

## THE STEGNER GERMANY REUNION

October 14-15, 2019

When I was in the third grade I was selected with several other grade school students to appear on the local radio station to promote "Book Week." The interviewer asked each of us our name and said to me, "McClary. That's Irish, isn't it?" I said, "No. I think it's German."

I knew nothing of heritage or genealogy and had never heard my father speak of his Irish and Scottish roots, if he was even really aware of them. I had heard references to German family and knew that my mother spoke only German when she started school.

We were closer to my mother's family and I always thought of Grandma Gerhardt as being the Gerhardt family representative, since I never knew my grandfather August Gerhardt. I knew my Uncle Rudolph and Uncle Herman Stegner (great-uncles) well enough, but may not have realized at that time that they were my Grandmother Flora Stegner Gerhardt's brothers. And it was later still when I learned that my Aunt Bertha (great-aunt), Grandma Flora's sister, had married Grandfather August's brother, Albert Gerhardt. And I occasionally heard my mother use the term double-cousins.

We went to Gerhardt family reunions, and didn't go to Stegner reunions. For many years I believed my German heritage came only from the Gerhardts. It was only as an adult that I began to think about my relationship to the larger Stegner family, many of whom I knew well enough but saw only infrequently. And it was only in the last couple of years that I determined other acquaintances were Stegner cousins, that five of my high school classmates were Stegner cousins, and that I had taken a Stegner cousin to my Senior Prom.

Even knowing that my mother's family was German, I had little interest in that heritage and didn't think much of my connection to Germany when studying world history. It was just another country. And the few German words that I had heard relatives speak were rough-sounding and I had no interest in learning them. The only German term I remember Grandma Gerhardt using was when she called someone a "dummer asel," which I later as an adult determined meant a dumb, uh, donkey. Very unlike Grandma to say that about someone.

There have been contacts with the German family over the years but I had found no one in current generations who had contact information for the family. We know that John Stegner from Boonville, a distant cousin, was an attorney involved with the Nuremburg Military Trials in 1945-46 and assume he probably visited the area. We also know that John and Fred Stegner, originally from Jamestown, visited in 1973 and Wendell Stegner, with Pilot Grove roots, visited in 2000. John and Fred visited in the home a Stegner family member, and recorded helpful information from church records.

Last spring I made contact with a distant Stegner cousin in Ebersdorf, Germany, a neighboring village to Frohnlach, home of the original five Stegner siblings who immigrated to Cooper County in the 1850s. Quite a few of us are cousins to the Gerhardt family of Billingsville, and since several of us were planning to attend the Gerhardt family reunion in Tutschfelden, Germany we agreed to extend our trip a couple of days to visit the Frohnlach area. Monika Martin, a six to seven generation cousin through Hans Brandeis Stegner (1689), son of Hans Pankratz Stegner (1640), graciously planned a reception and a day of visits to local Stegner sites of interest.

Five children of Johann Nicolas Stegner (1773) and Anna Stegner Stegner (1774), who were both descendants of Hans Pankratz Stegner (1640), immigrated to America 166 years ago. The last contact Monika Martin's specific branch of the family had from the American Stegners was 82 years ago when Clinton Humboldt Stegner Koch visited them from Albuquerque New Mexico, coming by ship from the United States.

This year a wooden pheasant from Albuquerque, New Mexico flew to them from the U.S. along with eight cousins from Billingsville, Boonville and St. Louis, Missouri; Reno, Nevada; and Cardston, Alberta, Canada. Kenneth and Janet Stegner, Carl Gerhardt, Venita Gerhardt Foons, Kenneth Gerhardt and his granddaughter Mia Gerhardt, and Bert and Beth McClary composed the group of American cousins.

Monika and Eberhard Martin have been married since 1969 and have two children. Their son Florian is married with two children and Matthias died in 1977. Monika answered the first email from the hospital while recovering from a hip replacement, and is now doing very well. We believed at first that she would not be available during our visit because she expected to be in the hospital again for another hip replacement in October. But after determining that she wanted to meet these American cousins she rescheduled the surgery for November.

During the several email exchanges over about six months prior to the visit I learned that Monika had been an au pair in New York during 1967-68 and she said that she still had "some English skills" but translated her emails to me from German with Google. She suggested that I might ask my German-speaking Gerhardt cousin to call her before we left Tutschfelden, so the evening before we left for Coburg I asked Anita Schnaiter to call and make final confirmation about our connections the next day.

