

## Letters in German from a Wisconsin Farm Woman: Anna (Jagow) Seifert's Letters to Her Son Lester, 1932–1942

Antje Petty



Source: findagrave.com/memorial/16405757

Anna and Julius Seifert with their children (from left) Norman, Edna, Lester, Edgar, and Hilbert

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Among the more extensive and varied collections in the Max Kade Institute archives are materials donated by Lester “Smoky” Seifert (1915–1996), a professor of Germanic Linguistics at UW–Madison, and a pioneer in the field of Germanic heritage language studies. Included are his early audio recordings of German heritage speakers dating back to the 1940s, field notes, manuscripts, and many other documents, including 164 letters and postcards written in *Kurrent* (the old German script) between 1932

and 1942 by Lester’s mother, Anna (Jagow) Seifert.

In the spring of 2022, a new *Kurrent* Transcription Group at the MKI chose Anna Seifert’s letters as its first project. The group is made up of experts from across the nation and Germany who meet once a week via Zoom to transcribe texts in the MKI archives from *Kurrent* to modern German type. Initiated by Friends of the MKI Board member Maria Sturm, the *Kurrent* Transcription

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## Greetings Friends and Readers!

In this issue of our newsletter we are pleased to feature a lengthy article by Antje Petty on the Anna Seifert Letter Collection, part of the legacy of the late UW German professor Lester W. J. “Smoky” Seifert (1917–1996). I had the privilege of first meeting Smoky in the late 1980s, when I was finishing my doctoral studies and writing my dissertation on Pennsylvania German, the subject of Smoky’s own dissertation nearly a half-century earlier.

Smoky Seifert played a major role in the field of German-American studies over the course of his long and distinguished career and was a stalwart supporter of MKI. Our library and archives are the repository of the bulk of his scholarly products, including meticulously prepared notebooks documenting his fieldwork on varieties of German spoken in Pennsylvania and Wisconsin, publications on various linguistic and cultural topics, and some sixty-five recordings of interviews made with Wisconsin German speakers, which are now digitized. In 2001, MKI published *A Word Atlas of Pennsylvania German*, featuring maps produced by the German Language Research Institute at the University of Marburg that were based on data Smoky collected in 1940 and 1941.

I am certain Smoky would be pleased to know that the German correspondence produced by his mother, the subject of this newsletter’s lead article, is being made accessible to researchers and the general public thanks to the work of

our *Kurrent* transcription group. I am deeply grateful to the Friends of MKI Board Member Maria Sturm, who founded a similar group at the German Society of Pennsylvania, and to Antje Petty for their leadership on this important initiative. Special thanks to Antje for developing the new webpage devoted to the Anna Seifert Letter Collection on our Institute’s website ([mki.wisc.edu/exhibits/virtual-exhibits-2/anna-seifert-letters/](http://mki.wisc.edu/exhibits/virtual-exhibits-2/anna-seifert-letters/)).

The success of the transcription group is a nice example of a “silver lining” of the pandemic, an opportunity for people from across the country and Germany to work together in real time on exciting projects. Similarly, our MKI Virtual Lectures, which have had as many as one hundred attendees, is another virtual way to share the fruits of research into the German-American experience across large and geographically diverse audiences. Many thanks to the Friends for your support and underwriting of these events.

While our virtual activities have become an important part of our outreach work, it is exciting to be able

to return to hosting in-person events in Madison and across the state. We value the face-to-face interactions we can have again, especially with our Friends. There is no substitute for an in-person Annual Meeting! Last summer’s gathering in Port Washington and Grafton was very enjoyable and we are already looking forward to coming together again next May in Monroe.

As 2022 draws to a close, we on the MKI staff have much to be grateful for, most especially the support from you, our Friends. Thank you for all you do to advance our work in the spirit of the Wisconsin Idea. We wish you and your families a healthy and happy holiday season *und einen guten Rutsch ins Neue Jahr!*

With gratitude,  
Mark

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## A Message from the President of the Friends of the Max Kade Institute

Greetings, Friends!

As 2022 is coming to a close, we reflect on another remarkable year at the Max Kade Institute thanks to its dedicated staff and you, our Friends, who have been crucial in supporting the MKI in so many ways. You have donated materials to the MKI Library and Archives, volunteered your time, made financial contributions, and above all supported the Institute with your membership in the Friends. We are especially grateful to our lifetime members!

Today I ask you, if you have not yet done so, to **please renew your membership in the Friends of the Max Kade Institute for 2023** and consider a financial contribution beyond your membership dues. Payments are tax-deductible and can be made online at [mkifriends.org/membership](http://mkifriends.org/membership) (preferred), or by using the form below and mailing it with your check.

**A membership in the Friends of the MKI makes a great holiday gift!**

In addition, you can help the Institute with a direct tax-deductible donation to the MKI at the UW Foundation and including the Institute in your planned giving: <https://mki.wisc.edu/support-the-max-kade-institute/>.

Please let us know if you have any ideas or suggestions on how we can best serve you, our Friends, and thank you again for your generous support!

Best wishes for a joyous holiday season and the new year ahead.

Warm regards,  
Kay Gruling, President

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# From Rags to Archives' Riches: German-Language Press in South Dakota and the Potential of Data Analytics

