

# Germans in the Civil War: The Letters They Wrote Home

Timothy J. Orr

ISSN 0003-4827

Copyright © 2007 State Historical Society of Iowa

---

## Recommended Citation

Orr, Timothy J. "Germans in the Civil War: The Letters They Wrote Home." *The Annals of Iowa* 66 (2007), 208-209.

Available at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/annals-of-iowa/vol66/iss2/12>

Hosted by [Iowa Research Online](#)

*Germans in the Civil War: The Letters They Wrote Home*, edited by Walter D. Kamphoefner and Wolfgang Helbich, translated by Susan Carter Vogel. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006. xxxiv, 521 pp. Illustrations, table, map, notes, glossary, bibliography, index. \$59.95 cloth.

Reviewer Timothy J. Orr is a Ph.D. candidate at Pennsylvania State University. He is working on a dissertation on Union military mobilization during the Civil War.

In 1860, 1.3 million German immigrants lived in the United States. Of those, more than 200,000 fought during the American Civil War, representing at least 10 percent of the Union Army and 9 percent of the Confederate Army. Many scholars agree that—of any minority—the German American experience is the least well known. *Germans in the Civil War* offers a much needed addition to Civil War ethnic history. Susan Carter Vogel has translated the latest edition of this book (originally published in 2002) for English-speaking audiences.

The volume includes 343 letters written by German Americans—35 soldiers and 47 civilians (19 of them women). Most of the writers represent Unionists or border-state families, but two are Confederate soldiers. Most of the letter writers communicated with friends and family in southern or western Germany, but the collection encompasses a wide variety of German territories. The editors admit that, in terms of religion, occupation, politics, and education, their sample might not accurately represent the totality of the German American experience during the war, but the collection takes immense strides in uncovering previously unheard German voices.

In their introduction, the editors suggest that several conclusions can be derived from German letter writers. The editors note how German troops intentionally segregated themselves into ethnocentric regiments, not only to avoid confusion certain to result because some German recruits could not speak English, but also for the purpose of strengthening German American social and business communities. The editors declare, “Given the Germans’ sense of being different, their strong roots in German communities, . . . one might be almost tempted to see the German regiments not as American troops who happened to speak a different language and eat different food but rather as allies who were fighting under U.S. supreme command” (23).

The editors also remark upon the high percentage of letter writers who enlisted in the Union Army as a means of honorable employment. They suggest that “at least one third” enlisted as a last resort (27). They assume that Germans’ deep-seated resentment of military service, their desperate employment situation when they arrived in the United States, and their imperfect understanding of American history, institu-

tions, and social customs limited explicit professions of patriotism in letters written to relatives in Germany. "To put it bluntly: they did not know 'what they were fighting for'—aside from the pay, their own survival, and perhaps vague notions of recognition and advancement in American society" (27). Thus, the editors discount the notion that the Civil War sped the process of Americanization.

In fact, the only Iowa German included in the collection—Bernhard Buschmann, a Catholic from Münsterland, who left Germany to avoid the draft and settled near Burlington—reassures his family in Germany that "I'll make sure I wait a long time before becoming a citizen," because "if you're not a citizen then you don't have to go" (that is, cannot be drafted). He acknowledges that "the war . . . has cost a terrific number of lives, but all men who died went voluntarily, men who didn't want to work but were just loafing around and who weren't worth much more than a bullet. . . . Where I am it's just like at home when there was a war in Baden or Holstein, you never noticed it at all, and it's like that here too. I've often listened for it, but I've never been able to hear a cannon shot, I often imagined I did, but it was always thunder, since it started to rain right afterwards" (340–41).

The most frustrating aspect of *Germans in the Civil War* is the excessive editing. The editors did their best to preserve textual authenticity, but they abridged many colorful letters. Battlefield historians might be vexed to discover 183 lines deleted from Carl Uterhard's letter describing the Battle of Lookout Mountain. Likewise, political historians might cringe to see 83 lines missing from Otto Albrecht's letter detailing the election of 1860. Social and agricultural historians will find 423 lines erased from the Kessel and Rückels family letters describing various aspects of daily life, including farming techniques, payment of debts, local religion, family health, and the birth of children. The three short letters from Iowa German Bernhard Buschmann have 123 lines deleted. The editors believe such liberal abridgment focuses needed attention on principal aspects of the German experience, particularly immigrant perspectives on war, politics, and slavery; descriptions of battles, hardships, and everyday life in the military; interethnic tensions; socioeconomic situations of the writers; and comments on reputations of Germans in society. The editors generally follow such guidelines, but their abridgment might restrict the variety of historians interested in this subject matter.

Nevertheless, *Germans in the Civil War* stands out as one of the strongest pieces of Civil War ethnic history published in decades. It may pave the way for future studies of the German population during the Civil War, which has been ignored for too long.

*Wilson's Creek, Pea Ridge and Prairie Grove: A Battlefield Guide, with a Section on the Wire Road*, by Earl J. Hess, Richard W. Hatcher III, William Garrett Piston, and William L. Shea. This Hallowed Ground: Guides to Civil War Battlefields series. Lincoln: Bison Books, University of Nebraska Press, 2006. xviii, 284 pp. Illustrations, maps, appendix, notes, bibliography. \$19.95 paper.

Reviewer Terry Beckenbaugh is assistant professor of history in the Department of Military History at the U.S. Army Command & General Staff College at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas. His dissertation (University of Arkansas, 2001) was on Samuel Ryan Curtis, who commanded the Federal Army of the Southwest at the Battle of Pea Ridge.

This guide to the battles at Wilson's Creek, Pea Ridge, and Prairie Grove is part of the University of Nebraska Press's Hallowed Ground: Guides to Civil War Battlefields series. The series, as a whole, is excellent and has focused on larger battles in both the eastern and western theaters. The guides are for a wide range of readers, from the tourist who wishes to grasp the major events leading up to and taking place at the battle to the scholar seeking a more thorough understanding of a particular fight by visiting the site. This is the first guide to battlefields in the trans-Mississippi West, and it is done by the authors of the best recent histories of the respective battles.

This superb volume compares favorably with the previous guides in the series. Those interested in following the actions of Iowa's regiments at Wilson's Creek, Pea Ridge, and Prairie Grove can do so by using this guide. As evidenced by the title, the guide also contains a section on the Wire Road, along with stops, that is crucial to understanding why the fighting took place at those sites. Furthermore, conflicts leading up to the battles, such as the fight at Cane Hill, Arkansas (November 28, 1862), prior to the Battle of Prairie Grove, are also detailed. Visitors to any of the above-mentioned battlefields would be well advised to secure a copy of this guidebook prior to visiting those hallowed sites.

*Iowa, Kansas and Nebraska Civil War Veterans: Compilation of the Death Rolls of the Departments of Iowa, Kansas and Nebraska, Grand Army of the Republic, 1883-1948*, by Dennis Northcott. St. Louis: NG Publications, 2007. xi, 658 pp. Appendixes. \$30.00 paper.

Reviewer Kenneth L. Lyftogt is a lecturer in history at the University of Northern Iowa. He is the author of several books on Iowa and the Civil War, including *Iowa's Forgotten General: Matthew Mark Trumbull and the Civil War*.

*Iowa, Kansas and Nebraska Civil War Veterans* is Dennis Northcott's third compilation of death rolls from the Grand Army of the Republic; the