

# The History of Potosi

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The lead mines which once gave Grant county fame were known but probably not seen by an Englishman before 1815 when a Captain John Shaw, who had established a trading business in Prairie du Chien, stopped near the present village of Cassville to buy a cargo of lead from the Indians. By passing as a Frenchman, Shaw was allowed by the Indians, who jealously guarded the mines from the Americans, to ascend the Grant River far enough to see the deposits probably around Potosi. Mining, as he reports it, was very simple. The ore, cropping out in surface veins on the hillsides, was merely pried out with deer horns or sharpened sticks.<sup>1</sup> But once the existence of the deposits was more widely realized, and their location known, the animosity of the Indians, and the danger of Sauk, Foxes, or Winnebago that existed until after the Black Hawk war,<sup>\*</sup> were not sufficient to keep the venturesome Englishmen and Yankees away. Miners were busy in southwest Wisconsin as early as 1819.<sup>2</sup> After the first steamboat made the trip from St. Louis to Prairie du Chien in 1823, there was an influx of 'sucker' miners who came just for the summer months and returned south for the winter. With the discovery of Adney lead by Major Adney in 1826, and the discovery of lead around Platteville in 1827<sup>\*</sup> most of the important fields of the region had been prospected.<sup>3</sup> Before the summer of 1827 was over, there were English settlements at Wingville, Cassville, Beetown, and Muscalunge, and by 1829 the population in the lead mining region was large enough to justify the establishment of a post office at Platteville.

In 1829, also, float was found in what is now Potosi<sup>4</sup> and a cabin, the first in that vicinity, was built by Thomas Hymer. Because of Indian troubles, however, he did not stay;\* and the development of these rich deposits did not really begin until the end of the Black Hawk war in 1833, with the discovery of the famous Potosi cave by Willis St. John and Isaac Whitaker, the first permanent settlers of the town.<sup>5</sup> Very shortly thereafter, in the same year, a group of English miners from Galena, about sixty in number, came and formed a camp in the Hollow. To guard against possible Indian troubles, they built a blockhouse in which they all gathered at night, after the day's mining.\*

Snake Hollow, as the town so begun was at first called, lies about fifteen miles from the southern boundary of Wisconsin, and two or three miles east of the Mississippi river. It runs along a winding valley for about three miles---a valley so narrow that there is room for only one street in the town. In the 1830's, three other towns sprang up between Snake Hollow and the Mississippi: Lafayette, Van Buren, Osceola. The last named town was very short-lived, but between the other two and Snake Hollow there existed great rivalry all through the decade, until they finally consolidated in 1839, with the head of Snake Hollow as the official site of the town, and under the official name of Potosi.<sup>6</sup> No accounts of the town venture an explanation of this name, but as very many of the early settlers were miners from Missouri or had spent some time there, it seems reasonable to suppose that it was named after Potosi, Missouri, a mining town which itself was named after the mining province of Potosi, Mexico.

So closely connected with Potosi that it is impossible to keep their records apart, are three other settlements a mile and a half to two miles east: British Hollow, settled almost entirely by English from Cornwall and Wales; Rockville; and Dutch Hollow, settled mostly by Germans. In the whole district, mining was of course the chief occupation. By 1834 Willis St. John had established the first smelter, and by 1840 there had been seven more built in and around Potosi.<sup>7</sup> Immigrants poured so steadily into the region that by 1841 Potosi was one of the first two towns of Grant county to be incorporated.\* By 1845 it was the largest town in the western part of the state, and the most feared rival of Galena and Dubuque, both of which employed runners to divert trade from there. For the river towns and trading posts up as far as Fort Snelling laid in supplies at Potosi, as did the lumbermen from the Kickapoo and Wisconsin rivers, surveyors from Dubuque and the Mineral Point land offices, and hundreds of teamsters from Illinois and Missouri. Mining was still the main occupation, but other business flourished also. There were in 1845, 8 general stores, 2 drug stores, 1 clothing store, 1 hardware store, 4 cabinet shops, 1 confectionery, 4 smelting furnaces, 6 saloons, 1 tenpin alley, 4 blacksmith shops, 1 chair factory, 2 brick yards, 1 tanning yard, 1 tanning mill, 2 livery stables, 2 bake shops, 3 shoe shops, 2 wagon shops, 3 hotels, 2 barber shops, 2 tailors, 2 tanners, 2 painters, 25 joiners, 12 brick and stone masons, 3 physicians, 1 jeweler, and 1 milliner. The town had its own warehouse at the landing on Grant slough, which was still navigable,<sup>8</sup> its own brewery,<sup>9</sup> and its own newspaper, the *Potosi Republic*, a weekly folio of seven columns, politically Democratic. It had two large livery stables which ran a regular passenger and mail service between Potosi and Galena; and so heavy was the passenger traffic that the four-horse, rockaway coaches were usually not only filled, but carried riders on the top and on the boot of the coach. Its river traffic was likewise heavy; the large packets and tugs that daily plied up and down the river frequently landed at Potosi bringing cargoes of merchandise

