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Pioneer German-Speakers of Santa Cruz County

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Introduction

People from many different places around the world came together in the early days of what we know today as Santa Cruz County in the State of California. Many language and ethnic groups were present, but only one numerically-significant group of non-English-speakers arrived and successfully assimilated into the culture in the earliest days of Santa Cruz County.

Because assimilation was so rapid and complete, however, that group of early immigrants is rarely thought of as a distinct minority. The group was composed of native German-speakers, coming mostly from a group of forty European states belonging to the German Confederation, and who only became numerous after the onset of the California Gold Rush in 1848.

By studying a representative cross-section group of those German-speaking pioneers, we can identify a number of characteristics that made them unique. Equally, we can see how much they were not so different from other early pioneers in our County.

Methodology

The following criteria were used to select from the considerable numbers of German-speaking immigrants for a smaller study group:

- born in a German-speaking country
- arrived in California by 1855
- were naturalized and settled in Santa Cruz County by 1870
- represent a particular population segment
- and have sufficient published biographical information for a comparative study.

Note that these criteria do not necessarily mean that the study group will include all of the earliest German immigrants to our area. For instance, the Prussian watchmaker and jeweler William Effey came to Santa Cruz in 1865, where he took over a business from Charles Winterhalder, also a German-speaker who settled here before 1860.¹

A cross-section

For this comparative study, nineteen individuals were selected from about eighty known early German immigrants. These were judged to be representative of the larger group, and considerable biographical information is available on each one.²

Because information depth varies considerably, the last selection criterion introduces a bias favoring those who were more active in the community and therefore more likely to have things written about them. So it should be borne in mind that the study group can only be fairly compared to a subset of the overall Santa Cruz County population which meets the same “sufficient published biographical information” criterion.

Before the Gold Rush

Very few “foreigners” (that is, those who were not native Mexican citizens) lived in our area prior to the 1848-49 Gold Rush.³ The colonizing Spanish Empire had discouraged immigration by foreigners, especially Americans. They feared (rightly) being overrun by the numerous and aggressive hunters, trappers, and squatters who kept pushing relentlessly to the west during the first half of the 1800s.

Following Mexican independence, a few early foreign immigrants gained the right to reside in California by converting to Roman Catholicism (if not already Catholic) and then becoming naturalized. Some of these men also married daughters of Californian Mexican citizens. Nationalities found in that group included American, British, French and Russian. There were, however, very few (if any) immigrants from German-speaking countries in the Santa Cruz area before ~1845.

| German-speaking pioneers study group | | | Important dates | | |
|--------------------------------------|---------------|-------------|-----------------|---------------|-------|
| Name | Occupation | Birthplace | Birth | local arrival | Death |
| 1 Bern, Charles | Skilled trade | Saxony | 1830 | 1853 | 1893 |
| 2 Bernheim, Reuben | Merchant | Wurttemberg | 1828 | 1863 | 1895 |
| 3 Cappelmann, Cornelius | Merchant | Spaden | 1830 | 1868 | 1888 |
| 4 Daubenbiss, John | Skilled trade | Bavaria | 1816 | 1845 | 1896 |
| 5 Dreher, John | Farmer | Bavaria | 1814 | 1849 | 1885 |
| 6 Effey, William | Skilled trade | Prussia | 1827 | 1865 | 1910 |
| 7 Finkeldey, Werner | Skilled trade | Nassau | 1833 | 1860s | 1907 |
| 8 Hihn, Frederick A. | Merchant | Brunswick | 1829 | 1851 | 1913 |
| 9 Kohl, George | Farmer | Bavaria | 1823 | 1853 | 1902 |
| 10 Kuhlitz, Charles | Brewer | Germany | 1827 | 1860 | 1909 |
| 11 Kuhnitz, Johann E. | Skilled trade | Pomerania | 1827 | 1853 | 1897 |
| 12 Otto, George | Merchant | Germany | 1826 | 1851 | 1899 |
| 13 Schwann, Jacob | Skilled trade | Germany | 1822 | 1860 | 1910 |
| 14 Schwartz, Louis | Merchant | Prussia | 1834 | 1855 | 1893 |
| 15 Steinmetz, Charles | Skilled trade | Hanover | 1827 | 1868 | 1905 |
| 16 Stoesser, Otto | Merchant | Baden | 1825 | 1853 | 1902 |
| 17 Trust, H. Andrew | Skilled trade | Germany | 1825 | 1850 | 1899 |
| 18 Werner, John | Skilled trade | Germany | 1827 | 1853 | 1899 |
| 19 Winkle, Henry | Farmer | Prussia | 1822 | 1866 | 1903 |

