The Pennsylvania Deitsch Dialect: A Proud Past and a Promising Future

By

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Imagine a newspaper editor complaining about an invasion of foreign "boors" keeping to themselves, speaking their own language, practicing a different religion, and taking low-paying jobs away from everyone else.

"Why should Pennsylvania, founded by the English, become a colony of aliens?" he thundered. But as these "alien" Germans began to buy property, organize and vote, even this editor, Benjamin Franklin, eventually changed his attitude.

These Germans spoke a particular dialect known as Pfälzisch, i.e., the language of the Pfalz (or Palatine) region of Germany. We call it Pennsylvania Dutch, or more accurately, "Deitsch." Not all speakers are practicing Anabaptists, such as the Amish. It is a vernacular that still faintly echoes across the Lehigh, Schuylkill, Susquehanna, and Juniata watersheds. Here in Union County, the German strongholds were in the more remote western reaches bordering Snyder, Centre and Clinton Counties.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, several native speakers began writing out phonetic variations of what had always been a spoken language. One of the most popular writers was Thomas Harter, who tapped into the rich vein of wry and somewhat ribald humor popular among ethnic Germans. Harter, posing as the fictional "Gottlieb Boonastiel," wrote a series of letters to the newspapers he published in Middleburg and Bellefonte.

Admitting from the start that he is "net recht" [i.e., not right], Boonastiel [or Beanpole] scribbles from his home on Hawsa Barrick [or Rabbit Mountain], peppering his observations with acerbic aphorisms:

- Children and fools always tell the truth.
- Politics is corrupt because people make it so.
- Those more concerned with reputation than with their character would steal the golden hinges on heaven's gate.

> - If you earn one hundred dollars a year and spend ninety-nine, you're better off than when you earn a hundred dollars and spend one hundred and one.

No one in Boonastiel's stories escapes his barbs. Everyone is a target, especially freeloading preachers, crooked politicians, gossipy neighbors, and cruel tightwads:

> I know a man who locked his son in a room with a bible, an apple and a dollar. After a while, he figured if he found the boy eating the apple, he'd become a farmer. If he was reading the bible, he'd become a preacher. If he held the dollar, he'd become a banker. When the father opened the door, he found the son sitting on the bible, eating the apple, with the dollar stuck in his pocket. That son became a first-class politician.

Nothing is sacred. Boonastiel even crows over the funeral of a banker who relished foreclosing on farms. His tombstone…

> …was paid for with blood money and inscribed all over with words of Scripture. When you read them, you'd think that he was already growing his fluffy angel feathers before he even died.

Boonastiel ridicules those who say there are "too many people":

> The hotels would like to have more customers to drink. Preachers would like to have a few thousand more members. Lawyers wish there were ten times as many fools arguing with each other. Doctors wish there were ten times more sick people. Even grave diggers would like to have more dead to bury.

On the other hand, he agrees that

> ….there are places with too many people, like the lines of job seekers standing outside of politicians' offices…. where one can grab some money, steal a little and rob a little without getting into jail.

Pretentious and immodest people have little chance of surviving in Boonastiel's (or any other Dutchman's) world. When he sees a woman wearing a low-necked dress at the president's "noggeration ball," he offers Polly's shirt to the woman because he had "never seen stout women so far down."

Nevertheless, Boonastiel is no self-righteous stick-in-the-mud. He can laugh at himself as much as at the rest of the world:

> I'd make a good president because I'm a good talker and can tell people more in one hour than they're able to believe in a whole year.

He may sign temperance pledges for Polly, but he's not above swigging from "Hullerheck's black bottle" a bit too frequently.

When an "Englischer" stopped and asked Polly for directions to "Schwinefordshtettle" (Swinefordstown, now Middleburg), she gladly complied. But that "Yankee," not understanding Polly's Deitsch, turned his horse away and yelled,

> "Damn these Dutch!"....It was good I wasn't at home because I would've tried my new boots on him."

