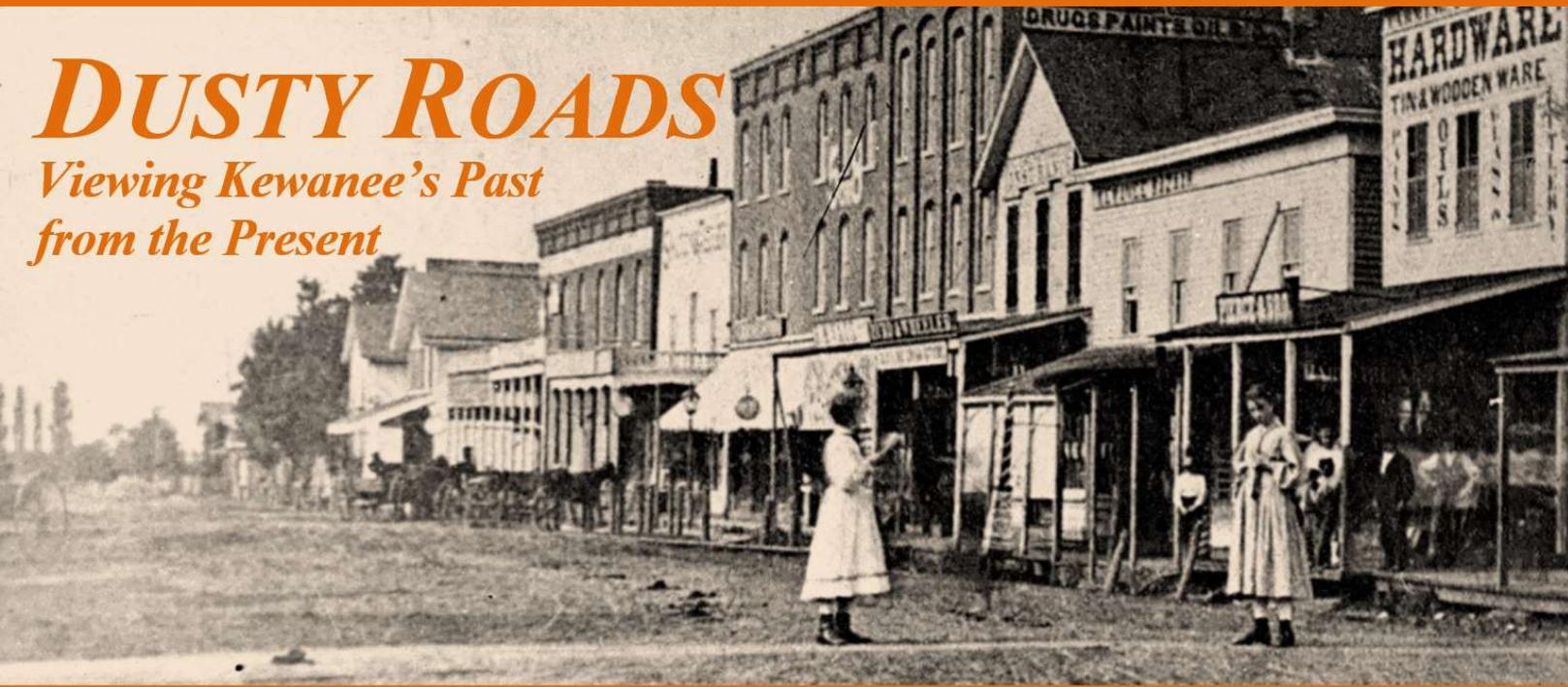


DUSTY ROADS

Viewing Kewanee's Past
from the Present



by Dean Karau

September 2020

From Village to Village

Tracing the Steps of Kewanee Forebears in Far Northeastern Germany

by Michael Fischer

(This week's column is written by Michael Fischer, my third cousin. Michael's ancestors from a number of his family tree branches lived and worked in and around Wethersfield and Kewanee beginning in the 1850s. Michael is the former Executive Director of the Sierra Club, and he is a member of the Kewanee Historical Society and the Henry County Genealogical Society.)

Narrow shafts of sunlight through the high-up louvers gave us barely enough light as we climbed the steep ladder, inching our way past heavy rough-hewn beams. Pastorin Cornelia Müller whispered, "Don't ring the bell - people will come running to see who has died."

Yes, we were climbing up the inside of the wooden belfry atop the simple stone-and-brick French Reformed Church in the

small village of Gross Ziethen in the Uckermark section of Brandenburg, 40 miles northeast of Berlin.

