

“I Did It My Way”: Multigenerational Pride and Independence in a German Immigrant Family

SLCC CEGN 0111 – Assignment 14: The Family History
Narrative (Final)

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Introducing Al Riedel, Corporate Executive and Community Leader

On April 21, 1982, the friends and family of Albert Louis (“Al”) Riedel gathered at the Saginaw Club in Saginaw, Michigan, to celebrate his ninetieth birthday. His immediate family sponsored the event, which was attended by more than one-hundred people, many of whom had been Al’s business associates during his illustrious career as one of the founders and eventually president of the Michigan Bean Co., a prominent agricultural concern in the region.

The event’s sponsors wrote and published a little booklet that chronicled Al’s personal life and his rise to fame and fortune. The booklet (see Figure 1)¹ focuses on Al’s success as a self-made man who did it “his way.”

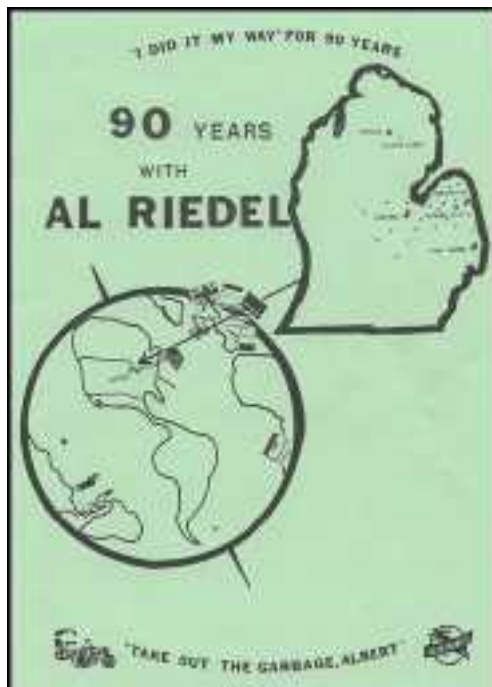


Figure 1: Booklet chronicling the life and career of Al Riedel

In the booklet nothing is mentioned about Al’s ancestors: the economic hardships they suffered in the Old Country, the wrenching leave-taking that occurred when Al’s grandparents

¹ “‘I Did it My Way’ For 90 Years,” 1982. The primary author was probably primarily Al’s daughter, Phyllis Margaret Riedel Symons (1918-1997).

left their families and sailed for the New World, or the sacrifices made by his parents to ensure the general well-being and education of Al and his siblings. Why would Al and his descendants not be proud of such illustrious roots? What might have caused such a glaring omission in the retelling of Al’s story?

Al’s Immigrant Ancestors

Al was the son of Louis Hermann Riedel (1869-1951) and Anna Maria Schreiter Riedel (1872-1960), Germans who immigrated to the U.S. with their parents in 1873. The families, who traveled with a group known as “Colonia Saxonia,” purchased land in what is known as the “Thumb” of Michigan.² In coming to the New World they were trying to escaping the economic, social, and political ills of Germany in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Their negative experiences in Europe made them hungry to own their own property, be their own boss, and pursue a better standard of living for themselves and their children, characteristics and values that are also strong among their descendants, including Al.³

The early years in Michigan were ones of extreme hunger, poverty, and the back-breaking work that was required to clear the land for farming. However, in spite of the difficulties, most of the immigrant pioneers persevered and eventually achieved a modest success in their New World lives. Al’s families (both paternal and maternal) were some of the more successful ones.⁴

² So called because the state is shaped like a mitten, and the Eastern part is its thumb (see the drawing of the state in Figure 1).

³ A detailed version of the story of the German immigrants is told in *Old Forestville and the Saxon Colony* by Edward J. Wahla (a first-generation American descendant), published in 1965.

⁴ Details about the Riedel-Schreiter immigrant families is recorded in *Riedel-Schreiter Family History* (edition 2.1), by Anna van Raaphorst, published January 2013.

Al's Pursuit of the American Dream

Al's ninetieth birthday booklet mentions several examples of his early personal and business activities as “proof that he was destined for success.” Al attended school through the eighth grade and graduated with a diploma that said he could enter Michigan State College, if he so chose. He formed a club for the young men of Minden City (Michigan) and was its first president. He courted his future wife, Ruth, “in grand fashion in a Hupmobile ‘Runabout’ with twenty horsepower.” (“Always a winner, he talked his childhood sweetheart into leaving her Nurse’s Training Course, and they were married October 13, 1913.”) In 1915, at the age of twenty-three, Al and several other men founded the Michigan Bean Co. He was elected secretary and a director, and four years later was named general manager and treasurer (figure 2 shows Al at an early point in his career).⁵



Figure 2: Al Riedel as a young businessman

⁵ “I Did It My Way,” pages 2-7.

