

STUDIES IN SHENANDOAH VALLEY GERMAN; A CRITICAL SURVEY

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Inconceivable as it may seem today, at one time not long after the Revolutionary War over five percent of the population of the State of Virginia was comprised of Germans, that is to say, people who either considered the German language to be their mother tongue, or who grew up in homes where German had once been commonly spoken.¹ Although a goodly number of these Germans were then living on the eastern side of the Blue Ridge Mountains in what are now the counties of Fauquier, Culpepper and Spotsylvania, by far the vast majority of them were to be found in that narrow, fertile strip of land between the Blue Ridge and Allegheny mountains known as the Shenandoah Valley. Indeed, from the time Adam Miller and his small party first staked out their claims in the sparsely-settled Indian lands around 1727, until the last new wave of immigrants arrived from neighboring Pennsylvania and Maryland around 1800, literally thousands of Germans moved up the Valley, some in wagons, others on horseback and still others, if we are to believe the few surviving accounts from those days, even on foot.

Since then, numerous books, articles and pamphlets have appeared dealing with many aspects of the colorful history and folklore of the Shenandoah Valley Germans, from Samuel Kercheval's anecdotal account based on boyhood years spent in Clarke County, *A History of the Valley of Virginia* (Woodstock, 1833), to Klaus Wust's meticulously documented and definitive history, *The Virginia Germans* (Charlottesville, 1969). Still, conspicuously lacking in even the most comprehensive of such studies has been a thorough and authoritative account of the highly unusual linguistic situation created by the presence of so many non-English speaking settlers in this one particular region. For here were settlers representing not only various regional German dialects in their speech, but with a common, universally understood High German Language as well, in direct contact with a society where English had already been the standard of communication for well over a hundred years.

To be sure, studies have appeared during the course of this century discussing various, individual aspects of the spoken dialects themselves. Thus far, however, not one single article has even remotely considered the broader implications of the overall language situation in the Valley, let alone dealt with the use of High German there. Furthermore, too often overlooked in most of the previous historical as well as linguistic studies has been the fact that those

Germans who chose to immigrate to western Virginia came from diverse regions within Germany and were, therefore, not all speakers of the same local dialects.

From the flat, coastal northlands near Bremen, to the Alps south of Bern in Switzerland, they had arrived at the docks, Swabians, Alsatians and Rhinelanders alike, all eager to set out for America at the first opportunity. Of those who subsequently came to Virginia, as the late Professor John W. Wayland pointed out in his book *The German Element of the Shenandoah Valley* (Dayton, Va., 1907), the overwhelming majority of them proceeded directly south from the ports of Philadelphia and Baltimore, spending but little time in places along the way.² What should have already been apparent from this fact, is that since most of these settlers had experienced such limited contact, if any, with older "established" German communities in the north, they most certainly had not had their speech *corrupted* by those dialects of German which were becoming prevalent there and so arrived in the hinterlands of Virginia with their regional dialects very much intact.

Similarly, those early settlers like Jost Hite or Jacob Funk, who already represented second or third generations of immigrant families by the time they arrived in Virginia, often - although by no means *always* - left close-knit communities in Pennsylvania or Maryland where their original homeland dialects had been carefully preserved. Thus, while it may be undeniably true, as most historians and linguists have maintained, that this odd mixture of "older" immigrant stock and "new" did eventually enable a *leveling effect* in the German dialects spoken in the Shenandoah Valley to occur, the consequences were never as radical as previously alleged. It should, in fact, be pointed out that there never was, nor is to this day, a single spoken variant which may be called Shenandoah Valley German.

The lack of a singular, mutually-intelligible spoken dialect of German scarcely seems to have mattered in those early years, however. What linked those Valley settlers together was rather their use of the High German Language of the standard Protestant or Lutheran *Bible*. As Klaus Wust, among others, has already clearly shown, even if those God-fearing Germans could provide little else of substance with which to furnish their new Valley homes, they at least owned a prayerbook, hymnal or *Bible* from which their own edification as well as the highly-regimented education of their children could be derived.³ This reliance on standard High German for widespread and more formal communication proved of even greater significance later on, for it provided the basis on which a local German-language press could be established in the early part of the 19th century.

Still, it was not just the presence of these German-speaking settlers in the Shenandoah Valley that allows this language environment to be termed "highly unusual". In large parts of Pennsylvania and Maryland, Germans, Swiss, and even a handful of Austrians had already settled and built large, thriving communities for themselves long before this time. What was different in the Valley of Virginia was, rather, the simultaneous large-scale immigration of English and Scotch-Irish into this same region and the relatively large number of so-called

"mixed" communities which subsequently arose there.

