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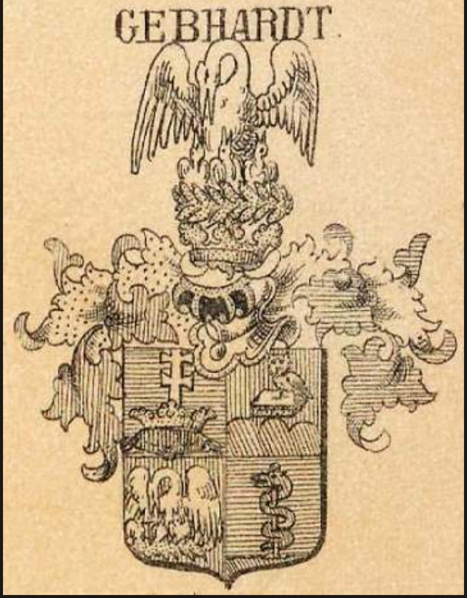

The Gebhardt Family Legacy

From the Teutoburg Forest to the Iowa Cornfield —
An eleven-chapter chronicle, from the year 9 CE to 2026.

Zeno E. Gebhart

Mayor of Dyersville, Iowa
23 June 1912 — 14 February 1985

Compiled for the descendants of Bernard & Frances Gebhart

Contents

A chronicle in eleven chapters, ordered as time runs

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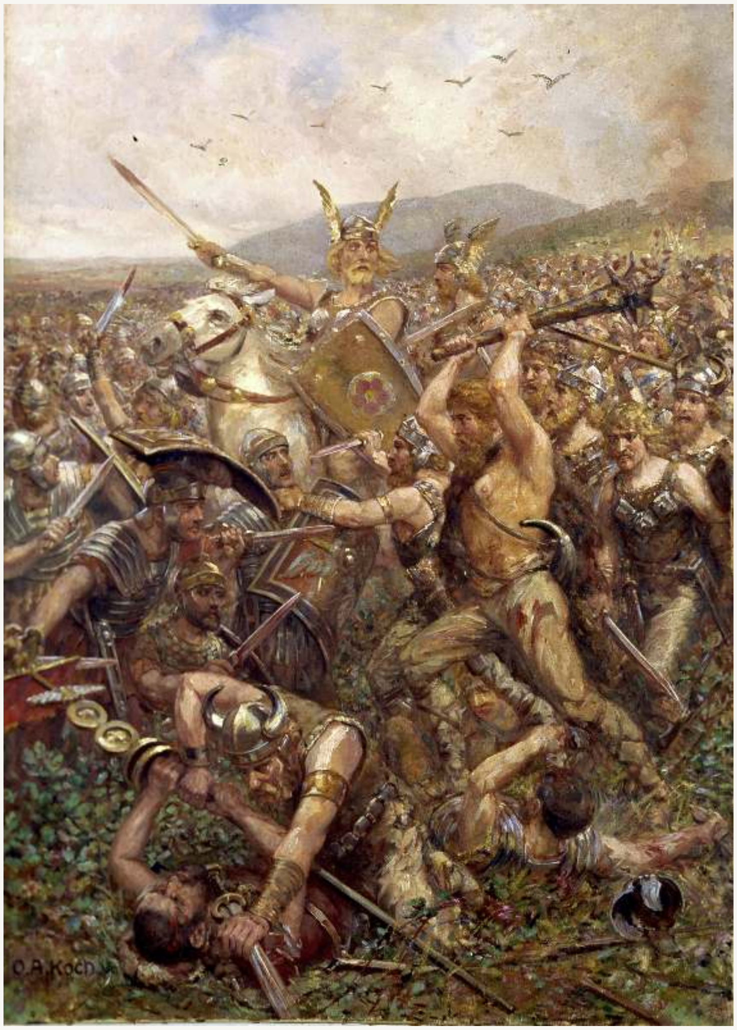
Foreword

This book runs forward in time. It begins in the amber-colored dark of a Germanic forest in the year 9 CE, where three Roman legions met their end, and it ends in a Wisconsin living room in the spring of 2026, where a grandchild of Zeno Gebhart opens a laptop and writes this preface. In between lie two thousand years: the minting of a name, the slow weather of Bavaria, a century of leaving, an ocean crossing, a river journey, a basilica rising out of black Iowa soil, a mayor in his shirtsleeves beside a fire truck, a winter funeral, and a cornfield that taught the country how to grieve. Every sourceable fact is footnoted; every gap in the record is named honestly. Read it slowly, in order.

CHAPTER I

The Ancient Forest

Teutoburg, September 9 CE



Otto Albert Koch, Varusschlacht, 1909. Arminius rallies the Cheruscan line against the collapsing legions of Varus. Lippisches Landesmuseum, Detmold; public domain.

