

Why the Riedesels Went to Ohio in 1844/1845

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The "whys" of history are more difficult to answer than the "whats." One of the most persistent questions I have had in studying our family history is why the Riedesel group from Haase house in Wunderthausen went directly to Crawford County, Ohio, in 1844 and 1845. The western edge of Ohio was a semi-frontier and a thousand miles from the port cities of the east. There had to have been some acquaintance already living there, but the connection has remained undocumented. However, I believe we now know what the connection was.

What We Knew

I will first review the history as we knew it. Ludwig and Florentine (maiden name Althaus) Riedesel lived in what was called Haase house in the village of Wunderthausen. They had five living children. In 1844, one son (J. Ludwig, born in 1822) and a nephew (Ludwig Dürr, son of Florentine's unmarried sister Elisabeth Gertraud, born 1823) went to America and to Crawford County, Ohio, near Galion. A year later, the rest of the extended family followed. We knew of:

- The parents, Ludwig and Florentine
- L. Heinrich Riedesel (later L. Henry, born 1818)
- His wife Amalia Beitzel/Riedesel
- Their two children Ludwig (later Louis) and Elisabeth
- Anna Elisabeth Riedesel (born 1820) and now married to
- Franz Homrighausen
- Georg Ludwig Riedesel (later George, born 1825)
- Johannes Riedesel (later John, born 1829)

The old parents, Amalia, and the child Elisabeth died in about 1848. In 1850, L. Henry and George walked out to Iowa and bought land at what became Wheatland. It took 20 years, but all five of the adult children and their families eventually lived at Wheatland; so did Ludwig Dürr. They were pillars of the community and ancestors to an uncounted number of people today.

Back in Ohio, we knew that son George Riedesel had married Elisabeth Gerhardt, the daughter of Christian and Elisabeth Gerhardt. George Riedesel did not move to Wheatland until 1870, and within a few years his now aged in-laws were living with them as well. The Gerhardts are buried there in Wheatland.

More Pertinent Facts

Here are some other things I have only recently learned or only now find significance in.

- Wunderthausen records say that several siblings of Florentine Althaus also emigrated, though no more facts are given.
- Christian Gerhardt was born in the village of Elsoff, near Wunderthausen.
- One of those siblings was Maria Elisabeth Althaus, born October 20, 1807; another was Johann Georg Ludwig, born June 20, 1804.
- Records from the Port of Baltimore list a female "Alhaus, M E" and "Alhaus, Lud" arriving on September 30, 1833. No ages are given, unfortunately.

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- An online list of burials at St. Paul's Cemetery in Wheatland refers to "Marie (Althaus) Gerhard", who died December 23, 1890; she is buried next to Christian (see <ftp://ftp.rootsweb.com/pub/usgenweb/ia/clinton/cemeteries/stpauls.txt>)
- A list of the members of St. Paul's church in Wheatland from 1879 lists an "Elisabeth Gerhardt"
- The 1850 Census for the Jackson township of Crawford County, Ohio, lists several Gerharts including "Christopher" [certainly Christian] age 44 and "Maria Elizabeth" age 41.
- This couple had a 13-year old daughter Catharine and a 9-year old daughter Elizabeth, both born in Ohio.
- Also living in the household was the two-year old "Joh. Ritaser"; note that in the Wunderhausen dialect, the name Riedesel sounds very much like that. I have no doubt that he was the son John of the young widower L. Henry Riedesel
- The 1880 Census for the Spring Rock township (Wheatland) in Clinton County, Iowa, includes the family of George and Elisabeth Riedesel; and also living there were Christian and Mary Gerhart, both age 70.

Analysis and Conclusions

There is little doubt in my mind that Maria Elisabeth Gerhardt was in fact the same Maria Elisabeth Althaus from Wunderhausen, and thus the sister of Florentine (Althaus) Riedesel. That she was sometimes called Maria, sometimes Elisabeth, and sometimes Maria Elisabeth is of no moment. Middle names were commonly used. Neither am I concerned that her age at the various censuses does not quite match a birth year of 1807. In my observation, people then had less reason to be concerned with exact ages. The age given for Christian Gerhardt at the time of his death corresponds to his known birth date of May 15, 1808.. He could not have been 44 in 1850 and 70 in 1880 in any case!

The fact that the Gerhardts were caring for the two-year son of L. Henry Riedesel in 1850 is also highly significant. Maria Elisabeth was presumably L. Henry's aunt and the baby's great-aunt. Apparently, Maria Elisabeth had gone to America many years earlier since she was married and living in Ohio by 1837 (when the older known daughter was born).

Thus, I believe that the Gerhardts were the reason that the young cousins (only about 21 years of age) traveled across the Atlantic and inland to western Ohio, with the rest of the family planning to follow a year later. Old Ludwig and Florentine tore up their roots to join her younger sister in the New World, and to give their own children new opportunities. Sadly, they lived to see very little of the amazing story that was to follow. Other Althaus siblings may well have lived in Crawford County as well, though I have not been able to document them. It is probable that Ludwig Dürr's mother traveled with them in 1845 but then died without a trace.

The reader may have deduced that George Riedesel's wife, Elisabeth Gerhardt, was also his first cousin. That would have been unusual. However, I doubt that civil authorities on the frontier would have cared that much. Nor did the doctrines of the German Reformed Church in which they were active define the rules of marriage to the degree that the Catholic church did. The family was probably happy that he married "a nice German girl." We could consider the implausibility of a first-cousin marriage as evidence against my theory, but I believe there are far more indications that I am correct. If so, then we have an historically plausible explanation for why our Riedesels emigrated to the boondocks of Ohio rather than other, established German settlements in the United States.