With the English language, as stated before, already so well-entrenched in Virginia, unlike Pennsylvania and Maryland where German was still preferred in some circles, the Valley Germans were extraordinarily hard-pressed to either conform to English or fight any change. Perhaps owing to their sheer numerical strength in some parts of the area, resistance became the first course that they chose. Thus there arose in the Shenandoah Valley of Virginia, unlike in Pennsylvania or Maryland, where English and German were generally segregated from one another, the peculiar linguistic environment known as a *diglossia* (see: Heinz Kloss, "German-American Language Maintenance Efforts," in: *Language Loyalty in the United States*, The Hague, 1966, pp. 206-52), in which essentially three distinct types of language, English, standard High German and the numerous, regional spoken German dialects existed side-by-side, each one fulfilling a specific social need.

While it is not the aim of this article to provide that long-overdue linguistic analysis into the relationship and use of these three language types, it is designed to provide a logical first step in that direction. By surveying, in brief, chronological fashion, those studies that have thus far appeared in print on the subject of the language of the Shenandoah Valley Germans, the way should be clear for such future research.

Probably one of the earliest preserved observations on the use of the German language in the Shenandoah Valley comes from no less noteworthy a source than a 1748 journal of the young George Washington. Washington, whose job it then was to survey Lord Thomas Fairfax's westernmost lands, commented on one occasion: "Our work was attended by a great Company of People Men Women and Children that attended us through ye Woods as we went showing their Anticks tricks I really think they seemed to be as Ignorant a Set of People as the Indians they would never speak English but when spoken to they speak all Dutch."⁴

Unfortunately, Mr. Washington's disparaging remark has often been attributed to a supposed early disdain for foreigners and their ways. Yet, lest one forget that George Washington was, after all, a reasonably well-educated man for his day, with a knowledge of and respect for foreign cultures and customs, a more logical explanation should be found. One need not investigate the matter very far, in fact, to discover a much more plausible reason for young Washington's retort. It so happened that his surveying at that time was necessitated by a major legal dispute between his employer and a number of prominent Valley Germans, who felt that their claims to land they had already settled should take precedence over Lord Fairfax's absentee rights. It seems, therefore, quite reasonable to assume that those Germans who "attended" Washington and his crew were, in fact, actually doing little more than looking after their own interests by insuring, to Washington's apparent annoyance, that his measurements were entirely accurate and fair.⁵

A considerable period of time elapsed between Washington's brief and uncomplimentary remark and the first study to actually discuss Valley German

speech. Although both Samuel Kercheval (1833) and Hermann Schuricht (1898-9) had referred, in passing, to the existence and use of spoken German dialects in the Valley, it wasn't until Professor Heber M. Hays' ground-breaking article "On the Dialects Spoken in the Valley of Virginia" appeared in *Dialect Notes* in 1908, that substantial progress can be said to have been made in the field.

Hays was, as he quite readily admitted, a member of that first generation of Valley inhabitants for whom the spoken dialects of German were already passing phenomena. They were, he explained, no longer widely accepted or used by younger people in the German community and had, for that reason, almost died out in even the remotest of places. While obviously an exaggeration in light of what is now known to have been the case in Hays' day, the number of dialect speakers had, nevertheless, declined markedly from what it had been only a decade-or-so before.⁶ Professor Hays felt, therefore, compelled to "... give a general idea of the language once in common use throughout the northern part of the Valley..." (p. 263), by providing a comprehensive summary of the structure, grammar and vocabulary of the particular dialect spoken by his mother in the Forestville area. The result of his effort, as witnessed in this one succinct study, remains, to this day, one of the most authoritative and precise linguistic guides in the study of a Valley German dialect.

