

# **“It Always Kinda’ Frightened Them That They’d Be Sent Back”: German American Origin Stories from Southwestern Illinois**

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*This article considers oral history from elderly second and third generation German Americans from the Midwestern United States whose families experienced intensive government-sponsored Americanization and language restriction during the first half of the twentieth century. These periods of anti-German sentiment abruptly ended German language practices in schools, churches and communities and complicated the process of identifying as German ethnics. This article examines a subset of collected testimonies, “Origin Stories”, which broadly concern a family’s migration from Germany to the United States and the early experiences of settlement and adaptation. In this testimony, narrators remember what it was like to be an “outsider” or to be singled out because of their ethnicity and German language use during both World Wars. Despite these testimonies, many of the youngest generations in these communities know little about the experiences of anti-German sentiment faced by their grandparents and great grandparents. As an educational researcher interested in historical immigration, I use methods of oral history to examine how members of these German American communities make sense of this important social history and the particular ways they communicate these interpretations across generations.*



*Figure 3.1 A photograph taken en route to the United States by John Cryder (circa 1895).*

*All profound changes in consciousness, by their very nature, bring with them characteristic amnesias. Out of such oblivions, in specific historical circumstances, spring narratives.*<sup>1</sup>

People in the States didn't like Germans because of that war and the Kaiser. So they hated em' way back then. Well, that seems so far away and you know and stuff but my dad lived it and knew it! You know, so he just kept his mouth shut. But when my mom or dad would say it [speak in German] and it ended up after Elmer during the first year had problems in school, they decided they wouldn't speak German anymore- only when they didn't want us to know what they were saying.

In this example, Dorothy Becker Cryder, age 87, describes the experience of her German-speaking family during the First World War in southwestern Illinois. Her father, John Becker (the author of the photograph above), migrated from Germany during his early twenties and struggled to maintain his primary language at a time of increasing hostility toward German immigrants and the German language. Like John Becker's decision to "keep his mouth shut," many bilingual German communities experienced abrupt and often painful language discrimination during this time, willing their homes to become English monolingual overnight and speaking German only when they didn't want their children to understand what they were saying.

The following article considers oral histories from elderly German Americans from southwestern Illinois whose families experienced intensive government-sponsored Americanization<sup>2</sup> and language restriction during the First and Second World Wars. Particularly central to these oral histories, are the experiences associated with language sanction at school and church and the enduring impact of language discrimination faced by members of these rural communities. These periods of anti-German sentiment brought an abrupt end to German bilingual instruction and complicated the process of identifying as German ethnics. The narrators in this study remember what it was like for their families to be considered "outsiders" or to be singled out because of their ethnicity and German language use during both World Wars.

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<sup>1</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 208.

<sup>2</sup> This definition of Americanization includes both the government-sponsored, coercive programs of forced assimilation aimed at immigrants at the turn of the century through the early 1920s, as well as a "variant of assimilation by which newcomers or their descendants come to identify themselves as American." Russell A. Kazal, "Revisiting Assimilation: The Rise, Fall, and Reappraisal of a Concept in American Ethnic History," *American Historical Review* 100, no. 2 (1995): 440.

In the United States, immigrants and their children account for more than 60 million people, or a fifth of all residents today.<sup>3</sup> While contemporary debates over immigration have drawn renewed attention to issues of acculturation, ethnicity and national identity, consideration of the historical experiences of European American immigrants and their own stories of migration, adaptation and language loss are often neglected. Heightened scrutiny over the extent to which contemporary immigrants are successfully assimilating is often accompanied by vague, historical allusions to successful European American assimilation and the so-called American melting pot. Carola and Marcelo Suárez Orozco in their seminal work on immigrant children in US public schools, note informal conversations with teachers and administrators frequently elicit comments such as, “my grandparents came here dirt-poor from Europe, they struggled to learn English, worked hard and assimilated-why can’t the new immigrants do the same?”<sup>4</sup> The authors argue the subtexts of these statements highlight a perception of history that is often incomplete. Many European Americans are not fully aware of their families’ immigration histories, particularly those painful or traumatic experiences that occurred in the process of assimilation. This incomplete understanding of their own ethnic history makes it easier to indict newer immigrants for not assimilating fast enough and helps to erase the important variations in the acculturation experiences of different European American groups.

While the elderly members of these German American communities recall the trouble experienced by their family members, the current generation of youth in these communities know little about the targeted anti-German hostility and severe language sanction faced by their ancestors. They know even less about the multiple ways their early immigrant family members negotiated, and in some cases, resisted these external pressures to assimilate culturally and linguistically. This lack of understanding keeps newer generations from drawing important connections between past and present eras of anti-immigrant feeling, especially in these communities, which are experiencing heavy migration of newly arrived immigrants today.

As a researcher interested in educational history, I use methods of oral history to examine how members of these communities make sense of this important period of anti-German feeling and language restriction and how they communicate these interpretations across generations. As many of these testimonies involve experiences with language loss at school, the study adds to our understanding of conventional

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<sup>3</sup> Tamar Jacoby, “Defining Assimilation for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” in *Reinventing The Melting Pot: The New Immigrants and What It Means To Be American*, ed. Tamar Jacoby (New York: Basic Books, 2004).