Randi Ramsden



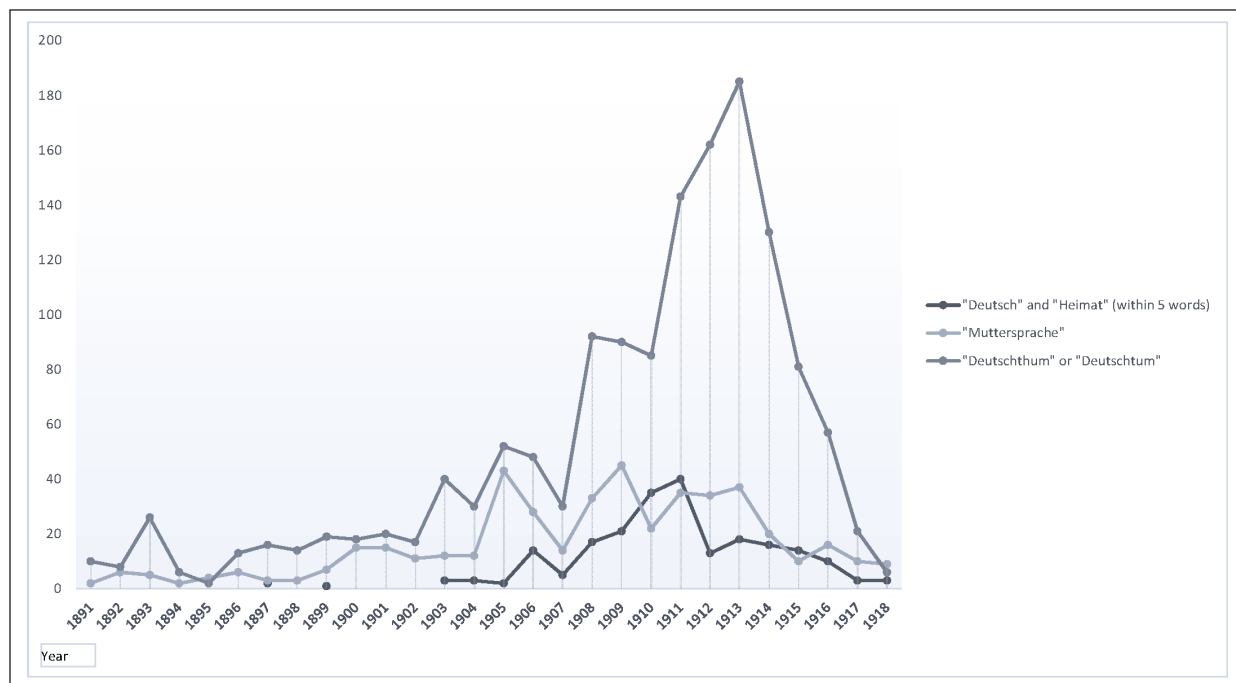
According to the US Newspaper Directory (<https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/search/titles/>), South Dakota has been home to 23 newspapers partially or entirely printed in German. The majority of them were published in the eastern half of the state. Many of the German-speaking immigrants who settled here arrived from Russia where they had previously established German colonies after accepting invitations extended by Catherine the Great in the 1760s and Alexander I in 1804. More than 300 German colonies mushroomed in Russia shortly after and remained largely independent with their own schools, churches, and businesses. After a political reform in 1874 limited the privileges the German settlers were enjoying, many decided to leave in hopes of maintaining their independence in the New World. Soon, new German linguistic islands formed in South Dakota and the newspapers published to serve these communities now grant researchers insight into the immigrant experi-

ence of Russia-Germans.

As one might expect, newspapers catering to a Russia-German readership tended to include news sections dedicated to reports from the German colonies in Russia. Additionally, there was an interest in Russia-Germans settling and establishing new communities around the world. The *Dakota Freie Presse* aimed to reach all of them and serve as the voice of Russia-Germans not only in the Dakotas, but in all of North and South America. An additional recurring theme in the South Dakota German-language press was the importance of the preservation of *Deutschtum*, or "Germanity." The *Süd Dakota Nachrichten* even pledged its dedication to this cause in its masthead: "Unparteiisch, zum Besten des Deutschthums" (Nonpartisan for the benefit of Germanity). Arguably, maintaining Germanity in the New World was more important to the readers and publishers of this paper than assimilating and getting involved in local politics. When in the fall of 1891 the *Nachrichten* ran into

budget issues due to subscribers not paying their dues, the editor pleaded with the readers to send their fees to help the paper, themselves, and Germanity in general (*Süd Dakota Nachrichten*, October 29, 1891): "Wir brauchen Geld! Diese Woche noch, jetzt, gleich! Wir müssen unsern Verbindlichkeiten nachkommen, Ihr habt das Geld, bringt es uns, bezahlt das Rückständige und für ein Jahr im Voraus und helft uns, wie Euch selbst und dem Deutschthum in Allgemeinen mit." (We need money! This week still, now, immediately! We have to uphold our commitments. You have the money, bring it to us, pay your delinquent dues and prepay for the next year, and help us and yourself and Germanity in general.)

A number of South Dakota's German-language newspapers have been digitized by the South Dakota Historical Society and are available in *Chronicling America* [[chroniclingamerica.loc.gov](https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/)], a free database hosted by the Library of Congress. Digitized newspaper databases are very convenient for researchers who



can access the material regardless of their location. In addition to the broadened accessibility, the meta-data associated with the digital files, as well as the searchable embedded OCR-generated text let users mine useful data with ease. With the help of data analytics, researchers are able to take a step back from reading individual pages and examine the bigger picture by detecting trends and developments throughout large numbers of pages, which in their analog state would take immense effort and time to dissect. Comparing the usage of specific words over time can help track linguistic or cultural changes and is useful in identifying turning points. As an example, searching South Dakota's German-language press available in *Chronicling America* for the usage of the terms "Muttersprache" (mother tongue), "Deutschthum" or "Deutschtum" (Germanity), and conducting a proximity search for the terms

"Deutsch" (German) and "Heimat" (home, homeland) within 5 words of each other amounts to 1,144 pages of newspapers between 1891 and 1918. Rather than analyzing the usage of each occurrence of these terms individually, the results instead can easily be turned into a spreadsheet in common programs, such as Microsoft Excel. With the use of a pivot table and chart options, a timeline can be produced to visualize the data. In the graphic, the 1,144 pages of newspapers are much more digestible, offer an overview of the usage of the terms over time, and raise new questions for further research queries.

According to the search results, the usage of "Muttersprache" became more prevalent after the turn of the century. Similarly, "Deutsch" and "Heimat" were not used in close proximity regularly until 1903 and then peaked in 1911, when the terms appeared on 40 pages. Taking a closer look at these pages to gain a better

understanding of the reason for this peak, we can see articles providing travel information for German immigrants visiting the homeland, poetry, organization of German immigrants in the US, and letters from Germans in Romania and Russia-Germans in Argentina. The majority of the results, however, can be traced back to a campaign run by and in the *Deutscher Herold* published in Sioux Falls, SD. The campaign lists reasons to maintain the *Herold*, including the preservation of the German language and Germanity in this country and the support for a readership of Germanic background: "Der 'Deutscher Herold' wird für alle Diejenigen herausgegeben, deren gemeinsame Mutter Germania ist, welche Deutsch denken und fühlen, ganz einerlei, wo früher ihre Heimat war." (The *Deutscher Herold* is published for those whose common

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## *Comanches and Germans on the Texas Frontier*

David Hünlich

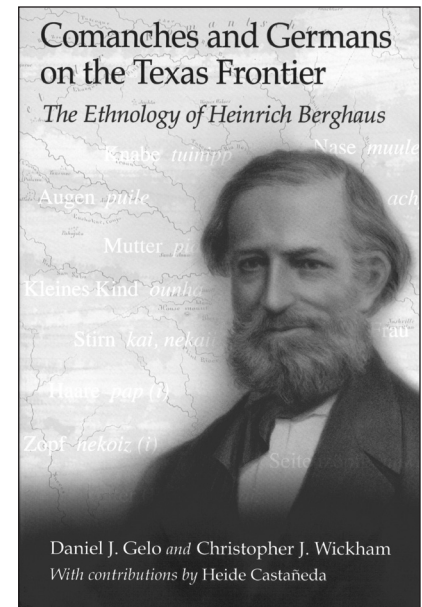
*Comanches and Germans on the Texas Frontier: The Ethnology of Heinrich Berghaus* by Daniel J. Gelo and Christopher J. Wickham, Texas A&M University Press, 2018, 272 pages.