Alas, despite the careful attention paid to detail, however, Hays' study did fail to convey the sense of linguistic variation still very much in evidence among the several dialects practiced in other parts of the Valley - an omission since perpetuated by many of his successors. Furthermore, while Hays did correctly ascribe to this dialect a distinctly South German origin, he ambiguously implied a kinship between so-called *Pennsylvania Dutch* (the designation for the spoken German dialects of eastern and south-central Pennsylvania) and Valley German speech, thereby laying the ground-work for the all-too-prevalent myth that the "Valley German dialect" [sic] was merely an extension in the south of *Pennsylvania Dutch*. Excusable perhaps in the early years of such dialect study, this particular misconception should have long since been laid to rest in light of irrefutable evidence now suggesting a wholly different derivation.⁷

With the exception of a very few scattered articles on such distant concerns as Valley family or place names (eg. Hermann Schuricht's posthumously published "Anglicized and Corrupted German Names in Virginia," *The Pennsylvania German*, XII, 1911), relatively little was said about the Valley German language until close to the end of the 1930s. To be sure, the historian Oren F. Morton had written one of his most scathing indictments on the persistent use of German dialects among older Valley residents in an article suggestively entitled "The Transition from German to English" (in: Abraham Funkhouser's *History of the United Brethren in Christ, Virginia Conference*; Dayton, Va., 1921, pp 89-93). Even so, his remarks, which were most likely inspired by the same sort of *Germanophobia* which haunted German-Americans during and immediately after the First World War, were of little, if any, consequence considering the dialects were already in the process of their own natural extinction at the time.

It was rather Ernest Gehman, Professor of German at Eastern Mennonite College in Harrisonburg, Virginia, who deserves recognition as Hays' successor. Through a series of short articles for the *Harrisonburg Daily News Record* composed in his own Berks County dialect of *Pennsylvania Dutch*, Gehman hoped, among other things, to attract responses from area residents to determine the approximate number of German dialect-speakers still living in the southernmost part of the Shenandoah Valley. His "Schwetz Deitsch" column of 1938 seems to have met with only limited success, however, as it was discontinued after a fairly short run. It could be, perhaps, convincingly argued that the few elderly German-speaking residents left in the vicinity either found Gehman's own dialect hard to understand, or were put-off by his expressed desire to "up date" a culture which to many of them had all but died out more than fifty years before. Still, despite the apparent reluctance of the more skeptical dialect|speakers to come forth, Gehman did manage to locate more than 1000 such persons and thus could report his findings in one of the last of his columns.

While not fully appreciated when they first appeared, during the succeeding "generation" of Valley German studies, Gehman's "Schwetz Deitsch" columns were reprinted in part in the 1963 "*Pennsylvaanisch Deitsch Eck*" [abbr. *ECK*.] series of the *Allentown (Pennsylvania) Morning Call*.⁸ Unfortunately for those with a genuine interest in the Valley dialects themselves, these articles offered little insight into their structure or use, concentrating on relating tidbits of folklore and humorous anecdotes instead.

Such criticism notwithstanding, however, the actual impact of Gehman's articles was, in all likelihood, even greater than he himself had originally expected. For only months after the "Schwetz Deitsch" reprints appeared, Professor M. Ellsworth Kyger of Bridgewater College published, in the same *ECK*. series, his own original piece in a Valley German dialect, which he hoped would similarly generate interest in local German speech.⁹ This article, in apparent imitation of Gehman's approach, was also little more than an assortment of traditional anecdotes and tales from which very little, if anything, could be derived about the language itself.

Still, Professor Kyger did follow this article up with a thorough and highly authoritative chapter on the spoken German dialects of the Shenandoah Valley ("Variants in the Pennsylvania German Dialect Spoken in the Valley of Virginia and Nearby Sections"), which he included in *The Pennsylvania Germans of the Shenandoah Valley* (Allentown, 1964)- a book coauthored with Professors Elmer L. Smith and John Stewart, both of Madison College. This book, the first major treatise to deal with the entire scope of Valley German history and culture since Wayland's aforementioned opus of 1907, as well as the chapter on the language itself, seems to owe its curious title as much to the "*Pennsylvania Dutch-myth*" of Heber M. Hays' day, as to the eagerness of its authors to be published in the prestigious Pennsylvania German Folklore Society's yearbook series. This notion is supported all the more by Smith & Stewart's own previous account of "The Survival of German Dialects and Customs in the Shenandoah Valley/ A

Preliminary Survey" (in: *The Report (of) The Society for the History of the Germans in Maryland, 1963*) in which they maintained that "... these [Valley] people used the German language and spoken the Pennsylvania Dutch dialect" (p. 66).