from St. Louis and New Orleans and returning laden with ore.<sup>10</sup> By this time, too, Potosi had three churches, a Catholic, a Methodist, and a Congregational, all of which had been founded at least five years earlier; a female seminary, a male academy, and a kind of small, coeducational grammar school which had been begun in 1838; and a post office that had already served the community for nine years.<sup>11</sup> Nor was this active, young town wanting in its social life. Aside from the various church organizations, there was an Odd Fellows lodge and a Free Masons lodge ;<sup>12</sup> bowling, and dancing, and ball games; the ever present conviviality of the many saloons; river voyages on steamboats that are reported to have had comfortable berths, excellent food, well stocked bars, poker games, and dancing at night; and occasionally the visits of show boats for which the whole town turned out.<sup>13</sup>

Though life was still far from luxurious, it was no longer as hard or as dangerous as it had been a decade earlier. The dugouts in the hillsides, and the rude cabins of sod, logs, or stone were being rapidly replaced by solidly built frame and even brick buildings. Usually these houses were built a story and a half high, the first floor having a living room, a dining room (what we would call a kitchen), sometimes one bedroom, and a summer kitchen which was often connected to the house proper only by a common roof. The half story was really attic, usually with a rough board floor, and sometimes with one window. Here the children slept and extra provisions were stored.<sup>14</sup> It was no longer necessary as it formerly was to card and spin wool into cloth before clothing could be made; and the days when oats were threshed by having horses trample on them, and grain was made into meal by hand were about over\*. But lamps of any kind were still scarce, and candles, like soap; were made by every individual family.<sup>15</sup>

The first miners in and about Potosi were largely from Illinois and southwest Missouri. In the 1840's the population was drawn mainly from Missouri, Kentucky, and Virginia, though there was a substantial percentage of miners from Pennsylvania, Cornwall, and Wales.\* Into this Yankee-British mining town, a few Germans had begun to penetrate as early as the 1830's, and in the 1840's quite a few new German families joined them.<sup>16</sup> But by the time the census of 1850 was taken, the adult male working population of Germans in the town and village of Potosi had jumped to 186. There is nothing surprising about such an increase at this time. It falls within the years 1846-54, which are recognized as the peak years of German immigration to the United States;<sup>17</sup> and it comes at a time when Wisconsin was the most publicized state in the union, with agents of various transport companies and land speculating companies advertising the state and promoting immigration to it both in New York and Europe.<sup>18</sup> But when one remembers that the great flood of this immigration to Wisconsin came via the Great Lakes route from New York to the lake shore counties, especially to Milwaukee, which was recognized as a German city before 1850, and was the usual distributing ground for the surrounding territory,<sup>19</sup> it may seem odd to have such an influx .of Germans in this far-away Yankee corner of the state. That they came the route usually taken by immigrants heading for Wisconsin and had temerity enough to face the hardships of travel over almost a hundred miles of what was practically wilderness<sup>20</sup> to get from the eastern settlements of Wisconsin to Grant county seems unlikely. Much more probable is Mr. Schafer's suggestion that the large number of Germans present in the lead mining region can be accounted for by their coming up the Mississippi from St. Louis in search of business opportunities on that commercial highway, and by additions from neighboring states. So far as Potosi is concerned, the Germans who came before 1840 did (all four of them) come from Missouri, Iowa, and Illinois. And of a total

