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Renquishausen-Syracuse Family Reunion: Roots for some here stretch to one tiny German village

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By **Charley Hannagan / The Post-Standard**



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Courtesy of Thorsten Buhl

THE MAYER FAMILY, which moved from Renquishausen, Germany, to Syracuse in 1882, sat for this portrait in 1897. Seated are (from left) Josef Anton Mayer, the mother Barbara Mattes Mayer and the father Paul Albert Mayer. Standing are (from left) Agatha Mader Mayer, Anselm Mayer and Johannes Konrad Mayer. Paul Albert Mayer was the brother of Conrad Mayer, a blacksmith who came to Syracuse in 1854 and was a soldier in the Civil War. Their parents immigrated to Syracuse when they were in their 70s.

When Maria Ursula Schilling immigrated to Syracuse in 1927 there were already people here from her hometown of Renquishausen, Germany, to help her settle in.

Of the 100 people who immigrated from the little village to the U.S. from 1848 to 1929, half settled in the Syracuse area, said amateur historian Thorsten Buhl, a native of Renquishausen.

Considering that about 400 souls called the village home during those years, that means a quarter of the population moved to America, he said.

Buhl, 32, is writing a book about the immigrants; it's scheduled to come out next spring. It will be his third tracing the history of the people of Renquishausen, a small village in the southwest corner of Germany, near the Swiss border.

On Saturday, he and 80 descendants of the Syracuse Renquishausen immigrants will meet at a

reunion at the Twin Trees III restaurant in North Syracuse.

"The big goal is to hear some more stories," said Buhl, who is the head of design and development for an Austrian tannery that makes leather for luxury car companies like Bugatti, Porsche and Daimler.

As a child, Buhl began his journey into the past by looking at his own family. At a family reunion in the 1990s he heard the story of a great aunt, who at 18 immigrated to the United States, worked as a maid, fell in love and married.

"The story behind all of it was interesting," Buhl said.

Questions about family history grew to the relationships between villagers. His first two books used birth, death, military and school records to document their lives.

Renquishausen was in a very poor area of Germany. There was little industry, and farmers scratched a living from very small plots of land, Buhl said.

The first Renquishausen villager to settle in Syracuse was Conrad Mayer in 1854. Mayer lived on the city's North Side. Buhl's records show he was a blacksmith who enlisted in the Civil War.

The Renquishausen experience in Syracuse is not unique to the village, said Dennis Connors, curator of history at the Onondaga Historical Association.

It is common for immigrants to send word back to family and friends about opportunities available in the new country. "They would come because there was someone in the family that was already established there," Connors said.



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THORSTEN BUHL (at right) is writing a book the Renquishausen immigrants.

People from the same family or village settled in the same neighborhoods, often working for the same employers, such as Syracuse China or Solvay Process, he said.

The people who plan on coming to the reunion have fond memories of their German relatives.

Betty Riley's grandmother, Magdalena Straub Aigeltinger was born in Renquishausen and immigrated to Syracuse in 1888.

Riley, 79, formerly of Syracuse, now lives in Wichita, Kan. with her daughter Debbie Riley Williams. They're coming back to Syracuse for the Renquishausen reunion.

Riley lived across Martin Street from her grandparents.

"She was quite tall, very slender, very straight," she said. When gardening, "she didn't squat, she bent over from the waist down."

A year ago, Williams was looking for something she and her mother could do together. Her brother gave her mother a subscription to Ancestry.com, a website that helps people plot out their family trees.

A couple months into the research, Buhl contacted them through Renquishausen researchers. He filled in some holes and now Williams has plotted out 900 relatives on her family tree stretching back to the 1700s. Recently, Williams found that she and Buhl are fourth cousins.

Buhl helped Linda Mattes, 60, Cicero, plot her husband's Renquishausen roots back to the 1600s.

"I thought it would be interesting to try to put together a family tree for my husband's family and specifically for my

grandchildren so they would know some of their own history," she said.

"It's so bizarre that they all immigrated right here to Syracuse," Mattes said.

Maria Schilling was among the last of the Renquishausen emigrants to land here.

She was one of family of 10 siblings from the little village. "When she was a young girl in her late teens and 20s, things in Germany were really, really bad," said Schilling's son, Herman Klaisle, 75, of Syracuse.

Schilling and her sister Mary Rose Schilling immigrated first to Holland, where they worked as maids.

Mary Rose Schilling immigrated to Syracuse first, followed a year later in 1927 by her sister Maria and one of their brothers.

Maria, who changed her name to Mary, became a housekeeper here and married Hermann Klaisle.

"I only spoke German because my mother and father were German," Klaisle said. "When I started school I couldn't speak any English. The teacher wrote home that they'd better start speaking English. And from that point on they started speaking English."

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Herman Klaisle and his sister Johanna Quantrille hold up their mom's passports. On left is her original passport from 1923 given to her by the German government. She used it to come to the United States from Renquishausen, Germany in 1927. The passport on the right was used in 1935 to travel back to Germany for a visit.

Your own family tree

Interested in mapping out your family tree? Start with the names and birth dates of your parents and grandparents and work backward through old family records. Many records are also available online. Here are some places to start:

- Ancestry.com
- Mormon.org
- Geni.com
- Census.gov/genealogy/www

His mother's home in Renquishausen is across the street from Buhl's family, said Klaisle, who has visited the village many times. When a German cousin told him in 2004 that Buhl was studying in Canada and would be visiting the U.S., Klaisle invited him to Syracuse.

Klaisle took Buhl to Assumption Cemetery on the city's North Side.

Last names on the headstones amazed Buhl -- Buschle, Mayer, Mattes, Moser, Schilling, Seeburger, Stehle, Straub and Weber.

"They were all common names in my village," Buhl said.

In his hometown of Renquishausen, older headstone engravings in the crowded cemeteries

are gone. Yet, here in Syracuse, the headstones of the Renquishausen immigrants remain.

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