

On German Names

(This article was adapted from one written in 1996 by Tim Conrad. The original can be found <http://www.rootsweb.ancestry.com/~GENHOME/tttgrnm1.htm>)

The Germans used what might be called a 'prefix' name in the 1700's and early 1800's (and possibly earlier). The most common prefix names were John, Anna and Maria. These names were used at the child's baptism and some later more formal documents, and dropped in other situations. For example, a child baptized John Jacob Schmitt would be known simply as Jacob Schmitt in other less formal documents. For girls, the prefixes Mary, Maria or Anna were used which was followed by Margaretha, Katharina, etc. For boys, the prefixes John, Johan, or Hans were used. The actual name of John was usually written John, Johan, Johannes, Johs, Hans or Hannes. You will often find a family with many sons with exactly the same first name; Johann, for example. The middle name then became the official name for the rest of that person's life. Frequently, if one child dies, the next same-sex born child would be given the same name. Sometimes a favorite name was reused if that first child was no longer living in the home.

An article by Elaine D. Schwar in the Fall 1995 (Vol 16, No 1) issue of *The Berks County Genealogical Society* (pg 8) refers to the naming practice as Rufnamen.

Other facts to keep in mind about German given names:

- ❖ Carolus, Charles and Carl are all the same in German
- ❖ Jurg, Georg, and George are the same in German
- ❖ Anton, Anthony, Andrew and Andy were often used interchangeably. Duny was short for Anthony.
- ❖ Blanche and Blandina were the same.
- ❖ Bastian and Bass were short for Sebastian
- ❖ Baltzer was short for Balthaser
- ❖ Asimus was short for Erasmus
- ❖ Felty was short for Valentine (the German 'V' can sound like an 'F')
- ❖ Phronica, Euphronica, Fronica, and Veronica are the same in German
- ❖ Frona is short for Veronica
- ❖ Ottila, Matilida, and Mathilda are often used interchangeably; nicknames are Tillie or Tilda
- ❖ Margaretha, Gretta, Margaret, etc. are the same
- ❖ Elisabetha, Elisabeth, and Elizabeth are the same
- ❖ **Rebecca was a nickname for Margaretha** (important to know in my **Frey** research)
- ❖ Peggy was a nickname for Rebecca
- ❖ Casper and Jasper were often used interchangeably.
- ❖ Lene and Lena were both nicknames for either Magdalena or Helena.
- ❖ Hanna was short for Johanna.
- ❖ Dinah and Tina were short for Christina
- ❖ Baby and Barbary were used for Barbara
- ❖ Sarah and Salome were often interchangeable
- ❖ Regina and Rachel were often used interchangeably

In order to separate the many girls with similar names such as Mary and Maria apart, teachers used various pet names: Molly, Polly, Pally, etc. They are all equivalent to Mary, though sometimes they were given as the 'real' name.

In the early middle 1800's and afterwards, a middle name like that used today was adopted. Sometimes this was the mother's middle name. In some cases, it seems that simply the letter was

used, like Jacob S. Conrad, and the middle name rarely shows up in print. In the late 1800's, middle names were a little more free form and many 'wild' names were in vogue for both first and middle names.

Sometimes the first and middle names were often transposed. A child baptized Henry Clarence Smith in the 1890s might show up as "Clarence H. Smith" in the 1900 census and "Henry C. Smith." in the 1910 census. It was not uncommon for parents back then to 'reuse' a name. That is, if they had a child named Jacob Conrad who died young, they might use that name for another child born later.

Much has been written about spelling in records. The researcher needs to pay much less attention to spelling in the earliest records, since many times, the person was illiterate and the name was spelled phonetically by the writer (e.g., the minister or census-taker). If it sounds similar, consider it, at least until you have a chance to study if it really is a different person.

Another hint: when looking up names in an index, don't just look at those pages that are listed, but also look at other pages in the same time frame. Many times, the transcription that you're reading has errors (did you ever translate old German names?). So look at the adjacent pages for people with a similar last name, but the same first name. (i.e., looking for Theodore and Veronica Conrad and find Theodore and Veronica Bonrad on the next page - write it down!).

The German vowels and vowel combinations vary widely, as do consonant pronunciations. Here are a few rules (other than these basics, get a good book on the German language including pronunciation):

- ❖ there are no silent vowels
- ❖ pronounce the second letter with ie and ei
- ❖ eu is pronounced like oy in boy
- ❖ an ending i and y are interchangeable (e.g., Lori and Lorey)
- ❖ an umlauted vowel (2 dots above) is often written as the vowel followed by an 'e'
- ❖ the umlauts are dropped in many transcriptions of records (no umlaut key on the typewriter?)
- ❖ in many cases the vowels are rearranged in the records; check out just about any vowels with the consonants that you are looking for
- ❖ D, T and Th are largely interchangeable (there is no 'th' sound like in 'the' in the German language! Remember your teacher telling you that Neanderthal Man was pronounced Neandertal Man?)
- ❖ G and K are often interchangeable (e.g., Klock and Glock, Kramer and Gramer, Kress and Grass)
- ❖ F is often pronounced V; Felty is a nickname for Valentine
- ❖ V can be pronounced W... Harrietsville and Belle Valley were pronounced Harrietswille and Belle Walley by German-speaking residents of Noble County, Ohio.
- ❖ A at the end of a word can be pronounced (and sometimes written) as Y. Fulda is often seen or heard "Fuldy" and Barbara is frequently "Barbary."

Last names often exist in two forms, English and German. The translation could depend on either the meaning (Schmidt to Smith, Heuman to Hayman) or the phonetic translation (Conrath to Conrad or Coonrod). People generally either changed the spelling to match the way they wanted it pronounced or they changed the pronunciation and kept the traditional form. In most cases, the number of syllables is correct. They didn't tend to leave off major parts of long last names, despite occasional wishful thinking of researchers.