The story of the Gebhardts begins not in a church register, and not on a ship, but in a stand of wet forest in what is now Lower Saxony, over four days between the 8th and 11th of September in the year 9 CE. An alliance of Germanic tribes — Cherusci, Marsi, Chatti, Bructeri, Chauci, Sicambri — under a 25-year-old Cheruscan chieftain named Arminius ambushed and annihilated three full Roman legions (XVII, XVIII, XIX) under the governor Publius Quinctilius Varus.[1]

Arminius was Rome's own creation turned against it. Taken as a youth to the capital, he had earned Roman citizenship and the equestrian rank, and served as an officer in Varus's own auxiliary forces before secretly organizing the revolt.[2] He knew exactly how a legion marched. He lured Varus's twenty-thousand-man column off the Roman road near Kalkriese Hill, roughly 20 km north of present-day Osnabrück, and into a choke-point between forest and bog.[1] Between 15,000 and 20,000 Roman soldiers died. Varus fell on his own sword. The legionary numerals — XVII, XVIII, XIX — were never reused.[1]

> **„Quintili Vare, legiones redde!“**
>
> *"Varus, give me back my legions!"*
>
> *— attributed to the Emperor Augustus on hearing the news; Suetonius, Life of Augustus §23.*

The Rhine became, that autumn, Rome's permanent northeastern border. Provinces that had briefly been called Germania Superior and Germania Inferior were reorganized as frontier military zones rather than pacified territory.[1] The Cherusci — a people of the central Weser valley, in the region of modern Hanover, first attested in writing by Julius Caesar half a century earlier — kept the forests and plains east of the river.[3] Arminius himself was assassinated in 21 CE by rivals within his own tribe who feared he would make himself king.[2] But the river held. Everything east of it remained the domain of the tribes whose names would eventually resolve into Deutsch, Dutch, and, eighteen centuries later, the surname Gebhardt.

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CHAPTER I (continued)

What the land still remembers

In the nineteenth century, a newly unifying Germany rediscovered Arminius — Latinized back into the vernacular as Hermann — as a founding hero. Between 1838 and 1875, sculptor Ernst von Bandel raised the Hermannsdenkmal above Detmold: 53.44 meters of copper and sandstone, sword pointed westward toward France.[4] For nearly a century it was the tallest statue in the Western world, inaugurated on 16 August 1875 amid the surge of national feeling that followed the Franco-Prussian War and the founding of the German Empire.[4]

A few kilometers south, the Externsteine — sandstone pillars seventy million years old — still mark what one 19th-century traveler called “the oldest church in Germany, and the roof is the sky.” They were sacred to Germanic peoples long before Rome arrived, and they are visited still.

The Hermannsdenkmal, Detmold.
Ernst von Bandel, 1838–1875. Arminius raises his sword above the Teutoburg Forest — a monument to a battle that had, by 1875, been refought in German memory for eighteen centuries.

The Externsteine.
Sandstone outcrops in the heart of the Teutoburg Forest, sacred to Germanic peoples long before Rome arrived — the physical ground from which the Gebhardts, eventually, descend.

* * *

In the amber-colored dark of a September forest, a young chieftain's knowledge of Roman tactics turned the empire's own discipline against it — and the river they could not cross became the western edge of a world that would one day call itself Germany.

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CHAPTER II

A Name Is Born

The 8th through 11th centuries

Eight centuries after Teutoburg, on the east bank of the Rhine and into the Danube country, the Germanic languages that had held the forest began producing written names. The name Gebhardt — spelled variously Gebhard, Gebhart, Gephart — is among the oldest. It is a dithematic compound, built from two roots in the Old High German way: gëba (“gift”) and harti (“hard, strong, brave”).[5] Taken together, the syllables mean roughly a brave gift — or, more poetically, the strong bearer of gifts.

geb + hart

geb	Old High German gëba — a gift, an offering, a thing freely given.
hart	Old High German harti — hardy, brave, strong, resilient.
Gebhardt	“a brave gift” — the strong bearer of gifts.

The first bearers of rank

The earliest historically documented Gebhard is Gebhard of Lahngau (c. 860/868 – 22 June 910), of the Conradine dynasty, who served as Duke of Lotharingia (Lorraine) from 903. He died in battle against the Magyars near Augsburg — a warrior duke, a gift and a hardness, faithful to the pattern of his name.[6]

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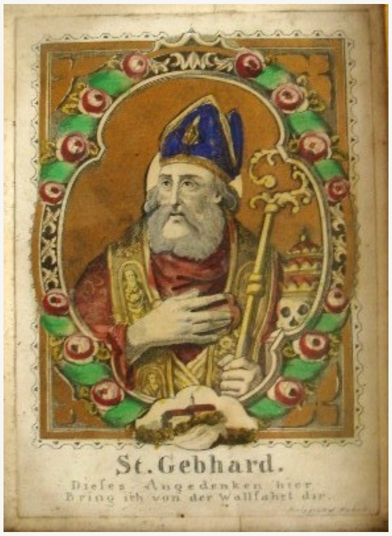
CHAPTER II (continued)

A bishop, a monastery, a saint


St. Gebhard.
Dieses Angedenken hier
Bring ich von der Wallfahrt dir.

St. Gebhard of Constance
1820 engraving. Born Austria, 949 CE; Bishop of Constance 979–995; founded the Benedictine Abbey of Petershausen 983. Feast day 27 August.

