

Some Sources for Northwest History

PENNSYLVANIA GERMAN BAPTISMAL CERTIFICATES IN MINNESOTA

Bertha L. Heilbron

EXAMPLES OF the illuminated birth and baptismal certificates employed by the Pennsylvania Germans after 1750 "turn up throughout the 48 states from Maine to California," according to a recent article by the curator of paintings of the New-York Historical Society.¹ It is, therefore, not surprising to discover a significant group of these colorful records among the holdings of a local historical society in Minnesota. The Lake Pepin Valley Historical Society has in its museum at Lake City a collection of Pennsylvania German items that includes five records of birth and baptism (*Geburts-und Tauf-Schein*), a confirmation certificate, and three religious prints.

The value of the baptismal certificates for the study of family history and the "great store of genealogical information" to be gleaned from them have long been recognized. One writer suggests that some historical society should undertake to collect them purely for their genealogical value.² This aspect is well illustrated in the Lake City collection, for by means of its five baptismal certificates the ancestry of a Minnesota family that migrated westward from Pennsylvania can be traced back to 1798.

The collection was presented to the Lake Pepin Valley society by the late Charles J. Romick, a pioneer Lake City mail carrier, who died about ten years ago. He was born in Minnesota in 1875, not long after his parents, Robert and Louisa E. Romick, settled in Lake City. That both Robert and Louisa were born in Pennsylvania is

¹ Donald A. Shelley, "Illuminated Birth Certificates," in *New-York Historical Society Quarterly Bulletin*, 29:93-105 (April, 1945).

² Shelley, in *New-York Historical Society Quarterly Bulletin*, 29:95; Henry S. Borneman, *Pennsylvania German Illuminated Manuscripts*, 16 (Pennsylvania German Society, *Proceedings*, vol. 46 — Norristown, 1937).

recorded in the state census returns of 1875 and 1885. The Lake City census of 1885 is signed by Robert Romick, who was then serving as city assessor. The birth and baptismal records originated in his wife's family.³ Louisa was a granddaughter of Jacob Orth, whose birth in Derry Township, Mifflin County, Pennsylvania, on October 1, 1798, is recorded in the earliest *Geburts-und Tauf-Schein* in the Lake City collection. It reveals further that Jacob was the son of Johannes and Maria Kepperling Orth.

The record of Louisa's grandmother, Judith Miller, also is included in the collection. The daughter of Peter and Maria Ohlinger Miller, she was born in Rascomb Manor Township, Berks County, "Pinsel Vania," on January 23, 1816. Evidence that Judith married Jacob Orth is to be found on the baptismal record of their son Peter, who was born in Derry Township in 1836. Other certificates in the collection record the births of Judith's sister Magdalena in 1806, and of the latter's daughter, Victoria Maria Becker, in 1833. The confirmation certificate in the collection is that of Jacob Orth's brother Heinrich; it is dated April 7, 1804.

The Lake City certificates are important also as examples of a folk art that once flourished in a small section of eastern America. Several types of craftsmanship are represented. No example of the earliest type of certificate, which was entirely drawn and lettered by hand, is included, but the record of Magdalena Miller represents a slightly later development, with a hand-drawn and hand-colored border surrounding a printed text. Quaint birds and gay flowers, including the characteristic tulip, are fitted into the space around a large heart-shaped area containing the printed form. The *Fraktur* lettering that gave its name to this Pennsylvania German craft appears in the form, which was filled in by a penman who wrote a fine German script. The latter may have been the artist, F. Bischof,

³ The state census records of Wabasha County for 1875 and 1885 are in the custody of the Minnesota Historical Society. Since Robert and Louisa Romick are not listed in the federal census returns of Lake City for 1870, it may be concluded that they settled there during the first half of the decade. Their son is listed in the record for 1885 only, where his age is given as ten years. Additional information about the Romick family and its Pennsylvania German ancestry was furnished by Mr. F. H. Kemp, vice-president of the Lake Pepin Valley Historical Society, in a letter to the writer, July 1, 1945.

who gave evidence of pride in his craft by signing the certificate. One writer declares that the decorations on the Pennsylvania German birth certificates usually are of the "most joyful character," in sharp contrast to the text, and especially the verses, which generally present gloomy reminders of the shortness of life.⁴ These characteristics are strongly evident in the record of Magdalena Miller, as well as in other items in the Lake City collection.

At least two of the certificates exhibit printed texts and border designs that have been colored by hand, and two others are lithographed or are colored with the aid of stencil blocks. All four bear the imprints of local printers—F. Wilhelm Schöpffin of Chambersburg, Johann Ritter and Company of Reading, A. and W. Blumer of Allentown, and G. S. Peters of Harrisburg. The collection includes two unused blank forms, both issued by the latter concern. Peters, who not only printed but distributed the forms, doubtless persuaded his customers to buy several at a time for possible future use. From Peters' press, also, came two of the three religious prints in the collection. One presents a quaint picture of "Die verschiedenen Wege nach dem ewigen Leben oder dem endlosen Verderben"; the other reproduces a painting of "The Lord's Supper." The latter, which bears captions both in English and German, probably is of more recent date than other items in the collection. The third religious print, which is in black and white, illustrates and tells the story in German verse of "Adam und Eva im Paradies." It was published by Daniel Roths of Reading.

Religious motifs, however, were seldom used in the decoration of the Pennsylvania German baptismal certificates. One writer declares that the "Protestant background of the Pennsylvania German sects barred the introduction" of purely religious themes.⁵ The artists turned instead to floral, geometric, animal, and bird motifs, and they frequently introduced angels and cupids into their designs. The certificates, which usually measure about twelve by sixteen inches, were often framed and hung on the walls. But even when this was

⁴ Borneman, *Pennsylvania German Illuminated Manuscripts*, 17.

⁵ Shelley, in *New-York Historical Society Quarterly Bulletin*, 29:101.

not done, the tendency was to preserve them as family records. That many of these informing and decorative documents reached Minnesota in the course of the westward movement is more than likely. Anyone who knows of additional Pennsylvania German illuminated baptismal certificates of local interest is asked to communicate with the Minnesota Historical Society.⁶

⁶ The Lake Pepin Valley Historical Society's certificates were displayed in St. Paul by the Minnesota Historical Society in January, 1946.



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