If you believe the headlines in the German press over the summer of 2022, in the middle of a severe drought and ominous times in Europe, Germans had something even more important to discuss: Is the Mescalero Apache chief named “Winnetou”—a fictional hero created by the 19th century bestselling adventure novelist Karl May—under threat by “cancel culture”? Is a thorough discussion of racism in Karl May’s work overdue? Is Winnetou-fandom a variation of cultural appropriation? Or did a German publisher overreact when it pulled a children’s book off the shelves because it contained the word “squaw”? If you were unaware of the unusual attraction Native American topics exert on Germans, this summer offered ample opportunity to become familiar with the complications of this relationship. Thankfully, this review is not about fiction, not about Winnetou, and not about Karl May, but about “Comanches and Germans on the Texas Frontier.”

In their book, Daniel J. Gelo and Christopher J. Wickham, two professors emeriti of The University of Texas at San Antonio, are providing the first fully contextualized English

translation of a quintessential publication on Native American language relationships from 1851 by the German cartographer gone ethnographer Heinrich Berghaus. Berghaus' article "On the relationship of Shoshones, Comanches and Apaches" includes one of the earliest Comanche word lists containing 366 entries. The translation and glossary are placed in Part II (Chapters 9 and 12). Whether you are familiar with the history of German-Comanche contact in Texas or only interested in the Comanche language, you can gain much from the context and commentary the authors provide. Gelo is an anthropologist with a focus on Comanche culture and language, and Wickham is an expert of German literature and linguistics with a historic interest in Texas German migration.

Unlike previous introductions to the topic, the book begins by describing the situation of the Penateka Comanche band in Texas, before changing the perspective to a German migration society, the so-called *Adelsverein* founded in 1842, which shipped thousands of Germans to Texas where many perished under terrible circumstances. Penateka chief Santa Anna and others eventually agreed to a treaty with John O. Meusebach, the commissioner general of the *Adelsverein*, to allow settlements in their territory. The authors add a widely unknown detail: Even before Meusebach arrived, Ger-



man leadership had considered the Comanche as “potential allies against the Americans” (p. 18). Although for strategic reasons, the *Adelsverein* representatives were entering Texas with a favorable disposition towards the Comanche. This disposition crystallized in a treaty, secured German survival in two large settlements (Fredericksburg and New Braunfels), and eventually made the Berghaus contribution to Comanche ethnography possible.

A central figure in the story is a 25-year-old German immigrant named Emil Kriewitz who lived with the Penateka band of the Comanche for three months after the treaty was established in 1847. Kriewitz was held as a hostage and served as an intermediary between the Penateka and the German settlements with the purpose of establishing peace.

The heavy focus the book places on Heinrich Berghaus somewhat dwarfs the role of Kriewitz as the primary field worker and documentary linguist at work. Berghaus, who never visited Texas, used Kriewitz' notes and word list to produce his article. Before we learn more about Kriewitz, however, the authors insert several short chapters on Berghaus: his imminent role as a cartographer, his relationship to Humboldt, his interdisciplinary interests, his world view as a German nationalist of his time. While the contribution of Berghaus to the study of ethnicity becomes sufficiently clear, the chapters in Part I of the book could possibly have been combined. In chapter 7, Gelo and Wickham return to Kriewitz and raise an important question: Why did Kriewitz create his word list in the first place? The authors refrain from speculation, and yet try to reconstruct the interactions between Berghaus and Kriewitz. But there are clues elsewhere. Ferdinand Herff, a young medical doctor who was one of the earliest settlers on the Llano River, writes in 1847\* that Penateka chief Santa Anna arrived in New Braunfels "in Begleitung des um die Sprache zu erlernen bei den Comanches lebenden Hrn. v. Kriewitz" (in the company of Mr. Kriewitz who lived with the Comanche to learn their language). If Herff is accurate in his description, learning the language was not a side product of the residency with the Penateka, but possibly its purpose. In that case, the background of the lexicon was practical, and not academic.

In Part II of the book, the authors make the decision to separate the glossary from the core translation of

the Berghaus article (Chapter 9). This makes the entire article much more accessible to linguists like me who are unfamiliar with Native American studies, especially after a quick skim of Gelo and Wickham's commentary (Chapter 10), and with a map pulled up on your screen. You can then fully enjoy the juxtaposition of old views and modern insights. It is fascinating to see how field notes from 150 years ago add to our current corpus of knowledge. In an overview of the Kriewitz glossary in Chapter 11, the authors prepare the reader for the lexicon by discussing possible transcription and elicitation errors. They make many astute observations about the elicitation situation and name candidates for dialectal differences or internal language change. But the book is not a volume in Comanche linguistics so that many questions remain to be raised and answered in the Comanche research community. For starters, the authors provide not only English translations of the German terms, but also modern Comanche dictionary entries next to the Kriewitz glossary in Chapter 12. While this is a good basis for analysis, it might prove difficult for people unfamiliar with German pronunciation and transcription conventions to find the patterns that were salient to the German listener at the time. When pronouncing the German transcription out loud (while bearing the difficulty of vowel transcription in mind), a comparison to Modern Comanche terms yields a rough estimate of 50 % of the entries being almost entirely equivalent between the two varieties while another 25 % seem to be related; another 25 % bear no resemblance to the linguist other-

wise unfamiliar with the Comanche lexicon. In other words: there are ample research opportunities hidden here.

After the vigorous summer debates of 2022, the old Karl May publications received a bump in sales. One would wish that "Comanches and Germans on the Texas Frontier" would experience the same uptick of interest. Not only because it is a formidable contribution, meticulously researched and well written, but also because Karl May's fictional characterization of the Comanche as 'arch enemies of Winnetou and his German friends' is disturbingly far from reality. Nobody debating Karl May's work seems to be aware. For anyone sincere about understanding the origins of the German fascination with Native American life, this book would be a sober starting point. 🦄

#### NOTE

\* Herff, Ferdinand "Über die Darmstädter Communisten-Gesellschaft in Texas," in *Allgemeine Auswanderungs=Zeitung*, Bremen/ New York; No. 43; October 23, 1848. [https://zs.thulb.uni-jena.de/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/jportal\\_derivate\\_00033139/AWZ\\_2\\_1848\\_Nr043.pdf](https://zs.thulb.uni-jena.de/servlets/MCRFileNodeServlet/jportal_derivate_00033139/AWZ_2_1848_Nr043.pdf)

**David Hünlich** holds a Ph.D. in Linguistics from the University of Texas at Austin. He is currently Senior Lecturer of German at the University of Texas at San Antonio.

