



# SOCIETY FOR GERMAN-AMERICAN STUDIES NEWSLETTER

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## PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Greetings, SGAS Members!

I hope your summer has been an enjoyable one!

It was nice to see many of you at this year's symposium in Iowa City, which featured thirty presentations spread across two parallel sessions. While the scale of the symposium was more modest than in previous years, the range of topics covered in the presentations was just as broad as in the past. It was a treat to listen to Karyl Rommelfanger's keynote address on Karl Pflaume on Thursday evening, the text of which is featured in this newsletter. My deep thanks to everyone who attended what was a very successful event.

Thanks also to Antje Petty for all the work she put into planning the symposium and to Glenn Ehrstine, who did a fantastic job as the on-site coordinator. I am grateful also to Jon Childers, Executive Director of the Amana Heritage Society, for facilitating our excursion on Saturday afternoon to Amana. A number of us also attended the German-language worship service led by Jon the following morning in Middle Amana, which was a special highlight.

In other Society news, this spring the Executive Committee voted to expand our numbers. Previously, the committee consisted of the four



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elected officers – president, vice president, secretary, and treasurer – plus the yearbook and newsletter editors and the membership coordinators for North America and Europe. In April the EC voted to combine the membership coordinator positions into one and to add to the committee the yearbook book review editor, website manager, a representative of members from outside North America, and a representative of members who are graduate students or at an early stage in their career. These changes to the structure of the Executive Committee are reflected in the amended Article VIII of our Society’s bylaws, which are accessible by clicking at the bottom of the About page on our website.

Another change the Executive Committee made this spring regards the Yearbook. For some five decades now, our Society’s signature publications have been produced exclusively in hard copy. Starting next year, the Yearbook, including past volumes and its predecessors (*Journal of German-American Studies* and *German-American Studies*), will be made accessible electronically through the KU Libraries system at the University of Kansas. This move will be consistent with the practice of other scholarly organizations that produce periodicals and will help raise the visibility of our Society and the field of German-American studies more broadly. I am very grateful to Yearbook Editor Bill Keel for facilitating the agreement we have entered into with KU Libraries.

The date and location for next year’s symposium, our forty-seventh, have now been set. We look forward to gathering in person again April 27-29, 2023, just outside of Washington, DC, in Alexandria, VA. Marcel Rotter has been hard at work planning what promises to be an exciting event, the details of which will be forthcoming this fall. I look forward to seeing many of you there!

Mit freundlichen Grüßen,

Mark



**47th Annual Symposium  
April 27–29, 2023  
Alexandria, VA**

Ken Lund. Prince Street, Old Town, Alexandria, Virginia. CC BY-SA 2.0. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/kenlund/14517914113>

# LAUDATIO FOR KARYL ROMMELFANGER

MARK L. LOUDEN

It is an honor for me as President of the Society for German-American Studies to present this year's Outstanding Achievement Award to Karyl Enstad Rommelfanger.

It may come as a surprise to members of our Society, which Karyl has served for many years, that she has no German in her family background. Karyl is a native of Minnesota and of Norwegian and Swedish heritage. She grew up in Wisconsin and attended River Halls High School. In her freshman year, Karyl took Latin and loved it, and she was looking forward to taking Latin II the following year, but when the local board of education decided to drop Latin, her class ended up switching to German. And that set her on the path toward a career in German.

After high school, Karyl headed back over the St. Croix River to Minnesota to attend Gustavus Adolphus College where she received her bachelor's degree in German and history. She then earned a master's at Middlebury College. Karyl taught German in the Manitowoc Public Schools for 36 years. During her career she was one of the first high school teachers in the country to incorporate the history of German immigration to America into her advanced German classes by connecting her students with local history. I'd like to share with you Karyl's own words about how one very special project got started.

*Foreign language teachers are accustomed to the occasional phone calls requesting assistance with the translation of a letter or help with a business matter. And a teacher living in a German-ethnic area such as eastern Wisconsin gets used to requests for help in understanding old family documents, letters, and a host of other items, from verses on beer mugs to old embroidered proverbs. Consequently, when elderly Alice Ahrens called on a September evening and asked for help with some "old German papers," it was very easy to say no. After all, how many such telephone queries can a person accept. And it was, furthermore, the beginning of the school year, a very busy time.*

*But Alice persisted. "These papers were my great-grandfather's. I've had them for years. And no one has been able to tell me what they are! I have to know what they are before I die." Still anticipating*

*nothing out of the ordinary, my "sorry" changed to a reluctant "yes," and I was off for a quick trip to meet Alice in her retirement apartment.*

