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The Society for German-American Studies: The First Twenty Years

As the Society for German-American Studies celebrates its twentieth anniversary in 1988 it is altogether appropriate to look back on its development and history. The Society was formed in 1968 as an informal interest group for those involved in the field of German-American studies. In 1977 it was reorganized as a non-profit corporation in the state of Ohio. A number of factors led to its formation in 1968, its subsequent reorganization in 1977, and to its substantial growth since that time.

The growing interest in German-American studies in the 1960s and 1970s reflected broader trends and interests in American society, such as the resurgence of ethnicity and the rediscovery of immigrant "roots." For German-Americans this ethnic revival had special significance, since once again there was public recognition of the German heritage in the United States. The German-American heritage in the first half of the twentieth century has been referred to as a heritage deferred because of the world wars and the resultant anti-German *Zeitgeist* of that era, but in the second half of this century the German-American heritage has been referred to as a heritage fulfilled, since German-Americans are now, and have been since the 1960s, exploring, celebrating, and revitalizing America's German heritage.

Aside from the ethnic revival, a number of special events occurred, which have proven to be beneficial to the German-American heritage, and especially to the Society. During the American Bicentennial in 1976 there were numerous conferences, publications, and local celebrations, many of which discussed and investigated the role of the German-Americans not only in the American Revolution, but also in the building of the nation. In 1980 the United States Census collected information about the ethnic ancestry of Americans for the first time. From the census data we learned that the German element was equal to that of the English element, and that, with the additions of the other German heritage groups (Swiss, Austrians, Alsatians, Luxemburgers), the Ger-

man element was the largest ethnic group in the United States. In twenty-three states of the Union German-Americans constituted at least twenty percent of the population, and this percentage was even higher with the addition of the other four German heritage groups. These statistics made an impact not only on German-Americans and those involved in German-American studies, but also on public officials and politicians. The point was clear: German Americans constituted the major ethnic group in the United States. In 1983 the German-American Tricentennial was celebrated with great fanfare across the country. Coming after the 1976 American Bicentennial and the news about the magnitude of the German element, the Tricentennial was of tremendous importance for German-Americans, especially because it was so widely celebrated throughout the country. It brought into focus not only the national, but also the international significance of the field of German-American studies. All of these factors and events underscored the fact that to understand American history, one has to understand the story of America's largest ethnic element. They also provided a climate that proved most beneficial for the establishment of the Society for German-American Studies.

Within this context, another factor brought those people who were involved in the field of German-American studies together, and necessitated the formation of their own society in 1968. This was the editorial decision of the *American-German Review* made in the 1960s to shift its focus to European German affairs excluding, for the most part, German-Americana.

The *Review*, published by the Carl Schurz Memorial Foundation in Philadelphia, commenced publication in 1934. It was a popularly written journal with an emphasis on European German affairs, but also with coverage of German-Americana. Established in the post-World War I era, it called itself "American-German," rather than "German-American" in an attempt to emphasize its Americanism. The *Review* came to be regarded as the central organ of publication for German-American studies, especially since it published the annual Americana-Germanica bibliography. Because of its slick format and popular style it attained a sizable readership consisting of the interested German-American public as well as scholars.

In the 1960s the editorial policies of the *Review* changed with what can be viewed as decidedly negative results. In the 1960s and 1970s there were, as we have noted, the beginnings of the well-known ethnic revival. Just as this interest was coming to the fore and beginning to take effect, the *Review* made the decision to exclude German-Americana from its pages, thereby alienating those involved in this field. The first sign came in 1966 when the last installment of the Americana-Germanica bibliography was published. Articles on German-Americana became fewer and fewer. However, it was not until 1968 that its editorial policy was explicitly stated as follows: "We are now steering away from German-American history (except for articles of very unusual interest and pertinence)." The emphasis in the future would be on contemporary events in the European German states. Unfortunately, the *Review*

continued on this new course, and due to this, as well as various internal problems within the Carl Schurz Memorial Foundation, ceased publication in 1970. By excluding German-Americana, and then ceasing publication the *Review* had, however, done German-American studies in essence a favor, because it forced all those interested in this field to get together, talk, and eventually form the Society for German-American Studies.

In 1968 Robert E. Ward wrote to me stating that the *Review* had "sadly neglected German-Americana of late," and invited me to join in establishing the Society for German-American Studies. I and others had come into contact with Ward in three ways. Ward, then chairman of the Modern Languages Department at Youngstown State University, was engaged in compiling an anthology of German-American poetry, *Deutsche Lyrik aus Amerika*, which was published in 1969. In the process of compiling this work he came into contact with most of the German- and Austro-American authors, many of whom resided in New York. They were interested in forming an organization and establishing an organ of publication; many of them had also written for the *Review*. Ward also attracted the attention of interested parties through the many articles he wrote for the German-American press regarding German-American studies. Finally, at various conferences Ward found that there was a group of people who always seemed to lament the fact that there was no organization for those interested in German-American studies.

