

Interview with Mr. and Mrs. Schmitt

Interviewer: Charles Petranek

n.d.

MR = Mr. Schmitt, MRS = Mrs. Schmitt

**Q:** You'll do fine. Basically, as far as this particular project is concerned, Darrel Bigham and myself at ISUE are interviewing people on the west side of town--west side of Evansville -- southern Indiana basically, and interviewing people that have some sort of German heritage or German background. We want to find out what type of German heritage people still have as far as language or customs or ways of doing things--things around the holidays that they passed on or try to keep alive, say, in their own family setting. When I was talking to Father Foster the other day, he gave me some impressions of what's happened and defined the whole area as being a fairly strong German community. We try to look at things as far as whether they consider it German. Do you have anything that you consider to be German?

**MR:** I don't know. You ask the questions--maybe we'll have some answers for you.

**Q:** Okay. Do you speak German? Do you have a German Bible?

**MR:** I can still speak it.

**Q:** You can still speak it.

**MR:** We hardly ever do. Our kids don't.

**Q:** Your kids don't. Did you ever try teaching them any German?

**MR:** Not really. They can understand a few words--words they're not supposed to understand.

**Q:** Yes, but that's about it?

**MR:** That's about it.

**Q:** Did you have to speak, or do you have a German background?

**MRS:** Yes. My parents were. I don't speak. I can understand it, but I can't speak it. I can say a few words.

**Q:** What about when you were growing up? Let's go back then when both of you were growing up. What type of family life? What was it like growing up in your households as far as the German? Was there a lot of German language spoken or was there certain customs your parents insisted on or how important was church?

**MR:** We were all at home yet. Everything was German. Everybody talked German.

**Q:** When you were first at home. When did you learn English then?

**MR:** When we started to grade school.

**Q:** When you started grade school? Did you go to grade school up here?

**MR:** St. Wendel. It was really hard for us because we didn't know a bit of English.

**Q:** You didn't know any English at all?

**MR:** It was just like learning a new language.

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**Q:** So, when did you go to grade school? What year was that?

**MR:** I'm fifty-eight now--that would have been fifty-two years ago? I guess we started about six or seven-- about fifty-one years ago.

**Q:** Fifty-one years ago, so that would have been back in 1929?

**MR:** That sounds about right.

**Q:** Did you have the same experience or not?

**MRS:** I just can't remember talking too much German because my father died when I was fifteen. I don't think I really talked too much German just then.

**Q:** Was it spoken very much in your home?

**MRS:** Not too much.

**Q:** Did you grow up in this area of St. Wendel?

**MRS:** Yes.

**Q:** So, then your experience was a little bit different then, wasn't it? It was all mostly English?

**MRS:** Yes.

**MR:** The older ones in her family--they spoke German.

**MRS:** They probably did, yes.

**MR:** She's the baby of her family so she kind of lost out on the German. Out of how many children?

**MRS:** Ten.

**Q:** Ten children? Did your older brothers and sisters--can they speak it better?

**MRS:** Yes. They don't now anymore, but they used to.

**Q:** Nobody's really passed it on down to the children at all?

**MRS:** No.

**Q:** St. Wendel--then in 1929 and 1930 when you were going to school--you had to speak English there.

Did they have any German classes at all?

**MR:** No.

**Q:** Did they ever have German classes that you know of up there?

**MR:** No. Not when I was going to school, no. All the young children you know at recess or dinner time--most of the kids up there--they'd talk German among themselves because they knew that better than they did English.

**Q:** With World War I was there any noticeable changes as far as the school system? Well, I guess there wasn't any German spoken up there at all in schools?

**MR:** No. There wasn't in ours, was there in yours?

**MRS:** No, not to my knowledge.

**MR:** She went to St. Joe for the last two years.

**Q:** Where did you go to high school?

**MR:** No high school.

**Q:** No high school?

**MRS:** We didn't have transportation in there so we couldn't go.

**Q:** So, you didn't go to high school?

**MR:** I didn't go to high school, didn't have no way.

**Q:** Where could you have gone? Would you have had to go to Evansville? Would that be the closest high school?

**MR:** Yes, it would be about the closest one. There was no transportation in those days. Back then we were needed on the farm to help on the farm. That's where we spent all our spare time.

**Q:** Yes. When did the transportation come in? When did the people in St. Wendel go to high school? Would you have any idea? World War II--afterwards?