The earliest arrivals

Soquel’s John Daubenbiss was one of the first German-speakers to settle in our area, and his immigration journey from New York to California is similar to the experience of many immigrants in the years just before the Gold Rush.

Born in Bavaria, Daubenbiss left home in 1835, at age nineteen, and crossed the Atlantic to New York City. From there, he went to Cincinnati, Louisville, Vicksburg, New Orleans and Fort Smith, Arkansas, where he joined a wagon train to Oregon. In 1843, he moved south from Oregon to Sutter’s Fort (now Sacramento) in California. After several other stops around northern California, Daubenbiss partnered with John Hames to buy property in 1845, and moved permanently to the future Santa Cruz County in 1847.

Other pre-Gold Rush arrivals included Santa Cruz farmers John Dreher and George Kohl, but biographical information on those two prior to arrival in our area is less extensive. Dreher came to California as a member of a volunteer United States Army regiment recruited in New York for the Mexican-American War. George Kohl’s prior activities are unknown.

Population explosion

First, the Mexican-American War (1846-48) brought California into the United States; then the Gold Rush that began in 1848 brought the world to California. Within a few years, the huge influx of gold-seekers from all over the globe completely transformed the slow-paced, isolated California of missions, cattle ranches, and native villages. Most importantly, many who came initially as treasure-hunters stayed to become Californians.

As late as 1850, however, few of those new settlers had found their way to geographically-isolated Santa Cruz County. The United States census of that year found a total county population of just 643.⁴ A follow-up census in 1852 found 1,219, including 110 “Indians Domesticated” and 33 “Foreign Residents.”⁵

By 1860, the count jumped to 4,944 County residents (a nearly eight-fold increase) of whom 1,078 (22%) were listed as “foreign born.”⁶ Because this was a United States Census, the “foreign born” category included all of the California-born former Mexican citizens. The 1860 census does not indicate how or whether Native Americans were counted. No numbers or countries of origin were given for other foreigners.

Becoming naturalized

The “Santa Cruz County Poll List of 1854” reproduced in *Santa Cruz County History Journal, Issue Number 2* includes only one German immigrant: Andrew Trust, a member of our study group.⁷ In 1854, poll lists (either those registered to vote in an election or those who had voted) were limited to native/naturalized males over age twenty-one. We know that a number of other native-German-speakers were residing in the County by that date, but apparently either were not yet naturalized or did not register to vote.

By 1866 the picture was very different. A Santa Cruz precinct poll list, published in the *Santa Cruz Weekly Sentinel*, identified voters as either “native” or “naturalized.”⁸ A somewhat un-scientific count from that list yields twenty-two German-sounding and/or known German names (noted as “naturalized”) out of a total of 133 naturalized (16.54%).

Over the next several decades, a number of pioneer biographies and autobiographies were published, some collected in historical works; others produced individually for local newspapers or family histories. More recently, the *Santa Cruz County History Journal, Issue Number 4* (1998), compiled, edited, and annotated biographies of early residents belonging to the Society of California Pioneers of Santa Cruz County.

The Santa Cruz organization was created and headed by Frederick A. Hihn, probably the best known of the German-born County pioneers. Given Hihn’s leadership role, it is perhaps not surprising that the Society’s foreign-born membership included a higher percentage of native German-speakers (over twenty-nine percent) than appears to be the case for the County as a whole.⁹



Fig. 1
Selected German immigrant origin states shown in their approximate locations on a map of modern Europe.

