

A 1999 letter to several family members about a trip to Germany

Hi All,

These are my notes from my Sept. 21-29 trip to Germany.

I had been sick from Sept. 2 with a bad sinus infection, and after several antibiotic changes with no results, I was getting worn down so badly it looked like it would be impossible to go on the trip. At the last minute, the doctor changed my antibiotic prescription to Cipro, and gave me a steroid shot, and I woke up feeling considerably better on the day of the trip.

The flight over was a ten hour non-stop flight from Houston to Frankfurt. The plane was a recent vintage 747. It was very lightly loaded with only about 20% of the seats filled. I doubt that they made a nickel on us because they had a fairly large crew for so few passengers, and they passed out free food, wine and liquor like it was going out of style. We flew over Pennsylvania, then up along the coast of Canada with the last land being Newfoundland, then passed over London and Brussels, landing in Frankfurt. Ten hours was a very long time to sit crowded into an airplane seat, with one's knees wedged into the back of the seat ahead.

At the speed we were going east, it was dark by 7 pm standard Texas time (STT), and by 8 pm STT they turned down the lights so that we could try to pretend that it was bedtime, but I didn't get any sleep. I suppose that's what all the alcohol was for; knocking people out by 8 pm. When we landed in Frankfurt it was about 2:30 am STT (9:30 am local time). Frankfurt airport is huge, and has local and long distance train stations on-site, which is convenient. The personal baggage carts at the airport are designed to go up and down escalators with you, which was a real surprise. I could hardly believe my eyes the first time I saw someone do it; I had been looking for an elevator, but there just weren't any. Could you imagine if a baggage cart slipped on an escalator, and came roaring down 20 feet of steps to hit you!! They have the wheel-fenders designed with bumpers on them which frictionally engage the escalator steps once the cart gets tilted by the escalator. I ended up pushing a baggage cart for what must have been a mile and a half getting from baggage claim, through customs, then to the train counter, then finding the right track to depart from.

I had to take a train from Frankfurt to Hannover, and it was 20 minutes late departing the airport. In Hannover I changed trains, with perhaps 10 seconds to spare, for the final leg up to Celle, which is just south of Hamburg. That train change was exiting, because I had to cross two tracks, which means a dash down crowded steps to go under the tracks, then a dash back up another set of steps, all while carrying two bags and a computer. I was tired from no sleep, and from pushing/carrying bags through airports and train stations all day; I'm just not used to so much exercise all at once. If you ever travel to Europe, pack lightly, because it is really exhausting to move heavy bags around the airports and train stations.

I stayed in the Caroline Mathilde Hotel in Celle, which is a lot different than a US Hotel. It looks like a very large old house, and I stayed sort of in the attic. The main thing I missed was no room service, and no restaurant downstairs, except for breakfast. My bedroom was about 8 x 8 ft with a single person bed. The German hotel beds do not have blankets and sheets as we know them; instead they have a sheet on the mattress, and a comforter wrapped up in a sheet-like enclosure. My kitchen was about 3 x 5 ft, and my living room was about 12 x 15, but don't let that immense size fool you; it had an arched ceiling that curves all the way down to the floor, so you can't use all of the room standing up. (The arch is from the old style roof line of the hotel; remember I was in the attic!) It also had a toilet-German for bathroom; one of those really important words you learn early on because you might need to use that particular word in a hurry!

My hotel was located near the ancient historical center of Celle, which is the scenic district with narrow brick streets, lots of sidewalk cafes, and little shops of all types, but especially clothing shops. Most of the people there are German; I thought there would be a lot more Americans in the tourist-type district. I think the streets in that old part of town may be limited to taxis, police and deliveries, because other than that the traffic is all pedestrians and bicycles. I walked down there for dinner, after crashing for 2 hours at the hotel

first to let a little life flow back into me from lugging luggage all day. Old Celle did have one restaurant with a menu that I recognized – McDonalds, but I was brave and went to a real restaurant and ate a German omelet. The restaurant had the architect's plans for it on the wall; it was built in 1848, so it was relatively new by old-Celle standards. It would be very easy to get good and lost on those narrow little streets. I did get turned around a little bit but managed to find my way back to the hotel by dark.