Anita and Monika's conversation was in German but Anita confirmed that Monika did speak English. That was an understatement, because upon our arrival we learned that Monika speaks very good English. Although her husband speaks very little English, a few other family members who accompanied us during our visit do. I had been a little apprehensive about communication but we had absolutely no problems during the visit.

Our group was met at the train station in Coburg by Monika and Eberhard. Eberhard drove Carl and me to the rental car agency while Monika became acquainted with the rest. They then led us on our 15-minute drive from Coburg to our hotel in Grub am Forst, a village just to the west of Ebersdorf/Frohnlach. Beth had selected the hotel online, but we learned that Eberhard and

Monika are personal friends of the owners, and as is apparently sometimes the custom in Europe, when we arrived our hotel door keys were hanging in the lobby with our names attached.

That evening Monika's lifelong friend Rita picked us up in a community-owned van and drove us to an inn in Ebersdorf for dinner. After brief introductions and pinning on the name tags thoughtfully provided by Monika, I made a crude attempt at reading greetings in German:

#### *GRUSS AN UNSERE STEGNER COUSINS*

*Hallo. Ich heiÙe Bert McClary. Es tut mir leid, Ich spreche kein Deutsch. Ich habe nur wenig geübt. Ich hoffe Sie koennen das verstehen.*

*Viele GrüÙe von Ihren Stegner-Cousins aus Amerika. Wir sind Nachkommen von Johann Nicolas Stegner, geboren siebzehn dreiundsiebzig (1773) im Frohnlach und Anna Stegner Stegner, geboren siebzehn vierundsiebzig (1774). Viele Stegner-Nachkommen leben not in Missouri.*

*Wir Sind augh Halbcousins von Marina Friedrich Pecher aus Frohnlach.*

*Wir freuen uns auf einen interessanten und schönen Tag in Großgarnstadt, Sonnefeld, Ebersdorf und Frohnlach. Unserer Heimat.*

*Wir möchten Sie einladen, uns in Amerika zu besuchen. Wir möchten, dass unsere Kinder Ihre Kinder und unsere Enkelkinder Ihre Enkelkinder kennenlernen. Wir sind eine Familie.*

*Ich werde Sie meinen Cousins und Ihren Cousins vorstellen:*

*Kenneth und Janet Stegner  
Carl Gerhardt  
Venita Gerhardt Foos  
Kenneth Gerhardt  
Mia Gerhardt*

*Vielen Dank.*

Here's the translation, if you want to try to pick out a few German words or phrases:

#### *GREETINGS TO OUR STEGNER COUSINS*

*Hello. My name is Bert McClary. I'm sorry, I do not speak German. I have practiced very little. I hope you can understand.*

*Greetings from your Stegner cousins in America. We are descendants of Johann Nicolas Stegner, born 1773 in Frohnlach and Anna Stegner Stegner, born 1774. Many Stegner descendants still live in Missouri.*

*We are also one-half cousins to Marina Friedrich Pecher of Frohnlach.*

*We are looking forward to an interesting and enjoyable day tomorrow visiting in Grossgarnstadt, Sonnefeld, Ebersdorf and Frohnlach. Our homeland.*

*We would like to invite you to visit us in America. We would like for our children to know your children and our grandchildren to know your grandchildren. We are one family.*

*I would like to introduce you to my cousins and your cousins:*

*Kenneth and Janet Stegner*

*Carl Gerhardt*

*Venita Gerhardt Foos*

*Kenneth Gerhardt*

*Mia Gerhardt*

*Thank you very much.*

I presented Monika and her family a pheasant made by Hillard Gerhardt, also a Stegner cousin, from Albuquerque, New Mexico. The pheasant was made by scroll saw, hand finishing and gluing from several species of wood. It is one of the simpler examples of Hillard's craftsmanship, which includes numerous turned-wood bowls and urns, the largest of which contains 7,500 individual pieces. Monika said they would rotate the gift to be displayed in each family member's home.

Monika and the several other family members at the dinner made us all feel welcome immediately. In attendance were her aunts Martha Stegner Knorr and Edda Stegner Eichorn, Martha's daughter Gisela Fenski, Edda's daughter Annette Martin, and Annette's husband Roland Martin. Martha is age 93 and accompanied us the next day on our sightseeing tour which included much walking.