*There was a warm welcome at the door and an admonition to "follow me." From a bedroom drawer Alice soon pulled a dozen sheets of old, lined paper, most of the them very well-preserved. But a glance at the top sheet revealed why no one had been able to help her. The manuscripts were all written in that tempestuous old German script! One thing, however, stood out very clearly at the top of one page: Im Jahr 1853.<sup>1</sup>*

Alice Ahrens's great-grandfather was a man named Wendel Wallau, who came to Manitowoc County from Hesse-Darmstadt and kept what Karyl described as a ledger-diary of his daily activities. Over a period of seven years, Karyl worked to transcribe, translate, and interpret these letters. But she did not work alone. She was assisted by some of her advanced high school German students. This inspired her to didacticize the materials and create a reader titled *Einwanderer*, which integrated language instruction with local history by having students work



Mark Loudon and Karyl Rommelfanger

with original documents. With her *Einwanderer* project Karyl was ahead of the National Standards for Foreign Language Education formulated in 1996, which underscored the importance of linking foreign language study to other disciplines.

The Wendel Wallau ledger-diary project was one of several that Karyl undertook related to the legacy of German immigration to Manitowoc County and which she also incorporated into her high school German curriculum. In connection with her Lutze Houseborn Project, Karyl took her students on fieldtrips to a historic local structure as it was being excavated and restored and created an entire curricular unit around the project.

Karyl's German and history professors back at Gustavus would have been very impressed by how much she has done in both fields. She has published articles in the *Friends of the Max Kade Institute Newsletter*; for the Manitowoc County Historical Society; in the *Voyageur Magazine*; a northeastern Wisconsin historical publication; and in *Die Unterrichtspraxis*, the leading journal in the country for the teaching of German.

In addition to her service on behalf of the Manitowoc County Historical Society, Karyl has served on the Board of Directors of the Friends of the Max Kade Institute, including a term as President, and on the Executive Committee of our Society as Secretary and North American Membership Coordinator. The public accolades Karyl has received include the prestigious Herb Kohl Achievement Award for excellence in teaching and the Manitowoc County Historical Society's Historic Preservation Achievement Award of Merit for her translation of the Wendel Wallau manuscripts.

It is hard to imagine a person more deserving of the Society for German-American Studies Outstanding Achievement Award than Karyl Rommelfanger. As a teacher-scholar she has worked tirelessly to advance the frontiers of our field and, beyond that, share the excitement of uncovering and interpreting the past with students and community members alike.

[1] Rommelfanger Karyl Enstad, "Einwanderer: The Evolution of a Supplementary Reader on German-Americana," *Die Unterrichtspraxis / Teaching German* vol. 31, no. 1, German-American Studies (Spring 1998), p. 51.

## KARL PFLAUME: A MALCONTENT IMMIGRANT

### KARYL ROMMELFANGER

Karl Pflaume, educated in agriculture and politically active during the 1848 German Revolution, emigrated from his home village of Aschersleben, Saxon-Anhalt, in 1851 and settled on a densely forested piece of land just four miles southeast of the young port village of Manitowoc, Wisconsin. Twelve years later, with a wife and two children, he followed the path of thousands of other European immigrants and returned to his homeland, completely disillusioned by his *Amerika* experience. However, he and his wife, Amalie Hornung Pflaume, left behind a treasure trove of letters and other writings that reveal the joys and hardships the young couple experienced in the New World.

Pflaume came from a well-established and highly respected patrician family in Aschersleben. An extremely complicated individual, Pflaume describes himself as being both even-tempered and prone to depression. He believes he has some kind of debility and admits that in the past he has been "explosive and injurious" to his father. Had he remained in

Aschersleben, he asserts, he would likely "no longer be among the living."

Karl Pflaume had studied at the University of Jena, hoping to become an *Ökonom* and administer his family's land holdings. But political unrest moved him in a different direction and he became a community organizer in Aschersleben, gathering together a local militia and founding a group called The Association for the Preservation of the Rights of the People. Distraught at the failure of the revolution, Pflaume set his eyes on *Amerika*, where he felt he could use his farming skills and enjoy the American freedoms touted in the news of the time.

The journey out of Hamburg on the sailing vessel *Florentin* appears to have been financed by his father and an uncle, with the motivation that Pflaume could assist them in establishing some kind of business enterprise in *Amerika*. Ultimately, however, farming simply required too much of Pflaume's time and he tells his family he cannot be both farmer and businessman.

