

In the early years of the 19th century vast numbers of people emigrated from Europe to the United States of America. This emigration was due in large part to the catastrophic economic and political upheavals embracing their homelands. People were crowded in the towns and the limited farm lands, made it near impossible for them to feed their families.

As a result of this miserable circumstance millions of Germans were attracted to the "New World", by the potential for a productive and prosperous new life. In order to find their way to America, whole families would pool resources, by selling off possessions to raise capital, then locate an agent to assist them in acquiring the necessary emigration papers and book passage on a sailing ship. When all was made ready the families would gather up their belongings into large barrels set on a wheelbarrow or cart and transport themselves by horse-drawn means or by foot to their port of passage.

Emigrants from Birgden and Kreuzrath set out for America

On June 2, 1865, three families from Birgden and Kreuzrath left from the port of Antwerp on a sailing ship named the "William Nelson". Peter Joseph Schaps, a farmer from Birgden, his wife Magdalena, their 7 children, Johann Leonard, Johann Joseph, Heinrich Joseph, Arnold Joseph, Maria Josepha Magdalena, Maria Gertrud and Peter Joseph, ages 2 to 18, along with his brother Johann Leonard. Schaps, his wife Anna Catharina, and sons Peter Joseph and Arnold Joseph all of Birgden. The family Schaps were accompanied by Gerhard Dohmen also a farmer from Kreuzrath, his wife Catharina Gertrud and their 4 children 4 to 10 years old. Nineteen persons in all, the three families had friends and relatives in the United States who would help the emigrants get settled upon their arrival to America.

Emigrants find fever, fire, and death on the North Atlantic

Many weeks went by, and the relatives and friends in the towns of Birgden and Kreuzrath, waited to hear good news of the Schaps emigrant families arrival to America. In the middle of July, 1865, the public service newspaper for Birgden reported that on the 26th of June, 1865, the sailing ship "William Nelson" which sailed on the 2nd of June for New York, had caught fire, burned and sank on the open sea. Of the 537 passengers mostly German emigrants, maybe 100 may have been saved. It was reported that of the three families from Birgden and Kreuzrath, one son was rescued, and successfully brought back to land at Havre de Grace (France), by the American sailing ship Mercury on the 21st of June. From Havre Peter Joseph Schaps age 18, sent the following letter to his uncle who lived in Birgden. This letter was found in 1985 by a distant cousin living around Birgden who had carefully preserved it for the day when someone from America might come calling.

" Le Havre, July 12, 1865

Dear Uncle,

I see myself obligated to write to you and tell you where I am, and what has happened to us. On the 31st of May, we boarded the ship and set sail for America. The voyage began with much wind and rough seas. Many people had taken ill with fever, finally on the 10th of June, we passed through the channel, and from then on things got better for a few days until church festival Monday the 26th. We had washed and scrubbed everything, then everything had to be smoked and brought up on deck to dry. At around 12:30 PM, when the food had been prepared, and was ready to be served we wanted to go down below, but without any warning flames shot through the door which had been bound with rope. Oh uncle, what a misery!, everyone was in a panic and running to the captain. Under these circumstances, a great majority of people had lost their presence of mind and were screaming and wailing dreadfully.

I gathered the children and my parents together; Father said little; Mother and my brothers and sisters sobbed loudly; I tried to comfort them, and we all prayed. As the sail began to burn, I asked Father if he thought a rescue was possible, to which he replied, "The rescue is lost". Then some small boats were let down, and after I commended my spirit to God, I gave my parents a parting kiss and my hand in reconciliation. One of the small boats was leaving when Dohmen came and asked me, if I had seen his wife, as he reached me his hand for the last time, I said "no" and then he left me wretchedly in prayer.

Meantime the small boat was now about 20 paces from the ship when I jumped spiritedly into the sea and swam bravely towards the boat, when I was nearer to the boat a sailor pushed me away with an oar. I called out to the sailors and asked them to take me aboard. When I had swam 200 paces I called to the sailors to please take me aboard, the cook who I had befriended answered me, and said only I could come aboard and threw me a line and dragged me in after I had gathered enough strength to hang on. When I had raised myself and took a place in the boat, I looked back at the ship, though the fire burned brightly I could not see my family very well. We waved and called to each other, which then a sailor forbade me to do, so I sat quietly and prayed. At about 5:00 o'clock in the evening other boats came near us with more sailors aboard, and it was very cold. We stayed about an hour away from the ship all night until morning, then all the sailors got into the smallest boat and said they were going to steer a course back to the ship to look for provisions. We then realized they might intend to leave us, so we followed them until we reached the smoldering remains of the ship, which soon sunk into the abyss.

