FINAL REPORT for John Leonard Berg

Causes and Patterns of 19th Century German Emigration

Project Abstract:

The 1850’s evidenced the largest migration of German people known in history. This phenomenon changed the social and cultural conditions both in the German homeland and in newly created American states like Minnesota. My research articulated the factors leading to this migration and traced the exact movements of one representative family through the grueling emigration process. The study commenced in the Rhineland village of Rath and continued across country to Bremen and the Bremerhaven sea harbor, the place of final farewells and the threshold to a new life. The research facilities at Bremerhaven are renowned for emigration history and provided me ample material and direction to attain my research goals.

Project Objectives and Methodology:

Building on the successful research from my 2003 SAIF Grant, I now completed my analysis of German Immigration into the Minnesota River Valley by studying the cultural milieu of historic Germany and the traumatic emigration process. Political, social and religious factors were fermenting in the small idyllic Rhineland villages of 19th Century Germany that resulted in sweeping change. Generations of stable communities and families were soon to be forever divided from one another. Having survived this horrific upheaval many German people continued to be faithful, loyal and protective of their heritage in a new land. My research answered the questions of why leave a familiar and beloved country and demonstrated how that transition was facilitated some one hundred and fifty years ago.

The objective of my 2003 SAIF Grant was to trace the historical development and contributions of German immigrants along the banks of the Minnesota River, with particular consideration given to the geographic area surrounding New Ulm, Minnesota. Beginning at Fort Snelling, located at the mouth of the Minnesota River, the plan visited historic sites along the entire length of the river until reaching the headwaters at Big Stone Lake some 300 miles distant. Each carefully selected stop entailed visiting historical interpretative centers, local museums and libraries, genealogical societies and local residents specific to research objectives. Detailed notes, photographs and supportive materials were collected at each site to facilitate a future narrative summary, written articles and poster collage.

My objective for the 2006 SAIF Grant was to actually return to Germany and experience the culture and environment out of which many Minnesota immigrants originated. I explored the salient causes forcing countless people to abandon their homeland, studied the wretched port conditions at Bremen and chronicled the perilous adventures associated with 19th Century emigration.
The tiny village of Rath is now surrounded by the world class city of Düsseldorf. Only a few historical buildings exist today where a thriving agricultural village once dominated. Beginning in Rath I investigated the local factors resulting in emigration by employing the resources of the Stadtarchiv Düsseldorf and the Düsseldorfer Verein für Familienkunde e. V. The archive and genealogical society were both equipped with abundant primary source materials documenting general historical events and specific materials relevant to my representative German family.

Leaving Rath I retraced the cross county sojourn taken by thousands of fleeing German farmers. The journey was completely taken by foot or mule cart considering that rail transportation was not yet available and river transportation was not practical. With the assistance of German researchers and existing studies, the emigrant trail was clearly defined and lead directly to the seaport city of Bremen and Bremerhaven.

At Bremen I have arranged to be partnered with Dr. Wolfgang Grams and other scholars associated with the German Emigration Center. The German Emigration Center (Deutsches Auswanderer Haus) is a new state-of-the-art research facility designed precisely to support research queries pertinent to my 2006 SAIF Grant. Bremerhaven is at the precise center of the 19th Century emigration phenomenon and has preserved all associated archival materials in several distinct collections. The remainder of my research exhausted the resources of the German Emigration Center; its library, documents collections and museums.

Several other organizations are conveniently located in Bremerhaven and Bremen; all supporting and facilitating my research interests. These ancillary organizations are: Deutsches Schiffahrtsmuseum (Maritime Museum), Museumsdorf of Cloppenburg, Morgensternmuseum (Historical Museum of Bremerhaven), Überseemuseum (Overseas Museum) and Focke Museum in Bremen.

In all of these research facilities I explored newspapers records, surveyed passenger manifests, mapped emigration patterns, experienced the harbor atmosphere and engaged the local research agents. I took notes, recorded and compared emigrant narratives and gathered materials for future narrative summaries and scholarly presentations.

A detailed itinerary of my German research is available upon request.

**Project Benefits:**

The benefit of this research project was to expand knowledge on the role and significance of German emigration from the Rhineland and its impact on the current population of immigrants in the Minnesota River Valley. Rather than simply experiencing history from a textbook perspective this research tried to personalize history, focusing on the lived experiences of particular German émigrés.
**Sharing of Information:**

The results of this research were presented at Research Poster Day 2007, an annual UWP event and this written summary forwarded to the Office of Sponsored Programs. I presented my research at the Thirty-First Annual International Symposium for German American Studies at the University of Kansas, Lawrence. A PowerPoint presentation is available for review by contacting me directly. I was the keynote speaker at the annual meeting of the German Bohemian Society of Minnesota in May of 2007 where I again offered a summary of my research. Additionally, I will facilitate a UW Extension class on genealogical research, offer research seminars for the American Literature of Immigration and Ethnicity class (Eng. 375), appear as a guest speaker to the campus German Club and make a formal presentation at the fall conference of the Wisconsin Library Association in Green Bay, Wisconsin.

**Budget:**

The 2006 SAIF Grant was fully encumbered.