A generation after Gebhard of Lahngau, a different Gebhard cemented the name's prestige. Saint Gebhard of Constance (949–995 CE), born in Austria, served as Bishop of Constance from 979 until his death. In 983 he founded the Benedictine Abbey of Petershausen — one of the most important monastic foundations of the Ottonian period. His feast day is 27 August; he is patron of the diocese of Feldkirch.[7]

Medieval scholars note that the bishop's popularity "may have had an influence on the continued use of the personal name into the Middle Ages and beyond."[5] The name was by then most common in medieval Bavaria, Swabia, and Franconia — regions where Catholic veneration of Saint Gebhard was strongest, and where the bishop's Ottonian-court connections gave the name aristocratic cachet alongside its common use among farming families.[5][8] By the later Middle Ages, as surnames hardened out of given names in German-speaking lands, Gebhardt became a family name in its own right, passing from fathers to sons.

> *"Born from two ancient syllables — gift and strength — the name Gebhardt was first carried by a warrior duke and a sainted bishop, and then passed quietly into the keeping of farmers and craftsmen who bore it through the long German centuries."*

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CHAPTER III

Bavaria

Middle Ages – 1700s

Carl Spitzweg, a Bavarian village scene, 19th century (depicting earlier rural life). Timber-framed houses, an onion-domed chapel, the Alpine shoulder in the distance — exactly the sort of village in which families named Gebhart farmed for generations.

For five hundred years, the Wittelsbach dynasty ruled Bavaria — as dukes (1180–1623), then as prince-electors (1623–1806), and finally as kings (1806–1918).[9] They were "strictly Catholic by upbringing," and the Bavarian dukes became "leaders of the German Counter-Reformation."[9] In 1623, under Duke Maximilian I, the duchy was elevated to the Electorate of Bavaria, cementing Bavarian leadership of the Catholic cause in the Holy Roman Empire.[10] This religious identity — intensely Catholic, rural, conservative — would persist for centuries and shape the emigrant communities that eventually crossed to Iowa.

THE THIRTY YEARS' WAR · 1618–1648

The catastrophe that shaped everything after. Overall, the German territories of the Holy Roman Empire suffered a population decline of roughly 40%, from an estimated 18–20 million in 1600 to just 11–13 million by 1650.[11] The city of Augsburg fell from 48,000 to 21,000 inhabitants. Swedish and then French armies repeatedly swept through Bavaria; crops were burned, livestock slaughtered, and peasants fled. Contemporary accounts describe people so weakened by famine they could not accept alms. Key actions fought in or near Bavaria included the Battle of Rain (April 1632), the Battle of the Alte Veste near Fürth (August 1632), and the French and Swedish invasion of Bavaria in the summer of 1646. The Peace of Westphalia finally ended the conflict in 1648.[11]

After the Peace of Westphalia, Bavaria underwent slow demographic recovery in the late 17th and early 18th centuries, repopulating abandoned villages with farming families.[12] It was in this hardscrabble, deeply Catholic, small-farm culture of Franconia and the Alpine foreland — in hamlets whose place-names still record the family root, such as Gebhardsreuth in Upper Franconia and Gebhartshofen near Ansbach — that families named Gebhart persisted into the era of mass emigration.

> *"Between the Peace of Westphalia and the age of steamships, the Gebharts of Bavaria were farmers in a landscape still scarred by memory — tending soil that soldiers had burned, praying in churches that armies had emptied, and raising children in a country that had nearly forgotten itself."*

