

PANORAMIC PAGEANTRY OF SHANK FAMILY NAMES

Perhaps one of the first characteristics in family research to attract the attention of the genealogist, other than the general events of family history, undoubtedly is the colorful variety in the spelling of family names. This is especially true of our colonial ancestors who came from a non-English speaking country, who because of cultural influence found themselves isolated in the New World, yet still subject to a progressive civilization. It is among the Pennsylvania Dutch that this pageantry of family names apparently reached a zenith, and took the longest to acquire their present form.

Few families can show a more unique variety than the family Shank. My European ancestors were living in Switzerland more than three hundred years ago. In the canton of Bern several Schenck families accepted the Anabaptist creed, with one result being that this family can be traced through Anabaptist literature. Around 1670 the religious persecutions suffered by Bernese Anabaptists prompted many to migrate to southern Germany. When William Penn extended his invitation to these resolute people, settlements were made in Lancaster county. By this time the name Anabaptist had been supplanted by Mennists or Mennonists (after Menno Simons), and today we know the creed and its adherents as Mennonite.

With Schencks coming to Lancaster soon after the turn of the 18th century, this family, prior to the Revolutionary War, had settlements in at least a half dozen townships. Many of these Schenck homesteads remained under the family ownership for several generations, with at least one, in Lancaster township showing continuous ownership for two hundred and more years. From this latter group the writer has access to a collection of miscellaneous family documents covering this entire period. Along with the formal sources of information, a wealth of material is provided to enhance the theme of this work.

The comparative religious asceticism of the Mennonite colonists produced some degree of isolation for their group. However, they were living in an English province, and from necessity they became a three language people. They retained the German of their European homeland for their religious services. For legal formalities a minimum of English was cultivated. Their everyday conversations were a compromise that is described as Pennsylvania Dutch. In this three language environment variations in names became abundant.

I should point out that all Pennsylvania Dutch families, Mennonite and non-Mennonite, were subject to influences similar to those of the Shank family. You realize this when consulting their published genealogies. It is not alone Brubaker! but also Brewbaker! Brubacher! Pupaether! Brubacherin! etc. Nor is it only Breneman! but also Breneman! Broniman! Briniman! Preniman! etc.

Nor can any discussion of pageantry in names fail to mention the Kreider family and its related spellings. In the family documents mentioned previously, a Michael Greider is later referred to as a Michael Kreider. This name is also spelled with a C: Criter, Crydor, etc., instead of either G or K, and with these three letters interchangeable, an impressive variation of spellings soon developed as various branches of this family moved into new areas. Genealogists researching these families revel in the fact that more than a score of legitimate variations of this family name have been recognized.

A unique feature of Shank pageantry to be shown, is that it occurred, with historical connotations, during a continuous residence of two centuries in Lancaster township. An additional factor relating to Shank pageantry was that the Swiss family of Schenck had counterparts in Great Britain; Schanck of Scotland, and Shanks of England. How this influenced changes in name spelling we shall see later.

The most significant of these changes took place from the arrival of the first settlers until around the end of the 19th century. This does not mean that we have no recent variation, but the recent changes have been minor variations that commonly occur among all families and are in evidence today.

Some of these later changes came to light while collecting material for a Shank genealogy. A cousin reported that his father, a Jonas E. Shank, had been given his mother's maiden name, Harnish, for his middle name. But another Jonas Harnish Shank was living on the same rural route, and these two Jonas H. Shanks had numerous mix-ups in mail delivery. With a show of ingenuity the younger Jonas dropped his mother's maiden name for that of his grandmother Eshleman, and thus became Jonas E. Shank.

Of added interest to me is the older Jonas H. Shank was my grandfather, for whom I was named. My parents, probably trying to avoid similar difficulties, called me by my middle name Clayton. Ironically too, there was a distant relative, a Clayton H. Shenk living in the vicinity and we had mail mixups! Nor could I initial my first two names "J. C." for address identification, for a Jonas Clyde Shenk (now a missionary in Africa) had the same mailing address. This situation, never serious, was terminated when I took up residence in Chester county.

Around the turn of the present century, a branch of the Shank family in Ohio changed the spelling of the family name to nearer that of the original Swiss Schenck. In Lancaster county one occasionally hears jovial discussions as to the authenticity of the various present day spellings of the family name. This writer takes a philosophical view to these discussions, realizing that a man's name usually is what he says it is, and that character is shown by the individual's action, more so than by the arrangement of the letters in his name. A man's name may also be what the court and administrative officials record it. Such appears to be the answer for some of the pageantry of names during the early generations of the family in Lancaster county.

