

## **A Short History of the Florian Rasch Family** **by Odette Howard**

Silesia was completely German at the time the Rasch family lived there. However, the area was torn by wars in the years that followed. Part of Silesia went to Czechoslovakia in 1919, and the German population was expelled from that part. Then, in 1945 all of Silesia was given to Poland. Those Germans who could escape, did so. The disquieting thought persists that had the Rasch ancestors remained in Silesia in 1852, we might have been numbered among those penniless DP's, displaced persons who were given support around the St. Florian area after 1945.

The Polish National Tourist Agency in New York City denies that there is a German influence in Silesia at present. When Poland took over the area, the names of the cities were changed. The present Wroclaw was named Breslan when it was German; (1) the present city of Zabkowice is the place called Frankenstein, which Florian Rasch's son Paul Rasch reports as the area from which the family came. The smaller towns are probably there also, but maps show only their new Polish names. A visitor wishing to visit Zabkowice (Frankenstein) should take Route E12, traveling SSW a distance of 56 km from Wroclaw (Breslan).

In Germany in the spring of 1852, eight brothers and their sister left their native land forever. The oldest was Florian II, age 32, and the youngest was Julius, who was between 8 and 18 years of age. They sold what they could before leaving, then packed up their elderly father, their wives and assorted babies, and they left for America. The well-educated family probably came on one of the fast sailing ships, a voyage lasting from six weeks to twelve weeks. Hopefully, they went from the port of Bremen, on the North Sea, about 350 miles northeast of their native state. Ships leaving Bremen had less cholera and provided better care for their passengers than other countries' ships. (2)

Arrival date in America was May 19, 1852. (3)

Most of those brothers and their wives never had to learn English, (4) because they did not come to a wilderness America, but to a German-speaking area. Wisconsin had a Catholic Bishop in residence at that time, and German was spoken in all the German settlements. 700,000 German-born persons were living in the colonies during 1860. (5) They had been coming for years. By 1776 a quarter of a million Germans lived here. The Revolutionary War brought the Hessian soldiers (fighting for the British), who had been literally sold to the British government by the corrupt and spendthrift princelings who ruled the German states. Many lost their lives, but many simply deserted and settled down as peaceful citizens of the Colonies they had been sent to subdue. (6)

The Napoleon Army retreat from Moscow in 1812 had among its soldiers Florian Rasch I, whose tale of frozen feet and starvation came down in the family verbally generations after his passing. (7) Silesian troops were subjects of Napoleon, and took advantage of this defeat to declare their independence as Napoleon's star began to dim. (8) Florian I married in 1815, when he was 24 years old, and was the father of the nine children who brought him along in 1852.

Silesia was in the southern, Catholic part of Germany. Germany became a nation in 1870; before that it was a collection of hundreds of tiny states, almost all of them misruled by petty tyrants. (9) The rigid class structure was finally destroyed by World War I. (10)

For a few months in 1848 the peoples of the Germanys had a brief hope of a more democratic government. After the Frankfurt parliament on May 18, 1848, a constitutional government was provisionally established, but the king refused the constitution saying that it interfered with a ruler's rights over his subjects. (11) The foreign state of Prussia then took over Silesia.

Liberty-loving Germans faced the choice of compulsory military service or emigration to America. The eight Rasch brothers and thousands of other able-bodied young men migrated to America. (12) It is easy to assume that their father, the veteran of the Moscow retreat, was not enthusiastic about another war, this time under the flag of Prussia.

For 20 years most of the families lived in the area of Centerline, Michigan (near Detroit). They buried their father, Florian I, from St. Clements Parish there, four years after arriving in America.

By 1862 the family of FLorian II had increased to six children; the twins were infants and the oldest boy, Paul, was 12 years old. The most horrible event of the history of the American frontier took place that year. The Sioux War of 1862 claimed most of its victims from the German speaking village settlements in Minnesota. (13) Surely the young German family in Michigan was aware of this tragedy.

The German-Americans were a solidly anti-slavery element in America. (14) Abraham Lincoln owed a large measure of his support to German Americans. Union forces won the battle of Lookout Mountain in Chattanooga (15) because of the Germans fighting under Sigel. They were sent by train into Alabama, then performed the incredible feat of routing the Confederate troops by attacking the sheer face of Lookout Mountain, and won the climbing battle, against severe odds.

A hundred years later, one is forced to wonder if survivors of that expedition went back to Michigan and described the rich undeveloped Alabama land.

During the 1800's, the various German states were trying to establish colonies in America, which they hoped would retain the rigid social structure of Germany. The most nearly successful of these was in Galveston, Texas, but all failed to become the property of Germany. (16)

Eight years after the end of the War between the States, many German-American families settled outside Florence, Alabama, (17) establishing the community which would be called St. Florian.

