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Some of the Key Reasons Why, Centuries Ago, Germans Immigrated to America

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In the 17th century, Germany, as we know it today did not exist. It consisted of various small duchies, dukedoms and kingdoms.

It was not united like England and France, so the actual first German settlers in the New World were members of other nation's exploration or settlement groups.

They spread the word back to their homeland of the New World opportunities and soon several additional groups of Germans settled in various areas throughout the colonies.

During the 1800s more and more German immigrants came to settle in America. The Germans eventually outnumbered all the nationalities in the New World.

Overall, between 1800 and 1919 more than 7 million Germans immigrated to the United States with the majority settling in the central part of the country, including Missouri. From the 1830s to the 1860s Missouri's population almost doubled with every decade, the majority being German immigrants.

The decision to leave one's family, friends, relatives, home and village was a very difficult one. While the reasons are many, here are some of the key ones:

1. The feudal system lasted well into the 19th century. In many cases citizens could not marry, travel, relocate or emigrate without permission of their prince and later civil authority.
2. In the early 1800s, in the poor areas of south and central Germany, restrictions were put on marriages in an attempt to limit growth because of overpopulation and an economic depression.
3. Struggle for power and influence between Prussia and Austria continued until 1871, with Prussia gaining more control of independent states. The result was an unstable political climate.
4. Permitted religions were determined by the ruling prince. These religious restrictions caused some to leave for religious convictions.
5. Ordinary citizens were burdened by a system of rules and law established by guilds, aristocracy, churches and government.

6. After the Napoleonic Wars ended in 1815, a flood of foreign imports penetrated the German market making it hard for the German industry to compete.

7. Ordinary citizens were unable to borrow money to buy land in Germany until after 1850.

8. Farms became so small that they were unable to sustain families.

9. The population had grown so large that it became dependent on the potato as a major food source. In 1840 a potato blight led to famine.

10. Industrialization wiped out home industries such as spinning, weaving, etc.

11. Young men were compelled to serve in the German army. Many emigrated illegally to escape this mandate.

12. High taxes to pay for governmental infrastructure and military expenditures.

13. By the 1840s societal classes became more prevalent. The middle class was committed to liberal principles, the working class to working/living reforms and the ruling/nobility class to maintaining the status quo.

14. Some communities, to try and get rid of the underprivileged, paid for their passage cost in exchange for the individual giving up all citizenship rights and promising not to return.

15. Gottfried Duden's book on his life in Missouri.

16. Emigration societies started in Germany.

Taken from the book "The Germans — Their Arrival, Settlement and Contributions Vol. 1" in the Washington Historical Series by Steve Claggett and edited by Mark Wellenkamp, volunteer of Four Rivers Genealogy group inside the Washington Historical Society building at Fourth and Market streets.