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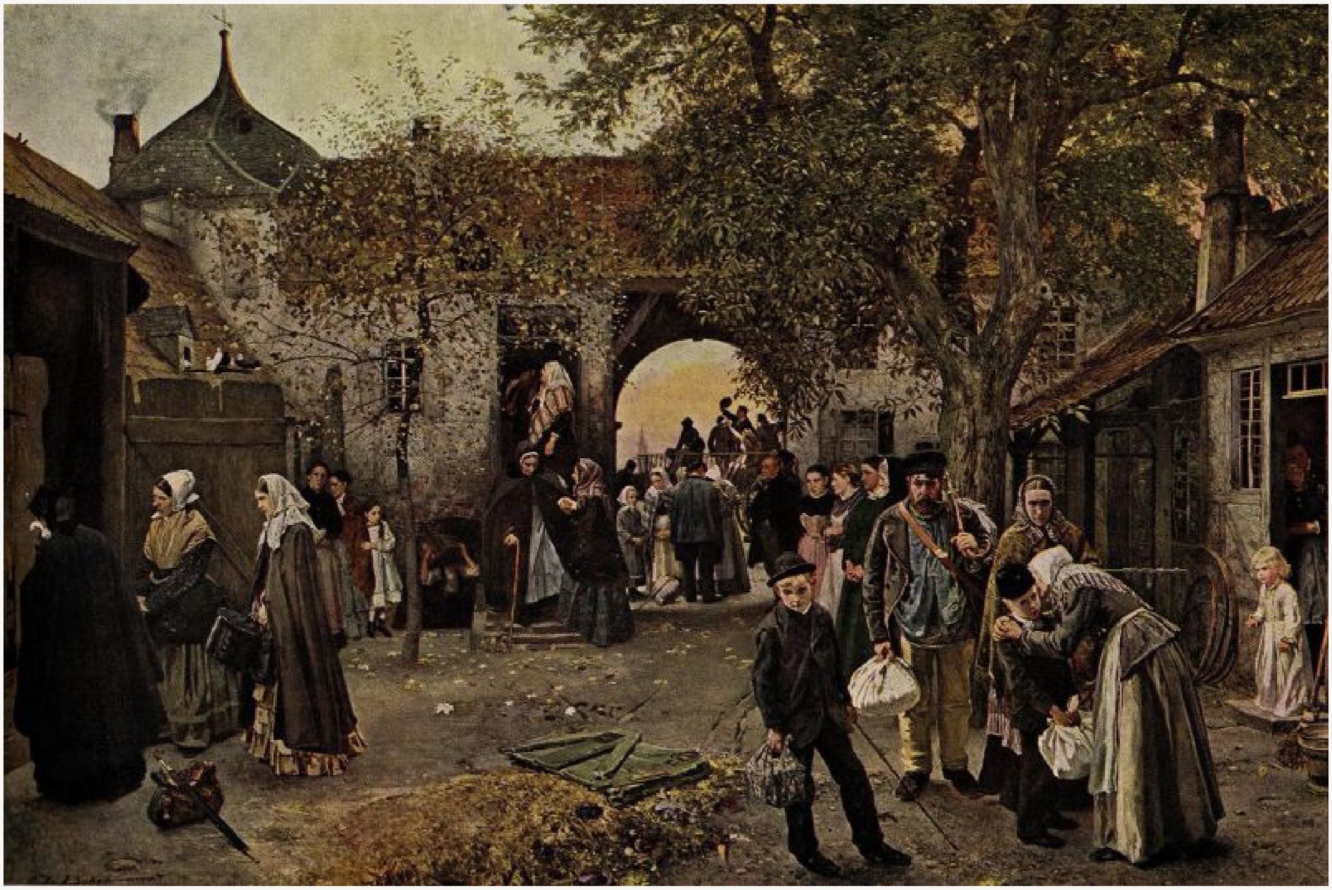
CHAPTER IV

The Century of Leaving

1815–1860



Christian Ludwig Bokelmann, The Emigrants, 1882 — a farewell scene of the kind played out at thousands of German village inns between 1815 and 1860. The wagon, the sack, the last loaf from the oven, the grandmother's hand on a grandchild's shoulder.

Between 1820 and 1920, an estimated six million Germans emigrated, driven by crop failures, religious conflict, political persecution, and a simple lack of economic opportunity.[13] The decade of the 1850s alone saw nearly one million Germans arrive in America. The single peak year was 1854, when more than 220,000 Germans were registered at American ports — roughly one in every 170 people then living in the German states.[14]

The trigger for the first massive wave (1846–1857) was crop failure. Beginning in 1846, repeated failure of the potato harvest in southwestern Germany — caused by the same Phytophthora infestans blight that devastated Ireland — pushed already-marginal farmers into destitution. An earlier spike of 20,000 southern German emigrants occurred in 1816–17 after the catastrophic "Year Without a Summer" caused by the eruption of Mount Tambora.[14]

Why they left — four pressures

Land scarcity	Bavarian inheritance law gave the farm to the eldest son, leaving younger sons as landless laborers with no prospect of ownership. American soil was the answer.[29]
Potato blight	The 1846–57 failures of the potato harvest in southwestern Germany pushed subsistence families off the land.[14]
1848 and its ruins	The failed Revolutions of 1848 sent roughly 6,000 "Forty-Eighters" across the Atlantic after the collapse of the Frankfurt Parliament.[15]
Conscription	Prussian military conscription was a further push, especially for men in their twenties. American soil meant freedom from the drill field.[14]

The primary German ports of departure throughout the 19th century were Bremen and Hamburg; the French port of Le Havre and the Belgian port of Antwerp also served large numbers of German emigrants. Many were routed through British ports as well.[16] Which port a family used depended on which rumor they had followed, which agent had found them, and which wagon-track had carried them out of the village.

> *"They left not in defeat but in calculation — a younger son with no acres to inherit, a father who had buried two potato harvests in a row, a man who had watched his government fail and decided the promises of Iowa were worth more than the ruins of Frankfurt."*

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14. Indiana University Indianapolis — The German-Americans, Chapter One (1854 peak year). https://library.indianapolis.iu.edu/static/collections/kade/adams/chap1.html

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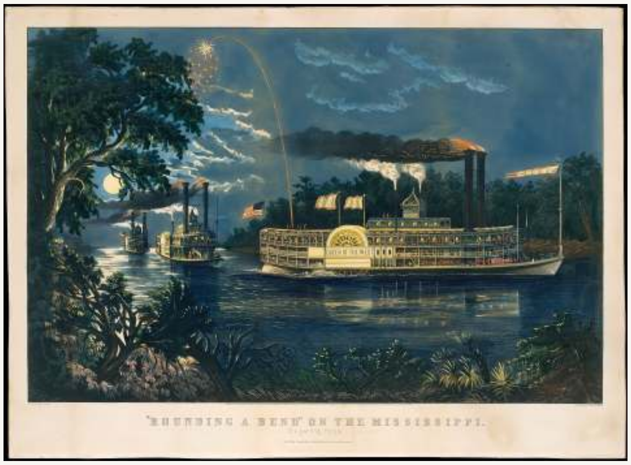
CHAPTER V

The Crossing

1840s–1850s

Alfred Stieglitz, The Steerage, 1907. The lower deck, where most German emigrants crossed.