of 967 Germans recorded in the 1850 census, 244, or about one-fourth, had lived in other states. The immigration was, and continued to be remarkably direct, but, it seems to me, that unlike the Germans in eastern Wisconsin, the Germans in Potosi did not, to begin with, start out with the intention of settling in this state. For though Grant county has very fertile soil for farming, and excellent grazing land, it had already been taken by the Yankees, English, and Irish.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, this was not the land being most advertised by speculating agencies, nor have I run across any mention of it in the many accounts which Germans in Wisconsin sent to their countrymen, describing conditions and giving advice about choosing a site on which to settle.<sup>22</sup> These all concern the eastern counties which are today recognized as being predominantly German. But there was considerable immigration directed to New Orleans and St. Louis at a quite early date. In fact, Germans from the Palatinate had come to New Orleans very shortly after its founding in 1718, and from Alsace and Wurttemberg in 1750. Shortly after 1840, New Orleans had 10,000 German inhabitants; St. Louis, too, attracted Germans in great numbers as it was the terminus of steamboat lines from New Orleans and the starting point of steamboat traffic up the Mississippi to the Illinois, Missouri and Ohio rivers. By 1845, St. Louis had two German daily newspapers.<sup>23</sup> But there were other early German settlements in Missouri. In 1824 Gottfried Duden with a few companions settled on the Missouri river, and apparently enjoyed his new life, for he wrote an idyllic book that had a wide circulation in Germany and attracted many Germans to the territory, particularly during the revolutionary periods, in Germany, of 1830 and 1848. Another early immigration which popularized the state was that of the *Giessener Auswanderungs Gesellschaft* led by Paul Follenius and Friedrich Munch with the idea of establishing a German state in Missouri. They came to Warren county, Missouri, with a large body of followers in 1834.<sup>24</sup>

A few years later, Iowa became the favored destination of incoming Germans, and in May, 1842, the newspapers of St. Louis reported that during the first three months of that year, 529 steamers had arrived there with more than 30,000 passengers heading for that state.<sup>25</sup>

Not only Faust's account, but other accounts of German settlements along the Mississippi<sup>26</sup> speak at length about the settlements on the west bank of the river but do not mention any settlements on the east bank. The inference one may draw is, as was so often the case with foreign groups coming to this country, that the German settlements on the east bank of the river, including Potosi, were not planned. In other words, the early Potosi Germans came from Germany with St. Louis or some other city in Missouri or Iowa as a destination, but hearing of Potosi after they got to the Mississippi, or seeing its bustling activity when the steamer stopped at the port of Potosi, decided to try their fortunes there instead. Once the beginning of this settlement is accounted for, the explanation of its continuance is the same as that of every other foreign settlement: letters back to friends and relatives, and the spreading of the news of good fortune in the chosen locality among their townsmen.

The story of the change of this particular town from an almost solid Yankee-British mining town to an almost as solid German agricultural town is an interesting one. And the most interesting phase of the story is the effect which settling in precisely such a community had on the Germans--on their speech and particularly on the changes in the pronunciation of their surnames.

By 1850, as I have said, the number of German men living and working in the Potosi district had risen to 186.<sup>27</sup> Of these, 96 or 52 per cent were miners, 31 or 16 per cent were farmers, 11 or 6 per cent were laborers. The remaining 59 people, representing approximately 26 per cent of the working population, were spread over twenty occupations.<sup>28</sup> By 1860, only 72 of these people are still in Potosi. Of the 96 miners, 18 are still miners, 17 have become farmers, 64 have gone from the district, and the rest have gone into other trades. Of the 31 farmers in 1850, 24 have gone, 6 are still farmers, and 1 has become a blacksmith. Of the 59 persons originally engaged in miscellaneous trades, 36 have gone, 4 have become farmers, and 1 has turned miner. To summarize: the original 186 German workers of 1850 have dwindled to 72 in 1860. Of these, 27 are farmers, 19 miners, and 26 engaged in miscellaneous occupations. By 1860, however, 165 new German families have come to Potosi. In this new group, 61 or 37 per cent are miners, 35 or 21 per cent are farmers, 12 or 7 per cent are farm laborers. Thus, the summary of the occupations of the total German working population present in 1860 is: miners, 33 per cent; farmers (not counting farm labor), 26 per cent; miscellaneous occupations, about 40 per cent. Between 1860 and 1870 the changes in occupation and the percentage of departures follow the trend established in the preceding decade; that is, the largest number of actual departures from the vicinity occurs in the mining group, and, what is more significant, an ever increasing number of miners become farmers. So that by 1870, of a total male working population of 203, only 112 or 6 per cent are miners, 136 or 67 per cent are farmers, and 53 or 27 per cent are in miscellaneous occupations.

