

Young Johann George Gackenheimer

1856-1915

By J. W. Henson

(The dates in this story are correct, but the various occurrences are only true to the times. Johann Georg was the grandfather of Audrey Gackenheimer-Henson.)

It was Sunday October 4 in the year of 1863. The weather had turned stubbornly cold for so early in the season. The faded blue skies of autumn had given way to heavy clouds blown before a fresh gale. But not to worry, for the crops had all been gathered and stored in the barn that stood behind the house on Kapellenberg Strasse 19 in the small village of Gültlingen. The milk cow and a yoke of oxen were munching fresh hay in the warmth of their barn while a handful of chickens went scratching and pecking through the straw on the barn floor, looking for their lunch.

In the Gackenheimer house Mother Anna Maria was getting the children scrubbed and polished, ready for their weekly session at Church. The Church was the second building above the Gackenheimer dwelling, on the same side of the street. It was an old house of worship built by the Catholic Church, and taken over by the Lutherans during the Reformation that swept that part of Germany. A heavy stonewall surrounded the church and had provided sanctuary for the people of the village when the old marauders attacked that area. Even in 1863 there were less than a thousand people in the small farm community.

There was a strong gate in the wall that opened onto Kapellenberg Strasse in front of the church, and another in the rear wall that allowed entrance into the cemetery. A tall masonry bell tower stood at the left of the church overlooking the valley where the village lay, and surveyed the farms that ringed the surrounding hills. The church was built in the years 1465-67, the date being chiseled with old Arabic numerals into a wall stone at the left of the front entrance.

The heavy oaken steps up to the top of the bell tower were deeply worn by the feet of numberless generations of bell ringers. After a few steps up, entrance was gained to the inside of the tower through a heavy door secured with an ancient lock that had been made in some unknown blacksmith shop many hundreds of years before. There were landings at each level as the steps proceeded up and along the inside wall. At these landings there were slits in the four-foot thick masonry wall of the tower. The slits were for observation and so armed men could fire down upon the enemy approaching the walls. In the top-hung two large bronze bells that rung a warning of an enemy encroachment so the community could seek shelter within. A door opened part way up the tower that gave entrance into the attic above the sanctuary below, and beneath the angle of the red tile roof.

On this morning the bells had started to ring in the church, but there was no enemy approaching. It was a call for the faithful to come and worship. Jakob Friedrich Gackenheimer, the father a man of 56 years, had died in the previous January, leaving his second wife, the first having died some eleven years before, and five small children to care for. Times were very difficult at best, and this left an almost impossible burden upon the woman, and her oldest child, Johann Georg, who was six years of age.

Anna Maria stepped out into the bracing cold carrying Karl a four-month infant, with Johann Michael clinging to her skirts and Johann Georg carrying little Luise Katharina, with little four-year-old Johannes darting in and out between them as they walked through the bracing cold to the church.

The churches in those days were not heated and all came heavily bundled under their winters best. The little fatherless family found a seat by Mrs. Gengenbach, the Mother of Anna Maria. She lived just below the Kapellenberg Strasse on Deckenpfronner Strasse. Grandma immediately began to supervise the activities of the three older boys so the service could proceed undisturbed. Johann Georg did not know on this day that little Karl would die the day after Christmas the following year. (1864)

After a meager lunch the little six-year Johann Georg found the house boring, and sought adventures within the confines of the church's courtyard. The harsh wind blew through his tussled blond hair, and tugged at the buttons of his all too light coat. He was very lonesome, and all alone. At last he found his way to the top of the wall and sat overlooking the village and wondering what was to be his lot in life. He determined that he would do something through hard work and study that would make his life count.

The next day was the first day of school. Johann Georg was in the first level of the local school in the only building that stood between their house and the church. The school years were only five months long and the skill of the teachers left something to be desired. However it did give him an education of sorts.