The owner of our company arrived from business in London on Thursday morning, and he and I had a meeting with clients in the afternoon. That evening we invited our clients and their wives to the fanciest restaurant I've ever been in, or could possibly imagine. It was called the Furstenhoff, but I'm sure that's not spelled correctly. It's one of those places where you are waited on by a whole herd of servers in tuxedos and eat your way through 5 courses; the whole shebang cost over \$400 for five people. A country boy like me hardly knows how to behave in a place like that, except for what I've seen in old movies. Jet lag started to hit me pretty hard by the end of the evening, but I survived.

The antibiotic I was on made it nearly impossible to sleep, so I got less than three hours sleep Thursday night, but it is such a stimulant that I nevertheless felt pretty alert Friday morning, despite having had less than 3 hours sleep over two nights. We had a brief business meeting on Friday morning, and then spent the afternoon touring old Celle on foot. Our afternoon meal was a little less extravagant than the day before; bratwurst, sauerkraut and potatoes at a nice little sidewalk cafe. Some of the sights we saw in old Celle were the "Stadkirche Celle", a church whose origins date back to the 1300's, and a Duke's castle. The weather was unusually warm for September, and we were in short sleeves.

That night I went to bed early to get rested up for an early morning train ride to Bavaria to start my vacation, but I got no sleep at all because of the medicine. I left the hotel before breakfast was served, so when my cab came at 6:00 am the hotel receptionist gave me 3 candy bars as a good-by gesture. The closer we got to Bayreuth, the more the countryside looked like something out of a Hansel and Gretel fairy tale. One curious thing was that as the train went around the banked mountain corners at high speed, one's up and down reference was distorted by centrifugal force, and it looked like all the houses in all the little towns were leaning out from the mountain at a weird angle, i.e. leaning down the hill. I was surprised that the leaves were still green, and farmers were still making hay, and some vegetable crops were still in the ground. I was told that it was much warmer than usual for that time of year.

My train arrived in Bayreuth, home of Richard Wagner, in the pouring rain. I loaded up on local maps at the train station, and while I was there jotted down the address of the local Hertz car rental agency. I took a cab to Hertz, which turned out to be a small room behind an auto parts agency in an industrial park. The rental agent wasn't there, so I waited for him, and when he arrived, he informed me that they were all out of cars. He spoke a little English, and since I was a foreigner stranded in an industrial park in the rain on a Saturday, he took pity on me and called one of his competitors, who sent a cab over for me. The moral of the story is to arrange for a car in advance, but that would have been difficult the first time around not having the phone numbers. I ended up renting a low mileage Ford passenger van with a standard transmission; it was either that or a tiny shoe-box sized car that didn't look any too safe collision-wise. I would of rather had a sedan, but under the circumstances was very glad to find anything at all.

The car rental agency had their cars stored at a Shell station on the north side of Bayreuth on highway 2, which was very convenient for me because it meant that I didn't have to drive through the hectic city to get to the town of Bad Berneck where I was headed. Bad Berneck is listed as the last town of residence of my GGG-Grandfather Johann Adam Dietel before he emigrated to America in 1839, according to his wanderbuch (passport). It is now an exquisitely beautiful tourist attraction with narrow winding cobblestone streets, guest houses, little shops and restaurants, and very little parking. I promptly got onto a narrow side street as I was looking for hotels, and wound up going straight up the side of a mountain on a one lane road with the fervent hope that I could find a place wide enough to get turned around somewhere. I did finally get back down the hill, and found a parking space, and ran around in the rain trying to find a room. Nobody had a vacant room, and I was getting soaking wet, so I drove back to highway 303, and headed into nearby Himmelkron, where I found a nice new modern motel near the autobahn with single rooms for under \$40 per night, and 4 or 5 different restaurants downstairs.

After unpacking, I decided to do a little reconnoitering before it got dark, so I headed north up the autobahn. Now if you want to try something radical, try driving on the autobahn in the rain having had practically no sleep for three nights in a row with trucks grinding slowly up the mountains in the right lane, and cars passing you at over a hundred miles an hour in the left lane. It was more than a little intense! I drove nearly up to Selbitz, then realized I was running out of steam, and headed back to the hotel. When I got to the hotel, I finally realized that not only was I sleep deprived, but I hadn't eaten anything but three candy bars all day, and didn't have supper the night before. I decided to lay down to rest, by which time I was so tired I was literally twitching. I managed to get a 2.5 hour nap, followed by a nice shrimp dinner. I also got smart, and didn't take my evening dose of antibiotic, and as a result, managed to get a good night's sleep that night and every night thereafter.

