

THE ZAHNISERS



A HISTORY OF THE FAMILY IN AMERICA.

BY

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AND

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ILLUSTRATED

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With a consciousness of its many defects, but with a hope that despite them all it may serve to knit more closely the ties of kinship-love throughout the family, this book is respectfully dedicated to the memory of the Zahnisers gone on before.

KATE M. ZAHNISER.

CHARLES REED ZAHNISER.

August 30, 1906.

The Zahniser Family includes at this writing 1,432 people, the mass of whom reside in Pennsylvania and the majority in Mercer County. They are the descendants of a German boy who with his mother arrived in America in 1753.

For more than a quarter of a century there has been a demand for a history of the Connection. This has lately become much more urgent as the fourth generation was seen to be rapidly dying off and with them much valuable information would naturally be lost. The first efforts towards a comprehensive record were made by Jacob Zahniser of Jackson Township, Mercer County, who died in 1891. For a score of

years he had been gathering statistics and recording facts relating to the early history, many of which he had obtained from his grandmother, the wife of the original Matthias. The manuscripts he left have been of incalculable value in the preparation of this volume which has drawn more largely from them than from any other single source.

In 1902 the present compilers began the task of securing a complete family record and putting it into shape for publication. The manuscripts mentioned above were found to contain a mass of material, but it was in no condition for publication so that it became necessary to work it over entirely in the new. As much additional data had to be secured, the first efforts were directed to this task. Blanks were sent out through the entire Connection to be filled with data for the Record of the Family. At the same time, steps were taken to find some trace of our ancestors in Germany and locate the relatives still living there.

This last undertaking, which, at the time, seemed likely to be most difficult, proved unexpectedly successful. The tradition in the family here was that our ancestor was the son of Valentine Zahneisen who married a certain Juliana Clemens and lived in a village near the city of Landau till 1753 when they sailed for America. Working on this basis, correspondence was opened with the Royal States Attorney at Landau which resulted in discovering the record of our ancestor's marriage and locating the families from which both he and his wife sprang. A letter was then addressed to "The Oldest Person named Zahneisen Living in Moersheim" to which the following reply—written of course in German—was received:

Moersheim, Sept. 18, 1902.

Most Esteemed Uncle:

In reply to the note of June 12, I will communicate to you the following in so far as I am acquainted with the facts in this matter. My name is Valentin Zahneisen,

63 years old, a master-baker in Moersheim near Landau, Palatinate; also born there. The brother of my father, Valentin Zahneisen, emigrated to America in the beginning of the nineteenth century. He was unmarried. Of a Juliana Clemens, to whom you referred in your note, nothing is known here. Moersheim is one-half hour from Ilbesheim and one hour from Leinsweiler.

This is what I am able to communicate to you in this matter. Should you have need of more particulars, please let me know. I am ready any time to give you gladly any information possible.

With greatest respect signs,

Valentin Zahneisen.

Thus after a separation of 150 years, the two branches of the family again came into touch with each other. Further correspondence followed and, in 1904, Rev. U. W. McMillan visited Landau and secured much valuable material including several photographs and establishing many things which had previously been only surmised.

The compilers have also been in touch with some of the best streams of tradition in the family. These

have been used along with the sources mentioned above. The task of selecting and adjusting such a mass of material, much of it fragmentary and sometimes contradictory, can be appreciated by those only who have been engaged in similar effort. It is regrettable that these records are still so incomplete. The statistics concerning some of the older generations had not been kept and some small branches of the family cannot be located. More trying than either of these misfortunes has been the fact that some of the Connection to whom blanks were repeatedly sent have neglected to return them. Others have returned the blanks but partially filled out. All the material secured has been faithfully used so that the compilers feel that they can disclaim all responsibility for important omissions. Of course not everything furnished has been printed; many incidents have been omitted and biographies have been cut down so as to observe a fair proportion and to keep within the

necessary limits of the book. Nothing, however, of real historical worth has been intentionally omitted. Doubtless some mistakes will be found; they are inevitable in a work of this kind. Great care has been used, however, to make them as few as possible, the proofs being read again and again in search of errors.

Among the most potent of the agencies that have been operative in preserving the family traditions and conserving the family spirit have been the annual reunions. The first of these was held in 1875 at the Old Homestead then owned by "Capt. James" Zahniser who, with Jacob son of Michael had been most instrumental in bringing it about. After a few years it became the custom to alternate the place of meeting between Jefferson Township and the vicinity of the original settlement. This arrangement continued till 1905, since which time they have been held at Mercer which is centrally located and easily accessible by rail. Unfortunately no record of these reunions has been

kept and we are thus deprived of what might have been a valuable source for this work.

