen and the community that grew into Wheatland, Iowa. The actors in our drama are several dozen emigrants, with the leading roles being played by two young men from the same small house in Wunderthausen: L. Henry Riedesel and his cousin, Ludwig Dürr.¹³



L. Henry Riedesel



Ludwig Dürr

The Beginnings in Ohio

Although Wheatland lies hundreds of miles to the west, our story begins in a settlement in Crawford County, Ohio. Among the 18,000 residents of the county in 1850 were a handful of emigrants from Wunderthausen and other longer-term settlers who had roots in another village in Wittgenstein called Elsoff. The closely-related Riedesel and Dürr families had arrived in 1844-1845 while the large family of Johann Georg Schneider joined them in 1848. The only towns in the county were Galion and Bucyrus, and German Reformed congregations were active in both. However, it was hard for families “out in the country” to get into the towns regularly. There is good evidence that these expat Wittgensteiners had erected their own meeting house with a small cemetery on a farm outside of Galion.¹⁴

Between 1853 and 1860, the pastor of the German Reformed Church in Galion was one Dr. Max Stern and it is reported that L. Henry Riedesel and Ludwig Dürr studied theology with him.¹⁵

¹³ The young men were first cousins and grew up in the same household in Germany.

¹⁴ See my paper “Lost No More: The Final Resting Place of Our Ancestors Near Galion, Ohio” at <http://www.riedesel.org/wp-content/uploads/Lost-No-More-rev-April2016.pdf>

¹⁵ This story is reported by Emma Wetter Hobbs (my great-great aunt), whose 1947 genealogy is the foundation upon which all subsequent researchers have built: History and Genealogy of the Wetter-Miller-Schneider-Riedesel

Stern himself was an interesting figure. He was born into a Jewish family in the area of Germany known as Upper Franconia (now part of the state of Bavaria) in 1815. Sometime before he came to America in 1839 he had converted to Christianity and was baptized in a German Reformed Church in New York City. He then studied at the German Reformed Seminary in Mercersburg, Pennsylvania and was ordained into the ministry in 1845.¹⁶ Following his years in Galion, Stern served other congregations and held important positions in the denomination. Among other things, he was the first President of the Northwest Synod.¹⁷ He died in 1876, having had considerable influence on a generation of pastors in the Midwest and on the practices of the Reformed Church in America.

A New Life

Stern's influence was certainly evident in Wheatland, where the closely-related Riedesel, Schneider and Dürr families were to settle in the years 1850-1860.¹⁸ Sources tell us that in the early years, L. Henry Riedesel and Ludwig Dürr led informal church services in their homes. Starting in 1857, a growing number of people from Wunderthausen made their way to eastern Iowa and the environs of Wheatland. Recall that this was still thinly-populated prairie land. The work was hard and money was tight, yet in November of 1857, a group of German settlers agreed to form a congregation.^{19, 20} As readers may know, this was the short-lived First German Presbyterian Church. Of sixteen known founders, six were natives of Wunderthausen. They called Pastor Oswald, and L. Henry Riedesel donated an initial piece of land for the cemetery.

This experiment proved unsatisfactory as Pastor Oswald failed to teach the Heidelberg Catechism or use the proper Reformed song book! In October 1861 the community voted to sever ties with the Presbyterians and to create a proper German Reformed Church. All six of the officers (Trustees, Elders and Deacons) were from Wunderthausen. The first pastor of this new congregation was Rev. John (Johann) Conrad Klar, a native of Hesse-Darmstadt (a Protestant state in central Germany). He served in Wheatland from 1861 to 1865. As was the custom back in Germany, part of his compensation was delivered in the form of foodstuffs, firewood and flour. A church building had been erected in the Presbyterian days, and (somewhat amazingly!), the members managed to put up a small schoolhouse in 1863 as well. While there were rudimentary public schools which at least the younger children attended, the Germans needed their own place to teach both the Catechism and the German language.

Families in Europe and America. Ogallala, Nebraska, 1947. P. 68. The 1911 souvenir booklet of St. Paul's mentions Stern's relation to the families but not his tutoring of the cousins.

¹⁶ Daniel BURGHALTER, *History of the Galion Reformed Church* (1910).

¹⁷ *Geschichte der Deutsche Synode des Nordwestens der Reformierten Kirche in den Vereinigten Staaten 1867-1917*. Central Publishing House, Cleveland Ohio (1917), p. 5.