**MR:** After World War II, I'd say.

**Q:** Early '50's?

**MR:** My nephew--they started going to high school then. But none of my family got to go to high school.

**Q:** So, when did your nephew go to high school?

**MR:** I think that would have been about 1948 or 1950---somewhere in there.

**Q:** Yes, that's interesting that the education--well, there was no transportation. There just wasn't much choice at all. Wasn't there a state law that said you should have gone to school?

**MRS:** Not at that time.

**Q:** Not at that time?

**MR:** We never did have transportation to school.

**MRS:** We walked.

**MR:** We were about three miles from school from here. Our home place is just right across the field here where my brother lives. That was our home place. We walked it or either caught a ride with a milk truck that hauled our milk. Back then it was in ten-gallon cans. They would just pile us in the back of that milk truck with all the milk cans. If you hit a bump or something cans would be flying all over the place. The kids would be right in with it. But that was just a free ride. The milkman just done that on his own to help us out. You walked to school too, didn't you?

**MRS:** I walked to school until my last two years in school. Then I had transportation because the bus went right by my house for transfer to St. Joseph. Other than that, I had to walk to St. Wendel.

**Q:** Well, when you were growing up, did you have a pretty strong family structure with the father being the head of the household?

**MR:** Oh, yes.

**Q:** Was he a very strong sort of--almost ruler?

**MR:** He was a ruler--that's right.

**Q:** Ruler. Is that a good term to describe him?

**MR:** I'd say that would be a good term.

**MRS:** And his family.

**MR:** What dad said went. Hell, I guess they talked things over, but I remember dad--whatever he thought was right, why that's the way it would be.

**Q:** Did he spend a lot of time with you when you were growing up or was, he involved with farming quite a bit?

**MR:** Just farming. In the wintertime there was no electric---so in the wintertime we would go out and cut wood--firewood---for the stoves--heating stove and cook stove.

**Q:** So, you would work with him quite a bit probably?

**MR:** We would work together. He were together all the time unless we were in school. We was glad to see a snow come along because there's not too much you can do when it's snowing out. That's when we'd get to go rabbit hunting. Back then you'd go rabbit hunting. I remember two of my nephews, my dad, and myself went one day. We shot seventy-five rabbits.

**Q:** Seventy-five rabbits! How did you ever haul them home?

**MR:** We just took them home and then go back out. It was right behind our buildings where we got them all in the woods there, the thickets.

**MRS:** Now you don't even see anymore.

**MR:** We dressed all those rabbits and hung them in a smokehouse where they used to smoke the hams and things like that.

**Q:** Did you smoke them then?

**MR:** No. We just hung them up there and let them freeze. Anytime you wanted a rabbit, you'd go out there and take one off the hook and dress them. There was enough wild game to live on-- rabbits and quail.

**Q:** Do you see very much wild game now?

**MR:** It's just about all gone. You just walk two or three hours before you maybe see a rabbit, much less get one. They've cleared all the fence rows and the woods and thickets and everything for farming purposes.

**Q:** Did you get to see your dad very much? You said he died when you were fifteen, but before then?

**MRS:** He was fifty-nine, but yes, I was just a kid. I was around home all the time. I saw him all the time.

**Q:** What type of work did he do?

**MRS:** He was a farmer.

**Q:** Farmer too. Was he always out working on the farm?

**MRS:** No, not to my knowledge. He was sick quite a bit. He done some farming. He didn't do too much towards the last five or six years.

**Q:** Any particular special German meals that your parents would fix that you remember?

**MRS:** Sausage and backbones and sauerkraut and navy beans-mashed potatoes. That's still a typical German dinner now.

**MR:** I remember for breakfast we'd have sausage and fried potatoes. Mother, she'd fry I don't know how many eggs. A big platter full of them. Just put them all on this platter and set them on the table. You just eat as many eggs as you want. I know nowadays most of them fry their eggs and put them on your plate. Then hand them to you.

**Q:** Yes, that's right.

**MR:** But back then you just had a platter of eggs.

**Q:** So, it was a big breakfast then?

**MR:** It was a big breakfast. There was five in our family so there was seven around the meal table at one time.

**Q:** Did you have a big lunch then too?

**MR:** Yes. Back when we had horses yet, we'd come home about eleven o'clock, I remember, for lunch. We called it dinner. Then the horses had to eat for an hour. We'd eat our lunch and take a nap. It'd be about an hour and a half before we could get back out into the field. So, you got your big dinner and a nap if you wanted one. We were tired and usually took advantage of that.