<sup>4</sup> Carola Suárez-Orozco and Marcelo Suárez Orozco, *Children of Immigration* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001), 50-51.

educational history with particular respect to the role of bilingual schooling in the maintenance of ethnic identity. By examining oral histories from ethnic European American communities now living within the Midwestern United States, this work hopes to contextualize our current understanding of white communities that may be hostile towards new immigrants or campaigns for minority language rights in the public schools. These oral testimonies and methodologies for analysis offer a critical lens for exploring the enduring impact of these experiences and may work to contest what gets collapsed in dominant educational histories of European immigrant communities, particularly histories of language shift and loss.<sup>5</sup> The conclusion of this work considers the potential for local classrooms to conduct oral histories in communities which now consist of students from both German American communities and more recently arrived immigrants from Central America. Oral histories might afford these diverse young people an opportunity to explore their own family's "funds of knowledge"<sup>6</sup> in classrooms where family history may not be recognized as relevant to the educational process.<sup>7</sup> Oral history methods can help newer immigrant students to challenge wider, deficit notions of their own communities and help all students see the importance of studying social history. Understanding the difficult Americanization experiences of German immigrants may help students to make important connections between past and present periods of anti-immigrant feeling and hostility toward first language rights. If students better understand what is shared *and different* among their family's immigration and acculturation experiences, there is more room for empathy, understanding and potential change in the next generations from these communities.

### **Historical Contexts of Language Sanction and Anti-German Feeling**

For German Americans, the onset of World War One began a distinctly targeted period of Americanization and anti-German feeling in the United States. The U.S. government's interception of the Zimmerman telegram, proposing an anti-U.S.

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<sup>5</sup> Herbert Kloss, "German-American Language Maintenance Efforts," in *Language Loyalty in the United States*, ed. Joshua Fishman (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton, 1966), 206-252; Terrence G. Wiley, "The Imposition of World War I Era English-Only Policies and the Fate of German in North America," in *Language and Politics in the United States and Canada: Myths and Realities*, ed. Thomas Ricento and Barbara Burnaby (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Publishers, 1998), 211-241; Joshua A. Fishman, *Language Loyalty in the United States* (The Hague, Netherlands: Mouton, 1966).

<sup>6</sup> Luis Moll, Cathy Amanti, Deborah Neff, and Norma Gonzalez, "Funds of Knowledge for Teaching: Using a Qualitative Approach to Connect Homes and Classrooms," *Theory Into Practice* 31, no. 2 (1992): 132-141.

<sup>7</sup> Irma M. Olmedo, "Family Oral Histories for Multicultural Curriculum Perspectives," *Urban Education* 32, no. 1 (1997): 45-62.

military alliance between Germany and México, confirmed fears of German sabotage and fueled growing anti-German sentiment. While many German American organizations and newspapers immediately declared loyalty to the United States, a “storm of anti-Germanism” raged in the period leading up to and following U.S. entry into World War One.<sup>8</sup> Public anti-German campaigns led to the closure of German ethnic societies, the shutdown of German language newspapers, and the abrupt end of German language instruction in schools and churches.<sup>9</sup> Dennis Baron notes German was targeted by the government as a language “to be rooted out” and many states, including Illinois, Nebraska, and Wisconsin, passed English Only constitutional amendments in schools and public places.<sup>10</sup> Within this climate of supposed national vulnerability, state governments were pressured to create councils of defense responsible for investigations of loyalty and patriotism, particularly in schools, universities, churches and unions.<sup>11</sup> The German language was most often the target of their suspicion and proof of people’s disloyalty. In 1918, the Nebraska Council of Defense stated, “instruction in schools, worship services in churches and conversations in public and over the telephone must be in English.”<sup>12</sup> The same Council argued against the use of German at a Lutheran Synod, calling the sermons “Germanic propaganda emanating from pulpits occupied by Kaiser agents” and German preachers “Nebraska Caesars” whose use of German needed to be stopped.<sup>13</sup> In the states aforementioned, German was banned in all parochial and public schools, in social gatherings, and in religious services. Widespread language restriction often led to attacks of German American church leaders and newspaper editors and many German books were banned from libraries or burned.<sup>14</sup> In the end, Terrence G. Wiley notes, “the eradication of one’s ancestral language became an essential component of Americanization and the rite of passage into the Anglo-American fold-at least for those who would be allowed to assimilate.”<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Kathleen Neils Conzen, “Germans,” in *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups*, ed. Stephan Thernstrom, Ann Orlov and Oscar Handlin (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980).

<sup>9</sup> Erik Kirschbaum, *The Eradication of German Culture in the United States: 1917-1918* (Stuttgart: Hans-Dieter Heinz, Akademischer Verlag Stuttgart, 1986).

<sup>10</sup> Dennis Baron, *The English-Only Question: An Official Language for Americans?* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1990).

<sup>11</sup> Wiley, “The Imposition of World War I Era,” 221.

<sup>12</sup> Robert N. Manley, “Language Loyalty and Liberty: The Nebraska State Council of Defense and the Lutheran Churches, 1917-1918,” *Concordia Historical Institute Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (1964): 9.

<sup>13</sup> Robert N. Manley, “The Nebraska State Council of Defense: Loyalty Programs and Policies During World War I” (MA thesis, University of Nebraska, 1959), 8-9, quoted in Wiley, “The Imposition of World War I Era,” 221.

<sup>14</sup> Manley, “Language Loyalty and Liberty,” 1-16.

<sup>15</sup> Wiley, “The Imposition of World War I Era,” 224.

Many scholars argue that German Americans, faced with such large-scale language eradication and claims of disloyalty, opted for a more “submerged ethnicity”<sup>16</sup> where overt cultural practices were confined to the private sphere. Frederick C. Luebke, argues a profound level of “cultural amnesia” characterized later generations of German Americans who “spoke almost no German and knew little of German culture.”<sup>17</sup> Wiley notes that these repressive language experiences of German American immigrants have largely been forgotten in the collective memory and later generation descendents “have come to assume that their grandparents and great grandparents all willingly deserted their ancestral tongues and cultures.”<sup>18</sup> These periods of intensive anti-German feeling and language restriction provide a necessary context in making sense of the following oral histories shared in these communities.

