

Wir Sind Neue Berliners

by

Tom Walker

During the war years, the townsfolk of New Berlin, PA., considered a plan to change the borough's name to something less German. Or did they?

I remember my father telling this story more than once. But does proof exist that such a move was considered? Turns out, it does.



I had forgotten this tale until I read the letters my dad wrote to his parents in 1944 and 1945 when he was in the Army Air Corps. My father, Spencer W. Walker, was born in New Berlin in 1925 and buried there in 2013. His parents, Spencer M. and Fannie M., lived on Market Street until 1944 when they moved to Mifflinburg R.D. #2.

Even though Dad did not live in New Berlin after he returned from the service, he always thought of himself as a New Berliner. At the very least, he continued to play for the New Berlin town team in the West Branch League. He and my mother, the former Grace Wagner of Mifflinburg, were regular visitors to Heritage Days.

Dad wrote this in his letter of January 15, 1945:

"I received a package from you the other day with that piece from the newspaper. I mean the piece concerning the changing of New Berlin's name. What a bunch of hooey that was. Good reading though and I got a lot of laughs out of it."

So it wasn't a tale. There exists a newspaper account to back up Dad's story.

I sent an email enquiry to New Berlin resident Diane Lengle, a volunteer with the New Berlin Heritage Association. Diane replied as follows:

Per the Union County, Pa. A Celebration of History, (Penn State Press, 2000) p. 297:

"In New Berlin a movement was afoot to discard its name, since it was identified with Hohenzollern rule, and substitute 'Verdun' (one of heroic defenses by Allied troops) or 'St. Mihiel' (a spectacular counterattack by American forces). The matter was scheduled for a town meeting; but no name could be agreed upon, and the town remained New Berlin."

I'm not sure what Hohenzollern (the royal family of Germany, last in power in 1918) rule had to do with the name of a small town in Pennsylvania. Perhaps the residents didn't want an association with the city that was the seat of German rule as far back as 1417. Maybe it was a hatred of the Nazis. Or maybe none of the above.

Diane said her husband, Jim, who is president of the Heritage Association, learned from some townspeople that the name remained the same but the pronunciation changed a little. "Berlin" became "Burlin" and more accent on the first syllable and on "New." I have been hearing about New Berlin for six decades and the name has always enjoyed the Burlin pronunciation.

Unfortunately, there are no references to support the claims published in the Union County history book. No year was given for the movement afoot, so this event

could have taken place during World War I when anti-German sentiment was pervasive. But there is a clue: the reference to a town meeting.

Could a record of the meeting exist? Was the discussion recorded in meeting minutes? I called Rebecca Witmer, secretary and treasurer of the New Berlin Borough Council. Alas, the records of council meetings before 1955 were destroyed in a flood.

While all the activity described above was going on, I set out to find the article. Dad was in India in January of 1945 and he received the Sunbury Daily Item in the mail. If the article had been in the Item, he would have seen it; his parents would not have sent it to him.

I asked my cousin, Bob Stoudt, if he could find anything in the archives of the Union County Historical Society where he is a volunteer. In a February 12 email, Bob reported he had sent me a copy of an article he thought I would find interesting.

The article was in the *Williamsport Sun*, October 14, 1944. The headline tells the story:

Union County Town Sticks to its Historic Name

Notwithstanding Playwright's Idea, Residents Favor Retention of New Berlin

New Berlin Has Had Its Name for 100 Years

Citizens See No Reason to Change it Now

As the headline states, the name change idea came from a playwright, Maxwell Anderson, who suggested that towns across the United States with the name Berlin — New Berlin, Berlinville, whatever — “...bear the taint of Berlin...” and that such names are “distasteful.”

Anderson sent telegrams to the mayors and councils of 16 communities across the country. His recommendation was driven by a desire to perpetuate the memory of Distomo, a Greek village destroyed by the Nazis on June 10, 1944. German SS troops murdered 214 men, women and children in retribution for partisan raids in the area. Attempts by relatives of the victims to collect reparations for the massacre were rebuffed by courts in Greece, Germany and Italy, most recently in 2011.

Anderson was acting as chairman of the Committee for the Rebirth of Distomo. The committee included the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, Vice President Henry Wallace, the Broadway theatrical director and producer Herman Shumlin, and the actress Helen Hayes.

It is not known if the mayor of New Berlin received Anderson's telegram. Judging by the comments reported in the Sun, however, the suggestion would not have been implemented.

Here is a sampling of what New Berliners had to say:

"If there are any changes to be made, let the name of Berlin in Germany be changed!" proffered Postmaster Joseph S. Seebold. "Does anyone realize the disruption that such a move would make in the mails alone? And how, may I ask, would it further the war effort?"

Dr. Lewis E. Wolfe, the community's only physician, had this to say: "What a narrow-minded, bigoted idea!"

Miss Susan Matilda Fries, a seamstress, says softly, "It would not seem like home."

David E. Peterson, storekeeper, asks, "What's the point?"

Joseph Van Horn, garage proprietor, exclaims, "No, sir-e-e-e!"