In addition to the persons mentioned above, special gratitude is due to Prof. Maurice E. Wright for translating documents.

Throughout the book, frequent mention will be found of places incompletely located. In all cases, Counties and Post Offices are in Pennsylvania unless otherwise stated and Townships mentioned are in Mercer County. In designating the various generations, Valentin Zahnisen and his wife are accounted the First, those following being denoted as Second, Third, etc., in order.

ORIGIN OF THE FAMILY.

CHAPTER I.

Nestled in the heart of a beautiful valley not far from the upper Rhine in Highland Germany, is the city of Landau. The entire region is historic; thirty miles to the north-east is Worms where Luther faced the frenzied powers of Rome; at about the same distance a little more to the east is Heidelberg the nursery of German Calvinism and where, still earlier, Jerome the companion of Huss nailed his theses to the church door; Landau itself figured in the religious conflicts of every century from the fifteenth. In the Thirty Years War it was taken eight times by Swedes, Spaniards, Imperialists and French, and to the present day it continues a stronghold of Protestantism.

At a distance of some two miles a little south and east of Landau are two villages called Ilbesheim and Moersheim. Of these the first has two or three hundred inhabitants, and the second about six hundred. Two miles farther east is another village called Billigsheim. Landau itself contains some ten thousand people.

It was from this group of villages that the Zahnisers came. A century and a half have elapsed since our ancestors bade farewell to the Fatherland, but in those regions there is so little change that one can look on conditions there today and with little difficulty imagine what they were in the middle of the eighteenth century.

The country surrounding Landau, is surpassingly beautiful and fertile and is proudly called by its inhabitants, "The Pearl of Germany." In the midst of the valley flows the little Queich and on either side the low-rolling hills are covered with patches of grain

and vegetables a rod or two wide presenting somewhat the appearance of a huge crazy-patch quilt. The people live in little villages grouped here and there, for land is so scarce and valuable that they have no room for fences and farm residences such as are common in America. The farmers own but a small strip of land each and this they cut up into little sections which they cultivate as an American would a garden. In the villages, the houses are built entirely of stone or brick and are almost as compactly placed as in our great cities. In most cases, the stable is joined to the house or stands but a few feet from the back door. The streets are narrow and are paved with Belgian Blocks. Most of the houses are very old, some of them having been in constant use for over four hundred years.

The people are a sturdy and thrifty class who live in a simple and, to an American, a somewhat primitive way. For use on their lands, they have no

horses nor even oxen but use cows for hauling and plowing and that without even a yoke. Broad leather bands are placed around the animal's horns and connected with great chains which are attached to the cumbersome wagons. The women folk work much in the fields and are constantly to be seen driving the teams of cows or following along with bundles of grain, perhaps, on their heads. Domestic habits are as simple as those of outdoor life. One of the chief products of the region is wine which the people use quite freely. Their wines, however, are light and seem comparatively harmless. Drunkenness is not prevalent as in England and America. There is nothing of the feverish rush so characteristic of American life, but much more of sociability and neighborly cheer.

According to the tradition preserved in this country, the family sprang from a certain Valentine Zahneisen, as the name was spelled at first in America,

who married Juliana Clemens and lived in a village near Landau. Two sons had been born when, in 1753, Valentine's health failed, and, by advise of his physician, they sailed for America. Our researches in Germany have not only verified this tradition, but have pretty conclusively determined that Moersheim was the village in which our ancestors resided. We have found people bearing the name, some of whom reside at Moersheim and the remainder at Billigsheim. Those at the latter place, however, seem to have gone originally from Moersheim. By courtesy of the Royal States Attorney at Landau, we secured transcripts of the records at Moersheim and at Ilbesheim. In those of the former place, the name Zahneisen occurs frequently during the last two centuries. The given name Valentine does not occur, however, prior to 1800 and then never in connection with Juliana Clemens. The frequency of the names Valentine and Michael in the later records indicate a common origin for that family

and our own in which these names have always been favorites. In the records at Ilbesheim, the name Zahneisen does not occur at all, but there are two entries one of which states that Valentin Zahnmeister and Juliana Clemens were married, September 24, 1743, which is just ten years prior to the time when our tradition says that two children had been born and the family sailed for America. The other entry is on the preceding page of the same book and states that Valentin Zahneis and Juliana Clemens stood up as sponsors at the christening of a child. Inasmuch as it was customary then for betrothed couples to be selected as sponsors at the christening of children of their friends, and since neither Zahnmeister nor Zahneis occurs elsewhere in the records it seems probable that the parties in both cases are the same. The probability that both forms are misspellings of the name Zahneisen is increased to a practical certainty by the fact that both entries are made in French hand-