Then we traveled north until the sun was so high we could not hold the correct course any longer, so we then rested a little bit. At 2:00 o'clock we traveled on, and just before dusk we saw a ship, towards which we vigorously rowed, but it passed us by. We traveled a little longer and saw a sailing ship and a steamer, but all at once it grew dark again. We prayed that someone should notice us, because the steamer was moving parallel to us, to no avail, they to pass us by.

We rested now, our spirits were low and everyone was exhausted and weak, then at about 2 o'clock in the morning a man from Limburg was scooping water, he notice another ship, we were

determined to reach this ship and in a short time we reached our rescue ship which welcomed us aboard. The ship was named the "Merkur" and the captain's name was Hein Nelson, and he immediately set a course from the direction from where we came and in a short time rescued 5 more people. One of the people rescued had sat in a water vat, and the others clung to the mast boom. The captain treated us well, he gave me a new pair of socks and shoes, even though I still had my wooden shoes, which had served me well in scooping water.

Dear Uncle!, now you can imagine what has happened to my parents, brother, sisters, uncle, aunt, and Dohmen. A man from Baden, who was one of the last on the ship, told me he had seen my parents, brothers and sisters, uncle and aunt, Dohmen and wife and children standing by the Captain's cabin, and as the fire took the upper hand, they all jumped together overboard into the water. None of them burned, rather they all found a horrible grave in the sea. He hoped they all died well because he had prayed with them for a half hour before he himself jumped into the water. A rescue was unlikely, since there were only four life boats and the sailors, helmsman and the captain got in first. Yes uncle, they even drew knives to hold back the crowd. It was also good fortune for me because the cook who threw me the line, knew me well. Had I swam to a different boat I surely would have perished, as so many did. There was another man swimming next to me and he seemed to be a stronger swimmer than I, but all of a sudden he was gone. It cost over 400 people their lives including 4 sailors.

They should put a rope around the captain's neck if he makes it back to America for the way he treated the people. Before I set out from Havre, I will describe the situation to the Prussian consulate official. We arrived in Havre on the 11th of July and were received well. The Prussian Consulate gave me and 6 other Rhinelanders new clothing from head to foot. Dear Uncle! you can imagine that I would have no money, but the consulate told me that I would receive money back for the loss of my parents, and before I left the ship Dohmen and Uncle Leonard gave me their travel money that I should survive the disaster. Now please write back to me and tell me if I should send uncles money back home or take it along with me to America. In the latter case, you could charge me for that, when you divide Uncle's piece of land in a brotherly manner. In any case, I will take the money Dohmen gave me along to America. You will have to see what you could do with the house, if you can sell it for a good price, do so and invest the money. I will send you my authorization. Uncle, could you arrange for 60 masses to be read and if I do not make it to America arrange for 6 more. If you do not have money to do this than arrange for what you can afford. Whatever money remains it is yours.

My Intention is to go to Houben's in America and if you can help me find Matthias, write to me so I might look him up at Stobel's in New York.

I want to end my letter here in the hopes that it finds you in the same health as it left me. The god which guarded me in the waves will protect me in the far off land where I am going, do not delay writing back to me because the steamship is supposed to leave on the 20th. It is difficult to get a pen and ink here since everyone has to write. A collection is being held for us today in England, as there are supposed to be a further 30 survivors in England, and we are a total of 87.

signed: Peter "

The young Schaps did indeed travel later that month from France to America and never again did he return to his old homeland. It is not known what sort of destiny he encountered in America. Later he again wrote a letter to his uncle describing his suspicion that the captain "Levi Smith" and some of the crews deliberate sabotage of the ship by setting it on fire allowed them to take possession of a large shipment of bullion being transported to America. Whether or not this accusation is the truth may never be known which was talked about for a long time in the small towns of the Selfkant region, and the terrible fate of their emigrant brothers and sisters still lives in Birgden and Kreuzrath.

Upon his arrival to America, Peter Schaps received a "Land Patent" for 160 acres of land in the Minnesota territory from President U.S. Grant . He made his way through St. Paul, spent time in Chaska, and LeSuer, Minnesota, drove cattle to Winnipeg, studied English and French at St. Johns University near St. Cloud and then homesteaded at Albany Minnesota. Building a grain elevator he became proprietor of Albany Roller Mills. Peter Schaps married Theresa Fischer, they raised 3 children who married and raised many grandchildren.

Peter Schaps died on December 6th, 1909 at the age of 62 and was buried in the Catholic cemetery at Church of the Seven Dolor's Albany, Minnesota, his grave stone is inscribed, "When you come by me, pray for me".

Info per: [Peter Schaps](#), North Branch, Minnesota