"ROUNDING A BEND" ON THE MISSISSIPPI.

Currier & Ives, 1866. A Mississippi River steamboat of the type that carried immigrants north from New Orleans.

In the 1840s, crossing the Atlantic under sail took 40 to 60 days. The replacement of sail by steam cut transit times by roughly two-thirds — to about 12 days by the late 1860s — but in the emigration peak years of 1846–1857, sailing ships still carried the majority of passengers.[17] Steerage conditions in this era were notoriously brutal. Passengers were crowded into cargo holds, sleeping on straw mattresses in shared berths. On stormy days the hatches were sealed. Cholera, dysentery, typhus, and smallpox were rampant; mortality on some routes reached one in nine.[18]

Contemporary witnesses described "hundreds of people lying there like sacks together, quite motionless, with neither light nor air." British and American governments introduced advisory legislation in the 1850s to reduce overcrowding and guarantee minimum rations, but ship owners responded slowly.[19]

The southern route

Between 1844 and 1847, German emigrants bound for the Midwest preferentially entered America through New Orleans rather than the East Coast. Of the Germans arriving in St. Louis between 1848 and 1855, two-thirds had come by way of New Orleans.[16] From there they boarded Mississippi River steamboats headed north. By 1853 the trip from New Orleans to Louisville took only four and a half days, compared to twenty-five days in 1816. The journey from New Orleans to Dubuque, Iowa took roughly two weeks by steamboat in the 1840s–1850s.[16]

The Dyersville local history records that a company of forty-two souls in ten families left Bavaria in 1845, made their way up the Mississippi by steamboat from St. Louis, and landed at Dubuque — after which they transferred to ox-drawn wagons and moved westward into what would become the hinterland of Dyersville.[25]

> *"Below decks, with the smell of tar and unwashed wool and river mud, they counted the weeks — these people who had never seen the ocean, who had left everything they knew for a description of a place they could not yet picture, trusting a bishop's letter and a rumor of black Iowa soil."*

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17. IZA Discussion Paper — Emigrant Voyages across the Atlantic, 1853–1913. https://docs.iza.org/dp16274.pdf

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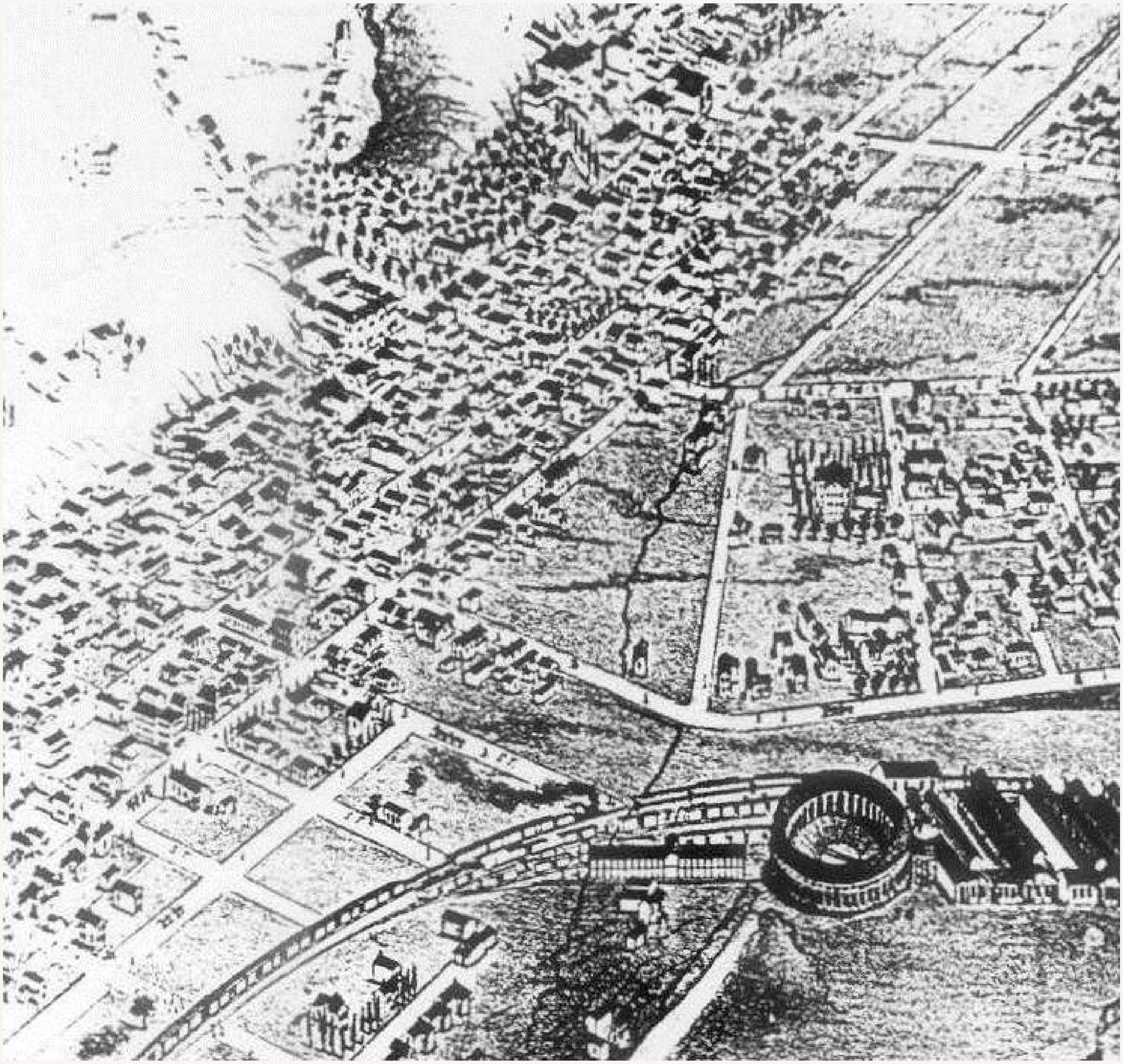
CHAPTER VI