## Origin Stories

This article begins by first examining a subset of collected testimonies, “Origin Stories,”<sup>19</sup> which broadly concern a family’s story of migration from Germany to the United States and the early experiences of settlement and adaptation. My interest in this testimony began during initial interviews when I noticed that stories of family migration were central to the life history interviews I conducted on family history. These particular narratives were polished and “worked upon”<sup>20</sup> discursive practices, operating as “mini theatrical performances”<sup>21</sup> in the course of their tellings. They worked much like Alexander Freund’s “foundational stories” in his examination of three generational interviews in Canada as they are genesis stories, or the “foundation on which other stories are built.”<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> John F. McClymer, “The Americanization Movement and the Education of the Foreign-Born Adult, 1914-1925,” in *American Education and the European Immigrant, 1840–1940*, ed. Bernard J. Weiss (University of Illinois Press, 1982), 96-116.

<sup>17</sup> Frederick C. Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty: German Americans and World War* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1974), 329.

<sup>18</sup> Wiley, “The Imposition of World War I,” 236.

<sup>19</sup> For a longer analysis of the origin stories and the way they articulate with visual sources of testimony, see Maris Thompson, “Family Photographs as Traces of Americanization,” in *Oral History and Photography*, ed. Alexander Freund and Alistair Thomson (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2011).

<sup>20</sup> Michael J. Toolan, *Narrative: A Critical Linguistic Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 1988).

<sup>21</sup> Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday, 1959).

<sup>22</sup> Alexander Freund, “A Canadian Family Talks About Oma’s Life in Nazi Germany: Three-Generational Interviews and Communicative Memory,” in “Remembering Family, Analyzing Home: Oral History and the Family,” ed. Katrina Srigley and Stacey Zembrzycki, special issue, *Oral History Forum d’histoire orale* 29 (2009).

Origin stories also include stories of adaptation, language sanction and anti-immigrant sentiment during this turbulent time-period of the First and Second World Wars. These testimonies detail the lives of parents and grandparents and therefore differ analytically from narrative studies that consider first person experiences.<sup>23</sup> As such, these stories afford an opportunity to analyze “generational memories,” or the “memories which individuals have of their own families’ history, as well as generational collective memories about their past”<sup>24</sup> and the way intergenerational transmissions affect their meaning. Erving Goffman argues stories about others are also stories about the self and become key sites for a presentation of self, where narrators can animate and evaluate the actions of specific people and events.<sup>25</sup> In these personal histories of family origin, narrators recall memories of their parents and grandparents and deploy a range of thematic and linguistic strategies in order to characterize their family members as particular kinds of people with particular kinds of resources who make their way in an unfamiliar and often inhospitable new landscape. In so doing, they paint a conceptual portrait of their own family’s immigration experience and convey larger beliefs about the German immigrant experience. Their memories, as Barbara Misztal argues, work at both “individual and collective dimensions” as they localize the experiences of migration and settlement to particular families, while at the same time work collectively to invoke larger discourses about the legitimacy of origin and what one must ultimately be willing to give up to become American.<sup>26</sup> These themes are particularly critical for German American communities during the first half of the twentieth century, when identifying as German ethnics and German speakers was severely delimited by public accusations of disloyalty.

### **Narrative, Life History and Oral Sources of Testimony**

Combining methods of oral history with narrative analysis was an intentional decision on my part as the majority of studies of German Americans have been

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<sup>23</sup> Ana De Fina, *Identity in Narrative: A Study of Immigrant Discourse* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2003); Ana De Fina, “Orientation in Immigrant Narratives: The Role of Ethnicity in the Identification of Characters,” *Discourse Studies* 2, no. 2 (2000): 131-157.

<sup>24</sup> Tamara Haraven, “The Search for Generational Memory,” in *Oral History: An Interdisciplinary Anthology*, 2nd ed., ed. David K. Dunaway and Willa K. Baum (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1996), 241-56; Tamara Hareven, “The Search for Generational Memory: Tribal Rites in Industrial Societies,” *Deadalus* 107, no. 4 (1978): 137-149.

<sup>25</sup> Goffman, *The Presentation of Self*. Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay On The Organization of Experience* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974).

<sup>26</sup> Barbara A. Misztal, *Theories of Social Remembering* (Berkshire, England: Open University Press, 2003), 6.

limited to large-scale historical or sociological studies.<sup>27</sup> While some important studies have focused on qualitative aspects of the Midwestern German experience such as a study of immigrant letters<sup>28</sup> or German women's oral histories in the rural Midwest,<sup>29</sup> these studies do not consider life histories or spoken narratives from later generation descendants of these German immigrants. Conducting an oral history with descendants of immigrants allows for a narrative analytical focus concerned less with 'adherence to fact' and more with "departure from it."<sup>30</sup> Alessandro Portelli argues oral history sources are always narrative sources and narrative methods of analysis may help us to understand testimony in relation to time or to the distance and perspective narrators take in relation to their stories.<sup>31</sup> This narrativizing perspective becomes particularly important as narrators talk about difficult experiences around immigration and Americanization from the distance of a generation or two. We come to know how these experiences get understood across time, actively reworked and textured by more recent discourses of immigration and nativism. We also come to know something about the silences or the hidden meanings of these stories of acculturation that are often not shared with the youngest in these communities. In his work on multi-generational interviews of German Canadians, Alexander Freund notes that processes of intergenerational transmission are not a one-way "handing down and receiving between old and young", rather they are interactive memory constructions<sup>32</sup> or as Ruth Finnegan adds, "active creators of a family's ethos."<sup>33</sup>

Origin stories emerged from longer life history interviews. George Marcus argues that life histories are a critical form of ethnography, as they "are potential guides to the delineation of ethnographic spaces within systems shaped by

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<sup>27</sup> Luebke, *Bonds of Loyalty*; Kathleen Neils Conzen, "German-Americans and the Invention of Ethnicity," in *America and The Germans: An Assessment of a Three-Hundred Year History*, ed. Frank Trommler and Joseph McVeigh (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985), 139-141; Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Phantom Landscapes of Colonization: Germans in the Making of a Pluralist America," in *The German American Encounter: Conflict and Cooperation Between Two Cultures 1800-2000*, ed. Frank Trommler and Elliot Shore (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001), 7-21; Kirschbaum, *The Eradication of German Culture*; Frank Trommler and Elliot Shore, eds. *The German American Encounter: Conflict and Cooperation Between Two Cultures 1800-2000* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2001).