But wait, Boonastiel's just starting:

> Maybe we're not quite as smart as those Yankees, who have nothing more to eat than potatoes, speck skins, black corn bread and lizards...When you come to our neighborhood, the land is first rate, with large, nice barns, good fence posts, and nice, fat oxen, and smart horses, and plenty of chickens in the yard to lay eggs, and smart wives, and pretty girls, and fat babies. We have plenty of the best young cattle meat, wheat bread and fasnacht cakes (doughnuts), fresh butter, and apple butter, and sauerkraut...Here the people have manners and invite you to eat when they visit...
>
> Now go once to an English neighborhood and see how it looks there. The farmers have their plows and reapers out in the weather from year to year. The fences are down, the wheat is spotty, the cattle are thin, the butter stinks, the eggs are hatched, the hash is made of bird meat, from the front and back....and the women are sickly and unappetizing, ugly and thin.

The names of his "neighbors" -- Billy Bloserohr [blowhard], Sim Haahnewackel [rooster], and Sammy Sendepetzer [penny-pincher] -- clue the reader in on who is receiving the latest, harshest round of invective:

> It's astounding how we have to pay for everything nowadays. They raise the prices up so high that soon we'll have to live on pig's nose and mosquito fat, or do without meat. Of course, if you want to be cheap like rich, old Sim Haahnewackel, you can get by. Not everyone knows how tight Simmy is, so "confidentially" I want to make it public....

> There isn't a meaner man in the whole neighborhood, and to prove it, I'll tell you how stingy he is.
>
> He butchered three pigs twenty years ago, and every year since then, when the sausages are all gone, he sends the skins back to the slaughterhouse to get them stuffed fresh....
>
> When his father was dying, he quickly ran to the barber to find out what it would cost to have him shaved.
>
> "What do you want," he said, "to shave a living man?"
>
> "Ten cents," said the barber.
>
> "And how much for a dead man?"
>
> "A dollar," answered the barber.
>
> "Well, I'll bring Dad up," said Simmy, and by the time the old man was shaved, he died--but it only cost ten cents. That was ninety cents saved....

And on it goes:

> Last winter, when the snow was two feet deep in front of his door, what did Simmy do? He was too stingy to buy a snow shovel, so he pinched his little boy's ears with tweezers until enough people came by to find out what was wrong and made a nice path.
>
> Simmy's so mean that when he gives his boy a penny in the evening to buy a stick of candy, he takes the penny out of the kid's pocket at night and whips him in the morning for losing it....
>
> When his wife takes the cream from the milk, she has to take the cream off the top and then turn the crock around and take the cream off the bottom.
>
> He always trims his chickens' toenails so that they can't scratch out the seed.
>
> When he writes a letter, he doesn't put in any capital letters, because the little ones don't take as much ink....

A similar sense of humor comes from the pages of another dialect writer who describes a Sunday visit:

> A family invited their minister to dinner. They knew he liked sausage, but so did their youngest son. No sooner was the 'amen' out than the boy stuck his fork in the biggest piece of sausage. The preacher reproached the boy for his bad table manners.

"Well," asked the little boy, "which piece would you have taken?"

"The smaller piece," replied the minister.

"Then don't make such a fuss," the boy retorted. "There it is!"

But the rich heritage of Deitsch and the fond associations and memories it conjured, would succumb almost completely to outside pressures. Since the 1840s, public schools had required that all instruction be in English. Church congregations had slowly abandoned their traditional Sunday German sermons. Something more sinister, however, hastened the decline during the early 20th century.

When interviewing elderly folks throughout central Pennsylvania, I often asked if, while growing up, they spoke Deitsch at home. Almost every one of them had the same response: "My parents spoke it, as did my older brothers and sisters, but no one encouraged the younger ones to speak it."

The mysterious language intrigued these children. They heard their parents chatting away with neighbors at church, at the gristmill, and at local drinking troughs. Topics of conversation ranged from politics to gossip. Adults often sprinkled the talk with enough profanity to whet any adolescent's prurient curiosity.

It's easy to blame this decline on the influence of movies, radio and television. One could also argue that improved roads gradually broke down this region's physical and linguistic isolation. Yet an interesting pattern emerges from these responses to help explain what happened. One particular year stands out, a year when parents deliberately began discouraging newborn children from learning the dialect.

That year was 1917.

Despite widespread antipathy toward Europe's problems, the United States was sliding into a World War already raging for three years. George Washington's Farewell Address, warning against foreign entanglements, had guided policy for over a century. But the British and American governments suppressed anti-war sentiment by mounting a virulent and hyperbolic propaganda campaign casting suspicion on anyone and anything German.