On board the *Florentin*, Pflaume made the acquaintance of two brothers by the name of Goethers and a Mr. Greenwood, a native of East India. After arrival in New York, the foursome traveled by train to Milwaukee, and then journeyed north to Manitowoc on a Lake Michigan steamer, arriving in the early fall of 1851.

Pflaume describes the little village of Manitowoc as having many small frame buildings, some painted, some not, with streets already named, though, according to Pflaume, “you could break your neck on Main Street and drown on Franklin Street.”

Pflaume recounts *Wasserlotten* (water lots) that are up for sale, but currently inhabited, he says, by “frogs, snakes, turtles, and muskrats,” but which were nevertheless “the object of speculation and were sold from one person to the next for the highest price, because it was predicted that the business side of the city would develop down on the river.”

Pflaume writes that the village is cut in two by the Manitowoc River and the “Yankees” have settled on the north side of the river, while the south side is inhabited chiefly by German speakers. Pflaume writes that many of these fellow immigrants are “well-educated men and women,” some already holding positions of influence in local government.

In his first years in Manitowoc, Pflaume is very willing to tender advice to his fellow countrymen, writing home that if more Germans would come to Wisconsin, they would be able to create a kind of transplanted New Germany with German schools, German courts, and even a German-run legislature. But Pflaume stops short of being a personal conduit for emigration, stating several times that “I am not trying to coax anyone into emigrating. There is pain and woe that only a bleeding heart experiences when a person rips himself away from the motherland, and I do not want to carry on my conscience having encouraged anyone into taking that step.”

Pflaume and the Goethers brothers bought adjoining pieces of land and Karl and Mr. Greenwood lived with the brothers the first winter in their quickly-constructed log cabin. With the help of hired hands, Pflaume spent the winter clearing his land of the multitude of trees that inhibited the possibility of growing crops. Pflaume writes that by the autumn of 1852 he was able to clear 17 acres.

As was typical of any farmer in the *Busch*, as it was called, once trees were felled, branches needed to be cut and brush burned. What was left on a farmer’s new-won acreage were tree stumps sitting amid an entanglement



*Karl Pflaume, sketch by John Her*

of tree and plant roots, all of which could take years to burn away or decay. Pflaume writes:

...in our backwoods, as long as there are stumps and roots, most everything has to be done by hand ... during his free time the farmer must also hike through bushes, swamps and fallen trees to locate cattle that have wandered away, and that can take two to three hours or even longer.

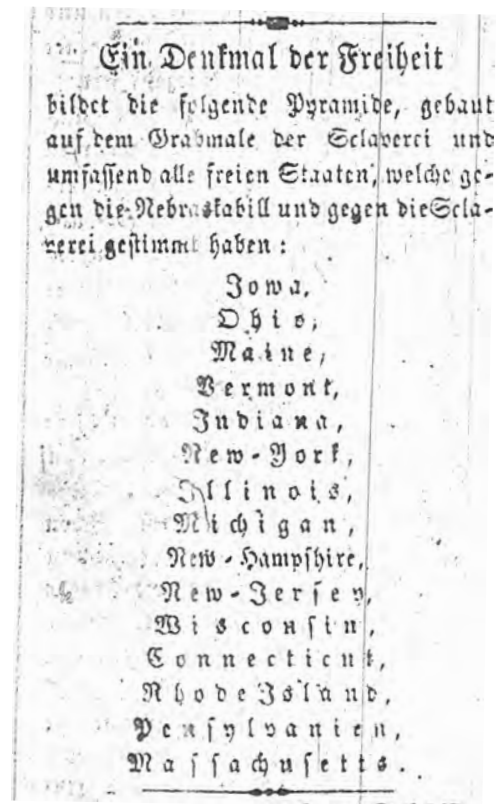
Despite these challenges, by the summer of 1852, Pflaume writes that he has sown 9 acres of oats, 1 acre timothy grass, 1/2 acre summer wheat. He has also planted potatoes, kohlrabi, peas, cabbage, and buckwheat. From seedlings he had brought along from the old country, he started numerous fruit trees. As for animals, he owns three oxen, one cow, one calf, a pig or two, and a dog. To provide shelter for the coming winter, Pflaume hired two carpenters, both Germans, to build him a frame house like the ones he had seen in the city.

Despite his accomplishments in the span of only one year, Pflaume freely admits that life on his farm is lonely at times. In an 1853 letter to his favorite Onkel Stäbe, Pflaume describes his life as *leidlich* or tolerable. Pflaume complains that if it were not for the cooking and washing, he could accomplish much more in a day.