Within this context Ward launched the Society in 1968, and commenced publication of a *Newsletter*. This was followed in 1969 by the Society's new journal, *German-American Studies*, as the organ and medium of publication for articles, essays, and reviews dealing with German-American history, literature, and culture; it should be noted that it was not called "American-German Studies."

The first issue of the journal contained articles on H. A. Rattermann, H. H. Fick, German-American literature, and ten poems by German-American authors. Its contents reflected the interests of the original founding group. They consisted in the main of *Germanisten*, who were primarily interested in literature, and German-American authors, who were mainly interested in a place where their prose and poetry could be reviewed and published. While they are the ones who formed the nucleus of the new Society, they could not have succeeded without the inspiration and leadership of Robert E. Ward.

German on his mother's side, Ward was born in a Cleveland German neighborhood in 1937 and learned *Schwäbisch* from his mother and his grandparents. German-Americana was not only an academic study area to him, but something he had grown up with, lived, and loved. And this was true of many who joined with him in founding the Society. He studied German at Baldwin-Wallace College with John R. Sinnema, the first treasurer of the Society. He continued his studies in German at Indiana University and received his doctorate from Vanderbilt University. Ward served as president of the Society from 1968 to 1979, and clearly gave it the leadership it needed in its formative years.

As the interest grew in the field so did the recognition of the various research needs within the field. This found expression in Ward's *A Proposal on Behalf of the Preservation of German Culture in the U.S.*, published in 1973 by the Society. This proposal recommended, first, the establishment of a German-American foundation to support educational projects and research work, similar to the old Carl Schurz Foundation, and, second, the creation of an institute for German-American research.

These and other related topics were discussed at the Symposium on German Culture in America and Ohio, which was held in Cleveland in October 1973 and coordinated by Ward. This meeting offered the first real opportunity for Society members to gather and discuss the general and specific issues facing the field.

At this time plans were underway among Society members for the forthcoming celebration of the American Bicentennial in 1976. Two conferences held in the fall of 1976 proved to be important milestones in the history of the Society. In October the Symposium on German-American Literature and Culture was held at the University of Kansas, coordinated by Erich A. Albrecht and J. Anthony Burzle. Discussion there centered on the need for a formal organization which would serve the interests of those in the field. This discussion was continued in November at the Symposium on Immigrant Literature and German-Americana held at the University of Cincinnati, and coordinated by Don Heinrich Tolzmann and Jerry Glenn. It was at this meeting that the Society was reorganized as it exists today; this included reorganization as a non-profit organization in the state of Ohio. It was also decided to henceforth schedule regular annual meetings and symposia and to publish a more substantial newsletter on a quarterly basis.

The first and second annual meetings and symposia (1977-78) were held at Baldwin-Wallace College under the direction of John R. Sinema. This provided a good and solid foundation for the Society's annual meeting schedule. Meetings since then have been held at the following locations: St. Olaf College (1979), the University of Missouri-Columbia (1980), the Institute for Texan Cultures in San Antonio (1981), Fort Hays State University, Kansas (1982), the University of Pennsylvania (1983), the University of Wisconsin (1984), University of Nebraska-Lincoln (1985), the University of Cincinnati (1986), the University of Kansas (1987), and at Millersville University of Pennsylvania (1988). With each successive year the annual meetings and symposia have increased in size and quality, and promise to do so in the future.

In 1979, after eleven years of service, Ward decided to step down from the position of president, and La Vern J. Rippley was elected to that office. During his term the Society took another big step forward. It was decided that we should launch a new annual publication to replace the *Journal*, which had been published since 1969. The *Journal*, originally entitled *German-American Studies*, became the *Journal of German-American Studies* in 1976, when it absorbed the *German-American Genealogist*, published and edited by Ward from March 1975 to May 1976. The *Journal* ceased publication in December 1980 with volume fifteen. The final issue contained a comprehensive index which listed nearly four hundred

items that had been published in the *Journal*, including articles, essays, bibliographies, reviews, notes, and original German-American literature. The *Journal* had fulfilled its role both as an organ for publication as well as a foundation for future work. It is now available on microfilm from University Microfilms. The successor of the *Journal* was the *Yearbook of German-American Studies* with J. Anthony Burzle as editor and Helmut E. Huelsbergen and William D. Keel as associate editors. Since its first appearance the *Yearbook* has included the "Annual Bibliography of German-Americana," a comprehensive list of books, dissertations, journal articles, and reviews in the field, compiled under the direction of Steven M. Benjamin. The new *Yearbook* received critical acclaim in a wide variety of journals, and established an outstanding reputation as the principal organ of publication in the field. The 1985 *Yearbook* contained a five-year index reflecting the diversity and growth of German-American studies. The index was compiled by Burzle during the last year of his editorship, after which he was succeeded by Huelsbergen and Keel who then became coeditors.