Continued from page 1

Group [see sidebar on page 12] is modeled after a similar project at the German Society of Pennsylvania.

At first glance, Anna's letters seem to be just simple notes from a mother to her son. Taken together, though, they offer unique insights into a rural German-American community during the Great Depression, the world of women on a small dairy farm, and the use of language(s) in this corner of Southeast Wisconsin.

The extended Seifert family in rural Dodge County is a good example of how, in some parts of the state, heritage varieties of German flourished as a primary language of communication well into the twentieth century. Lester Seifert, born in the town of Juneau, spoke both the *Oderbrüchisch* Low German dialect and standard German in the third generation.

His mother, Anna Ernestine (Jagow) Seifert (1876–1958), was also born in Dodge County. Her parents, Louise Dorothea Fellwock (1835–1901) and Friedrich Wilhelm Jagow (1836–1909) came to America as children, arriving with their families in New York on September 15, 1846, on the same ship, the *Russia*. They traveled with a larger group of emigrants from the Oderbruch, the low-lying marshlands along the Oder River that straddle the former Prussian provinces of Brandenburg and Pomerania and today's northern border of Germany and Poland. In Dodge County, the emigrants from the *Russia* joined earlier settlers from their home region.

Julius Seifert (1872–1933), Lester's father, was born in Hustisford, Dodge County, about ten miles from Juneau. As a young man, he bought a 1480-acre tract of land next to his

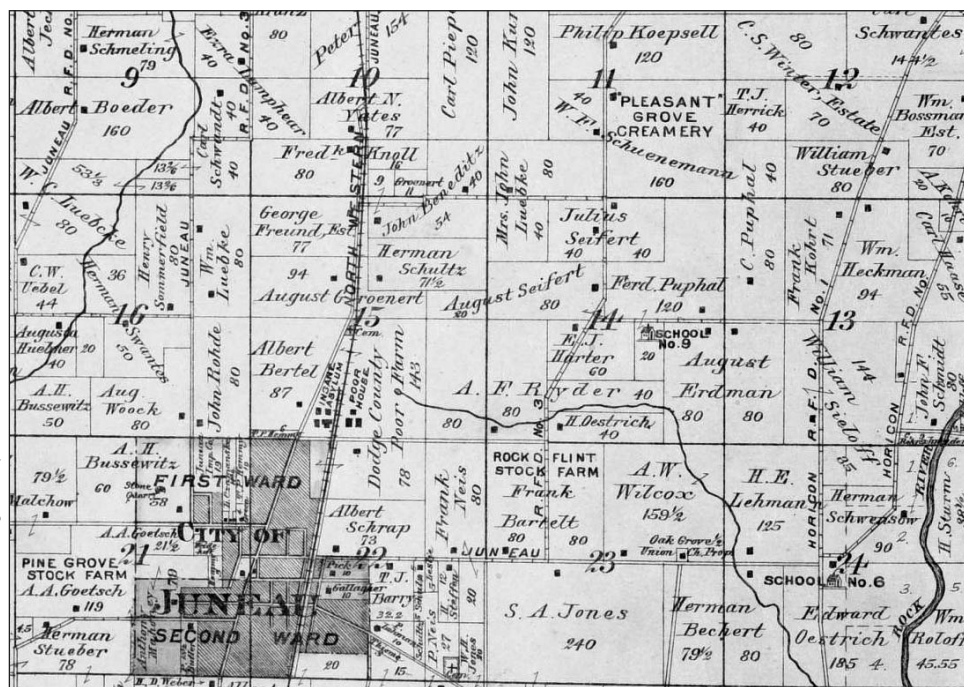


Anna Jagow and Julius Seifert on their wedding day, May 22, 1902

Source: findagrave.com/memorial/16405757

parent's farmstead, which became the dairy farm where Lester grew up with his siblings Edna (1903–1985), Edgar (1908–1979), Hilbert (1909–1993), and Norman (1914–1985). Almost all the neighboring farmers were German, too.

In 1983, Lester wrote about his past: "In my family we were brought up trilingually. We used English in the schools, and with people who knew no German we were rather surprised at such ignorance. We used a variety of Standard German in church, to a limited extent in the parochial school, and with Germans who did not know our dialect. The language of the home and the farm, of play with most of the children from neighboring farms, of large family gatherings and parties and picnics—there were dozens of such celebrations—for all these things our language was the *Oderbrüchisch* Low-German dialect."<sup>1</sup>



Farms of August Seifert and his son Julius Seifert in Oak Grove Township, Dodge County, Wisconsin

Source: Plat Book of Dodge County, 1910

Anna wrote her letters in standard German, using the *Kurrent* script she had learned in a German *Gemeinde-schule* (Lutheran parochial school) that she attended from age 6 to 14.<sup>2</sup> Located seven miles from her home, the school's language of instruction was German in all subject areas (reading, writing, arithmetic, world history, church history, catechism, and the Bible). In addition, students received one hour of English instruction in the morning. The school day was divided into two parts, from 9 a.m. to 12 p.m. and from 1 p.m. to 4 p.m. Unlike the neighboring "English schools," the German *Gemeinde-schule* was in session all year. Overall, there was a high respect for education and teachers in the German farming communities. According to Lester, "[t]here was, rather, a good deal of admiration for the talents and the high degree of education possessed by [highly educated teachers]. In my own family, for example, in which the different branches were farmers from the time they settled in Dodge County in the 1830s and 1840s, it was genuine praise to be



Photo of Anna Jagow, far right, and her two sisters before Anna married Julius Seifert

characterized as 'so gelehrt wie der Lehrer Balg.' (as learned as teacher Balg).