**MRS:** The horses had to rest too.

**MR:** Yes, the horses had to eat their corn and hay.

**Q:** That sounds like a pretty good way with me because it forces you to rest too as opposed to going all the time. With machines now we think we can go all the time without stopping.

**MRS:** Years ago, they used to walk behind a plow. They didn't get to drive a tractor. The horses pulled the plow and the man walked behind it.

**MR:** Now a lot of times we don't even stop for lunch. Just hangs their food on top of the tractor and eat your sandwich while you're plowing or something.

**Q:** Yes, that seems rather crazy. 1.Je' re going all the time now.

**MR:** With all the modern equipment we get our work done, but it seems like --- We farm acres now. That's the thing.

**Q:** Well, you have to stay in business, don't you?

**MR:** That's right.

**Q:** Just to stay even with the whole thing?

**MR:** Yes. Back then most people around here had either an 80-acre farm, most of them. Some of them maybe a 120. We had a family up the road here that had 40 acres and about 13 kids. They raised 13 kids off of 40 acres. That's all he done- just farming.

**MRS:** They had their big garden and they canned their own food and vegetables.

**MR:** Baked their own bread. About the only thing they had to buy was salt and sugar. They'd take their own wheat and take it to the mill, and have it ground into flour.

**MRS:** We used to buy flour in 100-pound sacks and also navy beans in a 100-pound sack and then just cooked them.

**Q:** You mentioned beans before too, when we were talking about a typical German meal.

**MR:** Sauerkraut and beans.

**MRS:** That was a German's dinner you know- navy beans and sauerkraut.

**MR:** That's still good.

**Q:** That's still good? How do you cook navy beans?

**MRS:** Just water and let it cook for about three hours, unless you want to use a pressure cooker. It takes less time.

**Q:** So, you just have navy beans and put a little pork in that too.

**MRS:** Yes. Ham hocks.

**Q:** How is that different from navy bean soup then?

**MRS:** Same thing only you add more water to your soup and ingredients.

**Q:** What about your sausage? Was it a particular German type sausage? Or just salt and pepper and that's about it?

**MR:** It was made like the country sausage is now - nothing like you buy in the stores.

**MRS:** Some put garlic in theirs. Some people didn't like it, so some don't put it in.

**Q:** It wasn't highly seasoned. You taste some of this Italian sausage or I've even tasted some bockwurst, that's very highly seasoned in other areas. I've noticed the sausage around here isn't --- it's good sausage but it's not highly seasoned.

**MR:** They'd smoke some of it. That was more highly seasoned – not like this real hot sausage.

**Q:** Did you have a butchering day? Did you do your own butchering?

**MR:** No. Neighbors - they'd all get together. About how many?

**MRS:** Five or six in our group.

**MR:** At least. He probably had about eight neighbors. They'd go from one place to the other all winter and set their date.

**Q:** Set their date.

**MR:** Then butcher as high as 13 or 14 hogs.

**Q:** Would it take that many families to do the butchering?

**MR:** Yes.

**Q:** It would take that many. There were that many jobs?

**MR:** It would take about 14 women.

**MRS:** Not in our group. 14 people, you mean?

**MR:** Yes, to butcher 14 hogs. I think they figure a hog to a guy. If you butchered five - you need five people. If you butchered 10 why you---

**MRS:** And the women came along to do the cooking. About 11 o'clock or 10 o'clock in the morning they went and cup up some liver and fried liver. Just had pickles and onions and liver sandwiches.

**Q:** So just take the liver and slice it.

**MRS:** Slice it and fry it. That was their little snack - morning snack. They had a big dinner with pie.

**MR:** And then the wine jug got passed around after the hogs were cleaned.

**Q:** The wine jug?

**MR:** Here would come the wine or beer - whatever you wanted.

**Q:** So, did everybody make their own wine?

**MR:** Mostly. A lot of home brew too?

**Q:** Home brew.

**MR:** It was mostly wine because it was handier.

**Q:** Wine seems to be bigger. I've run into several people that have stressed wine over beer.

**MRS:** It makes you warmer in the wintertime. You know, beer makes you cold. Wine heats you up and makes you warmer.

**Q:** Did a lot of people make their own wine? Did you make yours?

**MR:** Yes. I think everybody did. Just for their own use.

**Q:** Do you still make it today or not?

**MR:** We made a barrel about three years ago. It turned out real good. It was a little sweet yet, but we just let it set and let it get aged for about 10 years.