Modern European states:

1. France
2. Belgium
3. Netherlands
4. Germany
5. Poland
6. Czech Republic
7. Austria
8. Switzerland

What they left behind: German home countries and conditions

Home countries of early Santa Cruz County German-speakers included Saxony, Wurttemberg, Baden, Hesse, Nassau, Prussia, Hanover, Bavaria, Brunswick, and Pomerania.

All of these once-independent small nations belonged to the German Confederation from 1815 until at least 1866 and are today mostly parts of Germany. For several members of the study group, native country is recorded only as the generic “Germany.” Coincidentally, these same few were all

related, either by blood or marriage: Otto, Schwann, Trust, and Werner.

The years between the end of the Napoleonic Wars in 1815 and German unification, which was largely complete following Prussia’s defeat of France in 1871, were turbulent times in many of the forty independent states that were members of the German Confederation. Many saw violent revolutions in 1848-49, and unification-related conflicts in later years. Some Gold Rush immigrants probably left home as much to escape local political conditions as to seek their fortunes.

For example: Charles Steinmetz, after first coming to California in 1850, returned to his native Hanover in 1866 to bring out a younger brother who had been a prisoner-of-war following Hanover's defeat by neighboring Prussia.¹⁰ German-speaking emigrants to the United States came from many of the Confederation member states. By contrast, few came in these early years from more-stable Austria and Switzerland.

How they got here

Before 1846, most immigrants to reach California came overland, like John Daubenbiss. During the Mexican-American War years, some came by sea with the United States military, like John Dreher.

With the discovery of gold in 1848, however, the trickle of California immigrants quickly became a flood. Seemingly overnight, a small coastal village was transformed into the bustling city of San Francisco. It became the main port-of-entry for the gold-seekers, including those from the German countries.

From San Francisco, the objective was to get up the Sacramento River and beyond to the gold fields as fast as possible. Once there, however, some found that there were better opportunities than digging and sluicing. Many of the Germans had training in trades and merchandising, and the rapidly-growing population of northern California needed people who knew how to do those things. Some of those tradesmen and merchants later came to Santa Cruz County.

Group characteristics

The pioneer biographies are stories full of fascinating twists and turns leading eventually to Santa Cruz County, but the focus here is on the German-speakers as a group and their lives after arrival in our county. What did they have in common with non-German arrivals in the same time period, and in what ways were they different as a group? It appears that, in general, the Germans made every effort to assimilate into the community, so those differences may be less apparent.

One set of shared characteristics relates to a common heritage. Although their first language was German, they would have been visually hard to distinguish from the British, French, Americans and others of northern-European heritage who together comprised the most numerous ethnic type among early Santa Cruz County immigrants.

The high percentage of businessmen seems to indicate that they would have been quick to learn English (or already had some familiarity with it), and that they were literate and numerate enough for commercial transactions.

Judging from the absence of anti-German editorials in early newspapers, the sizable German immigrant group seems to have suffered little of the overt discrimination aimed at the California-born, Spanish-speaking residents. Chinese immigrants who also arrived during the Gold Rush years faced even greater hurdles than the Spanish-speakers.

Characteristics in common with other pioneers

The three pre-Gold Rush German immigrants in our study group—John Daubenbiss, John Dreher and George Kohl—had things in common with non-German arrivals which set that early group apart from the later “forty-niners.” For instance, shortly after arriving in the County, Daubenbiss enlisted to serve in the Mexican-American War under Fremont, as did many other “foreign” area residents.

Another fact setting these three apart from the rest is that they were the only three members of the study group from Bavaria, one of the most southern states of the German Confederation. It is not known whether the three knew each other prior to emigration, or may have met during travels within the United States before settling in Santa Cruz County. The only common bond found in this study was membership in the Society of California Pioneers of Santa Cruz County (see below).

