

First Settler From the Eifel Johann Lehmann – A Blacksmith

Ja, ich bin Johann Lehmann – yes, I am John Lehmann, born in 1805 in a small village called Wiesemscheid (Vees um schite). I was one of the first immigrants from the Eifel area of the German Rhineland to settle in Westphalia, MI. My wife was Anna Katherina Buechel from the village of Pomster in the Eifel. I was a “Hufschmied” – a blacksmith.

Before I go on to talk about myself, let me first do a short historical review of the Rhineland. In 1794-95 our part of the German Territory west of the Rhine River became a French Territory. We were part of France for about 20 years until 1815. So if you're doing research, many documents will be written in French during those years.

After the French were defeated in 1815, the dukes and princes lost their lands. The Rhineland, and with it, our Eifel became part of the Kingdom of Prussia. Suddenly the Eifellers became Prussian subjects. You can imagine, the Prussian King far to the east, did not care about this new and distant territory – the Eifel. The people became poorer and poorer. On top of all this there were poor harvests and famine. And in the end we did not know how to live anymore. The reason for the immigration was poverty. The poor Eifel had no choice, starve or find a new homeland. And so the great immigration started in 1840.

In 1840 I was 35 years old, married with two young children. By trade I was blacksmith but with not much work. I knew I had to make a change. My friend Nik Pohl in the town of Musch was also talking about emigrating. He knew of a man in Langenfeld who was getting ready to go to America. His name was Johann Fuchs (John Fox).

John Fox was a farmer and he also was a well-known lay juror – someone the officials hired to settle civil disputes. In other words – he was a well educated man. He had read of the cheap land available in America. Nik Pohl and I listened to Herr Fox and we made plans to emigrate.

In the early part of August of 1840 we were ready – John Fox, Nik Pohl, and I. We had our emigration papers. We were the first families from our district to leave the Eifel for America.

We traveled by wagon to the Rhine River where we got on a boat that took us to Rotterdam and then to Le Havre, France where we boarded an American Port-ship. This ship would take us across the Atlantic Ocean to New York.

Our home on the ship for 35 to 40 days was not first class. We were housed below deck with more than 250 people. Each family of six to ten was given a box-like space. We had to prepare our own meals but water was provided. We had to add larger and larger doses of vinegar to conceal the odor. How does that sound?

Sometimes we were able to go to the upper deck for some fresh air, but when the weather was bad we had to stay below deck for days where the air was stifling. Many people suffered from “ship fever”, and our children, our babies were crying. We had no video games or cellphones!

Finally, thank God – on October 1st we arrived at the port of New York. We rested a few days before we continued our trip to the west – up the Hudson River to Albany then to the town of Troy. There we got on an Erie Canal Boat that took us to Buffalo. The ride on the canal was slow but beautiful.

By the time we got to Buffalo it was November and the cold weather was settling in so we decided to stay in Buffalo until the next spring. We had good lodging with the German baker and innkeeper, and after several days I, Nik, John, and his older sons found employment. At last we were earning good money.

While we were in this city, John Fox wrote to his daughters in Germany, “Come to America! What a difference there is between this land and Germany.” He also included a note to John Peter Pohl, Nik's brother, urging him to come to America. My dear friend, John Fox, is

buried across this drive (point to the south).

In the spring we left Buffalo. We sailed across Lake Erie, up the river to Detroit. There we prepared for the last leg of our long journey – the walk on the Dexter Trail.

In this book (hold up book) you will read that on May 29th, 1841, 3 families arrived in the Westphalia Settlement. They, Nicholas Pohl, his wife Anna Mauren and four children, Johann Fuchs, his wife Anna Maria Schueller and 6 children, and me, Johann Lehmann, my wife Katherine Buechel and 2 children. Johann Buechel, Katherine's brother also came. We three families each bought 29 acres of land in section 5 on Hanses Road. My neighbor to the east was Nik Pohl, across the road to the north was John Hanses and across the creek to the west was Nikolaus Martin. I've been told that my land now is the home of Kate and David Hanses.

Our neighbors helped us build our first log house. Katherine and I raised our 12 children. Joseph, our eldest, married Theresia Miller and they settled in the south-east part of the township in section 27. Since they were the first to settle along that trail, it was named Lehmann Road. Norman Livingston now lives on that land.

Christina married Joseph Snitgen, a well-known merchant in town. Three of our sons – Peter, John and Peter Anthony – moved to Wisconsin, and our youngest son, Nickolas died in a work-related accident in Grand Rapids. Our daughter Agnes married Theodore Brechting of Grand Rapids. Catherine married John Schmitt and Maria Elizabeth married Conrad Fey. Maria Eva remained single. Our sons, the twins, John Joseph and William married girls from town – Anna Eva Arens married John Joseph and Catherine Martin married William. John Joseph was a wagonmaker and William was a blacksmith.

I continued my work as a blacksmith and like my neighbors, I set to work clearing my land so I could raise some crops. The Indians taught me how to raise beans, corn, and squash. They also showed

me how to tap the maple trees and to boil down the sap into maple syrup. I could hunt and fish without restrictions. And there was an abundance of wild grapes and strawberries.

Yes, our first years in Westphalia were difficult but we thanked God for our safe journey to America – to Westphalia – to this place of promise. With that, I'll say good-bye to you.

The text below is from the book *The Uprooted: The Epic Story of the Great Migrations That Made the American People* By Oscar Handlin

Below the decks is the place, its usual dimensions seventy-five feet long, twenty-five wide, five and a half high. Descend. In the fitful light your eyes will discover a middle aisle five feet wide. It will be a while before you can make out the separate shapes within it, the water closets at either end (for the women; the men must go above deck), one or several cooking stoves, the tables. The aisle itself, you will see, is formed by two rows of bunks that run to the side of the ship.

Examine a bunk. One wooden partition reaches from floor to ceiling to divide it from wall to aisle to create two decks. Within the partition are the box-like spaces, ten feet wide, five long, less than three high. For the voyage, each is home for six to ten beings.

This was the steerage setting. Here the emigrants lived their lives, day and night. The more generous masters gave them access to a portion of the deck at certain hours. But bad weather often deprived the passengers of that privilege, kept them below for days on end.

Life was hard here. Each family received its daily ration of water, adding to it larger and larger doses of vinegar to conceal the odor. . . .

It was no surprise that disease should be a familiar visitor. The only ventilation was through the hatches battened down in rough weather. When the close air was not stifling hot, it was bitter cold in the absence of fire. Rats were at home in the dirt and disorder. The result: cholera, dysentery, yellow fever, smallpox, measles, and generic "ship fever" that might be anything. It was not always as bad as on the APRIL, on which five hundred of eleven hundred Germans perished in the crossing; the normal mortality was about 10 per cent, although in the great year, 1847, it was closer to 20. . . .

So they'd be there; seafaring adventurers out to discover new continents, amidst the retching, noisome stench, the stomach-turning filth of hundreds of bodies confined to close quarters. Many nights, and many days that were indistinguishable from nights, they could see, by the sickly light of swinging lanterns, the creaking ugly timbers crowding in about them; they could hear the sounds of men in uneasy silence, of children in fitful rest; everywhere they could sense the menace of hostile winds and waves, of indifferent companions, of repressed passions. 278