"Retirement is for the Birds" –Al Riedel, 1962

In 1962, when Al reached the Michigan Bean Co.'s mandatory retirement age, he tried to flaunt the rules and stay on. When the company's board of directors denied him that opportunity, he opened an office in downtown Saginaw, Michigan, and hung out his shingle as a business consultant. He was proud of being, as he sometimes called himself, "an independent cuss."⁶



Figure 3: Al Riedel in retirement

How Al Felt About His Immigrant Roots

For most of his life, Al preferred to ignore his German heritage. Sometimes he was downright dismissive of the accomplishments of his immigrant grandparents. And Al wasn't the only family member who found his or her German ancestry a bit of a burden. As they began to

⁶ "I Did It My Way," pages 7-9.

grow up, all the Riedel children were critical if they heard their parents or grandparents speak German, which the children themselves had learned as their first language.⁷

Attitudes and events in the history of the United States during the World War I era (when Al Riedel had just reached his teen years), reveal why this might have been so. Theodore Roosevelt was one of the first to raise the issue of whether the German-American communities were more loyal to their mother country or to the United States: “[Some of] those 'hyphenated Americans'... are engaged in treason to the American Republic.”

Once the U.S. entered the war, a search for spies and saboteurs escalated into efforts to suppress German culture. Many German-language newspapers were closed down. Public schools stopped teaching German, and Lutheran churches dropped services that were spoken in German.⁸ And the nervous silence of their parents about the family’s culture and history prevented the Riedel children from learning much about their roots, or even about their still-living grandparents, all of whom had become naturalized citizens.

Alvin Schreiter’s “Letters Home” Are Discovered

Years later, in 1965, letters from Alvin Schreiter (Al’s maternal grandfather) to Alvin’s brother in Germany were discovered in a relative’s attic in Germany and translated into English by Al’s sister, Nettie.

⁷ Interview with Al’s sisters Selma and Nettie, July 1973 . Transcribed by Al’s niece Anna van Raaphorst.

⁸ “Over Here: World War I on the Home Front,” *Digital History* (digitalhistory.uh.edu); “‘We Had to Be So Careful,’ A German Farmer’s Recollections of Anti-German Sentiment in World War I,” *History Matters* (historymatters.gmu.edu); “German-Americans and World War One,” FAST-US (www15.uta.fi); “Anti-German sentiment,” *Wikipedia* (Wikipedia.org).



Figure 4: Alvin Schreiter on his farm, shortly before his death

Alvin’s fascinating letters proved him to be an astute observer and gifted storyteller. He wrote down the key dates and events of the immigration voyage to the New World and the early years in Michigan, including details like who was seasick and how much they paid for a loaf of bread. Here is an example:

The next day there was coffee and rolls and at noon meat and potatoes. Our Paul couldn’t eat with us, for the trip had made him queasy. At 6:00 in the evening we were aboard ship and at 1:00 the ship set sail. At sea we had a storm immediately, so that the waves washed over the deck. Everything had to be tied down. My wife was the first to get seasick. The next day there were only three men who were well. I myself couldn’t get up one whole day. Johann Rau, also from Planitz, had to wait on us, for there was [a lot of] vomit and diarrhea.⁹

Al was one of the first to receive a translated copy of his grandfather’s letters, and his thank-you letter to his sister clearly shows his excitement:

TERRIFIC! TERRIFIC! I don’t know when I have been so thrilled as with the copies of correspondence written by our grandfather... I think you have done a marvelous job of

⁹ Quoted in *Riedel-Schreiter Family History* (edition 2.1), by Anna van Raaphorst, published January 2013, page 38.

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translation. It surely is close enough to know all about what he was thinking way back when.

Looking back, knowing something of the hardships he endured and being responsible for a motherless family in part¹⁰-- one has a clearer understanding of how these “believed-to-be” odd things in people’s characters came about.

Can’t help but be proud of an old guy that had guts enough to do what he did, mind his own business, and get to be a respected citizen in a strange country – nothing spectacular, honest, paid his bills, and a credit to the community. He was charitable, considerate, asked no favors, and last but not least, no handouts from the government.¹¹

So, thirty-six years after his death, Alvin Schreiter, through his letters, won over his grandson (and many other members of the family, as well). The story is both a good example of the old adage “the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree,” as well as proof of the power of a rousing yarn. And both grandfather and grandson “did it their way.”

¹⁰ Alvin’s wife Louise died at age 49, leaving him with several minor children.

¹¹ Letter from Al Riedel to Nettie Riedel van Raaphorst, 5 April 1965.