Shortly before leaving for Germany, I had e-mailed the Frankenwald tourist bureau in Kronach and told them I would be visiting Selbitz, where my GGG-Grandfather Johan Adam Dietel was born in 1809. On their own initiative, they called the mayor of Selbitz, who called the local Lutheran church and had the church secretary looking through the old records in advance of my arrival.

On Sunday Morning I attended services at the Selbitz Lutheran Church. It was a dedication service for their new minister, who had just finished his schooling, and this was his first day in his first church. As I understand it from talking to him on the telephone on Saturday, he will share responsibility with a more senior pastor.

Selbitz is a small town with a population of about 4000. The church was much different than the small town and country Lutheran churches we are familiar with. In addition to the regular seating in pews on the first floor, there were two balconies for seating, each extending along the sides and rear of the church. The choir and the band were on the first balcony. The pulpit was gilded and very ornate, and approximately 2.5 stories high, with the organs of the pipe organ integrated with the pulpit and extending the pulpit to about 3 stories high. The introductory remarks, the dedication ceremony and announcements, etc. were made for the ground floor, but for the sermon, the new pastor climbed a set of hidden stairs on the back of the pulpit, came out through a curtain at a level about even with the first balcony, and spoke from there.

After the service I stood outside as the congregation exited, hoping to meet someone who could introduce me to the church secretary. I asked the first person that I established eye contact with if she spoke English, and she said no, only a little, but said that her husband did, and went and found him. They were Mr. & Mrs. Ernst Mueller, and they have 4 children ranging in age from about 3.5 to perhaps 10. Ernst is from a large family, and has a sister who lives in Minnesota, and another who lives in Great Britain. They introduced me to the church secretary and to the pastor, and arranged for me to visit the church secretary (who spoke no English) the next day. After discussing why I was in the Selbitz area, and pointing out where the cemetery and church office were, this couple most generously invited me to their home for dinner. Within a half an hour of arriving at their home, we were seated at a 5 course meal ranging from an Indian dish to a chicken dish, all perfectly delicious, and followed by desert. What a splendid meal for such short notice of having a guest! We spent a pleasant afternoon discussing a variety of subjects, including Ernst's touching story of faith, and his work as a printer, and our genealogy interests.

During the course of the afternoon, Ernst recalled that there was a Dietel home nearby that was now part of a farming museum, and told me where it was located. He mentioned that in that area, the t in Dietel is pronounced with a soft d sound, which is the way we say it in America. He also eventually remembered that he had done a printing job for a Dietel family which owned a lumber and cabinet business, and telephoned them and arranged for me to visit them. He also inquired to see if they knew of anyone who was interested in Dietel genealogy, and phoned the family historian they know, and made arrangements for me to see her, and arranged for another Dietel to go along as a translator. In short, he established contacts that would have been very difficult to establish without a good knowledge of the area, and without a good command of both the English and German language. I showed Ernst and his wife the Dietel book I had carried along, which shows that our GGG-Grandfather Johann Adam. Dietel was a weaver by trade. They then remembered that there was a little weaving museum in nearby Neudorf, and when I left their house at 2:30 in the afternoon, Ernst drove ahead in his car to make sure that I found the museum. It was a small

house with a thatched roof which had been home to the last person in the area who made a living by weaving at home.

The area around Selbitz was a poor one, but had a strong weaving tradition. One of the individuals manning the museum that day was a young man who spoke English, and he did a nice job of showing me around. When I asked to use the rest-room, he pointed me outside, to the left of the house, and it turned out to be a traditional outhouse. The museum was owned and operated by the little town of Neudorf, and there was no admission fee, and they would not accept a donation.