When we reached the top, there was the bell: bronze and large—about 4 ½ - 5 ft. in diameter at its widest. On the rim of the bell were cast the names of the church's founders – including Villain and Benoit - Dean Karau's and my 6th great-grandfathers!

My wife, Jane Rogers, and I had met Dean in Berlin several days before so we could travel together to the Uckermark in search of our shared relatives, especially the Benoit (Binno) and Bartz families, who had immigrated to Kewanee in the mid-1800s. Dean spent several days before and after researching in the Central Archives of the Evangelical Church in Berlin (EZA) in Berlin.



Dean had done extraordinary research about the history of our French Huguenot ancestors who, trying to escape religious persecution, moved from the south of France to the north, then to Belgium (then the Spanish Netherlands), and finally east to Brandenburg. Immediately after the 1685 revocation of the Edict of Nantes, which had granted freedom from persecution, our forebears accepted the invitation from the Elector of Brandenburg to resettle villages in the Uckermark. The Elector, Frederick the Great's grandfather, was faced with the disastrous results of the Thirty Years' War coupled with a plague, which had demolished and abandoned many villages. Buildings were in ruins, fields were returning to forest, and no taxes were being generated. So the Huguenot refugees, our ancestors included, were welcomed to Brandenburg.



French Reformed Church in Gross-Ziethen

Amazingly, only 40 years after their arrival in Gross Ziethen with just the belongings they could carry with them in their wagons, they had succeeded to become prosperous enough to build the church, cast and raise the bronze bell, and set down firm roots for almost two centuries.

In the beginning, those settlers remained steadfastly French, speaking French and worshiping not in German Lutheran churches, but in their own French Reformed churches. That lasted for more than a century—until the French they hated, in the person of Napoleon and his army, came to town. Finally, they started speaking German, and considered themselves to be German - but they kept their Huguenot churches and revered the Huguenot cross.



A Huguenot cross woven in silk in the Gross Ziethen church. The Huguenots were renowned silk weavers.

We were extremely fortunate to find two wonderful guides to our history: Reverend Cornelia Müller, the minister in several of the village churches, and Herr Sebastian Panwitz, a

Berlin-based family researcher. We stayed for three nights in the small bed-and-breakfast owned by Rev. "Connie," as we grew to know her, and her husband, Werner. The fingers of Dean, Connie, and Sebastian can be seen tracing our relatives in the Villain anhentafel, brought for our review by a Gross Ziethen high school teacher and a likely distant cousin, Robin Villain.



Was it a successful, enjoyable, memorable trip? Absolutely! Did we find signs of our Kewanee ancestors? Indeed, we did.

Even though we were less than two hours' drive from metropolitan Berlin, the dozen villages we visited were little-changed over the centuries. No convenience stores, no gasoline stations, no billboards, no supermarkets. Small, quiet towns,



Gross Ziethen church memorial for those who died in Napoleonic wars

Gross Ziethen memorial for those who died in the world wars

Klein Ziethen church memorial for those who died in Napoleonic wars

each with its small church, graveyard, and monuments to those who had died in the Napoleonic War, World War I, and World War II.

The villages are not far from each other—some less than a few kilometers apart (like Klein und Gross Ziethen,) others connected by a half-hour drive over narrow, tree-arborescent roads through fields of bright yellow rape. The “big city” of Angermünde, roughly in the center of the Uckermark, has a population of 10,000, just less than Kewanee. Most of the villages have a population of a hundred or fewer people.

The landscape is not dissimilar to that of Minnesota and northern Illinois—a relatively flat but rolling plain, carved out by glaciers leaving many small lakes and gravelly, sandy soil. Less than an hour south of the Baltic Sea, much of the area is in one of Germany’s largest parks and forested areas: the United Nations’ Schorfeide-Chorin Biosphere Reserve.

You can imagine the reaction when this shiny rental car pulled into each village, and Americans emerged with their umbrellas to tour the churches, study the gravestones, and walk the narrow,



View of Gross-Ziethen from the top of the French Reformed Church

treelined, sometimes cobblestoned streets, often in a drizzle.



Dean with baker Miranda Parstein, we met with retired fire chief Guenther Sauer, who displayed his gold medal. In Klein Ziethen, we toured the Cossäthenhofs (small plots of land in the village with a little adjoining acreage) where our Benoit/Binno relatives lived.