<sup>28</sup> Walter Kamphoefner, *News From the Land of Freedom: German Immigrants Write Home*, trans. Susan Carter Vogel (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991).

<sup>29</sup> Linda Schelbitski-Pickle, *Contented Among Strangers: Rural German Speaking Women and Their Families in the Nineteenth-Century Midwest* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

<sup>30</sup> Alessandro Portelli, "What Makes Oral History Different," in *The Oral History Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 1998), 32-42.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

<sup>32</sup> Alexander Freund, "Oma's Life," 5.

<sup>33</sup> Ruth Finnegan, "Family Myths, Memories and Interviewing," in *The Oral History Reader*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., ed. Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (London: Routledge, 1998), 177-183.



categorical distinctions that may make these spaces otherwise invisible.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, Barbara Myerhoff argues that life histories help to make people's experiences more visible and their consciousness about them more reflexive,<sup>35</sup> a particularly important approach for elderly narrators. Deborah Schiffrin's work with Holocaust survivor oral histories told through life stories contends that life stories allow narrators opportunities to "integrate a heterogeneous collection of people, places and experiences into a single framework: a vast array of people, initially differentiated by time, place, and role, are joined together into a set of narrative characters who not only form a network of relationships with the speakers in a story world, but also provide a matrix of relationships within which to define the self in a life world."<sup>36</sup> Life stories are also important for understanding how we "claim or negotiate group memberships," what "can be taken as expected, what the norms are, and what common or special belief systems can be used to establish coherence."<sup>37</sup> In life stories, narrators are actively constructing new meanings and negotiating new relationships with the characters and events in the stories as well as with those with whom they interact in the telling.

This article draws on data from a larger ethnographic study (2005-2006), which took place in Clinton County and adjacent Washington County, Illinois.<sup>38</sup> These small, rural counties are part of a rough circle of German American communities that stretch thirty miles eastward and twenty miles southward from the Missouri border. The data from this article includes interviews from five participants who are second and third generation German American, ranging in age from 79 to 93 years old. Two participants grew up speaking German as children and the other four, English. However, those who grew up speaking English were, like many in the larger study, prohibited by their parents from speaking German in their homes, a fact that becomes central to one of the oral histories shared in this article. Each of the interviews were video-recorded and video data also included observational footage of people's homes, family albums, family farms, and community celebrations. The interview transcripts were initially analyzed and coded as one body of data where I searched for patterns and themes that occurred across participants and then later,

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<sup>34</sup> George E. Marcus, "Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography," *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24, (1995): 110.

<sup>35</sup> Barbara Myerhoff, "Life History Among the Elderly: Performance, Visibility, and Re-membering," in *A Crack in The Mirror: Reflexive Perspectives in Anthropology*, ed. Jay Ruby (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982), 101.

<sup>36</sup> Deborah Schiffrin, "Mother/Daughter Discourse in a Holocaust Oral History: 'Because Then You'll Admit That You're Guilty,'" *Narrative Inquiry* 10, no. 1 (2000): 2.

<sup>37</sup> Charlotte Linde, *Life Stories: The Creation of Coherence* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993).

<sup>38</sup> Maris Thompson, "They Used German When They Didn't Want Us to Understand: Narratives of Immigration, Ethnicity and Language Loss in Southwestern Illinois" (PhD diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2008).

individually, in order to explore particular issues and themes for individual narrators.

My personal connection to these communities afforded me access to these interviews. My third-generation German American grandmother, Melba Fischer Schaefer, was born and raised in Clinton county and my mother, Judy Schaefer Thompson, grew up there until she moved to St. Louis in the late 1950's. Growing up, my grandmother shared very little about our German heritage. Details, such as her parents grew up speaking German or that her country school had bilingual instruction up until the First World War, were not shared until I began asking questions well into my adulthood. Similarly, it was only after I began early phases of the research that my mother shared stories about her German grandmother singing songs to her in German and speaking in a heavily accented English. The fact that my own German heritage was not marked or made mention of reflects John Coggeshall's conceptualization of the "invisible ethnicity" of these communities.<sup>39</sup> Like many white Americans who feel disconnected or uninformed about aspects of their own ethnicity, this work helps me better understand how I fit into these stories of Americanization.

All of the participants were born and raised in one of two adjacent counties and agreed initially to talk with me because of their interest in their own family history or a passing familiarity with my grandmother. During the interviews, I asked participants about memories of their immigrant parents, grandparents or great grandparents. I asked about family origin and what they knew of their family's migration history. I asked about childhood memories, memories of German language use at school and experiences with Americanization and language restriction. Interviews took place in people's living rooms, on their porches or for many, in resident care facilities. These interviews were often powerful experiences both for my participants and for myself and many asked me to return for a second interview if I was "interested in more history." It was clear that participants wanted to share aspects of this history. However, there were particular stories they were comfortable sharing and others that took more probing. Both of these will be considered in the subsequent section.