I have mentioned that the Swiss spelling of the family name was Schenck. It is ironic too, that the earliest deed held by the Lancaster township branch of the family does not use the Swiss spelling. Undoubtedly the office of Samuel Blunston, register of deeds in 1734, was English rather than German, and the name in this deed may have been spelled phonetically: Shank. The register of deeds may also have been aware of similarly pronounced English and Scotch family names. The

English family, Shanks, is mentioned in a Shakespeare folio, in the person of an actor in 1623. The family of Scotland goes back at least until the mid twelfth century, when a Murdoch Schanck received a land grant from Robert Bruce for services given Alexander 3d, King of Scotland. Originally this Schanck (probably Schangh) signified either a hill or a portion of the leg. Whatever the motivation may have been for the Shank spelling in the early deeds, it was not until the first quarter of the 19th century that the deed spelling reverted to Swiss influence.

It is not within the scope of this work to establish a kinship between the 17th century Swiss Schencks and families in the British Isles with similar names. But with the deeds for three generations of the Lancaster township line of Shanks using the simpler version of spelling, some proof for our Swiss ancestry is in order. In addition to family lore, John Shank, original owner of the homestead in Lancaster township, left a will, duly recorded December 4th, 1744, that was written in "High Dutch." In July of 1763, Michael Shank, son of John Shank, was granted an Alien Patent, giving him full legal rights as a subject of Great Britain. An Alien Patent would not have been needed by a colonist from Great Britain, nor would he be expected to write his will in "High Dutch."

During the three generations of Shank homestead deeds in Lancaster township the New World had lost much of its pioneering aspect. The prestige of Great Britain likewise no longer had its original appeal, for the colonies now were a new nation, severed from European political control. Despite the passive nature of the Mennonite creed, it was almost impossible for these folks to stand aloof during the struggle for independence, to favor either Royalist or Patriot. It was not an easy choice. The Declaration of Independence came but thirteen years after Michael Shank had been granted an Alien Patent. This right to hold property was a valuable asset to a foreign born colonist and must have had some effect in holding the loyalty of many to the crown. Yet family lore tells that on one occasion an ancestor, seemingly out of character usually associated to the Mennonite creed of non-resistance, feigned attack upon Hessian soldiers who had commandeered his wagon team. So vigorous appeared our ancestor's intentions that the Hessians fled, fled from the horror envisaged by the brandishing of a pitchfork for a weapon.

The foregoing incident dramatizes the decline of influence that specifically was Great Britain upon the pageantry of names. The War of 1812 did nothing to stay this decline. Andrew Shenk, of the third generation in Lancaster township, received a deed to the homestead in 1794, with his name thereon as Andrew Shank. At his death, the deed to his son John in 1826, gives the family name as Shenck, almost identical to the Swiss Schenck. Other family documents relating to Andrew usually carry the same spelling as the 1826 deed, though we have an occasional variation here also.

During his lifetime (1765-1826) Andrew Shenck built both the barn and house that are standing today. Upon each is a date stone inscription, giving us examples justifying the title to this work. From the barn inscription we read:

Von Andre Aff Schenk
cud Mary Schel&kin c
(uncipherable) 1799

A badly weathered portion of the date stone is responsible for the "uncipherable" line above.

The house was built thirteen years later, and in the meantime Andrew's wife Mary had died, after which Andrew married again. This inscription gives the following variation:

Mitt Gotteshilf
erbaud durch
Androas & Anna
Schenk 1812

In going over a dozen or more cancelled bonds testifying to Andrew Schenk's financial operations I hoped to learn his preference in spelling the family name. Here to my surprise, I found that with one exception, his signature was cut off from the bonds. The one that was not mutilated shows an almost illegible signature, while that of the co-signer, his son John, is easily read. This bond was not satisfied until after Andrew's death, which prompted me to surmise that feebleness of age was responsible for the signature scrawl. But a bond twenty years prior to the one above, having an endorsement on the back, shows the same illegible scrawl.

The scrawl indicates a lack of penmanship rather than that of an artistic flourish—also difficult to read—that characterizes many signatures in high places today. Perhaps too, removing the obligant's name from the bond was an easier way to show its demand had been satisfied than for these farmers to write a receipt.

From documentary sources we have seen three variations in both the given and family names for Andrew Schenk. These variations reflect a developing cultural phase in New World living. The transition from colonial hardship to that of a progressive commonwealth was due to have its effect upon so prosaic an item of life as the spelling of family names. The three language influence was to continue in full force among Mennonite communities for several decades after the establishment of the public school system in 1834.

The effect of the English language being taught in public schools was a substantial one. It produced a "new look" in Mennonite religious services, with the English language to eventually replace the traditional German. Even today some Mennonite writers regard an uncompromising opposition to English (evident in varying proportions a century ago) partly responsible for some membership losses, and in some instances sounded the death knell to a few isolated Mennonite congregations. We can understand too, that it was in the religious sphere that the spelling of the family name held its Swiss form the longest.