**Q:** 10 years!

**MRS:** We don't drink that much.

**Q:** People don't drink that much anymore. Do you do any butchering anymore or do you have any animals butchered?

**MR:** No. Butchering went out - oh, how long ago? Fifteen years, I guess nobody's butchered. My brother butchered about 10 years ago.

**MRS:** A lot of people do yet, but we don't.

**MR:** Since my dad died, us kids didn't really know how to go about it. You got to know what you're doing when you butcher a hog - cut up the mean and all that.

**Q:** Didn't you dad ever show you?

**MR:** Yes, he showed us, but---

**Q:** Showed us but it just---

**MR:** We didn't think we'd ever want to do that. You know, gut a hog?

**MRS:** You could do it anyway.

**Q:** Yes, well if there was some necessity to do it too. I mean if you really depended on this as opposed to you, you can go to the store now and buy most of your cuts or have somebody else do it. If you raise a few hogs or even some of your cattle, if wanted them butchered just have somebody else.

**MR:** I know between my brother and myself we could butcher hogs. What he wouldn't know, I would. There's really not that much to it. Just a lot of scalding and all that. Gutting them would be the biggest thing. That's like dressing a rabbit, I'd say.

**Q:** Yes, that's what I was going to say. You mentioned dressing all those rabbits. Was there any particular foods that you had around the holidays that was special or German? Any traditions around Christmas? We just got through with Christmas and New Years - Thanksgiving. Was there anything special about those days?

**MR:** Thanksgiving- that's when the pumpkin pies and turkey---

**MRS:** It's still the tradition now.

**MR:** Yes, just like it is now.

**Q:** Nothing special like around Christmas or anything that you fix? Any cookies or deserts or things that were just special?

**MRS:** Fruitcake.



**Q:** Fruitcake?

**MRS:** We had a Christmas tree. We didn't have electricity. We had those candles you clip on a tree. We couldn't light them until Santa Claus walked in the door. We lit all those candles on the tree. It was kind of dangerous.

**Q:** So, you lit candles that were on the tree?

**MRS:** Yes, they were about that tall.

**Q:** Can you imagine that? Your whole house is gone.

**MRS:** I can still remember that.

**Q:** That was tradition. Did Santa Claus come to your house? Did you see him?

**MRS:** Yes, we had several Santa Clauses. They were mean.

**Q:** Mean Santa Clauses?

**MRS:** Yes. There was about three of them in the gang, I think. I had a lot of brothers. They were after my brothers. They were mean to them - whipped them.

**Q:** So, you light these candles then when Santa Claus arrives. Then he gives out the presents?

**MRS:** Yes.

**Q:** Does this happen on New Year's Eve?

**MRS:** Christmas Eve.

**Q:** Christmas Eve.

**MRS:** Christmas Eve.

**Q:** Eve. That's right. I said New Year's Eve. Christmas Eve.

**MRS:** Each kid had a bag of candy. Each had their own bag. It had their mm name on it too.

**Q:** Did you do anything for St. Nicholas Day ?

**MRS:** No.

**Q:** Nothing was done.

**MRS:** We probably put a stocking out for a while.

**Q:** Did you ever get anything?

**MRS:** Yes. (Laughs) We got a little.

**Q:** Okay. I ran in to some people in town where St. Nicholas Day was a big day. They got candy and some fruit on St. Nicholas Day.

**MR:** Yes. I remember we did - in the stocking. It wasn't as much now, but we appreciated it more.

**Q:** Why do you think you appreciated it? Because you didn't have much to start with?

**MR:** Didn't have much to start with. Things are a lot different now.

**Q:** Yes. It seems that way doesn't it? There's almost no way of satisfying kids.

**MR:** You can't give a kid a treat anymore. They get a treat every day.

**Q:** Are there any particular meals that you fix now that you would consider German? Sausage?

**MRS:** Well, as I said a while ago the sausage and sauerkraut, mashed potatoes, or backbones. You could buy backbones if you wanted to.

**Q:** Backbones? What are backbones?

**MRS:** What part of the hog is that from? The back?

**MR:** It's where the spareribs are - between the ribs on the back. It's the backbone.

**Q:** Okay, I see.

**MRS:** They cut most of the meat off but do leave some on. You can just cook them in salted water and add a little onion. They just call that backbone.

**MR:** That's what they call eating high off the hog. That's where it's at.

**Q:** High off the hog? Is that where it's at?

**MR:** That's where it's at. The highest part of the hog. When you butcher hogs you can make porkchops, then you don't have backbones.