### **Establishing Legitimacy**

In the following example, Jean Platt talks about her grandparents and their motivations for journeying to the United States as a young married couple. Jean, born in 1926, grew up speaking English at home and was the daughter of the local funeral director in her town of Carlyle, Illinois. Small statured with a shock of white

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<sup>39</sup> John M. Coggeshall, "One of Those Intangibles: The Manifestation of Ethnic Identity in Southwestern Illinois," *The Journal of American Folklore* 99, no. 392 (1986): 177-207.

hair, Jean eagerly volunteered to share stories when I visited her assisted living facility in Carlyle. College educated in St. Louis and married to a local veterinarian, Jean shared many stories of her family and neighborhood events during the interwar and Second World War period. Here, she shares one of her family origin stories and speculates on her grandfather's reason for leaving Germany:

All their, all his life, my father's life, my grandfather's life he had heard his family talk about America and that it was the land of plenty, the land of almost like heaven. And he had made up his mind that he was coming to America so nothing could dissuade him no matter what the price or anything. And he married a girl that wanted to come too, so that's why they came here and they said the passage was rough. They came through the North Atlantic, which was stormy but they were glad they made it.<sup>40</sup>

Jean's story begins with an explanation of her grandfather's life-long desire to migrate. She explores her grandfather's motivation for making the journey after hearing of the opportunities in America and resolving to come despite the obstacles. America is the mythical point of reference for these storied longings, a metaphoric "heaven" and a literal "land of plenty." Jean's blurring of personal pronouns with "... his life, my father's life, my grandfather's life" underscores the generational nature of this family story, particularly among the men. The central event of the boat journey across the North Atlantic is described only briefly as "rough" and "stormy" and followed with a tidy resolution "they were glad they made it." Jean's story conveys much of the emotion and nostalgia that this particular story holds for her family. Her story works to establish the moral grounds on which her family's migration is made possible.

In another example, Mary Meyer shares a story of her grandfather's migration from Germany to Pennsylvania and later, Illinois. Mary, born in 1925, worked as a volunteer in Carlyle's local historical society. A secretary for the historical society's board and intimately familiar with the society's archives, Mary was instrumental in introducing me to a number of participants for this study. Interested and knowledgeable about her own family's migration and adaptation history, she shared this story about her grandfather:

And he was the second son so possibly the first son inherited the farm and this fella' was probably gonna' try his luck in the United States. Like I said, he stayed over there [Pennsylvania] and was naturalized

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<sup>40</sup> Jean Platt, interview by author, Carlyle IL, December 16, 2005.

in 1840. He landed in New York in 1835 so you had to have been, in order to get naturalized, you had to have I think maybe five or seven years to be here but if they came before they were twenty-one they could become naturalized, well, before five years or something. I read that somewhere. So, he was naturalized in Allegheny City. We have his naturalization-just the certificate of it- well my brother has it. Then finally about 1840 he came out to Germantown, that is Hanover at the time, and went back and moved his wife and children over here. There was only one child by that time in the eighteen forty census, there was an older man, too, so I don't know whether they stayed behind or I don't know anything other than, I'm just guessin.<sup>41</sup>

Mary's narrative is rife with factual details regarding her grandfather's arrival and naturalization and reads much like a historical text. She notes the year of his arrival in New York (1835), his date of naturalization (1840) and his eventual migration to Hanover (Germantown's original name prior to World War I) in 1840. These dates were important to her as a local historian and were common in stories of migration from other community members. Dates and documents worked to underscore the legitimacy of this testimony and the legitimacy of their family members as legalized migrants.

Mary's testimony also highlights a cardinal theme of naturalization and citizenship. As she speculates on the citizenship requirements at the time of her grandfather's migration and alludes to his own papers, her concern with his immigration status is made clear. Material documentation such as naturalization papers, birth certificates and land deeds often accompanied these interviews. When asked to sit down for an interview about family stories and German history, participants brought these documents with them. In many senses, issues of naturalization and legitimacy were integral to the stories of family origin. Material texts occupy a privileged status in these communities and become even more valuable during times of anti-immigrant hysteria. (Witness the focus on President Obama's birth certificate in the United States.) Here, the artifacts worked in concert with spoken testimonies to deflect any doubt about the legal status of Mary's grandfather. Her testimony and those of others also respond to larger political discourses about immigration and citizenship then and now. These origin stories take on new meaning as they answer larger questions about who has the right to legitimate belonging in the United States.

While Mary is interested in historical accuracy, she also speculates on parts of the story she does not know. She peppers her testimony with beliefs about the reasons for migration, "this fella' was probably gonna' try his luck" or questions

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<sup>41</sup> Mary Meyer, interview by author, Carlyle IL, July 19, 2006.

about the exact number of additional family members arriving in Illinois. This speculation works to help move her testimony beyond the literal, into something more imaginative and mythic. Amy Shuman argues that stories which ‘travel’, or stories told by those not originally present, begin to represent larger meanings outside of an individual teller. In her discussion of narratives from Italian artisans and their reconstructions of the past, she notes how stories about family and local events become allegorical, expressing symbolic meanings that move beyond the immediate context of storyteller and story.<sup>42</sup> This process allows narrators room to theorize aspects of the immigration experience that are impossible to know. These stories become part mythmaking process, part epistemological exercise, involving characterizations of family members and how they came to be.