With great interest, Anna read *The Juneau Independent* and "the Milwaukee paper," as well as articles in both English and German that Lester sent her, although she regretted that her English was not as good as her German: "Dear Lester, we were delighted to receive the paper with the article about Professor Kurat(h).<sup>3</sup> Now we know what he looks like. He must be a very capable man that he can speak so many languages. I am still sorry to this day that my parents were not able to send me to [a public] school [after age 14]. Then it would be easier for me to speak English. I still have a couple of columns to read. [...] I read the interesting passages aloud to Norman." [1939-11-02]<sup>4</sup> Earlier, Anna mentioned that she didn't send a birthday card to her non-German-speaking daughter-in-law, "because to write in English is so hard for me." [1938-10-31]

Anna understood that German was on the decline even in her rural community and at her German Lutheran church. In 1935 she wrote, "The service was nice. There were four pastors [...] who all gave a speech. Reinhard's speech was very beautiful and delivered in very fine German." [1935-11-19] Only four years later, however, she commented: "I got to meet the new pastor. German is difficult for him, but he still must give his sermon in German. [At the funeral], he just gave a short speech in English." [1939-11-16]

Adhering to common spelling conventions, Anna wrote personal names, place names, and English words in Latin script. It is fascinat-

## Scholar Dead in Mayville

### Rites Held for Gerhardt Balg, High Authority on Gothic Language

America's foremost authority on the Gothic language, Gerhardt Balg, Ph. D., was buried Monday in Mayville, Wis., where he made his home for many years. Dr. Balg, who would have been 81 in November, was the author of many illuminating tomes on the subject of the Gothic language. He was a personal friend of Carl Schurz and tutored members of several prominent Milwaukee families. Dr. Balg died last Thursday. Among those who attended his funeral were Mrs. Fred Pabst and Miss Paula Uihlein, who were, once his pupils.



Gerhardt Balg

Balg died last Thursday. Among those who attended his funeral were Mrs. Fred Pabst and Miss Paula Uihlein, who were, once his pupils.

Obituary for Gerhardt Balg, *Milwaukee Journal*, Oct. 3, 1933

ing, though, to see which words Anna defined as "English" by using the Latin script, and which English words she wrote in *Kurrent*, possibly indicating that to her these expressions were part of the vernacular German in Wisconsin. Examples of words written in Latin script are "car," "road," "tractor," "truck," "hospital," "nurse," "Watertown Fair Day," "card club," "dining room," "corn crib," "silo," "check," "money order," "turkey," "musk rat," "peaches" [*sic*], and interestingly, "beer."

Sometimes Anna used both English and German terms for seemingly

the same thing, until one notices that there is a different meaning. The 1930s were a time when snow removal methods changed on Wisconsin's rural roads. Anna used the word *Schneepflug* (snow plow) to mean either a horse-drawn snow plow or—especially when she referred to a paved road—a small truck with a mounted shovel. In her letter from February 1936, Anna described an entirely new snow removal machine: a “*stim Schaufel*” [steam shovel]: “On the cement road near Lüdkes, they are now using a steam shovel. They are throwing the snow out on one side, just as they did with the dirt when they dug the ditch here.” [1936-02-18]

English words written in *Kurrent* are often spelled according to German phonetic interpretation, such as *Inschurenz* (insurance), *schmoken* (to smoke), *Karpet* (carpet), *Zein* (sign), *butschern* (to butcher), *renten* (to rent), *penten* (to paint), *kannen* (to can).

In other instances Anna used English expressions and translated them directly into German: *Weil ich blos zwei Kühe melke, nimmt es nicht lange.* (Because I only milk two cows, it doesn't take long.) [1940-30-28] *Sie haben Ralph's Vater abgelegt in die Fabrik.* (They laid off Ralph's father at the factory.) [1940-07-24] *Er musste die Fenz fixen.* (He had to fix the fence.) [1934-01-31] *Schreib mir wie du das Hemd gleichst.* (Write me how you like the shirt.) [1941-04-10] *Er hat schon kalt für 4 Wochen.* (He has had a cold for four weeks already.) *Habe eben die Nachbars Frau aufgerufen* (I just rang up the neighbor on the phone.) [1941-04-03] *Leos sind gemuft.* (Leos moved.) [1939-10-05]

Occasionally, Anna's spelling betrayed the *Oderbrüchisch* dialect she spoke at home, for example when she spelled the word for yesterday as *jestern* instead of the standard German *gestern*.

Anna started writing to her son after he had entered Northwestern Lutheran College in Watertown, 20 miles from home to study for the pastorate. Their correspondence continued after Lester graduated from Northwestern in 1937, pursued an MA at the UW–Madison German Department, and later a Ph.D. in Germanic Linguistics at Brown University. Unfortunately, we do not have any letters after Lester graduated and joined the U.S. military as a cryptologist stationed in Washington, DC. As with most letter collections, only one side of the exchange survived, and there are months-long gaps, when Lester spent the summers at home. The relatively close proximity of the correspondents meant that they saw each other frequently and discussed topics in person that the letters only allude to, making interpretations difficult at times.

By the time Lester left home, only his parents and his brother Norman lived on the farm, and after Julius Seifert's death in January 1933, it was just Anna and Norman. Anna wrote about her daily life, the running of the farm, news about family members and the community, celebrations and events. While she did not discuss world affairs, or social and economic issues in an abstract way, her sentences painted a vivid snapshot of her rural German-Wisconsin community.

Many of Anna's letters started with her recounting her day, which usually



Lester Seifert's 1937 Northwestern College graduation photo, *The Black and Red* commencement issue

began with milking a few cows and other household and farm chores: “This morning, I already churned some butter, but we didn't have that much milk. Norman gave the fresh milk to the little piglets. He says I am working too hard.” [1933-11-02] The extended family helped each other, especially during harvest time and slaughtering season: “I will write only a few lines today, because we are about to start with the sausage making. We butchered [our pigs] on Saturday, and yesterday Uncle August's. We both helped him and Aunt Em because they helped us, too.” [1934-12-12] Nevertheless, with only Norman and Anna working on the farm, labor was in short supply, and they had to make hard economic decisions whether to hire people, rent machinery, or try to manage on their own.

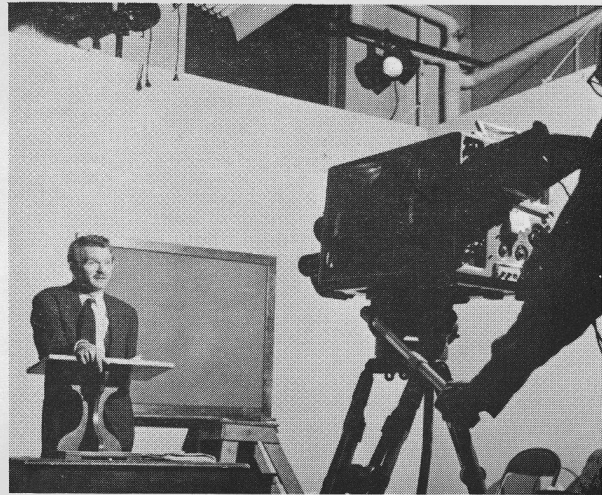
Other perennial farm topics included the many other chores, prices for livestock, feed, and milk; milk quality and fat content; the

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Flyer for the University of Wisconsin Extension Division, advertising new courses on WHA-TV starting May 3, 1954. Lester Seifert is at the podium before the camera.