**Q:** Because that's part of it.

**MR:** That's part of it. You either have one or the other. You can have backbones or porkchops.

**Q:** So, what do you do if you have backbones and you got a lot of eat left over?

**MR:** Well, you have the ribs to barbeque or whatever you want to do with them and backbones. Otherwise you have porkchops. That is part of the back.

**Q:** So, you fix this with saltwater and backbones?

**MRS:** And onions. Salt and pepper, onions and water. Cook it until it's done.

**Q:** How long would that be? Three or four hours?

**MRS:** I would say about an hour.

**Q:** Is that all you really fix then as far as---

**MRS:** That would be the German meal. Don't you think so?

**MR:** Mashed potatoes and navy beans.

**Q:** Mashed potatoes, they keep coming up too. Mashed potatoes.

**MRS:** Farmers used to do that.

**MR:** They go with spareribs and backbones.

**MRS:** He asks me to fix that every once in a while. Navy beans and sauerkraut.

**Q:** Yes. Do you make any dumplings with that? Have you ever made dumplings?

**MRS:** Not with that.

**MR:** How about your chicken and dumplings meal?

**MRS:** That's not old. That's not necessarily German.

**Q:** So, you don't have anything particular like potato dumplings or anything like that?

**MRS:** I never did fix them.

**Q:** Never fixed them. What about with your children? Are they aware of these particular recipes or any particular German customs that you---

**MR:** What they mostly like when they come home is her chicken and dumplings.

**MRS:** Cook an old hen and make my own homemade dumplings, fix my own dressing.

**MR:** That's a treat to them. Their wives-- their all good cooks, but they just can't cook those dumplings.

**MRS:** They tell them this is not like Mom's cooking.

**Q:** Do you ever fix these backbones and beans for them?

**MRS:** No, not when they come for company. No, I don't fix them for company.

**Q:** Are there any things that you would label as German that you have passed on to your kids? Seems like it's hard for people to identify that. What about religion? Do they still have some German services up here at St. Wendel?

**MRS:** When do they sing that German Song?

**MR:** Christmas time.

**MRS:** Forty hours symposium--forty hours devotion.

**MR:** "Great God" is the name of the song.

**MRS:** And symposium forty hours we sing.

**MR:** And at Christmas they sing "Silent Night, Holy Night" in German. We don't talk German around here or to the boys because they can't even understand it. I've got some cousins around here. When we get together, we still talk German.

**MRS:** Koester's. Did you ever hear of the Koester's?

**Q:** Koester's? No.

**MR:** It's a big family. It's my first cousins.

**Q:** Do they stay with the German tradition quite a bit then?

**MR:** Oh yes.

**MRS:** Another family is the John Getty family. Their kids, when they started school, they couldn't even speak English.

**Q:** Yes, Darrel Bigham interviewed them.

**MRS:** They still really talk their German , all the time.

**Q:** Is that K-O-E-S-T-E-R? Is the guy named Tony or Pop?

**MR:** Yes, Pop. That's the only uncle that I got.

**Q:** Well, I've got to interview him next.

**MRS:** He'll tell you a lot of things.

**Q:** Is that right?

**MR:** Yes. He's ninety!

**Q:** Supposed to be ninety-two.

**MR:** Ninety-two.

**MRS:** Well alert too.

**Q:** Is that right?

**MR:** Yes, he is. He's getting a little hard of hearing, but other than that he's sharp yet. If Edward is there, he'll help you.

**Q:** I'm supposed to go to---

**MRS:** Edward's his son.

**MR:** Edward Koester.

**Q:** I made the appointment with Tony.

**MRS:** Edward lives in the house--father and son live together.

**MR:** I'll imagine Edward's retired. They're probable home—both of them. (Mr. Schmitt gives directions to Tony Koester's house.)

**MRS:** Have you heard of the Golden Rain Tree Winery?

**Q:** Yes.

**MRS:** That's right up here. You'll pass it.

**Q:** I've been there several times. In fact, we were there for—do they have a bierstube or Summerfest up there?

**MRS:** Yes. A Winefest.

**Q:** Would you consider these bierstube's they have--like they have one up here in St. 1Nendel--is that German tradition of any sort?

**MR:** I think so because we went to German, how long ago? About nine years ago. We went to this Oktoberfest. I think that's where they got this started over here--from the Oktoberfest.

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**Q:** Is it pretty close to what you saw in Germany?

**MR:** It's not near as big. That over there goes on for a month.

**MRS:** Here they just serve food.