

# A Glimpse at the Pennsylvania German Gypsies

By Dorothy Gerlach

Some years ago, a Colonel Henry W. Shoemaker spoke to a group in Williamsport on "The Tree Language of the Pennsylvania German Gypsies." A copy of his speech about "these picturesque wanderers," as he called them, is in the Franklin and Marshall College Library. It is interesting reading.

The "tree language" part of the title doesn't seem too unusual, but the "Pennsylvania German gypsy" part does. As one knows, the use of Pennsylvania German to describe many things is quite common, but I can't recall ever seeing it in relation to gypsies.

As to the origin of this particular group, Shoemaker said they came to Pennsylvania with the Moravians from Bohemia. Coming from the Rhineland area, they brought with them some of the tree sorcery from that part of the country.

Trees had always been a part of their lives. For one thing, they were the roof of their homes, and the "tree language" they developed became their main defense against other groups of people.

The signs and symbols these Pennsylvania German gypsies carved on the trees contained messages to other groups of gypsies who traveled on foot through the mountains of Pennsylvania. This was a kind of written communication which even a young child could understand.

The Pennsylvania German gypsies taught the symbolism of what they called good and bad trees to some of the Pennsylvania farmers. Shoemaker included a number of unusual tales about the ways the local people put this information into practice.

The beech was listed first among those trees the gypsies had classified as good trees. On the other hand, the so-called evil trees were pines and aspens because their woods had supposedly been used in the construction of the Cross.

Shoemaker's account of the Pennsylvania German gypsies started me on a search for additional information about other groups of gypsies in order to gain a better understanding, of their origin and their characteristics.

That's when I discovered the writings of Konrad Bercovici, who had written much about the life, lore, and legends of the gypsies. Part of what follows here comes from his writings and the others I read.

First of all is the names "gypsy" or "gipsy"—both spellings are used. It is a derivative of the word Egyptian. By dropping the letter "e" and changing a few other letters, we come up with the word as we know it today.

Although Bercovici wrote that what we know about all gypsies is like a drop of water in a vast ocean, he wrote most interestingly about them and the nature of their living.

What is generally believed is that the gypsies had their origin in India, early in history. Then they traveled to Egypt where they sojourned so long in that country that they acquired the name "Egipcian." Around the 1500s they moved into Europe and later emigrating from there, from England too, they came to America with other early settlers.

In some cases, like other people who came here to improve their circumstances, many settled in various areas throughout the country. Here they became like the other people already living in the region. Other tribes, however, maintained their independent and free spirit and continued to wander.\*

As to some of their characteristics, gypsies have traditionally danced to the lilting music of violins, both happy and sad. Clothing with bright colors and much braid and embroidery has always been worn by gypsy women. The same is true of their gold bangles and the large hoops that dangle from their ears.

Gypsy men have been regarded as skilled musicians, fine metalworkers, good horse traders, and blacksmiths. This may help explain their presence in some areas during the time of fall county fairs and spring festivals and carnivals.

The habit of ascribing an Egyptian origin to people reported to be in possession of magical powers may also explain why so many gypsy women are fortune tellers.

\* Until Governor Dick Thornburgh signed a repeal of little-used restrictions on the ethnic group in October 1986, authorities were free to impound gypsies' property or run them out of town under a 1909 statute. State law also required gypsies to obtain licenses to move about the state freely. (*Lancaster New Era*, Oct. 24, 1986)

Called by a number of names, among them Bohemians, Romanies, and children of Little Egypt, they speak the Romany language which is based on ancient Sanskrit. Except for counting, that is, for Bercovici wrote that counting is sometimes still done in the Greek language by a few.

Both Shoemaker and Bercovici included information that may be of local interest. For example, the latter wrote that in the Middle Ages in the city of Abbeyville, copper pots and kitchen utensils were manufactured by gypsies, as French documents show. Many gypsies also mined the metals.

Furthermore, some of the gypsies held official positions in the state government. It was the word Abbeyville, linked with the gypsies, that caught my attention because of its local use.

Shoemaker said, too, that in earlier years the gypsies who traveled through Lancaster and Berks Counties often stopped at Pool Forge to sharpen their knives and tools.

In a recent novel about Lancaster County, *I Hear the Reaper's Song*, author Sara Stambaugh describes the gypsies' arrival in spring:

Gypsies came too. Mam was half afraid of them and said they'd have to see Pap when they knocked on the door and asked if they could camp in the meadow.

When they found him, he always said they could, but I could tell he wasn't happy about it.

"If you're in the meadow," he'd say, "I trust my wife's chickens will be safe."

He'd get a grin back. The men thanked him, with the women standing back in their bright skirts, usually with one or two little kids peeking out from behind them.

Just hearing of gypsies being in an area can generate much interest. Many people can tell stories about them not unlike the Stambaugh account.

I recall the stories we heard in my own family about the bands of gypsies who camped in the countryside around Florin, Mount Joy, and Donegal.

In writing about the gypsies, I learned a few new words. There is "gypsy straw" for making "gypsy bonnets," one with large side flaps. There is a "gypsy greyhound" and a "gypsy meal"—one served out of doors. There is even a chance that a writer might "gypsy away" some lines from another, a most inappropriate action.

I learned, too, that there is no end to the interest of the staff of the Lancaster County Library and its Interlibrary Loan Department in securing materials for one to write something like this!

## Sources

Bercovici, Konrad, *Gypsies, Their Life, Lore and Legends*. 1924. Reprint. Greenwich House, distributed by Crown Publishers, 1983. (Copy was obtained through the Interlibrary Loan Department, Lancaster County Library).

*Lancaster New Era*, October 24, 1986, "Gypsy Restriction Repeal Hailed."

Shoemaker, H. W., "The Tree Language of the Pennsylvania German Gypsies," 1925. (Printed copy of this speech is in the Franklin and Marshall College Library).

Stambaugh, Sara, *I Hear the Reaper's Song*, Good Books, Intercourse, Pa. 1984.

Various volumes and years of *The Encyclopedia Britannica*, "Gypsies."

OEDictionary (Gypsy words and definitions)

**Editor's note:** Colonel Henry W. Shoemaker was active in the early days of the old Pennsylvania Historical Commission. He was a recognized authority on folklore. As history, much of his writing is more romantic and speculative than derived from careful examination of reliable sources.

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