While Kyger's chapter on the dialects was meant to expand upon the contributions of Hays, it, in fact, repeated much of the same basic ground-work as its predecessor and offered only very modest additions. Citing Albert F. Buffington's preeminent research in the field of *Pennsylvania Dutch* as his model, Kyger did attempt to include and account for numerous variants in the spoken dialects themselves, thereby providing the first positive evidence of the existence of *regional variations* in Shenandoah Valley German speech. Where Kyger's study fell short, however, was in his failure to grasp and explain the true nature and cause of these structural differences. Rather than attribute the discrepancies in vocabulary, syntax and grammar to characteristics found in the original home dialects of the earliest Valley settlers, he maintained that they were merely the result of "some Swiss influences in greater degree than elsewhere" in the *Pennsylvania Dutch* language community (p.276)

In light of the invaluable linguistic data compiled by Professors Kyger, Smith and Stewart, however, it is not difficult to understand how new arguments and theories on the spoken German dialects of the Shenandoah Valley could have subsequently emerged. A break with the "Hays-tradition" was, in fact, long-overdue when Professors William J. Pulte, Jr., formerly at the University of Texas, Austin, now at Southern Methodist University; and Kurt Kehr, previously of Mary Baldwin College, and currently at the *Marburger Sprach-Institut*, published their respective articles in 1971.

In a chapter included in the book *The German Language in America* (University of Texas Press, Austin; 1971) entitled "The German in Virginia and West Virginia", Professor Pulte offered a very radical departure from most previous study of the spoken Valley dialects. Through careful linguistic argumentation, he totally contradicted the theories of Kyger, Smith and Stewart, among others, by explaining that while these German dialects could indeed be considered "distant cousins" of *Pennsylvania Dutch*, the similarity was more the result of historical coincidence than of any actual kinship. Pulte maintained that the underlying process of *language leveling* had been basically the same for both the Virginia and Pennsylvania dialects of German, owing largely to similarities in geographical and historical conditions in the two localities. But whereas *Pennsylvania Dutch* reflects strictly Rhenish origins, the Virginia dialects show great affinity with Swabian and Swiss speech, a fact which could be traced back to the earliest Valley-German settlers.

Unfortunately, despite the fine choice of linguistic examples used to illustrate this point, Pulte's study betrayed an extremely limited scope of research, which, linguistically-speaking, regressed almost back to Professor Hays' time. For by studying only *one* Valley family in only *one* Valley community, Pulte left himself wide open to a major methodological attack by those in disagreement with his particular view. It must be added in all fairness, however, that further investi-

gation of the dialects themselves would, in all likelihood, only serve to substantiate what has already been clearly shown, since Pulte, unlike most of his predecessors in this field, chose to base *his* theory upon the evidence available, and not the other way around.

Professor Kehr, on the other hand, was by far the more cautious of the two in his approach to the delicate historical question and so included his views buried in a footnote at the end of his study on Valley German hunting methods and terms, "*Jagdmethoden und Jagdwortschatz der 'Pennsylvania Germans' im Shenandoah Valley/ Virginia*" (in: *Et Multum et Multa. Beiträge zur Literatur, Geschichte and Kultur der Jagd. Festgabe für Kurt Lindner zum 27. November 1971*, New York, 1971). While not denying a direct historical link with those dialects of *Pennsylvania Dutch* found to the north, Kehr did state that "...in the 200-year isolation of the remote back valleys on the western edge of the Shenandoah Valley,...in Shenandoah and Rockingham County, Virginia, characteristics of family dialects are detectable just as they existed at the time of emigration and before the *language leveling*."¹⁰

Despite this most recent change in attitude regarding the possible origin and structure of the spoken Valley German dialects, the fact remains that this is but one relatively minor point in the much larger, more complex realm of Shenandoah Valley German study. For while scholars have continued to content themselves with chipping away at such highly selective aspects of the spoken language, the broader linguistic picture of Shenandoah Valley German continues to be woefully ignored. If it is indeed already impossible today to speak of the High German Language in the Valley as anything but a past phenomenon - which was certainly *not* yet the case in Heber M. Hays' day — then the time is also fast-approaching when the same will be said of the spoken variants as well.¹¹ Thus, the longer such a comprehensive linguistic study is put off, the more difficult the task will surely become.

Surprisingly enough, however, the spoken German dialects have defied most earlier predictions and have not completely died out in the Shenandoah Valley even today. While not as widespread or apparent as they were a generation ago, the most recent fieldwork by Professors Kyger, Smith and Stewart, a decade ago, turned up more than half dozen communities in Virginia, and even more in neighboring West Virginia, where local dialects of German can still be heard spoken.¹² According to several estimates, there are anywhere from 750 to 1000 persons living in the Valley of Virginia today who could, if they so desire, readily speak a regional variant of German. It is believed, however, that only a very small proportion of them choose to do so regularly, most of them purportedly being among the older Valley residents.