### **Interactions with Authorized Others**

Origin testimonies also involved detailed descriptions of the multiple ways in which family members navigated immigration restrictions and particularly, immigration officials, or ‘authorized others’, in order to be allowed entry or permission to stay in the US. In the following example, Alice Willeke Hall shares the story of her father’s migration. Born in 1912 and 93 at the time of the interview, Alice was one of the oldest residents I interviewed. A teacher for twenty-five years in both a country school and the Lebanon public school system, Alice shared memories of the events surrounding her childhood during World War I and the period following with humor, wit and detail. Many of her stories involved her immigrant father who migrated from Germany in his twenties along with his two older brothers:

He must have been about twenty years old. And his brothers came over here first. Two of his brothers! And evidently they were fairly successful and really felt sorry for the rest of the family. So, they went back to Germany and my dad was to go with his one brother... Now that was a story! They landed and were notified that they each had to have ten dollars to get through and Charles was the only one that had ten dollars. Of course, my father had nothing and they didn’t know what was going to happen. So, as a result Charlie went through first, showed his ten dollars bravely and handed it back to my father, his brother. He showed it and handed it to the next one. So the three of them got into the United States on that ten dollars and I’m sure

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<sup>42</sup> Amy Shuman, *Other People’s Stories: Entitlement Claims and the Critique of Empathy* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

that's the only illegal act my dad ever did he was such an honest person (laughs).<sup>43</sup>

Alice notes the story of her father and uncles outwitting immigration officials is highly tellable<sup>44</sup> and worth sharing: "now that was a story!" She provides a detailed explanation of her father's two brothers who came to the United States and were so successful they "felt sorry for the rest of the family" and returned to bring them over. These narrative details help her to portray her uncles as economically successful and morally responsible in their desire to bring over their brothers to the States. Alice contextualizes the "illegal act" of her father by claiming this was an act of circumstantial necessity. By describing the passing of the ten dollars through each pair of hands she builds narrative tension and underscores the three brothers' cunning in responding to their situation. Ultimately, she evaluates their deception positively, as one of circumstantial necessity in contrast to an otherwise law-abiding life. The formal elements of her story allow her an opportunity to portray her father and uncles as daring, doing only what was required to be allowed safe entry into the US.

In the next example, Jean Platt recalls early language experiences of her immigrant grandparents, specifically with the passing of an English literacy test:

First of all they had trouble with the language and then when they had to visit some [official] it always kinda' frightened them that they'd be sent back. So, they carefully answered questions and they, of course, were intelligent so they knew how to, you know, fend off some of the things. So they must've passed all the questions and that because they were allowed to stay.<sup>45</sup>

In this example from Jean, the anxiety her grandparents felt over their English language ability is linked to their fear of being "sent back." In a 'frightening' interaction over a literacy test, she describes their ability to "fend off some of the things" and "pass all the questions." Jean's story alludes to the increasing degree of scrutiny over the levels of literacy or English literacy for many German immigrant families in the time between the First and Second World Wars. The US Congress had tried unsuccessfully to pass literacy tests for immigrants in 1897 and 1913. In 1917, Congress passed the Literacy Act as part of the 1917 Immigration Act, which barred

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<sup>43</sup> Alice Willeke Hall, interview by author, Trenton, IL, October 26, 2005.

<sup>44</sup> For a terrific discussion of various dimensions of narrative analysis, including "tellability" see Elinor Ochs and Lisa Capps, *Living Narrative: Creating Lives in Everyday Storytelling* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

<sup>45</sup> Jean Platt, interview by author, Carlyle IL, December 16, 2005.

from US entry “all aliens over sixteen years of age, physically capable of reading, who cannot read the English language, or some other language or dialect, including Hebrew or Yiddish.”<sup>46</sup> These literacy requirements figured centrally in the stories from these communities and many narrators relayed their German- speaking parents’ or grandparents’ experiences with learning English. The obstacle of the literacy test presents an opportunity for Jean to display her grandparents’ intelligence in “fending off some of the things” and being granted permission to stay. It also conveys much of the uncertainty and fear that existed among many German immigrants who spoke very little English during the time of growing anti-immigrant and anti-German sentiment.

Additional testimonies detailing interactions with authorized others centered on finding work in the counties of Clinton and Washington. The following example is taken from Dolores Witt Satterfield, born in 1925, a second generation German American. Dolores grew up in Trenton, Illinois and was a younger friend of my grandmother. She worked as a secretary for many years until she was married. Her mother immigrated to the US with her brother and parents (Dolores’ uncle and grandparents) when her mother was a young girl. Her grandfather, Franz Hoffmann, spoke little English and struggled to find work in the States as he made his way to southern Illinois and majority German speaking communities. These language experiences figured centrally in her stories of migration. Here, she describes some of Franz Hoffman’s struggle to find work:

So they got over here and his sister lived in an area around Springfield, Illinois and she had written him and told him that if he came over she could get him a job in the mine. Well, he came over and he wanted to get the job in the mine and they said, (*looks at me*) “Well *you* can’t speak English! You wouldn’t understand if there was a problem so you we can’t hire you.” So then he came down to the New Baden area and moved onto a farm and worked in the mine down there and farmed!<sup>47</sup>

Dolores describes her mother’s and grandfather’s arrival in Springfield, Illinois, recommended by her grandfather’s sister as a good place to find work. When her grandfather applies for a position in an area coal mine, he is told matter-of-factly that his English level disqualifies him for employment. His decision to move to New Baden, a majority German-speaking town, is motivated principally by this

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<sup>46</sup> Sam McSeveney, “Immigrants, the Literacy Test, and Quotas: Selected American History College Textbooks’ Coverage of the Congressional Restriction of European Immigration, 1917-1929,” *The History Teacher* 21, no. 1 (1987): 42.

<sup>47</sup> Dolores Witt Satterfield, interview by author, Trenton IL, October 27, 2005.

experience with linguistic discrimination. Dolores portrays her grandfather as unrelenting in his search for work and directly invites my evaluation of his unjust circumstances when she cues my gaze and uses the deictic “you.” In this moment of her testimony, she animates the talk of her grandfather’s employer and invites me to evaluate the unfair circumstances in which he found himself. She is animating and commenting on this historical talk simultaneously.<sup>48</sup> By noting he is able to find work in another town, she further concludes that the employer’s discrimination is unreasonable and ultimately, unjust.