Monika gave a very warm welcome presentation to the group before dinner and explained that she was skeptical at first when a cousin, who was just recently deceased, gave her my email message that he had received from the church secretary. She thought at first it was some sort of scam and was not sure if she would respond, but then decided to follow up. After a couple more exchanges she was convinced that we were legitimate cousins and became excited about our proposed visit.

She described the visit by Clinton Humboldt Stegner Koch to Martha's home in 1937 when Martha was a young girl. She showed us two communications Martha later received from him, including a children's book about American Indians of the Southwest. Monika stated that there had also been a visitor in 1969 and there was a party, but Monika's family was not aware of it until later.

After a traditional German meal prepared the way our ancestors did it, including sauerbraten, gravy, potato dumplings, red cabbage and a raspberry cream dessert, we enjoyed additional conversation to get to know each other better. Then Rita drove us back to our hotel.

The next day was perfect, both in the weather and in our activities. After breakfast Monika met us at the hotel and led us to the Ebersdorf St. Laurentiuskirche (St. Lorenz or St. Lawrence Church) community building where she gave us a brief German history lesson of the 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, explaining some of the cultural and political issues of the time and how wars and changes in leadership affected the well-being and religious freedom of the citizens. It is hard to imagine the hardships they endured, but their family and religious community ties kept them strong. However, it is not surprising that some of our direct ancestors and other kin decided to seek a new life in America.

Then we were able to look at several historical church record books, with some records dating to the early 1600s. This was a very special event because few persons are allowed to see these valuable books. Records prior to this time had been destroyed by fire. Monika has access to the books and has used them in her family genealogy research because for many years she served as secretary to the pastor and the church council. She obtained permission for us to see them, and we were able to carefully turn through the old pages, frequently finding Stegner, Hoflander and other familiar German family names.

We found the original birth and baptism records of Lorenz Stegner (1800), Carl's great-grandfather, and Johann Peter Stegner (1812), grandfather of Kenneth Stegner, great-grandfather of Venita, Bert and Kenneth Gerhardt, and 3<sup>rd</sup> great-grandfather of Mia. We also found emigration records of Johann Paul Stegner (1803), 2<sup>nd</sup> great-grandfather of Derry Brownfield, and Johann Paul Stegner (1808), 2<sup>nd</sup> great-grandfather of Charles Stegner and Phyllis Stegner Kidd.

John and Fred Stegner were also able to view historical church records during their visit in 1973, but were not allowed to handle the books directly—the minister turned the pages. Fred had previously visited with Laura Gail Stegner Schler, the Stegner family historian, and sought certain records to help close some gaps. He recorded information as far back as possible, until the pages were too faded to read, obtaining useful information that he provided to Laura Gail.

The minister also took them to visit with a Stegner family member who personally did not know much family genealogy. She showed them a family keepsake, an old glass beer stein that was inscribed in fancy script with the initials J-N-S.

We had originally hoped to visit with our 5<sup>th</sup> half-cousin Marina Friedrich Pecher, cousin to several Friedrich and Thoma families of Cooper County, and her husband Siegfried and see their wholesale fabric business. We were unable to meet them or visit their business as they were away on holiday and had just sold their business the previous month.

We drove on from Ebersdorf through Frohnlach to the Sonnefeld Abbey Klosterkirche in Sonnefeld, hoping to take a photo of a portrait of Stephanus Thomae, who was pastor of the church from 1678 to 1707, for our 5<sup>th</sup> half-cousin Jim Thoma. Jim is a historian and genealogist who maintains the Cooper County Mo-Gen history and genealogy website and a personal Thoma family website that includes more Stegners and Friedrichs than Thomases as well as many other Cooper County families. We wanted to do him a favor for all the work he has done in collecting

Stegner family information in a very usable manner. We were unable to locate the portrait as the church was open for visitors but there was no church staff available.

Next, we drove to Grossgarnstadt, another village just north of Ebersdorf/Frohnlach, home of some of the current Stegner family and originally home of some of the Hoflander family who came to America with the Stegners. We had another traditional German meal of Coburger sausage, Annette's sauerkraut and Aunt Edda's cheesecake at the Evangelical Lutheran Church community building.