A limited number of work choices were to be found in largely-rural Santa Cruz County before the Gold Rush. Dreher and Kohl became farmers (it's unknown whether they were previously farmers in Germany). Daubenbiss, on the other hand, possessed a rare and valuable skill: he knew how to build and operate a water-powered mill. In Santa Cruz County, Daubenbiss built both sawmills and a grist (flour) mill. All three men later expanded into other sources of income as County growth presented new opportunities.

Many early County settlers were able to acquire large land holdings. Dreher and Daubenbiss (and later Hihn) became developers, subdividing their large land holdings. Kohl became a brick manufacturer in addition to farming. Both Dreher¹¹ and Daubenbiss¹² donated land to local school districts.

The members of our study group had other things in common with most other California pioneers, whether arriving just before or during the Gold Rush. They were:

- Young. Ages, upon arrival in Santa Cruz County, ranged from twenty-one (Schwartz) to thirty-one (Schwann)
- Male. Frontier areas tended to be largely male places, at least in the early years
- Unmarried. Younger men mostly waited until they were established and settled in their new home County before marrying. The oldest member of this study group, Jacob Schwann, was the one exception. Schwann married in New York before sailing on to San Francisco in 1853.

The German-speakers were not cliquish in business and social activities. Although plenty of examples can be found of Germans doing business or otherwise associating with other Germans, an equivalent number of transactions and partnerships occurred between Germans and English-speakers, especially in later years. The successful partnership of Soquel pioneers John Daubenbiss and John Hames is an early example.

They became involved in County civic activities at about the same rate as the more numerous American-born immigrants to California. Such activities included registering to vote, becoming active in political parties¹³ and contributing to charitable causes. To cite just one example of the latter, a list of Santa Cruz donors to the “Orphans’ Home and College Subscription” in 1870 includes twelve of the nineteen study group members plus a number of other Germans.¹⁴

They held public office roughly in proportion to their numbers. John Daubenbiss, F. A. Hihn, and Charles Steinmetz each served several terms as County Supervisors, and Hihn served a term as State Assemblyman. Otto Stoesser served as Watsonville City Treasurer, and George Otto served as County Treasurer. Werner Finkeldey (also spelled “Finkledey” in newspapers) was a Santa Cruz City Councilman and Henry Winkle was a school trustee.¹⁵

They were comfortable with the American legal system. Judging from court notices published in newspapers, the Germans were as likely as any early Santa Cruzans to make use of the American “tort” system of civil law. F. A. Hihn was especially active in that regard, probably because he was especially active in business.¹⁶

They joined fraternal orders and other similar organizations.

This form of civic and social involvement, very popular in those days, attracted many of the early German-speakers in our study group. Several belonged to more than one organization. Local branches of German-specific organizations like *Deutsche Verein* were established early in San Francisco and San Jose, but not in Santa Cruz until many years later. The most popular in early days were:

- Freemasons: Daubenbiss, Effey, Schwartz, Steinmetz, Winkle
- Oddfellows: Cappelmann, Otto, Kuhlitz.

Society of California Pioneers

This organization deserves separate mention, both because so many early German immigrants joined and because, more than any other, it demonstrated the desire to be identified first as Californians and pioneers rather than as Germans. Public demonstrations of connections to homelands left behind were secondary.

The Society of California Pioneers of Santa Cruz County (apparently independent from the state organization) was created and led through most of its existence by the most active and successful promoter of local interests of his generation, Frederick A. Hihn.

From the beginning, Hihn demonstrated his desire to assimilate, as evidenced by the early change in spelling of his name. Realizing that Americans found it impossible to pronounce Hühn correctly, he anglicized his surname to Hihn. The new spelling didn’t work completely, but got closer than what he would have heard before: “Hoon” or “Hun.”

Leadership of the local Pioneer Society was another effort toward identification with California, Santa Cruz County, and pioneer pride. Hihn recruited many of the other Germans to join him, including more than half of our study group: Cappelmann, Daubenbiss, Dreher, Kohl, Kunitz, Steinmetz, Stoesser, Trust, and Winkle.

