THE PENNSYLVANIA GERMANS

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The memory of the average American for historical facts seems to be short, and his tendency to cherish prejudices, inaccurate folk beliefs and downright misinformation boundless.

So it is with the general conceptions about the Pennsylvania Germans. To the student of the field it is apparent that in spite of intense research by numerous scholars, the American public still seems to need much enlightenment.

To get an old argument settled, I should like to point out once again that the popular term for these people is “Pennsylvania Dutch,” however the historically correct term is “Pennsylvania German.” Because they came predominantly from southwest Germany, I, myself, prefer in print to call them “Pennsylvania German,” especially since I have to state so often to disbelieving Americans that these “Dutch” are not wooden-shoe Holland Dutch from the Netherlands.

(Netherlanders have assured me that while they have nothing against the Pennsylvania “Dutch,” they, too, don’t like being confused with them.)

All peoples and all languages develop by mixture and levelling out. The Pennsylvania German people and the Pennsylvania German language are excellent examples of this process. They are good material for studying methods of research in linguistics, comparative philology and history.

Assuming that the language will also define the origin of the people, I should define Pennsylvania German as a language growing out of a mixture of southwest German dialects with English influences. It is the idiom of a typical language island, a dialect surrounded and influenced by an alien language.

The fusion began in the eighteenth century and was completed at the end of the Revolutionary War. The common language for the groups from the Palatinate, Wurttemberg, Baden, Switzerland, Alsace, and to a lesser degree from East Germany, was the German literary language used for their church services, schools and newspapers. Their culture was a rural German one with English influence and the indel-

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ible impression of the New World, particularly the frontier.

According to the research of the linguists A. F. Buffington, C. F. Reed and L. W. I. Seifert, the initial territorial divisions are still evident but need more careful scientific study. Between 1775 and 1820 there was comparatively little immigration because of the wars, and the spoken language of the people became set as what we call Pennsylvania German or Pennsylvania Dutch. In the section north-east of Philadelphia one could travel for miles without hearing anything but this language at the beginning of the nineteenth century. In the countryside and to a large degree in the cities also, the descendants of English, Scots and Irish, with names like Clark, Fox, Buffington and Burns, were Pennsylvania-Germanized, swallowed up by a melting pot within the greater American melting pot.

When the communications between Europe and America were re-established, people found it hard on both sides of the ocean to understand each other's nature. The English felt an aversion for the American English and the Germans of Europe regarded the Pennsylvania Germans as un-German, and their dialect as a hodge-podge. (All languages are a hodge-podge, I have pointed out.)

The years 1834-1837 may be regarded as a turning point in the history of the Pennsylvania German people and their language. Up to that point Pennsylvania had been a kind of Switzerland with English as the main language, but with widespread recognition of the position of German in the "Dutch" territory. Now began a period in which the literary German was replaced, step by step, by English, while the German colloquial language was still widely used until a much later time. When the new constitution was adopted in the thirties, the Germans demanded equal rights for their language with English. Their claims were unsuccessful. By the year 1880 there were practically no schools with German as the language of instruction, by the year 1910 the German newspapers had disappeared, and by 1920 all church services were in the English language.

It should be pointed out that German instruction, German newspapers and German church services, furthered by the immigration of the nineteenth century, are not "Pennsylvania German," although there are cases of the survival of all three through temporary cooperation of the two groups.

Without doubt, the industrialization of Pennsylvania hastened the process.
The legend grew that Pennsylvania German was a corrupt mixture of German and English. Literary German is for the modern Pennsylvania Germans a foreign language which those who know their dialect can understand to a degree, if "you don't speak too fast."

It cannot be said, however, that the disappearance of literary German turned the "Dutch" over night into masters of English. As late as 1895 the well-known educator A. R. Horne, president of Keystone Normal School, now Kutztown State Teachers College, wrote in his "Pennsylvania German Manual," Allentown, 1895, the big problem in eastern Pennsylvania was that for almost 800,000 inhabitants English was as dead a language as Latin and Greek.

The use of the dialect for literary expression began in the German newspapers and continued on until the present. Grammars have been written for it for the scholar and for the layman. One of the best is "Pennsylvania German Grammar" by Preston A. Barba and Albert F. Buffington, published by Schlechter in Allentown, 1954. At the Pennsylvania State University, graduate students under the supervision of Professor Buffington, are working on a comprehensive dictionary of the language. Its folklore is not only under constant investigation as part of the activity of the Pennsylvania German Society and the Pennsylvania German Folklore Society, but it is furthered in the Pennsylvania Dutch Folklore Center at Bethel under the direction of Dr. Alfred Shoemaker.