The other Society publication, the *Newsletter*, was edited by Ward from 1968-78 on an occasional basis. This was followed by the *Bulletin* from 1979-81, edited by Don Heinrich Tolzmann, and then by the *Society for German-American Studies Newsletter*, edited since by La Vern J. Rippley. The *Newsletter*, like the other SGAS publications, has also steadily increased in size and grown in quality.

The SGAS publications are of course of great importance to the Society. To support our major publication, the *Yearbook*, a Yearbook Endowment Fund has been established at the University of Kansas. A recent improvement in the *Yearbook* has been the inclusion of a book review section, edited by Jerry Glenn. Other publications which have been discussed as possibilities for the future, include a popular journal similar in format to that of the old *American-German Review*.

After Rippley's term of office (1979-81), it became my pleasure to serve the Society as president. It seemed to me that the Society had reached a certain plateau and had accomplished some of its goals. Since 1981 a number of things have been done to build on this base. First, we have launched a Yearbook Fund Drive with the goal of reaching \$100,000. We have a long way to go, but a solid start has been made. Second, a membership drive was begun under the direction of our Secretary/Membership Chairman, Robert E. Coley, which has increased our membership five-fold since 1981. The Society now has a substantial and diverse membership from coast to coast, as well as overseas, especially in Germany. Third, an affiliate drive was begun to attract related institutes, societies and organizations. In this regard the Society aims to provide national leadership in serving as an umbrella organization, and is proud to have several affiliates, such as the Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies at the University of Wisconsin, the Max Kade German-American Document and Research Center at the University of Kansas, and the German Heritage Society of Greater Washington, D.C.

As an indication of the increased diversity of the Society's activities we only need to look at the role it played in the proclamation of 6 October 1987 as the first national German-American Day. This resolution was first presented by Ruth Reichmann at the 1986 annual meeting in Cincinnati, after which a German-American Day Committee was appointed. This campaign, which was conducted in concert with German-American local, regional, and national organizations and societies, met with success. A similar resolution was passed by Congress for 1988. This work brought us into close cooperation with the other major German-American national organizations. What I would like to see develop is an annual meeting between the leaders of these organizations so that there can be greater communication and cooperation among all those who are involved some way in German-American affairs. Clearly the Society has a leadership role to play here, and contributions to make.

At present a major concern is the teaching of German-American studies. Although we have established a solid organization, excellent publications, and the field has been recognized as a field for study and research, we find that there are all too few courses and programs available for students. We have, therefore, appointed an Educational Task Force, chaired by Ruth Reichmann, which has prepared guidelines for the introduction of German-American studies into the curriculum at all levels. We need more courses offered at the college and university level, and also in secondary and elementary schools. In the latter schools we would like to see courses, or units of courses, which focus on the German heritage of the immediate community, region or state. We have the publications, the membership, and the expertise. All we need to do now is to translate this into action, and into the curriculum.

In conclusion, let me sum up the accomplishments and achievements of two decades with reference to the past: Twenty years ago we did not have a national organization. Twenty years ago we did not have annual meetings and symposia. Twenty years ago we did not have the publications, the *Yearbook* and the *Newsletter*. Twenty years ago we did not have a Yearbook Endowment Fund. In addition we have celebrated an American Bicentennial, the German-American Tricentennial, and the first two of the annual German-American Days to be celebrated nationally. We have goals for the future of the field of German-American studies. We have had goals in the past, and we have reached them. The German Pioneer Society of Cincinnati claimed as its motto: "Willenskraft Wege schafft," or "where there's a will, there's a way," and I know this is true for us also. May the Society ever look back with pride upon its past, and look forward with confidence to its future.

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Appendix
Publications of the Society
for German-American Studies

1. Newsletters

SGAS Newsletter, 1968-78 (Editor: Robert E. Ward).

Bulletin of the Society of German-American Studies, 1979-81 (Editor: Don Heinrich Tolzmann).

Society for German-American Studies Newsletter, 1981- (Editor: La Vern J. Rippley).

2. Journal and Yearbook

German-American Studies, 1969-76 (Editor: Robert E. Ward)

Journal of German-American Studies, 1976-80 (Editor: Robert E. Ward).

Yearbook of German-American Studies, 1981- (Editor: J. Anthony Burzle, 1981-85; Editors: Helmut E. Huelsbergen and William D. Keel, 1986-).

3. Report

Robert E. Ward, *A Proposal on Behalf of the Preservation of German Culture in the U.S.*, 1973.

4. Indexes

Don Heinrich Tolzmann, "The Journal of German-American Studies, 1969-80: An Index," *Journal of German-American Studies* 15, nos. 3-4 (1980): 75-94.

J. Anthony Burzle, "The Yearbook of German-American Studies, 1981-85: An Index," *Yearbook of German-American Studies* 20 (1985): 199-203.