Only one or two generations separated many ethnic Germans from relatives back in the Vaterland. Others could trace their immigrant roots to the early 1700s. With all this in mind, soldiers worried that they were shooting their cousins.

Decision-makers feed off voters who either possess short memories or fear social ostracism. It's easy to subjugate or kill someone if you turn the enemy of the day into something less than human. This official government-sponsored propaganda machine was too effective, yielding unimaginable consequences.

Atrocity stories filled the newspapers. Accounts of Germans torpedoing the Lusitania featured illustrations of drowned mothers clasping children to their breasts as they sank to the ocean floor.

Posters plastered everywhere depicted evil Huns bayoneting and barbecuing Belgian babies.

A Midwestern mob lynched a Mennonite farmer for speaking German on the street.

Politicians decided to rename the menacing-sounding sauerkraut as "liberty cabbage." Pennsylvania's legislature later passed a bill outlawing the teaching of German in public schools. Had Governor Sproul not vetoed the legislation, the bill would have become law.

Shortly after the war's end, an extreme nationalism trumpeted America's new role in the world. Attorney General Mitchell Palmer ratcheted the level of paranoia up another notch by throwing union leaders and political dissidents into prison. Ethnic Germans continued to be portrayed as anti-American reactionaries allied with a new enemy: the liquor interests.

When ill-defined notions of loyalty and patriotism attempt to obliterate language, dress, behavior and foods, we blithely dismiss it as collateral damage. Given this poisoned atmosphere, we can understand why succeeding generations of parents did not want their children to appear different.

Despite this cultural onslaught, Germans over the past hundred years have striven to keep the dialect alive. Beginning in the 1940s and continuing another twenty years, Sunbury radio station WKOK included popular dialect shows in its programming.

Harter's early preservation efforts through Boonastiel have borne fruit in many ways. C. Richard Beam and Jennifer Trout's comprehensive, multi-volume dictionaries carry on the pioneering work of Penn State professors Albert Buffington and Earl Haag. They capture all the subtleties of usage, context, and regional variation that make any language live.

Penn State, Millersville, and Kutztown Universities have since established heritage centers to study and promote the contributions of Deitsch language, art and agricultural techniques. All of this academic outreach, in turn, can trace its origins to a number of grass-roots efforts.

Punxsutawney may steal the publicity every February, but celebrating groundhogs is not unusual or unique to that area. The practice began with similar fraternal groups, known as Grundsau Lodsches [or groundhog lodges]. Many of these groups, still active in Berks, Lancaster and Lehigh Counties, have conducted "bissness" exclusively in dialect since the Civil War.

Annual Versammlungs [or gatherings] in the Susquehanna Valley also continue to meet and provide opportunities for dinner, fellowship and conversation.

Over the past fifteen years, a newsletter has united North America's 400,000 dialect speakers with the 2 million in Europe using the original Muddersprooch [or mother tongue].

Hiwwe wie Driwwe [Here and There] bridges time and distance by providing a forum on language, literature, news, tourism, and genealogy for its subscribers. Online versions of the newsletter are available at www.hiwwe-wie-driwwe.de. In fact, one issue reported that as part of a heritage tourism initiative, all Lancaster County road signs are now bi-lingual, in English and Deitsch.

Under his own name, Doug Madenford has posted a series of free, easy-to-follow instructional videos on YouTube, along with some "Ask a PA Dutchman" comedy shorts in the spirit of mid-century humorist "Professor Herman J. Schnitzel."

You can also find eight years of Earl Haag's ("Der Alt Professer") weekly columns, running side-by-side in Deitsch and Englisch, at the Pennsylvania German Society's website, www.pgs.org. (This is one of the finest sources of information for beginners.)

Deitsch is more than a collection of words and phrases spoken by the descendants of Anabaptists, such as the Amish and Mennonites. It is also more than a perverted version of English to exploit for commercial value. It reflects a mind-set stubbornly determined to preserve the cultural highs and lows shared by every group that ever arrived here. Their concerns and dreams, their humor and frustrations, the levels of trust at work, home and in business became more bearable because they shared those all-too-human experiences through a common language.

Note: You can find copies of the World War One-era propaganda posters on GoogleImages.