While this trend is entirely compatible with all we know of the German immigrants to this country, the large percentage of miners in the first two decades is unusual. In Glen Haven, another town in which the leading foreign element was German,

only one was a miner; almost all the rest were farmers. And in Cassville, none of the large number of Germans present were miners.<sup>29</sup> The reason for this difference may be that there was less land in Potosi not already taken up by the Americans and British, and that the settled farms that were for sale were too expensive for the newcomers to buy without first working at mining for some years. This is the more plausible when one sees how commonly the German miners who have been in the vicinity only a short time before a census is taken are reported as having little or no money or property. When one meets them again ten years later, they have either already earned enough to have bought a farm or to have established themselves in some trade, or they have at least accumulated several hundred dollars toward doing so. And certainly for the fairly poor immigrant who came to Potosi and had to turn his hand to something quickly to make a living, mining was the most obvious and most profitable work. According to the accounts of old settlers with whom I talked, everyone in town turned to mining at some time or other when he needed ready money. At that time there was still much ore on or near the surface, and neither any special skill nor initial investment for equipment was necessary to dig it up. Individuals went out into the fields and on the hillsides with their spades and dug to a depth of no more than four or five feet. The resulting 'gopher holes' with which the region was pocked can still be seen on the ridges on either side of Potosi's one street. And so abundant was the supply of mineral, that the mining companies operating there allowed the children of the town to gather freely pails full of waste ore which still contained enough mineral to have a ready market. Small wonder, then, that even the Germans here were many of them miners.

In 1849, when the work of improving the Potosi harbor by making a direct cut from the Mississippi river to Grant slough was progressing, and the continued development of the town seemed assured, news came that was to affect the future

of Potosi greatly. Gold had been discovered in California. The fever to go West did not strike Potosi fully until 1852, but when it did, the exodus was great and of a kind to completely change the complexion of the town. Though there were some Germans among them, by far the greater number of the outpouring miners were of the Yankee-British group, leaving the German element of Potosi prominent among those who remained. This, aside from beginning to turn the town from a characteristically Yankee one to a German one, foreshadows the turn from a commercial to an agricultural town.

Two other things happened at very nearly the same time which further changed the outlook of Potosi. A bad epidemic of cholera swept the region, further depopulating the town ;<sup>30</sup> and, work on the cut from the Mississippi river to Grant slough, begun in 1846, and intended to improve Potosi's harbor for more effective mercantile competition with other river towns, was abandoned; the slough filled up with mud so that steamers could no longer navigate it; and as a result, river trade was deflected to Cassville and Dunleith.\* The combination of having so greatly decreased a population with so large a percentage of Germans, and losing its harbor, definitely pointed to an agricultural rather than a commercial future for Potosi, and quieted the fears of its erstwhile rivals, Galena and Dubuque. For with the great migration to the West, and the further decrease in population caused by cholera, Potosi struck a depression that considerably lowered the price of all the property suddenly for sale, and made it possible for the Germans to buy land formerly held by the Yankees and British.<sup>31</sup>

Concurring with this increase in the material and numerical importance of the Germans, was an increase in their political and administrative importance. In 1853, Celestine Kaltenbach was made town treasurer, the first town office to be held by a

German. Thereafter the list of town officers always includes at least one German, often more. But the development of Potosi into the almost completely German settlement it is now, was fairly gradual, as is shown by the census records; for in 1870 the total German population still did not quite equal the total non-German population; and, of the non-German population, the British still represented more than half. The great social and numerical supremacy of the English-Yankee group in the community during the first forty years of Potosi's development left a lasting social and linguistic impression. Most of the men of wealth and recognized position were English or American. Business was transacted in English, with the aid of *Dolmetschers*; instruction in the schools was in English; and the greatest social preoccupation of the district was the weekly English spelling bee, in which young and old, native and foreigner alike vied for distinction. The first generation of Germans born here were brought up in a community in which English customs and the English language were, for them, the most dominant social and economic factors. To buy or to sell merchandise or property, to get work or to hire workers, the Germans had to make themselves understood and had to identify themselves to people whose language lacked some of the phonemes vital in German and possessed others which were lacking in German habits of articulation. The problem of making themselves understood was met, of course, by learning to speak English as soon as possible. But, in contrast to settlements in strongly German counties like Milwaukee and Ozaukee where the German element was from the beginning predominant enough to maintain its own culture and language in a position of equality with the new language and culture they were absorbing, the Germans in Potosi were so completely absorbed by their new environment that today it is almost impossible to find anyone, even among the surviving first generation German-Americans, who can speak German with any degree of facility, or who

