

A Major Branch Off of the Wittgenstein Riedesels

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Summary: This paper documents the relationship between Riedesel families in the vicinity of Marburg and those who remained in the counties of Wittgenstein. Several American Riedesels whose connections with the rest of us were previously unclear are now known to be part of the same great family.

Background

The first systematic effort to connect all of the Riedesels in the United States was a booklet I published in 1980¹. It was based on extensive correspondence within the U.S. and a limited amount of information from Germany. At that time, I identified one large family group that I could not connect to the many Riedesels who came to this country from the counties of Wittgenstein. In the emigrant generation were two brothers—John Henry and Peter—and a sister, Marie, who arrived around 1900. John Henry's descendants clustered around Westfield, New York, while Peter eventually settled in the Pacific Northwest. Little more was known of Marie except that she married a Zehner and lived in Tennessee.

The family reported some French history, and there were no obvious ties to the many other Riedesel and related families who had settled between the 1840s and the turn of the 20th century.

Ties to Lorraine and Leidenhofen

In 2003, a series of fortuitous events unfolded. I became acquainted with a Belgian woman (Christane Claeys) whose mother was born a Riedesel, and then her cousin, Stefan Riedesel, who lives in the small village of Leidenhofen near Marburg, Germany. After exchanging information, it became clear that Christiane and Stefan were related to the John Henry, Peter, and Marie.

The latter three were children of the second marriage of another Peter Riedesel (1839-1891) who was born in that village of Leidenhofen, but who emigrated to what was then the German province of Lothringen (after 1918, the French province of Lorraine). These three went to America. Other siblings and step-siblings remained in Europe—some around Leidenhofen in Germany, some in Lorraine (the town known as Diedenhofen in German and Thionville in French). Later generations of the latter moved on to Luxemburg and eventually Belgium. Christiane's mother grew up speaking German, but in Belgium their language is French.

These discoveries meant that we had a much larger cluster of Riedesels, but still of unknown origins. We found the earliest known ancestor to be a **Johannes Riedesel** who lived and died in Leidenhofen, but was clearly not born there. He had served in a regiment headquartered at Marburg, and was discharged in 1805 as corporal.

¹ *The Riedesels in America: A History and Genealogy*. Although long out of print, the essential information is available in various places at www.riedesel.org, and has been extensively corrected and updated.

Eureka

In late 2005, Stefan wrote with some exciting news. He had learned where this Corporal **Johannes** came from: a village called Winnen that is quite close to Leidenhofen and in the orbit of Marburg. The earliest member of the line was now a **(Georg) Wilhelm Riedesel**, born around 1702. As the author of a local history had surmised, he was a native of Girkhausen in Wittgenstein.

I then knew exactly who he was. Beyond any doubt, the Riedesels of Westfield and the Pacific Northwest and of Leidenhofen, Lorraine, Luxemburg and Brussels are kin to the rest of us.

I will not reproduce all the detailed facts here, but will share them if you want them. What I will do is put these families in context.

Wittgenstein: 1700

Two related families of Sayn-Wittgenstein were the sovereign rulers of the southern and northern counties of Wittgenstein. The seat of the former was the town and *Schloß* in Laasphe; its territory included the smaller town of Erndtebrück and villages of Balde, Wingshausen, and Aue. The seat of the latter *Grafschaft* (county) was Berleburg; the northeastern corner of this small domain included the villages of Girkhausen, Wunderthausen, and Diedenshausen. These three were, in turn, a single parish with its pastor resident in Girkhausen.

All of the Riedesels in Wittgenstein are known to be descendants of a single man, Heyrich Riedesel (c1615-1680). He lived in hamlet called Melbach, near Balde. He married twice with a total of ten known children.

By 1700, the Riedesels had separated physically into a group in the southern county and another living in Girkhausen in the northern county. A century and a half later, a handful of Riedesels from the "southern" branch came to the U.S., settling in Texas and Minnesota. A much larger collection of Riedesels emigrated from the northern county, specifically the village of Wunderthausen. More than not settled in or passed through Wheatland, Iowa. A few early emigrants went to the Mid-Atlantic states and came to be called Riddle, Radle, and Rittase.

The principal Riedesel households (patrilineal patriarchy and all) in Wittgenstein in the early 1700s included the following brothers:

- (Georg) Mannus Riedesel (c1664-1741), living in Girkhausen.
- (Georg) Heinrich Riedesel (c1666-??), also living in Girkhausen
- (Johann) Reinhard Riedesel (c1675-1754), living in Girkhausen
- Wilhelm Riedesel (1677-1747), born in Girkhausen but married into Wunderthausen in 1703 and was the progenitor of all the American Riedesels stemming from the northern county.

Their father, Johannes, may have been alive in 1700 but there are no records.

In the southern county, but not that far away were the brothers:

- (Johann) Mannus Riedesel (c1662-1726), who had remained at Melbach and is to this day respected as a master builder who left us such jewels as the Ludwigsburg in Berleburg, the chapel in Sassenhausen, and Hof Dambach near Girkhausen. The American emigrants from the "southern" branch are all descendants of the great Mannus.
- (Johann) Jost Riedesel (c1663-1738), who lived at Aue.
- (Johann) Gilbert Riedesel (c1671-??), who lived at Wingshausen

Their nephew was:

- (Johann) Jost (c1687-1745), who lived at Schamader

The Newly Discovered Branch

(Georg) Wilhelm Riedesel was a son of (Georg) Mannus Riedesel (c1664-1741) of Girkhausen. He was born there on March 12, 1702. How, when and why he moved to the village of Winnen is a matter of speculation. He married Anna Elisabeth Hainbach there in 1734; she was a native. Wittgenstein was historically poor, and young men had always seeped away. At this time, they would typically have been unlettered and lacking in either capital or trade skills. Whether Wilhelm had any of these advantages will never be known, but the circumstantial evidence is that he and his descendants did well (keeping in mind that they were not citizens, but subjects of an absolute ruler).

One son, (Christian) Friedrich Riedesel (1737-1793) lived to marry and have children. One of those children was Johannes Riedesel (1766-1828), who was to serve in the Regiment Kurfürst until 1805 and then settle down in the nearby village of Leidenhofen.

Circling back to where we started, it was this line beginning with Johannes that eventually extended to Lorraine (Lothringen) and then to the siblings, John Henry, Peter and Marie who came to the U.S.

Each of us Riedesels has thousands of "cousins" who are more closely related to us than some of the far-flung Riedesels in the U.S.—not to mention Europe. Nevertheless I find it satisfying to at last understand how it is we come together.

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