In these testimonies, family members of Alice, Jean and Dolores confront powerful others who wield considerable authority over their migration and settlement. They portray family members who must be tested in various trials to gain entry or permission to stay in the United States and work to invoke collective folk themes involving a mythical hero who is cast out of home and must overcome obstacles in order to one day return home.<sup>49</sup> Interactions with these authorized others provide narrators with important opportunities to portray the actions of their family members as clever and persistent despite formidable odds and to evaluate the contexts of their treatment.

### **Strategies of Language Maintenance: Negotiating Public and Private Space**

Another element of the origin stories was memories of specific incidents involving language restriction at school and home. As I noted in a previous study,<sup>50</sup> public sanctioning of German was the *sine qua non* of Americanization in these communities and many people shared lengthy stories about what it was like to watch their mother tongue disappear. Participants shared stories about family members who negotiated language restriction in schools, churches, and public places. These oral testimonies illuminate the impact of Americanization policies, such as the passing of the Edwards Law in Illinois (1889), which prohibited the teaching of German in school, the use of it in public meetings or even over the telephone.<sup>51</sup> They reveal multiple and strategic responses to these abrupt cultural changes and the consequences of them for these families. In the following section, three origin stories involving language negotiation will be analyzed in detail.

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<sup>48</sup> Goffman, *Frame Analysis*, 1974.

<sup>49</sup> Alan Dundes, “Structural Typology in North American Indian Folktales,” *Journal of Anthropological Research* 42, no. 3 (1963): 417-427; Luisa Passerini, “Mythbiography in Oral History,” in *Myths We Live By*, Raphael Samuel and Paul Thompson (London: Routledge, 1990); Vladimir Propp, *Morphology of a Folktale*, trans. L. Scott Wagner (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1958).

<sup>50</sup> Thompson, “Family Photographs as Traces of Americanization.”

<sup>51</sup> Kloss, “German-American Language Maintenance Efforts,” 238.



The first example is from Honora Heimann. Honora was born in 1916 in Damiansville, one of the oldest and smallest towns in Clinton County. Honora and her five siblings grew up speaking German at home and in the family store, “Horstmann and Olliges,” where she and her siblings spent most of their childhood. The children also formally learned German in school but by the time Honora entered second grade, instruction had abruptly halted. Despite prevalent language bans, Honora’s family continued to speak German at home. In the following interview, I ask her about the disappearance of German in the community and local reactions to this:

- MT: Did you notice when the German language started to go away?
- HH: Well, that was after we was in school you know after we got older then they mostly all taught English in school. Yeah, we had to talk English.
- MT: Do you remember what were some of the reactions to that?
- HH: Oh they would keep it up!
- MT: They would keep it up? How would they keep it up?
- HH: Well they would talk to it within themselves, you know, they would talk German, like some of them kids say what mom and dad don’t want us to hear they would speak English but otherwise they would speak German. Yeah we always spoke German.<sup>52</sup>

Honora’s first response to my question about the disappearance of German is her memory of school. She notes “well that was after we was in school” after “we got older” She clearly distinguishes the contexts of school and home, noting the shift to English was only noticeable when the children went to school. While many schools maintained German-English bilingual programs until the First World War, school policies began to shift after this time.<sup>53</sup> Like Honora, many participants in the larger study shared acute memories of being prohibited from speaking German on the schoolyard and/or being punished for doing so. When I asked how people felt about these changes, Honora responded with “oh they would keep it up!” in reference to her parents who would continue to speak despite increasing public sanction. When I asked for specifics about how they did so, she responded with “they would talk to it within themselves” referring to the use of German at home or among other German speakers. Honora’s use of social markers highlights spaces of language maintenance,

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<sup>52</sup> Honora Heimann, interview by author, Aviston IL, May 2, 2006.

<sup>53</sup> Audrey L. Olson, *St. Louis Germans 1850–1920: The Nature of an Immigrant Community and Its Relation to the Assimilation Process* (New York: Arno Press, 1980).

or language islands, where people could freely speak German during periods of public censorship.<sup>54</sup> Her testimony points to strategies of language conservation that persisted privately despite the official record. If there were any doubt as to how effective this resistance was, she mentioned later in the interview, “We speak a lot of German now yet!” Honora’s story of her family’s private use of German despite sanctioning at school highlights strategies of bilingualism as a way to respond to anti-German feeling and public bans on the speaking of German. Her differentiation of the space of home and school underscores the importance of place in marking spheres of safety for German speakers during this time.

In other stories, experiences with language sanction resulted in decisions to forbid the speaking of German in the family home. Many participants noted that dominant beliefs about home language interference with learning English were reasons for parents to stop speaking German to their children. Here, Alice shares a similar story:

I might tell you about how my dad, when he came over he got a tutor to teach him English. He knew he was bad in his English and the tutor must have been excellent because I think all of his kids spoke a good English, a very good English. Not that it was perfect, but as a result my dad was an avid reader and tried to encourage us too. BUT we were not allowed to speak any German in our house because my mother said “you’ll learn German and you won’t learn English and you’ll fail in the first grade!” and that’s what was happening to the kids that came, that had German parents. They came to school and had to learn English first so as a result we had to speak just English at home.<sup>55</sup>

Alice relays her own immigrant father’s language learning experiences as a context for the decision of her parents to forbid the speaking of German. She portrays her father as responsible and dedicated in his efforts to learn English. However, it is her mother’s anxiety over maintaining German at home that figures centrally in her testimony. Alice’s mother was native born and many of Alice’s stories involved her mother’s uncertainty over her marriage to a German immigrant at the time of the First World War. She foregrounds her mother’s rationale for forbidding German by using her mother’s own words “you’ll learn German and you won’t learn English and you’ll fail in the first grade!” Alice notes that her mother’s beliefs were in line with school-based beliefs which further underscore the ways that school language bans had powerful implications for private decisions about speaking German at

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<sup>54</sup> Kloss, “German-American Language Maintenance Efforts,” 206-209.