Mrs. J. Marlin Spangler, housewife and energetic war bond salesman, says. "There's no sane reason to change."

E.A. Snook, school principal, contends, "Very confusing."

Carl Soloman, a 12-year-old who comes from a long line of New Berlin Solomans, looked up at the reporter sheepishly as if to say, "You're kidding." There is no record of what young Carl said.

The article also reports that the name-change idea had "bobbed up" in two world wars:

"The suggestion didn't make it to first base during World War 1 and residents think it will meet the same fate in this World War.

"Some New Berlin residents point out that there are many fine people of German stock living in this country and that the quarrel is not with Germany itself or its forbearers, but with the Nazi regime.

"Another reminded us that we have had two wars with England but we didn't change English names, even those states which honored English kings and queens.

"Still another far-sighted person stated that by the time we get all of the Berlins changed over here, we'll be addressing mail to the Yanks in Berlin!"

I was still in pursuit of the article as it appeared in the Sun. I found it at the James V. Brown Library in Williamsport, where the newspaper exists on microfilm. The article includes photos of the town and of the people who were quoted. The poor quality of the microfilm renders the photos as not much more than black smudges, but their presence shows the prominence the newspaper placed on the story.

Although Anderson's campaign failed miserably, he nearly succeeded in getting the town of Berlin, Ore. renamed. Oddly, the town was not named after Berlin, Germany. Rather its name derived from Burrell's Inn, the town's former name. Residents apparently ran the words together as a verbal shortcut. A member of the local Chamber of Commerce accepted Anderson's proposal because he thought the resulting publicity would boost the area's economy. The townspeople were having nothing of it. According to newspaper accounts, residents, including a descendant of one of the Burrells of Burrell's Inn fame, petitioned the local court to prevent the name change. As one resident stated, "Maybe we'll change it and maybe we won't. But by golly, if we do, we'll do it ourselves, and not some New York playwright!" Berlin, it stayed, and Berlin it remains.

News accounts from October 1944 report that the residents of Berlins in Ohio and New Hampshire were similarly disinclined to change their town's name. An Associated Press article stated that the people of Berlin, N.H., pronounce their town name with the accent on the accent on the first syllable, same as the folks in New Berlin, PA.

The phenomenon of striking German-influenced town names was strong during World War 1. Berlins in California, Iowa and Michigan became Geneva, Lincoln and Marne, respectively. New Berlin, Ohio, became North Canton. Several Germantowns were also renamed, becoming Schroder, Texas; Garland, Neb.; and Pershing, Ind. In Canada, Berlin, Ontario, became Kitchener.

More than 90 communities in Australia shed their German names for ones that were more English or Australian sounding. The discarded place-names included Bismarck, Hamburg, Heidelberg and Rhine, along with Berlin and names combining German- with words such as Town, Gardens and Mountain.

The most aggressive attempt to obliterate German place names was reported in the *New York Times* on June 2, 1918.

With this headline, “To Strike Germany from Map of U.S.”, the Times introduced its readers to a heavy-handed attempt to force name changes through legislation. The gist of the article follows.

Representative J.M.C. Smith (1853-1923), Michigan, introduced a bill in the House to change the names of municipalities, counties, townships, streets and highways from Berlin or Germany to Liberty, Victory of some other patriotic designation.

The movement to give expression to public sentiment and oppose Germany is taking shape in the opposition to study German in elementary and secondary schools, in the change from sauerkraut to “liberty cabbage.” The Times reported that the city of Portland, Ore., had changed the Teutonic names of several of its streets and that loyal Americans with German patronyms are “striking them out.”

A study of the atlas revealed 28 places in the U.S. with “German” or some variation in the name and 30 with Berlin. Ohio had the most with nine followed by Iowa, six, Pennsylvania, five, and Wisconsin, three.

The Times identified Rep. Smith’s bill, H.R. 11,950, was referred to the Judiciary Committee. Another news account had the reference as H.R. 11,860. A search returned several legislative proposals with these numbers, none of which were the bill proposed by Rep. Smith.

Here is the text of the bill:

Be it enacted by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United States of America in Congress assembled. That the names of all cities, villages, counties, townships, boroughs, and of all streets, highways, and avenues in the United States, its Territories or possessions, named Berlin or Germany, be changed from the name Berlin or Germany to the name of Liberty, Victory, or other patriotic designation.

Sec. 2. That the municipality where any of the above names occur shall forthwith upon passage of this act take proper proceedings to make the changes above specified.

Sec. 3. That from and after the passage of this act all letters or mail matter addressed to any person residing in any municipality called Berlin or Germany shall be prohibited from transportation or delivery in the United states, its Territories or possessions.

A review of Printed Hearings of the House of Representatives Found among its Committee Records in the National Archives of the United States 1824-1958 (Library of Congress) indicates that the Judiciary

Committee of the 65th Congress (1917-19) did not hold a hearing on this proposal.

This may not be relevant to the story, but Rep. Smith was an Irish immigrant, coming to the U.S. in 1855 as a two-year-old.

Freedom fries, anyone?



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