well-being of the farm animals (cows and horses have names!), and of course the weather. In the spring, Norman struggled to plow the fields without his horses getting stuck in the muck; sometimes it rained too much, sometimes it rained too little; and the Wisconsin winter brought additional challenges with deep snow and freezing temperatures: "The road is completely closed. [The milk truck can't get through]. All the milk is transported by sled. This morning it was below 30 [degrees]. Yesterday, they tried to shovel the road free. Norman helped, too." [1935-01-26]

In the bitter cold, Norman lost two of his toes to frostbite and suffered from chilblains. Other maladies were frequent topics of Anna's letters, too, including her own "bad legs" and bouts with dizziness. There were measles, mumps, flu, and scarlet fever epidemics, one of which claimed the life of one of Lester's friends at school. Having just experienced a pandemic ourselves, it was interesting for our transcription group to

read about public health measures during these outbreaks: "The little ones [grandchildren] have whooping cough. The doctor put a notice on the house. Now they are not allowed to go to school." [1939-05-19]

A major concern in all of Anna's letters is Lester's well-being. "I thought you were sick because I didn't hear from you. If you only had five minutes to write to me, I wouldn't worry so much that you might have gotten hurt while playing ball." [1935-10-17] As it turns out, Lester was on the college football team, and Anna eagerly followed the team's schedule in the student paper *The Black and Red*. A few weeks after she wrote the above letter, the paper describes a zero to 65 loss against Lake Forest College: "The Black and Red gridders submitted to a thorough drubbing at the hands of a powerful team. However, Lake Forest was favored to win. It was not an upset. We omit the casualties." At Northwestern College, Lester was also a member of the theater group

and *The Black and Red* editorial team.

While Lester still lived in Watertown, Anna mailed him packages with clothing, food, and occasionally money. Lester still brought home his dirty laundry and any clothes in need of mending, an arrangement that ended once Lester moved to Madison and later on the East Coast. Now Anna was more concerned: "Did you buy a hat? Did the Chinese man mend your socks? Do not walk around without a hat! How does your nose hold up in the climate there? Where are you going to church now?" [1939-11-24]

By the late 1930s, money was extremely tight on the Seifert farm, but other neighbors and family members suffered even more. Lester's older sister Edna and her husband Leo were evicted from the farm they had rented and got into legal trouble when they cut a lock on a granary to retrieve their harvest. "Leo still has not found work. There are so many unemployed people, [...] There is an auction at Emil Seegert's place.

He is selling Budd [his horse], too. [...] On Monday, Norman helped Höhlers move out.” [1939-10-05] Edna also struggled to find and keep work, while taking care of her small children. “[Edna] stopped working in the factory kitchen. She couldn’t do the job well enough.” [1939-11-02] “[She] quit her job in the laundry. It was hard work. She couldn’t sleep or eat anymore, but the pay was good. Then she stayed with me for a few days and helped clean the house, while I took care of her little ones.” [1939-11-16] “Edna cannot join us this weekend because she often must work on Saturdays. Last Sunday she had to work for 8 hours in the evening [in a doctor’s household]. She earns 25 cents an hour, and the doctor’s wife also sometimes gives her other things. Last Sunday they entertained 15 guests for dinner, and Edna got leftovers and brought me some, too.” [1940-04-04]

Some neighbors were much harder hit: “At three in the morning [the livestock trader] came to Miller’s. They had six cows who could not stand up anymore. Two of them, they could load on the truck, but four had

to be moved with a stone boat.<sup>5</sup> He did not have any fodder anymore. He only fed them straw. [Millers] will move off the farm still this spring. Elmer [Miller] paid \$1,500 for the farm, and now he will lose everything.” [1940-04-11]

Lester’s letters opened a window to a bigger world for Anna, and she followed him vicariously as he traveled by train, car, and bike to places she herself had never been to. “Your beautiful trip to Boston must have been very interesting. I often said to Pa: ‘If only we could travel sometime, somewhere.’ But for farmers that is difficult. During the last years of Pa’s life, we had help, but by then he was not healthy anymore.” [1940-03-28] In her own world Anna was open-minded and enjoyed new experiences. “When I visited Aunt Ida in Yorkville, we had chop suey. I like it a lot, much better than chili. [Aunt Ida] made some *Schnitzel*, too, and then we poured the chop suey over them.” [1939-02-23]

Throughout the years, Lester told his mother about his studies and research. When he started his German heritage language survey in Wisconsin,

Anna was one of the first people he interviewed. One can tell from her joyful and youthful voice how much she enjoyed the experience. It is thus only fitting that the last piece of correspondence in the Anna Seifert Collection is a brief note from Lester in May 1955 with a pamphlet announcing a new “Conversational German” course that he was leading on UW–Madison Extension television.

On October 1, 1989, Lester Seifert was featured in the *Wisconsin State Journal’s* “Know Your Madsonian” column that started: “Lester Seifert, noted scholar and recipient of the prestigious German Cross of Merit award, could have become a farmer when he was choosing a career more than half a century ago. But his parents’ farm in Dodge County was too small to be divided between five children. ‘If we had more land, I would have been a farmer,’ Seifert said. ‘I enjoyed farming.’ Seifert also considered the ministry, knowing it would please his mother. ‘She had wanted me to become a Lutheran minister,’ Seifert explained, and a laugh bubbled through his voice as he added that ‘she forgave me, of course.’ She not only forgave him for pursuing a life of studying and teaching about her native tongue, German, she was proud he said.”<sup>6</sup>

You can find examples from the Anna Seifert Letters Collection with transcriptions and additional background information on a new MKI Webpage: [mki.wisc.edu/exhibits/virtual-exhibits-2/anna-seifert-letters/](http://mki.wisc.edu/exhibits/virtual-exhibits-2/anna-seifert-letters/). Also included are a few audio samples of Anna’s recorded conversation with Lester from the late 1940s