Dubuque County

1833–1850



Dubuque, Iowa — an aerial view engraving, 1872. The Mississippi in the foreground, the lead-mining bluffs and the grid of the young city behind. Already by the 1860s, Dubuque was 30% German by population.

The Iowa side of the Mississippi had been the domain of the Meskwaki (Fox) when, on 22 September 1788, the French-Canadian trader Julien Dubuque signed an agreement at Prairie du Chien giving him exclusive rights to mine lead on their lands near Catfish Creek — becoming the first European to settle permanently in what is now Iowa.[20] In 1796, Dubuque obtained an official land grant of 73,324 acres from the

Spanish Governor in St. Louis, naming the area “The Mines of Spain.” He died on 24 March 1810; after his death the Fox prevented his creditors from continuing operations, and no white settlement resumed for over two decades.[21]

Following the Black Hawk War, the Sauk and Fox ceded nearly all lands in eastern Iowa by a treaty signed 21 September 1832, effective 1 June 1833. On that date miners rushed back to claim the lead deposits, and Dubuque was formally settled — the first permanent European-American settlement in what would become the state of Iowa.[22]

BISHOP MATHIAS LORAS · 1792–1858

Pope Gregory XVI established the Diocese of Dubuque on 28 July 1837. The diocese originally stretched from the northern border of Missouri to the Canadian border, and west from the Mississippi to the Missouri River.[23] Pierre-Jean-Mathias Loras, a French Catholic priest born in Lyon, was appointed first bishop and consecrated on 10 December 1837. He arrived in Dubuque in 1839 to find only three parishes, several hundred Catholics, and one priest. Loras actively published letters in American, Irish, and German Catholic newspapers describing cheap fertile Iowa farmland and religious freedom, specifically to attract Catholic immigrants. By 1854, he had established 31 Catholic churches in Iowa with membership exceeding 15,000.[23]

The Germans organized their own Catholic parish in Dubuque — Holy Trinity — in “a small stone church at 8th and White Streets in 1851,” built after German families petitioned Bishop Loras for permission to form a separate German-language parish. By 1860, Germans were the largest ethnic group in Dubuque, comprising 30% of the city’s population.[24]

> *“A French bishop from Lyon, writing letters in imperfect English to German Catholic newspapers in Cincinnati and Baltimore, described Iowa as a kind of promised land — and the farmers of Bavaria believed him.”*

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CHAPTER VII

Dyersville Founded

1849

In 1847, a 26-year-old from Somersetshire, England, arrived on the prairie thirty miles west of Dubuque. He purchased land in 1848 and began laying out a settlement. The town was “known as Dyersville as early as February 13, 1849.” His family and friends from Bonwall, Somersetshire, joined him in 1849.[25] The town bore the English man’s name, but the farmland around it was already filling with Germans.

The first Bavarian settlers had arrived in 1846 — the forty-two souls in ten families who had crossed from Bavaria, steamed up the Mississippi, and taken covered wagons westward. They settled “a few miles south of the settlement of New Vienna” and became the nucleus of the farming community that would surround Dyersville.[25][26] The economic panics of 1857 and 1873 pushed many of the English settlers to sell their farms, homes, and stores and move on; German immigrant families bought what they left behind. By 1910, Germans had “taken an almost exclusive possession of Dyersville and the surrounding area.”[26]

The Basilica of St. Francis Xavier, Dyersville. Gothic Revival; twin spires 212 feet tall; 64 stained-glass windows; completed in 1889 by a parish that had, in many cases, mortgaged their farms to build it.

