

English as a Second Language

Transition from German to English

By: Willard Kistler

Peter's School



Peter's School 1927-1928

Willard Kistler is the second boy
from the left in the second row.

Alfred Herber's daughter, Helen Herber (Ludwig), is the teacher.

Alfred J. Herber, my grandfather, was a public school teacher in one-room schools in Heidelberg Township for over thirty-seven years from 1885 to 1922. He was born near the Weisenberg Church at the Herber homestead on September 16, 1862. He was educated in the public schools. At age seventeen he attended the "Summer Normal School" at Lynnville and later at New Tripoli to get his teaching credentials. He taught in Weisenberg and Lowhill townships for a few years before purchasing a small farm a short distance from Pleasant Corner. His long, dual-career teaching in Heidelberg Township schools and farming began.

He taught most of the thirty-plus years at the school located closest to his home, Peters School along what is now Rt. 309. In later years he was also asked to go to other schools in the township to "straighten out" discipline problems. From the late nineteenth century into

the twentieth century there were up to eight one-room schools in Heidelberg Township. Some of them did not open every year. Besides Peters were Hawks, Kemmerers, Pleasant Corner, Mantz, Germansville, Water Pond, Saegersville, Central and Heidelberg.

Alfred was known as a strict disciplinarian and he was eager to comply with the Pennsylvania School Code which stipulated that English be the language used in public school. Especially before World War I, Pennsylvania Dutch/German was the language most families in the area used at home. Alfred's family of fourteen children spoke German. Alfred had to face a dilemma as the slow deterioration of Pennsylvania Dutch as the primary language began to occur. Ever since the German immigration began in Pennsylvania in the eighteenth century, English had been the language of "outsiders" or auslanders.

How did Alfred resolve this dilemma? He owned a piece of property over which he and his children walked to get to school. This "Newland" as it is still called provided the boundary line not only of home and school but of English and German. The rule was that, on the way to school when they stepped off the Newland, they had to begin speaking English. English was required until they returned to the Newland on their way home. Then they could speak their first language (German) again. None of Alfred's children had any English before going to school. I asked my mother who started attending school in 1895 how she could talk when she had no instruction. She replied that for a few months she didn't speak a word in school. She would only talk (in German) when she reached the Newland on the way home.

Herber Family



Alfred Herber with his wife, Amanda,
in the center of the photo
surrounded by their 11 children.

This was taken around 1916
at the Alfred Herber homestead
which is still occupied by
fifth generation progeny.

This was a total immersion program. Not only did Alfred insist on using English in the school room as prescribed, but he also forbade German on the playground during recess. For some children this dichotomy was difficult to handle. Alfred's youngest daughter, Florence Herber Harter, boarded with a family in Slatington to attend High School. When she was asked to say a prayer before eating, she didn't know a grace in English so she prayed in German. She endured giggling and was ostracized. This caused her to have an emotional break-down and she had to leave school. The next year she stayed at home and took the Berksy train to Slatington High School. She graduated four years later and became a public school teacher herself.

During World War I the GI's returned home speaking only English. They did not want to associate in any way with the German culture which had caused such calamity in Europe. Speaking Pennsylvania Dutch/German from that point on had a stigma attached and

accelerated the use of English as the primary language of all citizens. Church services ceased being in German and German hymnals were packed away, for example.

Alfred's legacy was his own children in whom his wife and he instilled a respect of education. Of his eleven children who lived past infancy, nine continued their education beyond eighth grade. Five became public school teachers, one a public school superintendent. One was an ordained minister, and another was a college professor.

Alfred Herber's steady handling of the many changes facing Heidelberg Township residents in his time was remarkable, particularly the way he navigated the transition from German to English.