¹⁸ I have detailed the relationship between the village of Wunderthausen and Wheatland in my paper "Wheatland as the New Wunderthausen" available for download at <http://www.riedesel.org/wp-content/uploads/Wheatland-As-The-New-Wunderthausen.pdf> and also in the Curtis Memorial Library in Wheatland.

¹⁹ The early history is recounted in the booklet prepared for the 50th anniversary of the founding of the congregation: John GATERMANN, *Denkschrift zum Fünfzigjährigen Jubiläum der Deutschen Ref. St. Pauls Gemeinde zu Wheatland, Iowa* (1911). Gatermann was the energetic pastor at the time.

²⁰ I also referred to these later sources: 75-Year Booklet (1936); C. Esther COPP, *St. Paul's United Church of Christ Centennial Book 1861-1961* (1961); und Harold J. KOENIG, *To the Glory of God Alone, the First 125 Years* (1986). All were published privately.

A series of ministers followed in the footsteps of Rev. Klar and the congregation bloomed, fed by a flow of new emigrants from Wunderhausen. The town of Wheatland was predominantly “English”, with the Germans from Wittgenstein and elsewhere living on farms. The core of the congregation continued to be the emigrants from Wunderhausen and their descendants. For instance, a report in 1876 enumerated 145 members. By my estimate, 64 percent of them had origins in Wunderhausen or a couple of neighboring villages back in Wittgenstein.



Not surprisingly, the congregation outgrew the original building, so a new and larger one was built in 1878. It cost \$4,000—and carried no debt. The Germans were both frugal and generous. This building served the congregation until 1961 when, on the 100th anniversary of its founding, today’s modern church replaced it. A parsonage costing \$5,000 and featuring gas lighting was built in the early 20th century. The 50th Jubilee celebration in 1911 was a high point and a turning point for St. Paul’s. A dozen or so of the founding members were still alive. Far more were buried in St. Paul’s cemetery, which was enlarged by further additions from the farms of L. Henry Riedesel and his younger brother, George.²¹ It is reported that the confirmation class of 1909 with 25 young people was the largest ever. One of L. Henry’s sons, Rev. Charles Riedesel (1871-1960) was just the first of several sons of the congregation to enter the ministry (as were two of Charles’ sons).

Dr. Elmer G. Homrighausen (1900-1982) became an eminent theologian on the faculty of Princeton Seminary. Almost all the members of the church council in 1911 were related to the settlers from Wittgenstein by birth or by marriage. The Ladies Aid Society counted approximately 70 members. The younger “Martha Aid Society” consisted of younger (and probably English-speaking) women. The 20-voice choir was larger than many congregations can muster today.

Then came The Great War of 1914-1918. All things German were now suspect, congregations included. Further east, German Reformed congregations had usually switched to English years earlier as their native speakers died out; St. Paul’s still had a ways to go. I have been told that the German language was still used in services as late as 1930. But the once-proud identity of the congregation as a hub of German culture and faith was gone for good. It was 1934 when the German Reformed Church body was merged into the Evangelical and Reformed Church. In a

²¹ These were the farms, respectively, of the late Paul Riedesel of Wheatland and of Donald Ott.

further fusion in 1957, the latter denomination became a large part of the present United Church of Christ (the affiliation of St. Paul's today).

Founding Members Still Alive in 1911 (from the 50th Anniversary Booklet)



Names in bold were those entered by Emma Wetter Hobbs. I have provided all the other information.

Front/seated: **Mrs. Philip Schneider** (Marie Penningroth; 1845-1936, widow of Johann Philipp Schneider, 1836-1908)
 Florentine Schneider (Probably Flora Beitzel, 1831-1911, from Wunderhausen, widow of Henry A. Schneider, 1826-1889)
 Elisabeth Riedesel (1835-1923, born Elisabeth Knoche in Wunderhausen, widow of John Riedesel, 1929-1904)

Standing: **Philip Schneider** (1839-1916; born Johann Philipp in Wunderhausen)
 Mrs. Penningroth (Probably Sophronia Richmann/Riechmann, 1852-1943, widow of Frederick Penningroth, 1849-1903)
 Maria Strackbein (Probably Maria Homrighausen, 1847-1933, from Wheatland, widow of Louis Strackbein, 1836-1919)
 Louis Schneider (Probably Georg Ludwig from Wunderhausen, 1842-1925)