Unique characteristics of the German-speakers

Some of the early German immigrants who ended up in Santa Cruz County had met previously in the course of their travels. Hihn and Kunitz were shipmates departing from Germany and were partners in a Sacramento candy factory in 1850. Bern and Werner met in San Jose and came to Santa Cruz together in 1853. Jacob Schwann married an immigrant relative of Andrew Trust while still in New York.

Only one member of the study group ever had a (reported) criminal conviction, and that was for what we would today call a “white collar” crime. In 1879, while serving as the elected County Treasurer, George Otto was tried and convicted of embezzlement of public funds.¹⁷

Some differences can be seen in the kinds of occupations the early German-speakers favored. To a greater extent than other early County immigrants, they seem to have come from urban areas, and relatively few were farmers, fishermen, miners (after the initial gold fever) or timber/lumber workers.

Early occupations among the men in our sample group (many moved into additional or different pursuits later in life) include:

Skilled trades and/or manufacturing (9). This includes a variety of skills: leather workers (Bern, Werner), a mill-builder (Daubenbiss), a watchmaker (Effey), a piano maker (Finkeldey), a soap and glue manufacturer (Kunitz), a cabinetmaker (Steinmetz), and two bakers (Schwann, Trust). Many other skilled trades are found in the aggregate German immigrant group.

Merchant (6): Bernheim, Cappelmann, Hihn, Otto, Schwartz, Stoesser. Some of the “skilled trades” group above also engaged in merchandising, especially in their later years.

Farmer (3): Dreher, Kohl, Winkle. It’s notable that two of these three were among the earliest German-speaking immigrants in this County.

Brewer (1): Kuhlitz. Although considered a skilled trade, brewing merits special attention because it’s the one occupation dominated in early County days (not so surprisingly) by German-speakers. Two others of the earliest local brewers, Henry Bausch and Otto Diesing, also belong to the larger German pioneer group.

Other Germans entered the local brewing business in later years, but those three seem to have been the only brewery owners in Santa Cruz County for many years. In addition, Cappelmann began as a saloonkeeper, and later developed a wholesale beer and liquor distribution business.

Religion is another area where distinctions can be found. Early eastern-state Protestant Americans established churches as soon as they arrived: Methodist, Episcopal, Congregational, Baptist. In contrast, although biographies mention that several members of the study group were nominal Lutherans, no Lutheran or other German-associated

church was established in Santa Cruz County until the 1880s, when a Danish Lutheran church opened in Watsonville. In 1884, a German Methodist Episcopal church was founded in Santa Cruz, but that denomination was born in the United States.¹⁸ Jacob Schwann was involved with the founding of that church. Otto Stoesser was the lone Catholic in the study group (the brewer Henry Bausch was also Catholic).

Also, the beginnings of this County’s Jewish community trace back directly to the first German-speakers. The first Jewish immigrants came almost entirely from German Confederation states, including German-speaking areas of what is now Poland. In our study group, Reuben Bernheim (one of three merchant brothers) and Louis Schwartz were Jewish.¹⁹

The largest concentration of native-German interments is found at what was then the non-denominational Oddfellows Cemetery.²⁰ Evergreen Cemetery, oldest in Santa Cruz and also non-denominational, hosts the remains of John Dreher, Andrew Trust, and two Hihn infants. Bernheim and Schwartz are buried at the Home of Peace Jewish cemetery.

Pioneer Germans were probably no more or less interested in music than others, but would have brought with them the kinds of music they knew best. Werner Finkeldey was a merchant, piano-builder and noted amateur vocalist. He founded and led the “German Liederkrantz” in the later 1860s, a choral music group. Liederkrantz groups aimed to promote traditional German music, but not exclusively. One published program included several non-German pieces, including a rendition by Prof. Finkledey of “The Star-Spangled Banner.”²¹

Concluding Assessment

The group of German-speaking immigrants to Santa Cruz County included in this study seem to have been readily accepted in local society. They engaged in business, civic, and social activities at rates similar to native American residents born in eastern states. Most were (at least in early days) more interested in identification as California pioneers than as Germans. F. A. Hihn and many others put their energies into the Society of California Pioneers and existing cross-cultural organizations rather than forming new groups with German-specific identities.