In Neuruppin, the birthplace of Theodor Fontane (pronounced Fontana,) we happened upon a Fontane festival, celebrating his literary contributions to German culture. We spend a pleasant hour chatting with Dr. Katharina J. Schneider, a Fontane researcher and discussing his realistic, sardonic and skeptical views of 19th century life in the Uckermark.



French Reformed Church in Klein Ziethen

In Schulzendorf, we befriended the village baker who took us down the street to talk with a neighbor about our Schirmer relatives. It turned out they had moved away, but we saw the house where the last Schirmer lived when he had served as mayor.

Back in Klein (Little) Ziethen, Pastorin Connie took Pastorin Connie took us through the church where Dean's and my Great-great Grandparents, Karl Benoit (Americanized to Binno after his arrival in Kewanee) and Louisa-Marie Baartz were married in 1848, shortly before they emigrated to Kewanee.

Speaking of marriage: as we were standing in Reverend Connie's main church, the one with the wooden belfry in Gross (Big) Ziethen, Jane nudged me and said, "You know, today's our 35th wedding anniversary." Smiling, I asked Connie where she would stand while officiating a marriage, "Why, right here," she said, moving to stand there. Positioning ourselves in front of her, we asked her to help us renew our wedding vows. With Dean running a video, I reached over to kiss Jane after we had exchanged rings. But Dean interrupted: "Not yet, she has not pronounced you man and wife!" Connie took our four hands in hers, and pronounced us to be married "in happiness, as long as both you live." There was a pause, and then she blurted out: "NOW you can kiss!!" And so we did.



Jane and Michael renewing wedding vows before Pastor Connie

Here is Sebastian's list of the 14 villages he set-up for us to visit: Angermünde, Bruchhagen, Crussow, Friedrichswalde, Groß Ziethen, Herzsprung, Klein Ziethen, Klosterheide, Lindow, Neukünkendorf, Niederfinow, Parstein, Schmargendorf, Schulzendorf, Vielitz.

We found traces of dozens of families with Kewanee connections, among them Benoit, Bartz, Charlet, Schmidt, Quart,

Gleich, Wilke, Bailleu, Deutschland Mursener, Manthe, Charlet, Usedel, Heise, Wagner, Tietz, Kempin, Fuerst, and Rathnow.

Compare that list with the founders of The Church of Peace - many of those families are among those first thirty. Perhaps there might be a sister-church relationship set up between Rev. Müller's churches in the Uckermark?



Following are the names of those who met on the above date in the home of Wilhelm Charlet for the purpose of mentioned new church wherein the United Catechism could be used:

Peter Quart	Wilhelm Schmidt	Christian Liebholz
Christian Heise	August Krause	Carl Binno
Albert Usadel	August Bailleu	Gottfried Kuester
Gottlieb Schmidt	Gottlieb Manthe	Wilhelm Deutschland
Ludwig Schultz	August Kuester	Ferdinand Kempin
Julius Wagner	August Baartz	Nicholaus Zang
August Quart	Wilhelm Bartz	August Doye
Wilhelm Charlet	Heinrich Keiser	Julius Kallin
August Tietz	Friedrich Richter	Wilhelm Heise
August Beuster	Friedrich Fuerst	Karl Heise

The church was called Die Deutsche Vereinigte Evangelische Friedens Gemeinde (The German United Evangelical Peace Church). Every member of French Huguenot ancestry eventually joined.

Two weeks after organization, on January 24th, a constitution drawn up by Pastor Regier and patterned after that of St. Michaelis Church was adopted. At this time twenty-six more signed the list of charter members. They were:

August Fuerst, Jr.	Christian Rosentahl	Ferdinand Beuster
Gustav Rathenow	Johann Werderman	Julius Schneider
Carl Kaiser	Friedrich Krause	Wilhelm Foerder
Frederich Rosentahl	John Cronau	Ernst Krause
Gustav Schultz	Ludwig Hoepfner	Wilhelm Henning
August Schultz	Christian Kremzow	Ludwig Henning
Wilhelm Hoepfner	Caroline Geming	Carl Lartz
G. Wilhelm Schmidt	Wilhelm Neubert	Matthaus Reiff
A. A. Schultz	Jacob Reiff	

List of original members of the Church of Peace (provided by LeeAnn Bailleu)

Finally, here is a personal measure of the success of our genealogical-research visit to eastern Germany: Connie, Sebastian, Dean, and Jane and I maintain an email connection several times each month. We have become friends, after all, in the most

gracious meaning of that word. A priceless gift of present-day friendship springing from long-ago lives in a faraway time and place.

September 18, 2020