That the spoken German dialects *will* eventually die out, already seems a foregone conclusion. Whether it comes in this generation, or the next, is of relatively little consequence. Its usefulness has already run its course, and its persistence is mainly due to certain diehard traditions among some of the older Valley Germans. Still, it is to be hoped that before such a day finally comes when Shenandoah Valley German is entirely relegated to history, the comprehensive

study of the German language there will have at long last begun.¹³

NOTES

1 According to *The First Census of Population for the United States of America, Taken in the Year 1790*, the population of the Commonwealth of Virginia was officially given as 692,000 [*Historical Statistics of the United States, Colonial Times to 1970, Pt. I* (Washington: United States Bureau of the Census, 1975), p.36] Estimates of the German population of the State at that time suggest a figure of around 35,000 people [Klaus Wust, *The Virginia Germans* (Charlottesville, Va.: The University Press of Virginia, 1969), pp. 186-7].

2 See: John W. Wayland, *The German Element of the Shenandoah Valley* (Dayton , Va., 1907), pp. 27-31; see also: I.D. Rupp, *A Collection of Upwards of Thirty Thousand Names of German, Swiss, Dutch, French and other Immigrants in Pennsylvania from 1727 to 1776*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Leary, Stuart & Co., 1898).

3 See: Klaus Wust, "The Books of the German Immigrants of the 18th Century," *Rockingham Recorder II* (1958), pp. 24-9.

4 Klaus Wust, *The Virginia Germans*, pp. 51-2.

5 A number of Shenandoah Valley histories have already dealt with this topic, cf.: Klaus Wust, *The Virginia Germans*, pp. 34-5 & John W. Wayland, *The German Element of the Shenandoah Valley*, p. 52.

6 Klaus Wust, *The Virginia Germans*, pp. 188-9.

7 In addition to the information included in this article regarding the study of Professor William J. Pulte, Jr. ["The German in Virginia and West Virginia," in: *The German Language in America* (University of Texas Press, Austin, 1971)]; see: Ralph Charles Wood, "Pennsilfaanisch (Pennsylvania-deutsch)," in: *Deutsche Philologie im Aufriss, I*, ed. W. Stammler, 2nd. ed. (Berlin, 1957), esp. p. 1932.

8 Earnest G. Gehman, "Pennsylvania German in the Shenandoah Valley," *ECK*. March 16, 23, 30, 1963.

9 M. Ellsworth Kyger, "The Pennsylvania-German Dialect in the Shenandoah Valley," *ECK*. December 7, 1963.

10 Kurt Kehr, "Jagdmethoden und Jagdwortschatz der 'Pennsylvania Germans' im Shenandoah Valley/ Virginia," in: *Et Multum et Multa. Beiträge zur Literatur, Geschichte und Kultur der Jagd. Festgabe für Kurt Lindner zum 27. November*

1971 (New York & Berlin, 1971), p. 161 [as translated by the author from the German].

11 The High German Language is said to have ceased playing a major role in Valley German Affairs with the last regular German-language church services around the year 1890. There are, however, those who would argue that High German was no longer important after the cessation of regular German-language printing in the Valley in 1841.

12 Virginia Valley communities where German dialects can still be heard include: Dayton, Brocks Gap, Palos & Bergton-Criders (in Rockingham County); and Jerome, Broadway-Timberville & Orkney Grade (in Shenandoah County).

13 The author wishes to thank Professors M. Ellsworth Kyger (Bridgewater College), John Stewart (Madison College), William J. Pulte, Jr. (Southern Methodist University), Kurt Kehr (*Marburger Sprach-Institut*) as well as Klaus Wust for their kind encouragement and personal assistance in the completion of this study. Special thanks also to Professor Jürgen Eichhoff (University of Wisconsin-Madison) for guidance during the initial stages of this project.

In der Nacht

Bei meinem
ganz geheimen Flüstern
wird die Nacht mit hohlen Augen
an gehauchten Worten saugen,
und ich bin mit dir allein...

Bei deinem
ganz geheimen Ahnen
wird die Nacht mit ihrem Atem
mein gehauchtes Wort verraten,
und du bist mit mir allein...

Ilse Pracht-Fitzell
Jamesburg, New Jersey