

# Thinking about Immigration

## German Iowa and the Global Midwest Frequently-Asked-Questions

We hope this site and the related exhibits and events will prompt discussions about Iowa history, the history of immigration, and present-day issues. The following FAQ may address some of your questions--and, we hope, provide you with new ones.

Q: Where exactly did German immigrants come from?

A: German immigrants began arriving in Iowa in the 1840s – but there was no country called “Germany” until 1871. Its borders were very different from the borders of today’s Germany, and many German-speakers lived outside Germany. The people we call German immigrants came from an area loosely known as “German-speaking Central Europe,” which includes today’s Germany and Austria as well as portions of many other countries including France, Switzerland, Czechia, Poland, and more.

Q: Did German immigrants take jobs or livelihoods away from Iowa’s previous inhabitants?

A: In the earlier years of statehood, European-American settlers, including Germans, were granted or purchased land that the United States had recently expropriated via war and inequitable treaties from Native Americans. Germans who arrived in cities often competed with other European-American arrivals for jobs or for customers, as they founded their own businesses. For much of the period of massive immigration, the urban and rural economies were growing rapidly and could absorb a great deal of new labor. However, there were economic cycles, and during periods of depression or recession, economic tensions sometimes translated into inter-ethnic resentments.

Q: How did German immigrants contribute to Iowa today?

A: As the single largest ethnic group in Iowa, German immigrants and their descendants contributed to every sector of the economy, to education, to politics, to cultural life, to the built environment . . . it would be hard to point to an aspect of Iowan life that wasn’t in some way shaped by the legacy of German immigration! But most German influences have blended with other influences. Christmas is a good example. The Christmas tree comes from Germany, but the German tradition is put it up on Christmas Eve and open gifts that same evening – at least, those gifts that haven’t already been opened on St. Nicholas’ Day, December 6. In the United States, the English tradition of opening gifts on Christmas Day caught on, and it’s common to put up the Christmas tree weeks in advance.

Q: Do immigrants today learn English more slowly than German Iowans did?

A: When it comes to language, the most common pattern for immigrants then and now is generational change. Immigrants who arrive as adults usually learn enough English to function, with the degree of fluency depending on what exactly their needs are. Do they work in an English-speaking environment, for example, or do they work with other immigrants from the same country? Many German immigrants lived and worked in German-speaking communities and never became fluent in English. That was why the sudden crack-down on German in World War I was such a hardship, even for people who had lived in Iowa for 20 or 30 or 40 years. By contrast, immigrants arriving as children almost always learn fluent English, as do children of immigrants. In fact, children and grandchildren of immigrants often regret that they weren't taught the language of their ancestors. This is true of immigrants and their descendants today, just as it was for German immigrants. In 2014, for example, 37% of Hispanics aged 5-17 and 30% of those aged 18-33 spoke only English in their homes, meaning they were unlikely to become fluent in Spanish or pass it on to their children. Similarly, few descendants of German immigrants can speak German today.

Q: Did German Iowans stop speaking German after World War I?

A: German use declined a great deal, with few surviving German newspapers and most bilingual schools turning to English-only. However, many German communities continued using German in their daily life, and in smaller towns, the use of German in schools and churches often persisted in the post-World War II years.

Q: Did German customs ever clash with the morals and values of other Americans? Was German culture more compatible with mainstream America than later immigrant cultures?

A: Members of other European-American groups often found German traditions strange and offensive. German Americans, for example, carried on the German tradition of spending Sunday afternoons with their families at a beer garden. They caught up with their friends after a week at work, socialized in the pleasant weather, and enjoyed the nearby parks, where they might participate in informal sports or make music. Many Americans of English ancestry were horrified by such consumption of alcohol in public places – with children present, and on a Sunday! These cultural clashes boiled over into politics, with temperance pitting German Americans against English Americans in many Iowa elections in the late 19th century. Sometimes, tensions over beer erupted into inter-ethnic violence. Another source of tension was religion, with Catholic German Americans the target of widespread anti-Catholic prejudice. And the use of German on the streets or in businesses as well as the many German-language newspapers displayed in news kiosks could feel alienating to Americans who didn't understand German. Although much of our German heritage may now seem mainstream, it didn't start out that way. It became mainstream by a process of hybridization and accommodation –

just as other cultures' unique practices have become part of the mainstream. Just think about the standard American cuisine of bratwurst and potatoes – or pizza and tacos!

Q: How much did German-Americans stay connected with their ancestral homes?

A: German immigrants often corresponded with German relatives throughout their lives. They might go back to visit – though a visit might be a once-in-a-lifetime treat, since it was expensive and meant time off from work. Continued contact often eased chain migration: If unemployment was high in Germany but you had a cousin in Iowa, perhaps that cousin could help you to get a fresh start. During the world wars, mail was disrupted, and families had to reestablish contact afterwards – when they sometimes learned about dramatic changes and losses. Finally, many German Americans followed the news in Germany via the American press, imported German papers, or the German-American press.

Q: What were German-American attitudes in the World Wars? How about immigrant populations and security risks?

A: The US was neutral in World War I until spring of 1917, though it favored the Allies (Britain, France, Russia) with trade relationships. During the period of neutrality, many German Americans continued to feel loyal to the land of their origin. The newspaper *The Fatherland* expressed pro-German sentiment, which was perfectly legal until the US joined the war. Many German Americans hoped fervently for continued neutrality: they knew the US favored the Allies but hoped it didn't come to war against Germany, where they still had family and felt a connection. But many German Americans had committed themselves to the US armed forces in earlier generations, with the Civil War and campaigns against Native Americans – and once the United States entered World War I, German Americans did their part for the war effort. In fact, just as for immigrants today, joining the army could be a way to prove your loyalty and become fully American. Fewer German-Americans supported Germany in World War II, even during the period of American neutrality (before Pearl Harbor). Although a large part of the US population was isolationist, active support for Germany meant supporting Nazi Germany, and this was much tougher for Americans to condone. Only a very small number of German Americans were sympathetic the Nazi cause. In both World Wars, there was concern that German Americans might pose a security risk. This concern was overlaid, however, by cultural attitudes. In the First World War, when German Americans still seemed very foreign to many other Americans, security concerns justified broad official measures, such as the banning of German-language newspapers. In addition, individual citizens whose passions had been inflamed by anti-German rhetoric were responsible for a great many violent acts, such as beatings of German Americans and destruction of their property. By the time of the Second World War, German Americans were much more part of the mainstream. Although the threat of a German invasion of the US was much greater than it had been during the First World War, official measures targeted only Germans who did not hold US citizenship. By contrast, Japanese Americans, including American citizens, were rounded up and interned without due process for the duration of the war. When we think about immigration and security risks today, it's good to ask

ourselves how our thinking about the level of risk might be influenced – consciously or not – by other factors such as cultural attitudes.