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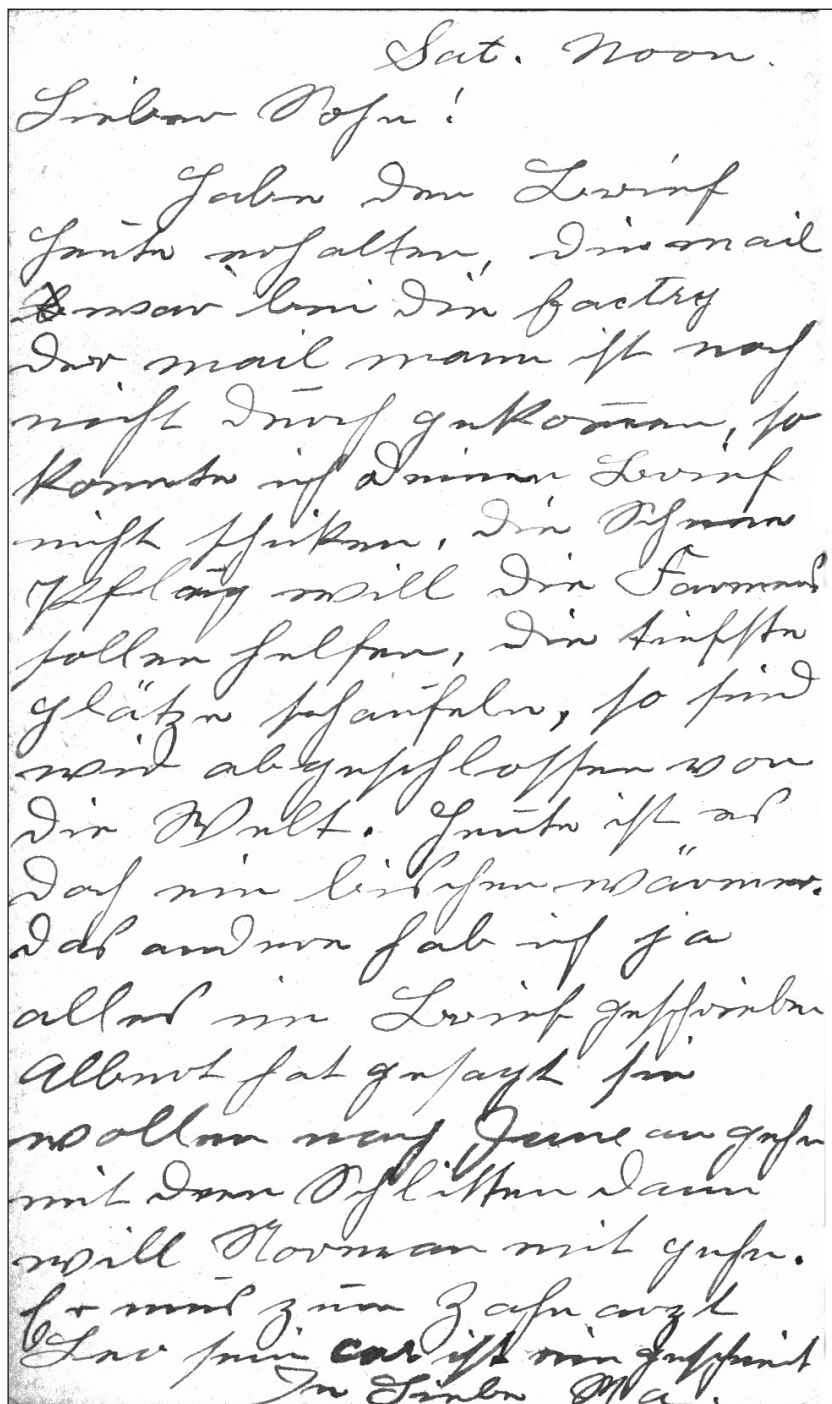
**[apetty@wisc.edu](mailto:apetty@wisc.edu)**

[This is neither a workshop to learn how to read *Kurrent* nor a translation group. Documents are exclusively from the MKI collection]

*Continued on page 15*

## Anna Seifert's Postcard to Her Son Lester, January 25, 1932

This postcard is the first piece of correspondence in the Max Kade Institute's "Anna Seifert Collection," that Anna Seifert wrote to her son Lester after he entered Northwestern College in Watertown, Wisconsin, in the fall of 1931. Writing in German in *Kurrent* script, Anna also used English words that she wrote in Latin script (indicated in italics in the transcription and translation.)



Sat. Noon.

Lieber Sohn!

Habe den Brief  
Heute erhalten, die *mail*  
b war bei die *factory*.  
Der *mail mann* ist noch  
nicht durch gekommen, so  
konnte ich Deinen Brief  
nicht schicken. Die Schnee  
Pflug will die Farmers  
sollen helfen, die tiefste  
plätze schaufeln, so sind  
wir abgeschlossen von  
die Welt. Heute ist es  
doch ein bischen wärmer.  
Das andere hab ich ja  
alles im Brief geschrieben.  
Albert hat gesagt sie  
wollen nach *Juneau* gehn  
mit dem Schlitten dann  
will Norman mit gehn.  
Er muß zum Zahnarzt.  
Leo sein *car* ist ein geschneit.

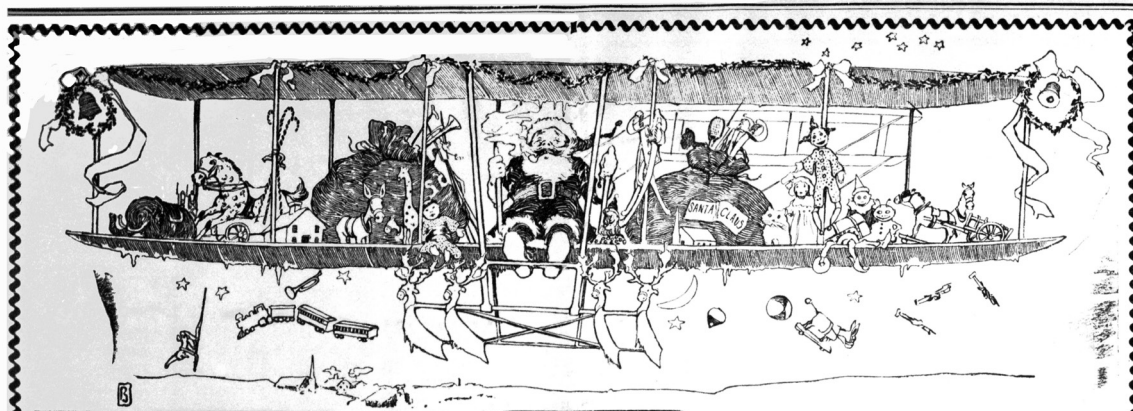
In Liebe Ma.

Saturday, noon

Dear son!

