

the uncomfortable reality that Pennsylvania's Revolution sprang from calls for liberty from Indian attacks, and the liberty to wage a racist war of ethnic cleansing. Scholars of early Pennsylvania, the American Revolution, and especially of "frontier studies" will find Spero's book immensely valuable to understanding the intersection of all three.

PAUL DOUGLAS NEWMAN

University of Pittsburgh at Johnstown

William W. Donner. *Serious Nonsense: Groundhog Lodges, Versammlinge, and Pennsylvania German Heritage* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016). Pp. 164. Illustrations, notes, glossary, index. Paper, \$29.25.

The heritage that the Versammlinge (gatherings) and groundhog lodges celebrate was developed by descendants of eighteenth-century German and Swiss immigrants during their over three hundred years in this colony and state. Their normal port of entry was Philadelphia, where a significant number remained; however, most settled in the rural interior. The vast majority were Protestant, mostly Lutheran and Reformed. A small minority was Mennonite, Amish, and Pietistic German Baptists. Even fewer were Catholic. They spoke Pennsifawnisch Deitsch, which Donner considers a language, not a dialect. It resembles what is spoken in the Rhenish Palatinate. Donner explains that most academicians call them Pennsylvania Germans, though many of the "farmers and working-class people" (10) call themselves Pennsylvania Dutch. Whatever they are called or call themselves, they are different from nineteenth-century German immigrants, and they have preserved their culture longer.

In the 1920s and 1930s, Pennsylvania Germans confronted "a rapidly changing and modernizing world" (iii). When they, especially William Troxell and Thomas Brendle, realized the need to preserve their heritage and language, they organized Versammlinge. They first met in 1933. Donner notes that in 1934, seventeen groups organized formally into lodges, located primarily in southeastern Pennsylvania. The lodges adopted the groundhog as their mascot and claimed that it had the ability to predict the weather, a tradition carried over from Europe. Members were required to speak Deitsch and were fined if they spoke in English. Donner describes the lodges' organizational pattern and specifies their officers in Deitsch with accompanying translations.

Although the lodge members were serious about preserving their culture, their meetings included much that was “nonsensical.” Donner reports that meetings begin with a procession led by a replica of a groundhog held high for all to see. It is placed under the speaker’s podium, followed by a prayer, the pledge of allegiance to the United States, and the singing of “My Country ’Tis of Thee,” all in Deitsch. There is always a meal, which in early years included buffalo and even groundhog. Recently, the menu usually consists of chicken, ham, sausage, potatoes, beans, corn, and filling. Among the many songs that they sing, “Snitzelbank” is the favorite.

Normally one or more speakers provide entertainment. Their talks might have serious points, but almost always include humor that sometimes is earthy. It often pokes fun at themselves and their ancestors. Donner considers Rev. Clarence Rahn the most popular and effective speaker. Rahn was a Reformed pastor who served a five-church rural charge for fifty years despite opportunities to move on to larger, more prestigious congregations. He died in 1976. Donner was told that Rahn avoided philosophical and theological complexities, but drew from his own experiences while growing up on a farm, working in his grandfather’s blacksmith shop, on a road crew, running a chicken farm, and listening to his parishioners. He would select a point that he wanted to get across and use stories to illustrate it. Of course, he spoke in Deitsch. He believed that Deitsch “made direct expression possible” (88). According to Rahn, “Pennsylvania German words show a disregard for frills, as did the people who created them” (88). Rahn was called the “Will Rogers or Mark Twain of the Pennsylvania Germans because his messages appealed to the common people” (81).

Also on the program are skits. Donner states that he is “fascinated” (63) by what he calls the Pennsylvania Germans’ “theatricality” (63). It proceeds from a nineteenth-century tradition of Pennsylvania German writers translating English plays into German. During the 1920s and 1930s, Pennsylvania German writers wrote original plays. For the lodge meetings, scriptwriters cooperate with the players, who often spontaneously insert their own lines during the performances. Serious plays emphasize the past, but do not advocate a return to it. They sometimes compare the unsophisticated past to the overly complex present. Lighter plays revolve around the activities of the groundhog or current events. Donner describes a recent skit that included a (fictional) call from President Barak Obama during which he talked in Deitsch about his Pennsylvania German ancestors.