can remember his native pronunciation of names like *Gerhardt* and *Burkhardt*, which are here always pronounced as though spelled *Gerid* and *Burkit* with a strong stress on the first syllable but no stress on the second. Indeed, from the treatment of their surnames we can reconstruct the social and linguistic evolution of the Germans of this region. Take the fairly common German name *Schmidt*, for instance. In Milwaukee and Ozaukee counties the name is still pronounced *Schmidt*, or if the pronunciation has changed to *Smith*, the spelling, too, has changed. But in Potosi, the name always retains the German spelling but is regularly pronounced *Smith*. The inference is that linguistic pressure was stronger in Potosi than in Milwaukee and Ozaukee communities, but that the conscious influence of the written word was weaker. Moreover, the Anglicizing of these German names apparently occurred so rapidly that the old spellings were, almost from the beginning, the orthodox symbols for the new pronunciations; so that, with more than half of the community pronouncing the symbol *Burkhardt*, *Burkit*, there was no need to change the symbol in order to point it toward a new and more American pronunciation. The changes in pronunciation, however, were necessary, and took place for sound linguistic reasons. As it was necessary for the Germans to learn to speak English, so it was necessary for their names to be adapted to the regular patterns of the new speech. It is, indeed, mainly in this Yankee-British pronunciation of characteristically German names that the bustling mining town of 1840 can still be recognized in the sleepy little agricultural town that is Potosi today.

## Footnotes

1. Castello N. Holford, *History of Grant Oounty, Wisconsin* (Lancaster, Wisconsin, 1900), 9-11. References to Holford will hereafter be indicated by an asterisk in the text.
2. Joseph Schafer, *Four Wisconsin Counties* (Madison, 1927),46.
3. *Ibid.*, 46.
4. Potosi, Wisconsin Scrapbook, 3. (This is a collection of newspaper clippings from the *Grant County Herald* and the *Platteville Journal*, 1906-34, gathered in Potosi by the author, now in the Wisconsin historical library.)
5. *Ibid.*, 3 (October 8, 1930). See also pamphlet on Grant county history, item dated May 5, 1915.
6. *Grant County Herald*, May 15, 1915.
7. Scrapbook, 1.
8. *Ibid.*, 1-2;
9. *Ibid.*, 5 (*Grant County Herald*, December 16, 1931).
- 10 *Ibid.*, I, 8-10.
11. *Ibid.*,3-4.
- 12 *Ibid.*, 1.
13. *Ibid.*, 10.
14. Holford, p. 47, and accounts of early homes by various pioneers. Quite a number of such houses can still be seen in Potosi and other old mining towns. In fact, in Dutch Hollow, at least, the general plan has been adhered to even in the houses built within the last fifty years, with the one difference that the half story has become a full story.

15. Accounts of living pioneers.

16. Only three, possibly four, German families settled here before 1840. Between 1840 and 1850 about fifty-six more German families came, though only twenty-eight of the fifty-six can be proved by census and church records to have been not only in the state but also in the Potosi region, and only eleven came before 1845.

17. Kate A. Everest, 'How Wisconsin Came by Its Large German Element,' *Wisconsin Historical Collections*, xii, 302.

18. William Dames, *Wie Sieht Es in Wisconsin Aus* (Meurs, Prussia, 1849),. 18. Dames is thoroughly disgusted with those commercial speculating agencies and warns his countrymen against them. There are scores of other Germans who, writing of their experiences in the new country, sound the same note of warning. The agencies really were a considerable factor in directing immigration until the state appointed an official commission for immigration in 1852. Cf. Everest, " 319-321.

19. Joseph Schafer, *The Wisconsin Lead Region* (Madison, 1932), 17-18.

20. Cf. accounts of difficulties and discomforts of travel in contemporary accounts: 'Letters and Diary of Joh. Fr. Diederichs,' in *Wisconsin Magazine of History*, vii, 357-358; Dames, p. 20; *Memoirs Historical and Edifying of a Missionary Apostolic. . .* (Chicago, 1915), 182-189. This volume, familiarly termed *Memoirs of Father Mazzuchelli*, was translated from the Italian by Sister Mary Benedicta Kennedy.

21. Schafer, *Wisconsin Lead Region*, 210, 213.

22. See especially *DrT .Auswanderer am Niederrhein* (Prussia, 1848-50). Nos. :.1, 2, 5, 6, and 8 of this publication deal particularly with immigration to Wisconsin.

23. Albert B. Faust, *The German Element in the United States* (Boston, 1909), i, 437-438, 447-448.

24. *Ibid.*, 440-444.

25. *Ibid.*, 461.

26. Cf. J. Hanno Deiler, author of the following: *Zur Geschichte der Deutschen am unteren Mississippi* (New Orleans, 1901); *Louisiana, Ein Heim für deutsche Ansiedler* (New Orleans, 1895); 'Settlement of the German Coast Of Louisiana,' in *German American Annals*, N.S. vii, 1909, 34-63..

27. This includes heads of families and single men. It represents roughly one-fourth or less of the total German population.

28. Census records for Grant county, 1850. Wisconsin historical library.

29. Schafer, *Wisconsin Lead Region*, 210.

30. Scrapbook, 1.

31. Schafer, *Wisconsin Lead Region*, 213.