This 18<sup>th</sup> century church built on a previous 17<sup>th</sup> century foundation has about 80 individual paintings on galleries and walls depicting the life of Christ and other biblical stories. Take a quick look around the inside at:

<http://backert.magix.net/public/Panorama/Kirche/Kirche.htm>.

This aerial look around the outside provides a good view of a typical small German village:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4bVU84mV8FY&feature=youtu.be>.

Our last driving stop was St. Laurentiuskirche in Ebersdorf, the home church of the Stegner family. The church has its origin in a 13<sup>th</sup> century monastery dedicated to St. Lawrence that became a protestant church after the monastery moved to Sonnefeld. The building had undergone several expansions from the original and was reconstructed after a fire in 1945.

St. Lawrence was the archbishop of Pope Sixtus II and was ordered by the Roman Emperor Valerian to turn over all the treasures of the Church. He instead widely distributed the wealth of the church to the poor and indigent and presented the people themselves to Valerian as the true treasures of the church. He also conspired to hide and protect the written documents of the Church and is known as the patron saint of archivists and librarians. He was executed by roasting on a gridiron for his actions and is one of the most revered saints of the Catholic Church.

The record books of St. Laurentiuskirche that we viewed are of great historical significance and great personal significance to members of the local church. All of the local churches of the denomination have been requested to turn over their records to a central church repository, and most have complied, but the Ebersdorf church has refused. Perhaps they have inherited a little of the courage of their namesake St. Lawrence. I hope no one gets roasted.

In addition to the record books the church has other items of historical significance, including several sets of communion chalices and patens. One had been used as early as the 1600s. It was an emotional experience to hold in our hands the same chalice that had touched the lips of our ancestors in celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Monika documents that Caspar Hoflander (1625) and his son Johannes Hoflander (1666) are ancestors in her family line of Hoflander-Muller-Stegner. I have not yet tried to make the connection to Johann Hoflander of Grossgarnstadt, husband of Kunigunda Stegner, one of the five siblings of our family line that came to America. In 1660 the former convent yard near the church was given to the Hoflander family to farm in exchange for a portion of their income, given first to the monastery in Sonnefeld and later to the duke.

This estate eventually included two houses that were inherited by the two elder Hoflander sons, the “big house” that is currently owned by a Hoflander descendant and the “little house,” currently owned by a Stegner descendant who is a cousin to Monika. While walking in this residential neighborhood we were aware of a mild but vaguely familiar aroma in the air, but it was not the aroma of German cooking.

We walked to the Hoflander property and while observing the buildings we were greeted by the owner. She gave us a personal guided tour of an unexpected 75-cow dairy operation contained in several large buildings. Carl was especially interested to observe the completely automated computerized milking and feeding system built by DeLaval, a Swedish manufacturer of milking equipment. Carl was a DeLaval American division corporate officer.

We drove to Monika and Eberhard’s home, a nice house tucked away in a residential area in Ebersdorf, for a brief rest and glass of wine on their patio. We invited them to join us for dinner at the hotel restaurant for one last German meal. At the restaurant Monika interpreted the German menu for us, describing the various salads, soups, entrees and desserts in American food terminology. She explained one entrée item containing the word musik, saying we would not hear the musik until tomorrow. Although the entrée did not contain them, her comment reminded me of the poem about beans, the musical fruit, but I didn’t quote it.

Monika had occasionally hesitated while speaking with us during the day, searching her memory bank for a specific word or phrase, and said that now she had resolved to continue improving her English vocabulary. During dinner she asked Eberhard a question in English and he got an unusual look on his face, as he speaks little English. When she realized what she had done, we all had a good laugh. We told her of our cousin Anita in Tutschfelden who said after about ten days of continuously speaking English to us she had begun to dream in English.

We had another relaxing and delicious meal, discussed events of the day, shared invitations to meet again in the U.S. and in Germany, and continued to bond with our new family members.

Eberhard will probably learn a few more English words and phrases for the trip they will make to the U.S. We told them of the annual Stegner reunion in Pilot Grove and there were offers to host them at various locations across the U.S. and in Canada. I believe they were intrigued with the idea of visiting America and learning more about these American Stegners. Perhaps they could stop in New York and Monika could see the changes that have taken place over fifty years. She might even be able to locate the family she lived with.

Monika said they will definitely plan a visit, not this spring but within the following year. We will stay in contact to ensure they keep this in their plans.

Bis wir uns wieder treffen, auf wiedersehen.