writing. When one remembers the difficulties of modern American officials with the spelling of foreign names, it is very easy to see how a French scribe could make the errors. At Ilbesheim the Clemens family still resides. It seems highly probable, therefore, that Valentine was one of the Zahneisens at Moersheim and that Juliana's home was at Ilbesheim. At the latter place they were married and then took up their residence at Moersheim. The suggestion that the original form of the name was Zahnmeister which was transformed into Zahneisen is rendered untenable by the fact that the former name is nowhere else found while the latter appears frequently in the Moersheim records prior to 1743.

The name Zahneisen (or Zahneissen by an older spelling) means "Tooth-iron", that is, an iron instrument for use on the teeth such as forceps or other tools of the dentist. Zahniser is an American transformation and of course meaningless.

The present Zahneisen family in Germany consists of only about a dozen persons. Valentin Zahneisen, the leading member of the family, is a retired master-baker and resides at Moersheim. He has two sisters, Elizabeth and Barbara and each of them has one child. He also has one brother, Konrad, living in Billigsheim who has three children. There is also a cousin of Valentin, Michael, living in Billigsheim, and Valentin himself has one daughter, married and two sons, one of them married and living in Landau. From this it is evident that the prospects for the continuation of the name in the Fatherland are not very bright. The family is said to be one of the most prosperous and respected in the community. Valentin is himself a genial character and now lives a life of comparative leisure. His picture occurs elsewhere in this volume.

One fact of considerable interest lately discovered is that another member of the family likewise named

Valentin and an uncle of the Valentin now living in Moersheim emigrated to America in 1805. This is the party mentioned in the letter from Valentin Zahniesen quoted in the Introduction and whom he apparently mistook for our ancestor. This man was twenty to twenty-five years old when he emigrated, and was unmarried. Nothing is known as to where he located or whether he afterwards married and left descendants. In case he did so, it is scarcely likely that his name would take the same form in anglicising as ours. From this reason the task of locating this branch of the family seems well nigh hopeless.

Of the Clemens family from which our maternal ancestor came, but little is known. The family is of Swiss origin however, and the fact that Juliana was a member of the Reformed Church along with the other fact that Landau lies on the route from Switzerland, the cradle of Calvinism to Heidelberg, its centre in Germany, suggests that the family may have been

one of those that migrated for conscience sake. In the days of religious bigotry, it frequently happened that those who were unwilling to sacrifice their religious convictions found safety in moving to another country. Such seems a probable explanation of the settlement of the Clemens family in Ilbesheim. The Zahneisens now living in Germany are all Lutherans, there being no other Protestant churches in the villages where they reside.

This much, then, we know of the origin of the Zahnisers. Their ancestors came from one of the choicest parts of Europe and out of that upper middle class which is everywhere the most stable element in society. The sturdy Teutonic stock which gave to the world a Luther and a Melangthan, and the free Swiss blood that stirred in a William Tell, united to produce the Zahnisers.

THE SETTLEMENT IN AMERICA.

CHAPTER II.

It often happens that the things we undertake for our betterment bring us rather disaster. The sea-voyage on which Valentine Zahneisen entered for the improvement of his health, proved a long and rough one and before it ended both Valentine and his younger son died and were buried at sea. Juliana and her older son, now four years old, landed in Philadelphia probably in the Fall of 1753. A widow with a small child, alone in a strange land among people of strange customs and a strange language, it is no wonder that Juliana was homesick and discouraged. She often declared that if she could have walked back to Germany she would have returned at once. The hardships and dangers of her first voyage that had cost her

the death of a husband and a son, however, deterred her from undertaking another.

It seems that she was not without a fair supply of money and by this means she succeeded in reaching a German settlement in Lancaster County where she seems to have had friends and which probably had been Valentine's destination when they left Germany. Here she resided till 1790. Some time during that period she married a certain Henry Stout but was again left a widow. There were no children by this marriage.

Juliana's son, who landed with her in Philadelphia, was named Matthias. As he grew to manhood in Lancaster County, he learned the carpenter's trade. About the year 1774 he married Mary Lint, daughter of Michael Lint, with whom he lived in Lancaster till 1790. During his residence in Lancaster, his sons Matthias (2), Michael, John, Valentine and William were born.