Cameos above: **Catherine Holmes** (1845-1940, daughter of J. Franz Homrighausen, wife of Erastus Holmes)
 Susie Riedesel (Aunt Susie; 1847-1942)
 Wilhelmina Keller (1838-1929, born Wilhelmina Schneider, 2nd wife of John Keller, 1831-1907)
 Flora Riedesel (1841-1920, born Elisabeth Florentine Schneider in Wunderhausen; widow of Henry Riedesel, 1834-1898)
 Heinrich Heiner (No further information; no Wunderhausen connection)

Comments

The nature of the early St. Paul's church and the influence it had on the lives of these emigrants from Wittgenstein was not unusual for this time period. Then as now, the church functioned as both a religious and a social community. For many decades of American history, such churches were a critical meeting point for newcomers to the U.S. Theologian Richard Niebuhr (1892-1971) published an important sociological treatise in 1929 with the title "The Social Sources of Denominationalism", including a chapter devoted to the churches of the immigrants. He was, of course, reflecting on the extensive wave of immigration in the preceding half century. By this time, relatively few were English-speaking Protestants so assimilation was a potent social and political issue. The immigrants typically felt pressed from many directions, particularly with reference to their language and traditions. Niebuhr wrote:

*[Language and tradition] . . . were the uniting bonds of the group and the symbols of its social solidarity. It was necessary, too, for the immigrants under these circumstances to find a center around which they could organize their values, a leadership which would hold together the scattered individuals of the race, a form of organization which would enable them to maintain and foster their solidarity. The only center which was available, as a rule, was religion; the only leaders, with few exceptions, who had braved the difficulties of a new orientation along with the migrating artisans and farmers were the clergy; the only organization which was readily at hand for maintaining the unity of the group was the church. . . . The church with its use of the old language, with its conservative continuance of Old World customs, with its strictly racial character was the most important of the social organization of the immigrant.*²²

Such a description fits St. Paul's. In many places, there were closer relations between German-speaking Reformed congregations and German-speaking Lutheran congregations than between the assorted Reformed bodies who shared the same theology—but not the same language.

Thus the history of St. Paul's in Wheatland was certainly not unique in America, but I know of no similar cases where Wittgensteiners founded an enduring congregation with a strong ethnic identity. For instance, many from Wunderhausen settled in the Kansas City area but there is no evidence that they created their own religious body. Many Germans, including some from villages in Wittgenstein, flocked to the area around San Antonio. Again, the evidence is that there was never a church community built around the Wittgensteiners. I would propose three important reasons for the strong, durable position that St. Paul's played in binding together the emigrants from poor villages in Wittgenstein along with generations of their descendants.

1) Such a concentration of people from a single origin in Europe was rare. I have counted more than 150 sons and daughters of Wunderhausen who lived around Wheatland for at least a while. Wunderhausen only had a population of 460 in 1900 and most of those who went to America did so between 1857 and 1880 (at least a hundred more went to other places in the U.S.!).

²² H. Richard NIEBUHR, *The Social Sources of Denominationalism*. Henry Holt and Company, New York (1929), pp. 222-223.

2) At the time when the people from Wunderthausen were first settling around Wheatland, it was still a frontier. There were no churches in place, least of all one using the German language. There was thus a great gap in the religion market. If there had already been a German-speaking Lutheran congregation in the Spring Rock Township, the odds are that our ancestors would have joined them.

3) The presence of a couple of ambitious members of the community who took the initiative to establish a Reformed congregation was of special importance: L. Henry Riedesel and Ludwig Dürr. In contrast to later arrivals, they had had the advantage of living among other Americans in Ohio for several years. For that reason alone, they would have had more influence in the community. Whether the cousins had been all that attentive in their confirmation classes back in Germany or had parents who were especially pious, we have no way of knowing. What they did have was instruction from a prominent cleric of the German Reformed tradition in the person of Rev. Max Stern. I think that Stern and his star pupils provided the necessary spark for what was for generations a thriving church with a solid German identity in a small Iowa town. Such an identity, like that of most historically ethnic congregations, faded over time but that fact takes nothing away from the remarkable story of what St. Paul's came to be and what it represented to hundreds of German-Americans around Wheatland.

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