<sup>55</sup> Alice Willeke Hall, interview by author, Trenton, IL, October 26, 2005.

home. Yet, like Honora, her testimony indicates something beyond the official record. She adds that years later in college, she took German and retained pronunciation skills that made her proud. Despite language sanction in her own home, she identifies standard speaking skills as something worthy of retention.

## Conclusion

Origin stories involved common themes and discursive strategies which helped narrators to portray family members as extraordinary people with the skills and resources needed to make a new home in Illinois. Through these intergenerational testimonies, participants constituted beliefs about the German immigrant experience: who these family members were, what motivated them to come and how they adapted to life once here. Origin stories, particularly those involving the actual migrations of family members, are discursive projects involved with constructing notions of legitimacy and belonging. They are representative of a story genre, remembered and retold in ways that bind the community together, ensuring a “community of memory,” or a constitutive story that adds comfort and gives shape and meaning to people’s everyday lives.<sup>56</sup> In her study of Mexican immigrants in Washington DC, Ana De Fina argues that immigrant narratives always exist in relation to larger institutional and public discourses about immigration.<sup>57</sup> She notes, “Immigrants are attentive and receptive to public discourse about them because they know that the opinions and evaluations that public discourse may convey about them may lead to concrete and tangible action for or against them.”<sup>58</sup> These German American narrators and the stories they share may be answering larger questions about membership and legitimate belonging in their communities and American society more broadly. The purpose for their telling may exist outside of the story and respond to questions along the lines of, “what right does your family have to be here?” Shared language practices helped these narrators to convey important ideological positions with regard to family origin that is in dialogue with more contemporary debates about who is and who is not entitled to be American.

Origin stories also involved more troubling Americanization experiences around language. As participants shared stories of language sanction at school, at home, and in public, they detailed family members who actively negotiated, and in some cases, resisted these external pressures to assimilate linguistically. The testimonies afforded opportunities for narrators to evaluate these turbulent political

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<sup>56</sup> Robert N. Bellah, Richard Madsen, William M. Sullivan, Ann Swidler, and Steven M. Tipton, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (New York: Harper & Row, 1985).

<sup>57</sup> Ana De Fina, “Identity in Narrative: A Study of Immigrant Discourse,” 42-44.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

contexts and convey some of the residual feelings of confusion and loss that accompany their renderings. Second and third generation family members are still making sense of this painful history; the ongoing nature of their interpretations trouble generalized portraits of voluntary cultural assimilation and highlight the often delimited terms of admission offered to German immigrants in the first half of the twentieth century.

As much as these intergenerational stories of origin revealed, they also concealed. While origin stories were frequently invoked in local commemorations, such as family reunions and local German festivals, these events did not feature the painful chapters of this social history. At many of these events, I asked participants if they shared the stories of language sanction for example with the youngest members of their families. They often responded that some stories were “too ugly” to talk about or mentioned that people didn’t have any trouble today so “why dig up all that stuff?” Similarly, when I asked the youngest generations in these communities what they knew about the experiences of their great grandparents in negotiating these turbulent times, they knew little about the details of this history. If they did respond to questions about the early bilingual history in the area, they often told me their grandparents were not allowed to speak German at home. When I asked them why they thought this might be, they often looked at me blankly and said, “because people didn’t like German” or “they needed to learn English” or sometimes, “I don’t know.” It was clear that the youngest generations were participating in their own forms of theory making, often contextualized by current discourses of anti-immigrant rhetoric in the US. It was also clear that these young people knew little about the historical chapter of anti-German sentiment in their own towns and even less about the multiple ways their family members negotiated external pressures to assimilate ethnically or linguistically.

These socialized omissions have powerful implications for rural Midwestern communities of the US experiencing new and rapid immigration. Immigrants from Central America and México are migrating to these historically German counties to find work in agriculture, meat processing or construction. Newer immigrants are regarded cautiously and often negatively, particularly with regard to their perceived immigration status and/or interest in speaking Spanish in schools, churches and public spaces. These negative feelings are perplexing in light of powerful testimony that describes family members who experienced strong anti-immigrant feeling a half century ago.

An oral history study that engages questions around origin and language history of Midwestern German Americans, comes at a critical time. Oral testimonies such as those analyzed here may help to defeat overgeneralizations about European American cultural and linguistic assimilation in the United States. Spoken testimony points toward complex processes of self-identification associated with the experience of Americanization and further highlights how German Americans often adopted

contradictory stances toward their experiences with ethnic harassment and language sanction. Identifying as German ethnics and German speakers was complicated by accusations of disloyalty and questionable patriotism. Highlighting these complex and often invisible experiences with language shift now may dramatically impact how the historically immigrant German community receives newer, non English speaking immigrants and supports their desires to acculturate in additive versus subtractive ways.<sup>59</sup>

Oral history projects are critically needed in the schools of these communities. For the youngest members of both historically immigrant German speaking and newly immigrant Spanish speaking, conducting oral histories on origin and migration stories would add powerful and needed historical context for contemporary classroom discussions on Illinois history. If younger generations of Americans are more informed about their local immigration histories, a potential space opens up for conversations concerning the multiple pathways to citizenship and bilingualism beyond hateful national rhetoric. Informed local history is desperately needed to recognize and understand diverse language histories in these communities and better value the potential contributions of new immigrants. More than ever we need oral testimonies and new ways to study them in educational contexts to add renewed purpose and clarity to our understanding of social history and future processes of social inclusion.