Though no copy exists of the response letter from Onkel Stäbe, Pflaume is clearly ecstatic at the uncle's response, which is repeated in a return letter from Pflaume. Uncle Stäbe has assured his nephew that he will help him find a bride. Pflaume replies by laying out an improvement plan for his property. He tells Onkel Stäbe that he will not only build shelter for his animals, but also, presumably to please his new wife, he will plaster the interior of the frame house, construct a second floor, and add a porch on the north side.

Late in 1853, Pflaume returned to Germany and on March 21, 1854, married Amalie Hornung, the daughter of the Aschersleben pharmacist. The young couple arrived in Manitowoc in May 1854 and Karl was more than happy to show off his new bride. Clearly an arranged marriage, Amalie writes home about "getting to know each other" and stating that they seem to be a compatible couple. It also becomes clear through their letters home that Karl has gotten to know a number of influential Germans in the village and that they enjoy lively social contacts with a number of them.

One in particular is Karl Röser (Roeser). Trained as a lawyer in his homeland, Röser participated in the 1848 Revolution and was imprisoned for a time, somehow escaping and fleeing to England with his family and eventually emigrating to Wisconsin. He arrived in



Ein Denkmal der Freiheit. November 30, 1854, Wisconsin Demokrat (Karl Röser's newspaper)

Manitowoc in 1853 and immediately founded the city's first German newspaper, *Wisconsin Demokrat*.

Röser was a force to be reckoned with, not only as an editor, but also in the formation of the new Republican Party in Wisconsin. At an organizational convention in Madison in July, 1854, Röser was one of only four Germans represented. He was fiercely anti-slavery and anti-religion and could be abrasive, mean-spirited, and unforgiving. The editor of the *Manitowoc Herald* wrote that Röser's chief occupation was to "vilify and traduce worthy citizens."

Although captivated by the politics of the time, Karl Pflaume was initially just a hardscrabble farmer who read widely. In an October 1852 letter he reported that the wheat crop, though poor in other parts of the US, had done well in Wisconsin. With the exception of corn, his own crops of rye and oats had yielded well. He also had success with potatoes, though not in the great abundance that he had hoped. His wife Amalie writes that she helps with the farm work in any way she can, but especially enjoys tending her flowers, some of which are hyacinths, tulips, roses, pansies, and dianthus.

Despite his farming successes, Karl Pflaume could not keep himself out of politics for long. In the fall of 1854,



*Bericht über die republikanische Convention zu Waupun. September 28, 1854, Wisconsin Demokrat. Karl Pflaume's report from the Waupun, WI convention – as the only German among 40 Americans, his influence among Manitowoc County Republicans is clear.*

he was one of two men appointed to be delegates to the Waupun Republican Congressional Convention. And later that fall, despite falling behind on his farm work, Pflaume addressed a meeting of the Manitowoc County Republicans. *Wisconsin Demokrat* eagerly reported that he was received *mit vielem Beifall* – with great applause!

Nonetheless, in a letter home, Pflaume expresses his discontent with many Germans who support the Democratic Party, asserting that they are confusing the word “Democrat” with “democracy,” without understanding the basic tenets of the Democratic Party: nativism and temperance. Karl writes to his father-in-law that “... social relations seem bad here, especially among the men. Politics is ruining *Gemütlichkeit*. However, Pflaume looks to a brighter future under the new Republican Party “of which I am a part,” he asserts

Meanwhile, cracks begin to appear in Pflaume’s social relationships. He cut off contact with one acquaintance, whom he describes as a drifter who spreads false rumors. There are additional problems with several neighbors due to various disputes – but Amalie reports that they still enjoy meeting with the Rösers and others when they go to town. No one journeys from the village to visit them anymore, however.

In the summer of 1855, Amalie announces to her mother that she is pregnant and anticipates the child will be born sometime in early 1856. She explains that she is doing fairly well, sometimes feels sick, but that her dear husband is very attentive to her. The couple arranged for a trained midwife.

Amalie gives birth to a daughter on February 1, 1855, and they name her Wilhelmine, or Minne for short. Amalie describes Minne as a healthy baby, quite long, with blue eyes and blond hair, and resembling her father. The baby thrives.

In the ensuing years, Amalie will bear six children, but only Minne and a little boy named after his father survive. The deaths of the four other children become a major heartache for the Pflaumes. Initially buried on the farm property, upon their return to Germany, Karl moves their bodies to the city cemetery in Manitowoc, where they remain today.

(To be continued in the next issue)

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