Received the letter today. The *mail* was at the *factory*. The *mail man* was not able to get through, yet. Therefore, I was not able to send your letter. The snowplow [driver] wants the farmers to help him shovel the deepest spots. We are thus isolated from the world. Today it is a little warmer, though. Everything else I wrote in the letter. Albert said that they will go to *Juneau* by sled. Then Norman will join them. He must go to the dentist. Leo's car is snowed in.  
With love,  
Ma

## Santa as an Aeronaut

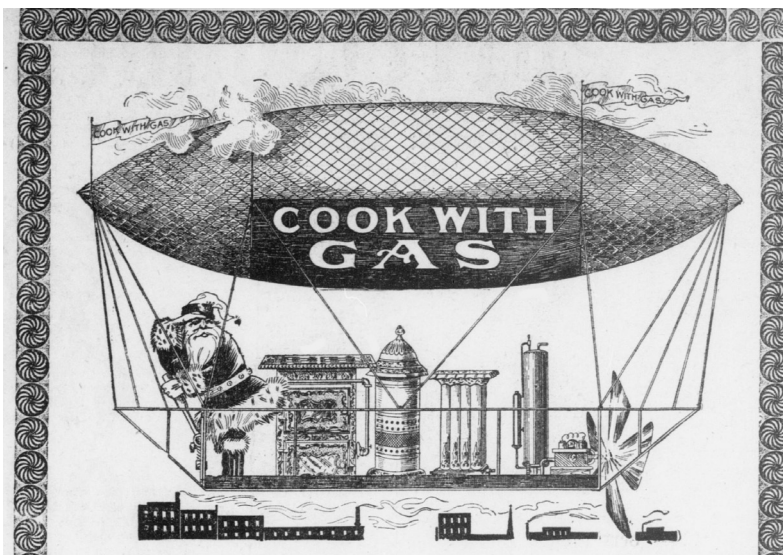


**Der Weihnachtsmann im Luftschiff „Eureka“**

In Eurer Apotheke ist der Weihnachtsmann in seinem Luftschiff „Eureka“ eingetroffen und hat eine riesengroße Auswahl von Weihnachtsgeschenken aller Art für Groß und Klein, Alt und Jung hinterlassen.

Wollt Ihr Euren Angehörigen, Freunden oder Euren Herzliebsten eine Weihnachtsfreude bereiten, so geht zur Eureka Apotheke, dort könnt Ihr bekommen, was Euer Herz begehrt, zu so niedrigen Preisen, welche von keinem Store in Eureka und Umgegend übertroffen werden können. Kommt recht zeitig, ehe die schönsten Sachen vergriffen sind. Unsere Sachen werden garantiert.

|                                                                                                                                                                 |                                                                                                                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                                                                              |                                                                                                                                                        |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Prachtvolle Goldwaren</b><br>Armspangen, Ringe, Halsketten, Knutadeln, Uhrketten, Manschettenknöpfe, Schlipsnadeln, Medaillons sowie viele andere Goldwaren. | Toiletartikel, Parfüme, Artikel zur Brandmalerei, Schreibmaterialien in feinen Weihnachtsschiffen, Füllfederhalter, Gefülltes Glas, die besten „Lillibridge“ Candles usw. Christbaumschmuck u. Weihnachtspostkarten. | <b>„Edison“ Phonographen. „Eastman“ Kodaks (Abnehmer). Puppen und sonstige Spielwaren für Kinder. Auch haben wir eine große Auswahl Märchenbücher für Kinder.</b><br>• • • Kommt so zeitig wie möglich • • • | <b>Prachtvolle Silberwaren</b><br>Messer, Gabeln und Löffel, Becher, Silberne Haarbürsten, Kämme und Spiegel, Handgemaltes Porzellan sowie Lederwaren. |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|



Am Weihnachts-Abend, zu später Stunde,  
 Im Luftschiff macht Santa Claus seine Runde;  
 Von dem Nordpol kam er nach Baltimore,  
 Brachte nützlichere Geschenke, als jemals zuvor.  
 Alt' Santa Claus ist weise und flug:  
 D'rum bracht' er einen Gasofen, der erspart genug.  
 „Die Gas-Compagnie.“

As the Wright brothers sparked aeronautic enthusiasm across the country in the beginning of the 20th century, the imagery of Santa on an aircraft became quite popular in advertising around the holiday season. Examples of this advertising trend can be found in German-language newspapers as well: “Santa Claus on Airship ‘Eureka’” advertised the large variety of Christmas gifts available at the Eureka Pharmacy in South Dakota (*Eureka Post*, December 16, 1909). Further east, a Baltimore gas company had Santa deliver gas stoves on board a zeppelin, the “airship” first patented in Germany in 1895 (*Der Deutsche Correspondent*, December 23, 1903). Evidently, to children and newspaper-reading adults at the time, Santa was an early adopter of new technology.

Both German-language newspapers, the *Eureka Post* and *Der Deutsche Correspondent*, are available in *Chronicling America* [[chroniclingamerica.loc.gov](http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov)].

Continued from page 5

mother is Germania, who think and feel German no matter where their homeland used to be.) Upon closer examination, similar campaigns run by the *Herold* contributed to the peak usage of “Deutschthum” or “Deutschtum” in 1913. An advertisement-like text block repeatedly published that year reads: “True Germanity is not tied to borders and the *Deutsche Herold* is published for all children of Germania [...]” Another reminds readers to subscribe to the *Herold* to honor Germanity.

The data that can be derived from the growing number of digitized newspapers available online lends itself perfectly to such quantitative analyses. The exciting potential of digital humanities, however, cannot and will not replace the qualitative analysis of the historical texts at the center of this research. Unlike data commonly collected in the natural sciences, newspaper writing, OCR-generated texts, and language can make for messy data. Nevertheless, it can be helpful in processing large amounts of newspaper pages and guide researchers’ decisions on where to dig deeper and consult the text. 

If you are interested in the political culture in South Dakota’s German-language press, find Ramsden’s essay “Printing History in the Making: Political Culture in South Dakota’s German-Language Press, 1880-1915” in *The Plains Political Tradition: Essays on South Dakota’s Political Culture, Volume 4*.

Continued from page 12

(with translation), and more details on Lester Seifert’s German heritage language research. If you are interested in the entire letter corpus, please contact Kevin Kurdylo at mki@library.wisc.edu. 

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Seifert, Lester W. J. 1983. Some German contributions to Wisconsin Life. *Yearbook of German-American Studies* 18: 173-184. [https://mki.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1100/2014/10/Some\\_German\\_Contributions\\_to\\_Wisconsin\\_Life-Seifert.pdf](https://mki.wisc.edu/wp-content/uploads/sites/1100/2014/10/Some_German_Contributions_to_Wisconsin_Life-Seifert.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> Anna described her schooling in an interview with Lester that he conducted in the late 1940s as part of his German Heritage Language Survey.

<sup>3</sup> Hans Kurath (1891–1992), Professor of German and Linguistics, and Lester Seifert’s Ph.D. advisor at Brown University.

<sup>4</sup> Brackets refer to the date a letter was written. All translations are mine.

<sup>5</sup> A sled-like device pulled by oxen or horses to haul heavy objects, such as rocks on fields.

<sup>6</sup> “Know Your Madisonian: Lester Seifert,” *Wisconsin State Journal*, October 1, 1989, page 2G.

The Newsletter of the Friends of the Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies is published three times a year at the University of Wisconsin–Madison. Submissions are invited and should be sent to:

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