The final scene of this pageantry is appropriately portrayed in the family records entered in our German family Bible. This Bible, a Martin Luther translation, was published in Lancaster in 1819. It contains a subscription register of well over twelve hundred names, obviously being those who placed orders before it was printed. It credits "Andreas Schenck" of Lancaster township with two volumes. The first entry of family records is the marriage of Andrew's oldest son, Johanes Schenck, to Susana Harnish, in 1812. It tells us the birth dates of both Johanes and Susana, and gives their parents names as well. In line with the Mennonite influence among the Lancaster township branch of the family, it should be mentioned that Johanes Schenck was a minister for both Millersville and Rohrerstown congregations from 1833 until his death in 1857.

This couple was blessed with four sons and seven daughters during the years from 1813 to 1835. Their births are recorded in the German language as is the

marriage record of their parents, with the family name the Swiss Schenck. Estate settlement papers show that the two oldest daughters had little or no schooling, for these documents have been signed by them with their mark. The younger children fared better with their schooling and we have a fine collection of their signatures. Also extant, is a receipt of March 29th, 1841, stating that Sarah (tenth child) was the pupil of C. Peterman who had received payment from John Shank for ninety three days tuition at the rate of 2½ cents per day.

The family records in this Bible tell us that John Shank died in 1857. As I have typed it so also does the Bible record the current Shank form. This death record is in fractur. Susanna's death in 1872 is in fractur too, and also uses the Shank spelling. In fractur too is their son's wedding record, Jonas H. Shank and Lydia Huber in 1859. This is the older Jonas H. Shank mentioned earlier.

In line with the family name reaching its present form as shown by these family Bible records, it is also significant that four daughters in this family Americanized their given names. Signatures on various documents, later than the above entries from the Bible record, show that Maria became Mary; Susanna is shortened to Susan; Veronica becomes Fanny; and Magdalena is now Martha.

Since the middle of the 19th century the spelling used by the descendants of John and Susanna Schenck have kept almost invariably to Shank. Conversely, descendants of John's brother Michael, prefer the Shenk spelling. Other branches of the Shank family are usually satisfied with either the A or the E, though this does not hold true in all instances. The Biographical Annals of Lancaster County, published over a half century ago, show many of the variations mentioned in this article. Another interesting aspect of name pageantry, for which the Annals play a part, is in tracing descendants of Big John Shank who had homesteaded in Manor township in 1740. Some of Big John Shank's descendants married into the Brenneman clan and are included in Gerberich's Brenneman Family History. Where the Annals use the Shank spelling, you will find Shenk being used in the Brenneman history for the same families.

Another complication (this could be sub-titled "problems for a genealogist") can well be illustrated from court records. Administration papers for the John Shank estate of Lancaster township in 1744 were granted to his son, "Michael Shank Jun." Forty years later this same Michael Shank was appointed by the court as guardian for Abram and Elizabeth Brenneman, minor children of the deceased Adam Brenneman. The court order for this guardianship is extant, referring to the guardian as "Michael Shenk senior."

Not all junior and senior appellations are as easy to associate to definite individuals as the above references to Michael Shank of Lancaster township. Some writers mention a Michael Shank Sr. as being the progenitor of Lancaster county Shanks. It obviously cannot be the Michael Shank of Lancaster township to whom they are referring, probably being the Michael Shank of Providence township, who is said to have arrived here in 1720 and died around 1745. Perhaps it was after Providence township Michael's death that my ancestor Michael was credited with the senior title, to differentiate him from another Michael Shank Jr., who was living in the same era. Michael was a popular name in the Shank family. At least a half dozen Michaels were living in the county prior to the Revolutionary War. The name John was a close second in family preference.

Despite the popularity of Michael in the early years of the family in the New World, it is rarely, if ever, in use today. On the other hand, John is one of the more common names used. One reason for the absence of Michael today is sometimes given that one of the last Michaels of the Lancaster township branch was an unsavory character. It is true that many of his financial schemes, reaching from Lancaster township to Bedford and Blair counties and in Ohio to Wayne county, were not of a salutary nature. But his native shrewdness and wit proved him a more interesting character than his detractors care to allow. Nevertheless, there seems to be more conversational enjoyment in discussing his activities than that of his more respected contemporaries. A redeeming feature for this Michael is that contrary to many expectations, his descendants have proved to be as fine and as honorable citizens as you can find today.

Another feature in name pageantry, this one on a decline, is that of giving the maiden name of the mother as the middle name of the child. Though this practice may have in some instances been lacking in euphonic enunciation, it was and still is a boon to the genealogist in working out family lines.

In recent conversation with a genealogist of much experience, we agreed that variations in name spellings do not annoy us. Rather they give an added fascination to our task, and it is this alluring prospect of unraveling the seemingly mysterious labyrinth in names that make the solution more rewarding.

It is practically impossible, in my opinion, to show the precise factor in detail that have determined each and every variation in names. There is, however, a generous basis of fact for the political, cultural, and religious background that influenced the Shank pageantry which we have shown. The various spellings used herein, which may appear to be contradictory or misspellings, are authenticated by documents from which they have been taken. I venture to predict the future will not see a similar pageantry, unless coming events develop a provocative influence as that which occurred from colonial times until the present day.