In the Colonial period and shortly thereafter, the Pennsylvania Germans produced a significant literature in literary German, which was largely in their newspapers, and this continued until almost 1900. Likewise the literature in the Pennsylvania German vernacular was largely a newspaper production. Alongside of the newspapers, the volumes of the Pennsylvania German Society and the Pennsylvania German Folklore Society are the greatest repositories for Pennsylvania German prose and poetry.

The literature in the vernacular produced writers of real talent. The poems of Henry Harbaugh are the most widely known. For more details the reader may consult the books listed at the end of this article.

The Pennsylvania German Magazine, founded in 1899, gave many writers a chance to see their poems and articles in print, but it folded up before the first world war. March 23, 1935, Preston A. Barba began the "Pennsilfaanisch Deitsch Eck" in the Saturday edition of the Allentown Morning Call. Along with English articles on the
history, folklore and language of the Pennsylvania Germans, the *Eck* printed poems and stories in the vernacular. Among the writers whom Barba discovered were the talented John Birmelin, lyricist, and the prose writer Lloyd A. Moll. *The Pennsylvania Dutchman*, founded in 1949 under the leadership of Alfred Shoemaker, was less interested in literary expression, but, nevertheless, printed a large amount in the Pennsylvania German dialect.

For every reader of the vernacular, however, there were hundreds of listeners to the radio programs and visitors to the popular gatherings, such as the groundhog lodges and the "Versammlinge." The late G. Gilbert Snyder, the radio "Wunnernaas" of Berks County, once received 50,000 replies to a request that his listeners write to him.

Since Pennsylvania German literary production is reduced to a few columns in English newspapers, it consists mostly of poems and short sketches that will fit the space. It is regrettable that the excellent novels of the late Charles C. More are still unpublished and confined to the archives of Muhlenberg College.

Even more regrettable is the fact that the American nation in general knows nothing of the talents of More, of Birmelin and Thomas H. Harter, whose "Boonastiel" is still a source of delight when read before audiences who know the Pennsylvania German dialect.

There are two questions that I am constantly asked about the Pennsylvania Germans. One is: Since there were so many Pennsylvania Germans who went into the teaching profession, why did the populace oppose the public school system? The second is: How long will Pennsylvania German persist?

The first question could be answered in one sentence: The Pennsylvania Germans feared the new schools would destroy their American cultural patterns based on language, religion and farm life. Stronger even than their fear for their language and culture, was the fear that religion would be neglected and a foreign economy instilled in their children. And, in fact, industrial opportunities, urbanization and higher education have in many places destroyed the old bond between the Pennsylvania German farmer and the land.

The answer to the second question is more complex. When children who don't speak the vernacular in their school years may acquire it when they become a little older and go to work, and then sometimes use it almost exclusively, one cannot make any predictions based on school census as to when the dialect will disappear. Nor can im-
migration disrupt it rapidly. I have met Poles, Armenians, Slovaks, Italians and Irish in the Allentown area, who speak it fluently.

However, linguistic history teaches us that a language island will ultimately disappear. Sooner or later Pennsylvania German will die out. In many sections it is dead or almost dead. Some students predict, as they have been doing for a hundred years, that in the next generation it will die out entirely.

But whether the language dies out or not, the Pennsylvania Germans as a regional group will persist. Settlers in the area where the dialect is not spoken, acquire or at least their children acquire the characteristics well known to Americans as "The Pennsylvania Dutch." The manners and customs are so set that it is doubtful whether they will be undermined even in the face of the urbanization of the Lehigh Valley in the heart of the area.

Once I saw on the shores of a lake in Austria a boat built exactly like the boats once sailed there in the bronze age. It struck me that the tribe that originally settled there must have persisted throughout all periods of linguistic change. Anthropologists' statements corroborated my supposition.

The Pennsylvania "Dutch" are, in a way, such a tribe. Like the New England Yankee, the French Cajan and the Kentucky mountaineer, they have set their pattern on their section. This pattern will persist in spite of change of language, in spite of immigration, industrialization and general education. Eastern Pennsylvania will remain "Dutch" long after the German vernacular has disappeared.

A few books to get you acquainted with problems of Pennsylvania German research are:


Your librarian will help you get a more comprehensive list. The author of this article will be glad to help make a more extensive bibliography for anyone interested in more intensive research. Consult your book dealer for popular books of which dozens have been written since *The Pennsylvania Germans* attempted to explain the “Dutch” to the American nation.