The Revolutionary War occurred during this period and the Zahneisens, or Zahnisers as they now came to be called, were not without a share in its hardships. Matthias' mother spun flax and carried the cloth to Philadelphia where she received for it \$36 in Continental Currency. Shortly afterwards this money was repudiated, but she still preserved her hard-earned savings and most of it is still in the family, valued by those who possess it far above what it was originally worth. Matthias had some \$600 of this money at the time of his death. Matthias was a soldier in the Revolutionary War, but we do not know in what organization or for how long a period. This residence in Lancaster County is the most baffling period in the Family history. There are no other sources, apparently, than the traditions handed down from Matthias and his mother. These, however, are probably very reliable since other traditions received

in the same way and later compared with other sources, have invariably been found correct.

In 1790, Matthias moved with his family, including his mother, to Allegheny County and settled on a farm, though Matthias himself still worked at his trade and left the bulk of the farming to be done by the boys. In 1796 he sold this farm to Frederick Stoner by whose grandson, Whitmore Stoner, it is now occupied. The farm lies in Penn Township east of Pittsburg and south of the Allegheny river and about one and a half miles south-west of the old town of Unity. The Mount Hope Cemetery is on the farm and a few rods west of it is the old stone house in which Matthias probably lived. The western end of the structure carries a stone tablet stating that it was built in 1812, but the eastern part is the original dwelling and is very much older. The older part is virtually a three-storied affair and built directly over a large spring. The first story was used as a cellar and milk-

house and the upper stories as a dwelling. The surface of the ground is rough, steep and full of rocks, in marked contrast to that found in Mercer County where the family next located. During Matthias' residence here, his sons Jacob and David and his daughter Mary were born.

At the time when Matthias sold his farm in Allegheny County, the section of the state north of the Ohio and west of the Allegheny river had just been opened for settlement. The land had been purchased from the Indians in 1789 but they refused to vacate till General Wayne in the decisive battle of Fallen Timbers in 1794, convinced them that contracts are made to be kept and that the land was no longer theirs. The Indians now lowered their wigwams and silently retired westward, leaving the region open for white settlers. The Legislature had in the meanwhile arranged to sell the land. Settlers were required to clear, fence and cultivate at least two acres for every hundred

they desired to purchase and to build a house in which they were to reside or cause others to reside for a period of five years. At the end of that time they were permitted to purchase the land at the rate of \$20 for each hundred acres. The first man to settle in Mercer County in accordance with this arrangement was Benjamin Stokely who located three miles northeast of the present town of Mercer. This is the only white family definitely known to have been in the County when the Zahnisers came, though it is possible that the Roberts family was already located in Sugar Grove Township.

Mercer County lies within the region formerly covered with glacial ice. Ages ago, great glaciers hundreds of feet deep and many miles wide crept down over the entire region. By this agency the hills were cut down and the valleys filled with debris. The result is that there are no abrupt hills and few places where the rock is exposed. The surface is gently

rolling and covered with glacial drift in some places more than a hundred feet deep. This drift is composed of various substances and contains many boulders and smaller stones locally known as "Nigger-heads" which have been carried here by the glaciers from regions farther north, and with which the young Zahnisers became acquainted in their first efforts at plowing, though often to the woe of shins and ribs. The soil produced by the glacial drift is fertile and the early settlers found it covered with forests of very large trees, mostly poplar, chestnut and oak.

When Matthias Zahniser sold his farm in Allegheny County in 1796, he and his three oldest sons sought out a new location in the territory just opened. Going on the theory that the land which produced the largest trees would produce the best crops, he selected a place in what is now Lake Township, eight miles north-east of Mercer. Here they built a cabin, cleared five acres of land and planted an orchard. The

place selected was some eighty rods north of the location now occupied by the home of J. Ira Zahniser. A portion of the old orchard is still standing.

With the coming of Winter, Matthias returned to Allegheny County but the three sons remained in the Wilderness with a few head of cattle which they fed chiefly on browse. Doubtless they would have returned with their father had it not been for the danger of thereby losing their claim to the land. By an unwritten law, universally observed among the settlers, if a claim was left without a person on it and without a fire in the cabin, it was considered abandoned and a new settlement could be made on it by any person who might choose to enter the vacant cabin.

When the Spring of 1797 opened, Matthias moved the remainder of his family from Allegheny County and settled on a tract immediately east of that which had been occupied during the preceding Summer and which now passed into the hands of his son

Michael. The oldest son, Matthias (2), settled the tract immediately south of his father's and John settled the one east of Matthias (2). Each of these tracts contained upwards of two hundred acres and was obtained in accordance with the settlement statute explained above. Much of this land is still occupied by descendants of Matthias, scores of whom live in the surrounding community.