The parish grows into a basilica

A Catholic parish for Dyersville's Irish and German Catholics was founded in 1858–1859, named St. Francis Xavier after the first major donor, Francis Xavier Bullinger, who gave $50 to start the building fund and later donated his life savings to purchase the church lots when a title problem arose.[28] The first church was completed in 1862; already by 1869 it had to be doubled in size. By 1880 the population had again outgrown it.[27]

Construction of the present Gothic Revival basilica began in September 1887. The cornerstone was laid 3 June 1888. The new church was dedicated on 3 December 1889 by Bishop John Hennessy of Dubuque, with special excursion trains bringing an estimated 6,000 people from across Iowa for the ceremony. The building cost approximately $100,000 — financed by parishioners who mortgaged their farms.[27] The parish maintained a German-language school after the old church building was converted to classrooms. The parochial school was central to preserving German Catholic identity across generations.[27]

> *"James Dyer platted the town, but it was the German farmers who built the church — and when the twin spires rose 212 feet into the Iowa sky, every German family for thirty miles around understood that this was now their place."*

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CHAPTER VIII

The Road-Builder's Son

1880s – 1912

By the close of the nineteenth century, the Bavarian settlement around Dyersville had already become a dense network of second-generation German-Iowan families. The Gebharts married the Henkels, the Henkels married the Bullingers, the Bullingers married the Reulands. This is the world into which Zeno Gebhart's parents were born.

BERNARD & FRANCES · A DUBUQUE COUNTY MARRIAGE

Frances M. Henkels was born 1 April 1886 in Dubuque, Iowa, to John Henkels and Elizabeth Reuland — themselves of German immigrant descent. On 12 January 1909, in Luxemburg, Dubuque County, Iowa, she married Bernard A. Gebhart.[30] They are recorded together in New Wine Township, Dubuque County, in the 1930 census — the same township in which Dyersville is located. They raised at least six sons and one daughter (seven children in total).[30] Zeno Edward Gebhart was born 23 June 1912 in Iowa, the son of Bernard A. Gebhart.[36] Frances outlived her husband, dying 25 August 1970 in Dyersville at age 84, and was buried there.[30]

Iowa learns what roads are for

Bernard Gebhart made his living in road construction — a trade that, in the Iowa of his working life, was essentially inventing itself. In 1900, Iowa had 104,000 miles of road open to travel. All of it was unpaved dirt. Only 1.62% of Iowa roads were surfaced with gravel or other materials. Road conditions were seasonal: excellent when dry, impassable when wet.[31]

Iowa's first concrete paved road was a half-block section in LeMars in 1904. The first two Iowa cities connected by paved road were Mason City and Clear Lake, in 1918. As late as 1920, when Iowa had 407,578 registered automobiles, there were only 25 miles of paved road outside cities and towns.[31] The Iowa Highway Commission was established in 1904 in Ames with the purpose of studying and solving "the road problem in Iowa." Road contractors — Bernard Gebhart among them — played a central role in the transition from dirt, to gravel, to macadam, and eventually to concrete in the 1910s–1920s.[32] By the end of 1931 the Iowa Highway Commission announced that Iowa was “no longer a mud road state.”[31]

> *“Bernard Gebhart worked the roads as Iowa itself was learning what roads could mean — every mile of gravel he laid was one more mile connecting a farm to a market, a family to a church, a son to a world his grandfather could not have imagined.”*

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CHAPTER IX

A Mayor at Mid-Century

Dyersville, 1951–1970s

#GOTHEDISTANCE

Dyersville's main commercial district — the town Zeno governed.

Iowa cornfields around Dyersville at golden hour.

On a spring afternoon in April of 1951, five men posed beside a new fire engine on the main street of Dyersville, Iowa. The caption in the Dyersville Fire Department's archive names them from left to right: Chief Jake Nebel, W.F. Lambach, Mayor Gebhart, Herb Link, and W. Hale. The truck was a 1951 Ford F-7, the fire department's pride that year.[33] The man third from left — Zeno E. Gebhart, road-builder's son and grandson of Bavarian farmers — had inherited a town that prayed in German and voted in English.

Dyersville had been incorporated as a town in 1872; at the March 1873 election its first officers were chosen, with William Trick as Mayor. The city has a council-mayor form of government.[34] By the mid-twentieth century, it had grown into a stable, prosperous German-Catholic community — in the range of 2,500–3,500 residents at mid-century, and 4,035 at the 2000 census.[35] Parish life centered on the Basilica of St. Francis Xavier; the economy was locally rooted farming that was transitioning to mechanized agriculture.