According to Donner, people who participate in the groundhog lodges were initially exclusively male; however, a women’s *Versammlinge* was established

in East Greenville, Pennsylvania, in 1985. Most speakers and members are Lutheran and Reformed. Mennonites and Amish are not excluded, but do not participate. Many members are professional men, such as pastors, educators, and businessmen. Donner does not specify the other vocations of the thousands of members of the lodges, but it can be assumed that some are farmers.

The concern for the Pennsylvania German culture that the *Versammlinge* and groundhog lodges express did not emerge suddenly. As Donner provides background, he features Henry Harbaugh, a mid-nineteenth-century Reformed pastor, theologian, historian, and writer. Donner cites scholars who attribute to Harbaugh the “development of *Deitsch* as a literary language” (101). Early twentieth-century collections at Henry Mercer’s and the Landis Valley museums displayed Pennsylvania German material culture. Later exhibitions at prominent Philadelphia and New York museums “instilled a new sense of pride among the Pennsylvania Germans themselves” (106). The organization of the Pennsylvania German Society in 1891 and the Pennsylvania German Folklore Society in 1935 provided outlets for scholarship about the Pennsylvania Germans.

Donner wrote this book for several audiences. Initially, he intended it “for Pennsylvania Germans themselves” (3), especially their children and grandchildren. When he realized that the *Versammlinge* and groundhog lodges express themes that are common in American life, he broadened his focus to include scholars in various fields. An even broader audience that he hopes to reach is the literate public. These people, he believes, have an inaccurate understanding of the Pennsylvania Germans that he blames on the media and the tourist industry that highlight the Amish.

In Donner’s opinion, the future of the *Versammlinge* and groundhog lodges is uncertain. He mentions that one lodge has disbanded and that attendance at others is declining. He recognizes that participants are growing older—into their seventies and eighties—and that not many of their descendants speak *Deitsch*. He suspects that a “few will continue as *Deitsch*-language events, a few will allow English, some will mix the two languages . . . , and many will be discontinued” (129). He feels more optimistic about Pennsylvania German culture, which he predicts will continue in some traditional ways, such as “eating pork and sauerkraut on New Year’s Day or *Fastnachts* on Shrove Tuesday” (130). He believes that ethnicity now is less about everyday activities and more about one’s own identity. As Pennsylvania Germans have developed ways to express their culture in the past, he seems certain that they will continue to do so in the future.

Donner's style is personal. In the "Preface," he describes his circuitous route to his interest in Pennsylvania Germans, mentions the influence of his mother and grandfather, and uses the first-person pronoun frequently. His numerous illustrations lighten the text. Nevertheless, he employs scholarly paraphernalia. Passages in Deitsch are paralleled by English translations. In eleven pages of endnotes, he carefully documents his sources, which include lodge records, newspaper accounts of Versammlinge, and material in archives of academic institutions. (He implies that he might have learned more by attending meetings and talking with knowledgeable participants.) His extensive bibliography contains numerous books and articles that indicate not only where he obtained some of his information but also where those who are interested in Pennsylvania Germans can find additional material. For readers who are not familiar with the Pennsylvania Germans, he includes a brief glossary, in Deitsch and English, of terms that appear frequently in the text.

Donner has developed a topic that few outside of the Pennsylvania German community know about. Indeed, not even all Pennsylvania Germans are aware of where and why so many men spend their evenings enjoying what Rahn called "sensible nonsense" (3, 95) at the Versammlinge and lodge meetings. Donner has expanded our knowledge of Pennsylvania German culture. His book is a valuable contribution to the increasing volume of enlightening literature about Pennsylvania Germans.

JOHN B. FRANTZ

The Pennsylvania State University

Gary F. Coppock. *Valentines and Thomas: Ironmasters of Central Pennsylvania. Phase III Archaeological Data Recovery. The Valentine Iron Ore Washing Plant (36Ce526), Proposed Benner Commerce Business Park 82-Acre Parcel Benner Township, Centre County, Pennsylvania*. Prepared for The Centre County Industrial Development Corporation by Heberling Associates, Inc., 2012. Pp. 544. Free, available for download courtesy of the Centre County Historical Society at www.centrehistory.org/exhibits/building-on-the-past/.

It's not what you find, it's what you find out.

—David Hurst Thomas