Notes

1. Geoffrey Dunn, "Pioneer Spirit: A History of the Winterhalter Family in Santa Cruz County," 1996, *Local History Articles*, Santa Cruz Public Library [website].
2. Biographical information on the majority of study group members is from the material collected in *Santa Cruz County History Journal*, Number 4, 1998. Many of the death dates are from grave markers. Others:
 - * Charles Bern: Harrison, 263 (see Other Sources)
 - * Reuben Bernheim: Harrison, 298
 - * William Effey: Harrison, 314
 - * Werner Finkeldey: Harrison, 316
 - * Charles Kuhlitz: Guinn, 733
 - * George Otto: *Sentinel*, various articles
 - * Jacob Schwann: Martin, 230
 - * Louis Schwartz: Harrison, 322
 - * John Werner: Harrison, 297.
3. Phil Reader, "A History of Villa de Branciforte," *Santa Cruz County History Journal*, Number 3, 1997, 17. Reader: "A 'padron' or census taken in the fall [1845] gives the names of 470 residents of Branciforte and the Santa Cruz area including 80 foreigners."
4. California Census (1852) totals summarized by county, online at: <https://www2.census.gov/library/publications/decennial/1850/1850a/1850a-47.pdf>. Accessed Mar. 18, 2024.
5. United States Census (1850) [same pdf as above].
6. United States Census (1860).
7. Stanley D. Stevens (transcriber), "Santa Cruz County Poll List of 1854," *Santa Cruz County History Journal*, Number 2, 1995, 48.
8. "Poll List," *Santa Cruz Weekly Sentinel*, September 1, 1866, 1:4.
9. *Santa Cruz County History Journal*, Number 4, 1998, 241 [table in column 1].
10. *Ibid.*, 222-223.
11. *Santa Cruz Weekly Sentinel*, March 21, 1868, 2:3.
12. *Santa Cruz County History Journal*, Number 4, 83.
13. "Santa Cruz County Democratic Convention," *Santa Cruz Weekly Sentinel*, July 22, 1871, 5:2, [Steinmetz, Daubenbiss, Cappelmann and Otto are mentioned].
14. "Orphans' Home and College Subscription," *Santa Cruz Weekly Sentinel*, September 24, 1870, 2:4.
15. Public offices held, and other non-footnoted information about study group individuals, is found in biographies contained in the "Principal Biographical Sources" listed below.
16. "District Court Calendar," *Santa Cruz Weekly Sentinel*, Aug. 15, 1862, 2:4 [includes Charles Bern, George Otto and Otto Stoesser as plaintiffs; F. A. Hihn as a defendant].
17. "The Otto Case," *Santa Cruz Weekly Sentinel*, June 19, 1880, 3:7.

18. Paul Tutwiler, "Santa Cruz Spirituality", *Local History Articles*, Santa Cruz Public Library [website].
19. Ross Eric Gibson, "Jewish Pioneers Played a Big Role in Santa Cruz," *Local History Articles*, Santa Cruz Public Library [website].
20. Janet and Randy Krassow, "A Walk Through Time: A Historical Guide to Santa Cruz Memorial Park," *Local History Articles*, Santa Cruz Public Library [website].
21. "Grand Concert!!," *Santa Cruz Weekly Sentinel*, June 22, 1872, 2:6.

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- Martin, Edward. *History of Santa Cruz County, California*. Los Angeles: Historic Record, 1911.
- Santa Cruz Weekly Sentinel* newspaper (1862-1909).
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- Terry, Carole Cosgrove. "Die Deutschen in Kalifornien: Germans in Urban California, 1850-1860," 2012, UNLV Theses/Dissertations/Professional Papers/Capstones, Paper 1639. Url: <http://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/thesesdissertations/1639/>. Accessed Mar. 17, 2024.