When I left there, I headed south for Himmelkron, and my motel room. After a bit, I started to wonder if I had time to find the Dietelhof museum, so I headed down route 2 instead of taking the autobahn. Soon I began seeing signs for the museum, which is called the Oberfrankisches Bauernhofmuseum. I arrived at 4:45. They normally close at 5, I found out later, but a bus load of tourists arrived about the same time I did, so the proprietor decided to stay open late for the crowd, and kept the museum open until almost 7. I arrived at the upper house, and asked to see the Dietel house. The proprietor, who spoke little or no English, took me outside in the pouring rain, and started gesturing down the hill. I thought that he was pointing at the road, and telling me to get in my car, and take that particular road. We were getting soaked, so he went inside, got me an umbrella, and finally got the message across that the Dietel house was just down the hill, within walking distance. It turns out that the Bauernhofmuseum is comprised of two homes, the Ober Hof and the Dietelhof. I practically ran down to the Dietel farm, I was so excited.

The Dietel house was an ancient house near Kleinlosnitz, apparently lived in by Dietel's for many, many years, with the last ones leaving for the United States in the 1800's. There were Dietel family trees on display, photographs, a Dietel confirmation certificate, and a number of old pieces of furniture which were stenciled with the date, and the Dietel owner's initials. I was able to buy a 156 page book there, in German, which details the emigration of a number of Kleinlosnitz Dietel families to America in the 1800's. It is titled "**In der Neuen Welt-Kleinlosnitzer in Nordamerika**". Of particular interest in the book was a photograph of an 1837 brochure about the benefits of emigrating to America. Since my GGG-Grandfather emigrated in 1839, I wonder if he was motivated by the 1837 brochure. Page 57 of the book mentions Selbitz, so I need to get a translator to see what it says. Evidently, judging from the equipment in the upstairs rooms, the Dietels who last lived at the Dietelhof were also weavers. The farm buildings there formed a small courtyard for the house; all very charming.

After leaving the Dietelhof, I drove around the local countryside until it started to get dark. In the little town of Zell, I saw a sign pointing to a Dietel subdivision. From the internet, I knew that an Alexander Dietel lives in Zell who is the contact person for a shooting club, but I didn't get to meet him during this trip.

On Monday morning, I ate my complimentary breakfast at the motel, and headed north on the autobahn for Selbitz to visit the church secretary. She let me look at the old original church record books. Usually, when dealing with such old documents, one has to be satisfied with microfilm, so having the original book in my hands from the first decade of the 1800's was certainly a thrill. I may have found a reference to the 1809 birth of my ancestor, but I'm going to have to find someone who is familiar with the old German script before I can be sure. The pastor unlocked the church so I could photograph it. I visited the church cemetery, but found that all the old stones were gone, and all that remain are a few from the 20th century. They plan to convert the cemetery to a park in 2 or 3 years, at which time I presume all tombstones will be removed. Now I know why Ernst Mueller was surprised that the Greenville Lutheran Cemetery, where Johann Adam Dietel is buried, still has stones from the mid-1800's.

After visiting the church, I took a walking tour of Selbitz, and took several rolls of photographs. I found a shop that had a nice souvenir plate which had a line drawing of the skyline, including the prominent steeple of the Lutheran church. After lunch, I visited Holtz-Dietel, which is a lumber yard and carpentry business near the little town of Sparneck. No one at the shop spoke English, but since they knew I was coming, they sent for their daughter-in-law Sonia Dietel, who did know a little English. Sonia took me to her house, and left me with her father and mother-in-law Mr. and Mrs. Hans Dietel while Sonia's mid-wife visited her to inspect her new baby's belly-button. We tried to communicate with sign language for awhile, then I went to

the car and got my Dietel book, and looked at it with them. This worked out well, for I knew the German words for grandfather, grandmother and cousin, and they were interested to see what American Dietle's looked like, and where they lived.

They were making a lot of German comments on my Grandfather Irvin Dietle's picture, so I mentioned to Sonia that I thought he looked a lot like the Dietel that is the administrator for their Bayreuth Landkreis (county), and it turned out that's exactly what her in-laws had been commenting on too! After visiting with them, and playing with their dog and 2.5 year old son, Sonia and I drove to Munchburg to visit with H. Dietel, who has an interest in Dietel genealogy. What is most remarkable is that Sonia had a 10 day old baby, but was willing to make time in her day to show me – a perfect stranger – around; I am very grateful for her kindness. She also has a 6 year old son, who just started to school in mid-September. Holtz-Dietel makes windows and doors, and specializes in the old style doors and windows for repairing the old homes in the area. Sonia told me that there is an Alexander Dietel, I think she said in Hoff, who does the same thing, and used to buy lumber from them until he could get it closer to where he lived.

