

SISTER CAROL ROHLOFF, CSJ

I was born in 1945, the first child of Ida McGivern and George A. Rohloff. My maternal grandmother's maiden name was Ida Paul. All I know about my maternal grandfather, Larry McGivern, is that he came from South Troy, "the clover patch of Irish immigrants." Hence, I know almost nothing about my maternal heritage.

My paternal grandmother was Ellen Walker and my paternal grandfather was August F Rohloff. I know very little of my Grandmother Walker's background. I was however, even as a small child, always interested and proud of being German. I guess it just went with the family name. I used to love to go visit my grandfather. He was a tall stately man with a small mustache. He died when I was in third grade so my memories are somewhat foggy. I do remember that at Christmas time he would make us what we called German candy. It was made of sugar, water, vinegar and butter (2 pieces the size of walnuts). These ingredients were boiled to a hard crack (where you would see icicles form when you dropped the boiled liquid into a glass of cold water), and then this boiled liquid was poured in a cake pan that you had covered the bottom with shelled walnuts. Very simple and I still make it in the real cold days of winter. One needs the cold to have it harden quickly.



In high school I chose to study German. I was very interested in where we came from. My maternal Aunt Gretchen, my father's oldest sister, told me we came from Prussia. The more I inquired, I was able to have her tell me my grandfather came from Mecklenburg-Schwerin. She also told me we may be part Jewish as my grandfather's grandmother was named Sophia Oppermann. Aunt Gretchen told me my grandfather came over to the USA in 1869 as a two-year old child. August (my grandfather) had one brother, Fred. Their mother died when they were still small so their father remarried. The woman he married was a widow with children. So in the family unit there were his children, her children and their children. My dad told me his father did not get along with his stepmother, so at a young age he moved to Saginaw, Michigan to work on a farm but later returned to the Capital Region.

When I was on sabbatical in 1990, I did some family research on the Rohloffs. I was able to find the census records showing that my grandfather as a child lived in Albany on Sloan Street. When I went to check out the home, it had been torn down. My cousins were having a family reunion that year, so I was able to share what I had found including all the names of my grandfather's half brothers and sisters. I also learned that my grandparents, Frederick and Johanna, were buried in the Evangelische Cemetery in Albany and I went there to visit their graves. In the 1910 Albany census, I found my grandfather's date of birth to be in 1868. In 1901 he was 42 and married to Helen A. Walker, 32. She was the daughter of the Walkers with whom he boarded. They had two children, Gretchen, 6 and Karl, 4. My dad was born in 1911 and his other three siblings thereafter.

When we were novices (1966-67) we used to go to Albany to visit the shut-ins at the Albany Home for Incurables (no longer in existence), and I found a lady named Mary Rohloff. It turned out she was my father's aunt, the youngest child of his father and stepmother. Contact had been lost over the years. As a family we went a couple of times to visit her. She was a tall frail lady with white hair placed in a bun on top of her head. We would bring her vanilla ice cream which she loved. My Dad loved ice cream too and I must say I attribute my love of it to being in the genes! My Dad told me when he was young his Aunt Mary would come to Cohoes to see the family and his father would send his older brother, Karl, down to the Mohawk River to catch eel. Aunt Mary would take it home "ALIVE" in a brown paper bag as she took the trolley home to Albany. Eel may be a northern Germany delicacy, but I never even had a tempting to taste it. The stories did fascinate me though.

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When I first entered the community, I wanted to be a biology teacher and began studies in that area. One day, however, I was sent for and asked if I would like to change my major to German. At that time I did not care one way or the other, but saying “yes” would set the stage for my first ministry and lots of opportunities. I studied German and became a German teacher at CCHS, Troy. While there I was awarded a grant from the Goethe Institute and studied in Germany for one summer. I never did get to Mecklenburg-Schwerin that summer but I did improve my ability in the German language. Two years later I was able to take twenty of my CCHS students to Germany for a month of study and living with German families. We were in northern Germany in a small town named Wedel. This was as close as I ever was to my “family homeland” and loved every moment.

This gives you the background of my “Germanness.” I relate to my grandfather coming over from Germany as a two-year old. I speculate at what my great grandparents’ life was like and through the internet discovered *Friedrich Franz IV, 1897-1918*.

In previous centuries, the map of Europe looked much different than it does today. Germany, as a nation, didn’t exist until 1871. In 1618, the most dominant German power was the Holy Roman Empire ruled by the Catholic Hapsburgs from Vienna. Germany was fragmented into many states, varying in size and power, ruled by semi-independent princes. The Reformation had also split the country, with most of the southern states remaining Catholic while the northern states converted to Lutheranism.

Mecklenburg was known for being perhaps the most backwards of the German states. Fritz Reuter, the famous writer from Mecklenburg, often said that everything happened one hundred years later in his home province.

Life in Mecklenburg was different than life in other German states. However, it shared many characteristics and the people, of course, experienced many of the same events of history. You will find that quite a bit of the information below applies to other German states.

Living Conditions

Life was hard for peasants of all classes in Mecklenburg. They lived in some of the worst living conditions in all of Western Europe. Nearly everyone in Mecklenburg was poor and in each class the people were worse off than those in the same class in many other Western and Northern European localities. Landless peasants made up most of the population. They had few possessions of their own. Most owned no land, no farm, and often no home. Sometimes landless peasants built little temporary houses. Other times, they lived in the homes of landowners. They went from place to place, working on the farms of other people. They had no power and no rights.

Men worked long, physically draining days. During harvest season, work days could last seventeen or eighteen hours. Women weren’t spared from hard labor either. They often worked alongside their husbands, planting and harvesting in the field. Women cleaned out the stables, milked the cows, and fed and cared for the livestock. Besides participating in the “men’s work,” they performed traditional female tasks such as caring for the children, mending clothes, tending the garden and washing the laundry.

Death rates among the relatively young were alarmingly high in Mecklenburg. The first year of life was by far the most precarious. If a person lived to her first birthday, her life expectancy increased by ten years. If she lived to be ten, she could add another ten years to her life expectancy. In Mecklenburg as a whole, nearly forty percent of deaths occurred in children under fourteen. On the other hand, only one-fifth of deaths were among people over seventy.

Germans, another major group, made up a quarter of the arrivals from 1830 until 1880. The percentage peaked in the 1850s when nearly thirty-seven percent of immigrants came from Germany. Most Germans came for economic reasons. Once here, they worked as skilled laborers and farmers.

Up until the 1850s most emigrants traveled on sailing ships, with an average voyage lasting 43 days. Steamships, which made sailing ships obsolete by the end of the 1870s, shortened the voyage to 12-14 days. Steamships began replacing sailing ships as early as 1850, although some emigrants continued to choose sailing ships for nearly thirty years because of their cheaper fares. The last sailing ship left Hamburg in 1879.

Arriving in the U.S.

Soon after arriving, immigrants headed to Castle Gardens, located across from the Statue of Liberty on an island off the southwest tip of Manhattan. As the predecessor to Ellis Island, Castle Gardens served as the station to examine and process new immigrants until 1890. Scores of immigrants crowded through its doors, hundreds each day, thousands each month.

While nearly 2.6 million immigrants came to the U.S. in the 1850s when Castle Gardens opened, by the 1880s the number had doubled to 5.2 million. Two out of three of those landed at Castle Gardens.

This completes my reflections on my German heritage. I realize it has influenced my life. I owe a great deal to my ancestors for choosing to come to the USA for I realize we Caucasians are all descendants of the immigrant population. I believe God gave us the entire world without boundaries and we have a responsibility to ALL PEOPLE to share and assist them in living the best life possible.