Farm toys, and a basilica's elevation

Two things happened in Dyersville during Zeno's era that would shape the town's identity for generations. In 1945, Fred Ertl Sr. began making scale-model farm tractors in his Dyersville basement, eventually founding the Ertl Company — a toy manufacturer that made Dyersville the "Farm Toy Capital of the World" and home to the National Farm Toy Museum.[25] And on 11 May 1956, Pope Pius XII elevated St. Francis Xavier to the rank of a Minor Basilica — the twelfth church in the United States to receive the honor. It was a major celebration in the community Zeno led.[27]

> *"To be mayor of Dyersville in the 1950s was to preside over a community that had never quite forgotten it was a village in Bavaria — one that happened to have been transplanted, intact, to the rolling hills of eastern Iowa."*

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CHAPTER X

February 1985

A death, and a field that came after

Zeno Edward Gebhart died on 14 February 1985 — Valentine's Day — in the frost of an Iowa February, and was laid to rest at Mount Olivet Cemetery, Key West, Dubuque County, Iowa. He was 72 years old: born 23 June 1912, a son of Bernard and Frances Gebhart, mayor of a town that had been German for a century.[36]

FIELD OF DREAMS

The Field of Dreams movie site — the Lansing farm, four miles northeast of Dyersville. Filmed three years after Zeno's death; a line of visitors still stretches across the infield on most summer afternoons.

Three years later, a film crew

Filming for Field of Dreams began on 25 May 1988, three years after Zeno's death, on the property of Don and Becky Lansing in Dyersville, Iowa — approximately four miles northeast of town, just off U.S. Highway 20.[37][39] The diamond was built across two adjoining properties because the producers wanted sunset shots with a clear line-of-sight. Sue Riedel, a local Iowa teacher, was tasked with scouting farms and selected the Lansing property because "it was set by itself … totally surrounded by corn."[38]

Directed by Phil Alden Robinson and starring Kevin Costner, Amy Madigan, James Earl Jones, Ray Liotta, and Burt Lancaster (in his final film role), the film was released by Universal Pictures on 21 April 1989. It grossed $84.5 million against a $15 million budget, and was nominated for three Academy Awards: Best Picture, Best Original Score, and Best Adapted Screenplay. In 2017, the Library of Congress selected it for preservation in the National Film Registry.[37]

After filming, the Lansing family kept their portion of the field intact and opened it to visitors; within three years of the film's release, an estimated 60,000 people had made the pilgrimage to Dyersville.[39] In August 2021, the Chicago White Sox defeated the New York Yankees 9–8 in the first MLB Field of Dreams Game, played in a ballpark constructed adjacent to the movie site. It drew over 7,800 fans and was broadcast nationally.[37]

> *"He died on Valentine's Day, in the frost of an Iowa February, and was laid in the earth of Dubuque County — and three years later, not four miles from his grave, Kevin Costner walked into a cornfield and heard a voice that the whole country would hear."*

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CHAPTER XI

The Descendants

1985 to 2026

Forty-one years after Zeno Gebhart was buried at Mount Olivet, the town he governed is still anchored to its roots. As of the 2020 census, Dyersville had a population of 4,477; a 2026 estimate places it at roughly 4,588.[35][41] Approximately 60.9% of Dyersville residents identify German ancestry — a proportion higher than nearly any neighborhood in America.[40] The next largest ancestries are Irish (11%), Mexican (3.1%), and English (2.4%).

The Basilica of St. Francis Xavier still rises 212 feet above the Iowa plain. It is one of 53 minor basilicas in the United States and remains an active parish church, drawing both worshippers and architectural tourists.[42] Its most recent major restoration cost over a million dollars and returned its twin golden-cross-capped spires to their full glory — visible from the surrounding farmland just as they were when Zeno Gebhart's parents mortgaged their future to build that church.[25]

The Field of Dreams Movie Site at 28995 Lansing Road receives tens of thousands of visitors annually. It was purchased in 2012 by a private partnership, Go the Distance Baseball LLC, for approximately $5.4 million; Baseball Hall of Famer Frank Thomas joined as majority owner in 2021. MLB has held its Field of Dreams games in Dyersville in 2021 (White Sox vs. Yankees) and 2022 (Cubs vs. Reds), drawing national television audiences.[38][37]

THE GRANDCHILDREN

Zeno's grandchildren have scattered outward from Dubuque County in the way American families do. One of them lives in Madison, Wisconsin, about two and a half hours northeast of Dyersville as the car drives. On a clear day he can point to the map and trace the route his great-great-grandparents took in reverse: up the Mississippi to Dubuque, west into the corn. He drives down occasionally — for a cousin's wedding at the basilica, for a grandparent's burial at Mount Olivet, for the hush of a Field of Dreams evening when the infield lights come on and the old farm gives back what it borrowed. He is the reason this book exists. The rest of the grandchildren are the reason it was worth writing.

Dubuque County's German identity has not faded. By 1895, 65% of Dubuque's population was either foreign-born or had foreign-born parentage, with 62% of that number from German-speaking countries.[24] That demographic gravity persists in parish rolls, in surnames, and in community identity more than a century later — the low-German-Catholic culture that shaped Zeno Gebhart's town is still, recognizably, the culture of the town today.

> *"The spires still rise, the cornfield still rustles in late summer, and on any given afternoon a family from somewhere else will pull off Lansing Road, step out of their car, and stand in silence at the edge of that diamond — not entirely sure what they came for, but grateful, as the Gebharts once were, that they came."*

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