Migrating again, the family of Florian Rasch II packed up ten of their eleven children, said goodbye to their Michigan kin, and came to Alabama. The oldest boy, Paul, had entered the priesthood in Wisconsin of Christmas Day of 1870. Those who came in April or May, 1873, were:

- Edward, age 21 ; who would marry at 29 and live to be almost 100 in Alabama;
- Robert ; who stayed a short time and returned to settle in Michigan;

- Annie, age 15 ; who married at 21, moved to St. Mary's, PA, her husband's home town, and lived to be 90.
- Clara, age 12 ; who would enter the convent in St. Louis, Missouri, when she was 17, and die in 1904, age 43. She is buried in Notre Dame Motherhouse cemetery, Right Row 4, Grave #31, St. Louis.
- Julius, age 12 ; who would marry at 19 and lived to be 53 in Alabama;
- Katie, was 10 ; would live 11 years. She died in Birmingham, was buried in St. Florian;
- Elizabeth was 8; would live 12 years in Alabama until age 20. Her picture exists with her parents, taken about the time of the move. [\(18\)](#)
- Emma, age 6 or 7; who would marry under the age of 18, move to Birmingham, and die in childbirth when she was 23 or 24. Buried in an unmarked St. Florian grave, next to Florian and Caroline Rasch. [\(19\)](#) [\(20\)](#)
- Anthony was 2 ; would marry in St. Florian at age 24, move to Oklahoma.
- Frank was an infant. He would marry at age 27, live to be almost 90 in Alabama.

All sources agree that St. Florian is named for Florian Rasch. The family legend (repeated this summer to the author by a lady in Pennsylvania) is that he was a very holy man who went to daily Mass, and died in the church. Another version of the origin of the name of the town is found in the booklet about the 100th anniversary of the parish [\(21\)](#) which cites the donation of the bell for the first church as the reason the town was called St. Florian, in honor of its donor.

The town of St. Florian was recently incorporated. It is interesting to note that not one sixth generation person named Rasch now lives in St. Florian. While many descendants of Florian Rasch do live there, their names have certainly changed.

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Sources:

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- (3) Family Bible Record of the Frank Rasch Family lists arrival date as May 19, 1852. [\[rtn\]](#)
- (4) Bernauer, Marianne, 'A History of St. Florian', 1965, p. 27 [\[rtn\]](#)
- (5) United States Census of 1860:1,300,000 foreign-born in the U.S., 700,000 of whom were German. (quoted p. 133, O'Connor) [\[rtn\]](#)
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- (7) Bud Rasch's story of "the old grandpap, long dead in Michigan, years before I was born who made it back alive from Moscow under Napoleon." [\[rtn\]](#)
- (8) Russell, Francis, 'The Horizon Concise History of Germany', 1973: McGraw, Hill, p. 158 [\[rtn\]](#)
- (9) O'Connor, *ibid.*, p. 21 [\[rtn\]](#)
- (10) Russell, *ibid.*, p. 176 [\[rtn\]](#)
- (11) Russell, *ibid.*, p. 161 [\[rtn\]](#)
- (12) O'Connor, *ibid.*, p. 125, and Russell, *ibid.*, p. 161 [\[rtn\]](#)
- (13) O'Connor, *ibid.*, p. 198 [\[rtn\]](#)
- (14) O'Connor, *ibid.*, p. 128, p. 132 [\[rtn\]](#)
- (15) O'Connor, *ibid.*, p. 149 [\[rtn\]](#)
- (16) O'Connor, *ibid.*, p. 86 [\[rtn\]](#)
- (17) Bernauer, Marianne, p. 10: Transfer of John Wilson Land to Rev. J. N. Houser, Recorded Lauderdale County Alabama Courthouse, Deed, Book 20, Page 300 [\[rtn\]](#)
- (18) 'St. Michael's Parish . . . a hundred years' Clara Eckl and Janet Peters with

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- (19) The World Almanac and Book of Facts, 1973 Edition, George Delury, Editor, NY.:  
Newspaper Enterprise Assoc., Inc.; p. 956: Special laws applicable to those  
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under 18 [\[rtn\]](#)
- (20) Interview by Janet Peters with Miss Mamie Rasch, July 12, 1976 [\[rtn\]](#)
- (21) 'St. Michael's Parish . . . a hundred years'. p. 10 [\[rtn\]](#)

Other sources used include:

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- D. Letter, Sr. Mary Rosine, S.S.N.D. Sisters of Notre Dame, St. Louis, MO
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- G. Records, Lauderdale County Courthouse, Florence, AL
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