H. Dietel received us graciously, and with Sonia's help as an interpreter, we spent a nice afternoon discussing Dietel genealogy. I had brought along a copy of the Dietel book with the hopes of finding someone interested in Dietel genealogy to give it to, and H. (I think her name was Hedwig, I have to find the scrap of paper I wrote it on.) was very happy to receive it. Her father Johann Hans Dietel was killed on the last day of battle with the Soviets in World War II, and her uncle Max Dietel was also killed in the war. She gave me pictures of both of them. She lives with her sister and brother in law Mr. & Mrs. Walter Rauch. She told me that in Klenlosnitz, 5 houses in a row are occupied by Dietel's. I tried to buy a copy of the local phone book from the hotel because there are so many Dietel's in it, but they wouldn't part with it because they only have two phone books for the entire hotel.

Before we left Munchburg, I asked Sonia what the significance of the old tower was that is located high on a hill above Munchburg, and she said that it was built in honor of a visit from Bismark. Bad Berneck also had a similar tower, but I didn't go up in either one.

On the way back from Munchburg, instead of taking the autobahn, I drove scenic route 2 back to Bad Berneck, which goes through the town of Gefrees. I had always half wondered if I had identified the right Selbitz and Berneck, since there are several towns with those names in Germany. The nearby town of Gefrees proves that I was in the right area, however, as that town was stamped in Johann Adam Dietel's passport before he left for America, while he was still getting ready for the trip. The map of Germany that I had in America didn't show the little town of Gefrees, so I didn't understand the significance of the Gefrees passport stamp until I actually visited the area in person and understood the proximity of Gefrees to Berneck and Selbitz.

I got back to Berneck before dusk, and managed to snap a few pictures before darkness fell. On Tuesday morning I woke up to find that a light rain was falling. After the usual breakfast of a ham sandwich, cereal, coffee and juice, I drove into Bad Berneck to take pictures. Since it was raining, I wore a suit coat as a sports jacket to protect the camera. I had 400 speed film in the camera. Since it was a dark, dreary day, I also bought some 100 and 200 speed film, so I certainly got enough pictures of Berneck. It was a thrill to walk on the same streets as my ancestors did, and see the same sights, including the ornate Lutheran church which dates back many hundreds of years, apparently back until the middle ages, according to the German-language brochure. While I was in Berneck I found a china shop, and bought a nice vase for Emily and a plate for Amy. At least I pretend the plate was for Amy; since no one will buy them for me, my strategy is to buy them for Amy because then I can still look at them! After photographing Berneck 3 times over, I spent the rest of my time touring the local countryside taking pictures. I was thrilled to see that the barns in the area look just like Pennsylvania barns. The houses have extremely steep roofs which are typically covered in orange tile, but occasionally in slate. It is hard sometimes to stop and take pictures, because none of the roads have berms.

I left the area about 2:00 and drove back to Bayreuth on the autobahn to return my car and catch a train back to Frankfurt airport. When I filled up the gas tank before returning the car, I was surprised at the high

cost; around fifty dollars. That explains why so many cars have stick shifts; they don't use as much gas as automatics.

The train rides are an interesting part of the trip because they are great for sightseeing. They are modern, high speed trains. The seating is spacious, with tables for every first class passenger. There are also dining cars, and special night trains with sleeper cars. The trains go so fast that they pass cars on parallel main roads like they are standing still. It is a real rush to pass a train going the opposite direction because the relative speed is so high, and the other train is so close; it only takes a few seconds. One can see from the many hunting stands visible in the woods and fields that deer hunting is a popular activity.

When I got to the airport hotel, I found out that the hotel room was horribly expensive, but since I was tired and needed to use the plumbing badly, and since I had to be at the airport early the next day, I took the room. It's a good thing I did, because it took a lot of extra time the next day to make it through ticketing, security, and passport control. The flight back was about 11 hours, including an hour on the ground at Frankfurt. Fortunately I had a seat mate who spoke English. She was born in Nuremburg, moved to the United States when she was 19, and is now living in the Houston area.

Lannie Dietle
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