When the short school year was finished Georg would run various chores for his mother about town. As the sun began to warm the earth he was busy in the garden that lay between the school and their house. Days turned into weeks, weeks made months, and so the years rolled on until one day just before turning into the teens his mother announced to him that she had apprenticed him to Mr. Lutz in town as a shoemaker's helper.

Georg was excited over the prospects, but was a little timid for only his mother and the schoolmaster had ever watched him work before. How much would they expect of his small hands. Georg was short for his age, but his pleasant round face told of a desire within to do and to be the best that he could in whatever he attempted.

On the first day at the shoe shop Georg was introduced to the pattern maker who also doubled as designer, the cutters, sewers, and the shoe last operator. All of the work was done by hand. Georg was given several pairs of dirty farmer's shoes to clean for the repairman. One pair had belonged to a woodsman whose axe had slipped and sliced open the toe of his shoe. He removed the dried blood from those and the muck from the farmers' shoes. They were all washed, scrubbed, and set aside to dry so the repairman could go to work on them the following day.

Most everyone of the adults in the village had a pair of shoes and some of the more affluent had several pairs, including a pair for church and business only, so there was a lot of repair work to be done along with the creation of a new product.

Mr. Lutz was kind to Georg, but very insistent that everything he did was done properly. The dyes and rough leather made his small hands rough and sore in the wintertime. Frequent washing only removed more of the natural oils from the hands and left the skin dry and cracking.

There was no need for Georg to carry his lunch since he was only a few short blocks from the sanctuary of his home. The hours in the shoe shop were long and demanding, but once a week it was all worth it for he would take home his few Marks for the use of his mother.

Men would come into the shop and sit while the pattern maker took the measurements of their feet, and determined the exact style of shoe the patron desired. Women's shoes were chosen from styles that had been created more for appearance than for comfort.

The pattern maker then drew designs for the heel, uppers, sides, and the sole. From a piece of soft tan wood, taken from trees in their own Black Forest, he carved the entire foot of the patron to be attached to the shoe last for molding the leather uppers. A cutter went to work cutting the proper weigh and thickness of leather for the part he was making.

It was confusing to the young apprentice as he swept up the crumbs of leather and the dirt from the floor and saw several men working on a single pair of shoes. He could not imagine how all those separate pieces were to come together to form the shoe.

Slowly as the days and months progressed so did Georg's understanding of the process. One day he was allowed to try his hand at tracing the pattern onto a piece of leather and cutting it out. The sharp knife was a hazard and it had a mind of its own, wanting to follow the grain of the leather rather than the curve of the pattern marked upon it.

In time he had pretty well mastered each of the skills of the trade, and one day Master Lutz gave him his very own leather and told him to make a pair of shoes for himself. He was overjoyed, for he had never owned a new pair of shoes before. He worked carefully on them after hours in the shop. At last they were ready for the ultimate test... the insertion of the owner's foot. Only as he stood upright and took a first step in his own new shoes did he understand why it was so necessary to be exacting and careful in everything that he did.

The greatest compliment for a fine pair of new shoes was the smile on the patron's face as he stepped out onto the street in his shining new and comfortable purchase. He felt that double pride-as maker and owner of his own new shoes.

The years ticked along and about the age of 20 years he moved to Kuppingen, a small village about 10 miles from Gültlingen, where he met and fell in love with Margaretha Magdalena Höpfer. She was six years his senior, and had a son out of wedlock. They were married on May 28, 1878. They never had any children. On July 14, 1882 the little family resigned the Lutheran Church and became Methodists there in Kuppingen.

On November 18, 1889 Anna Maria Gengenbach-Gackenheimer died and thus severed all of Georg's emotional ties with Germany. Times were very hard at this particular time. There was much talk throughout the country of the marvelous opportunities in the United States of America across the

Atlantic Ocean to the west. Immediately after the death of his mother he began working on all of the necessary papers to leave Germany and move to America.

They landed in Baltimore, Maryland on May 29, 1890 after a stormy 12-day trip across the ocean on the German ship DRESDEN sailing from Bremen, Germany. They settled in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania and Magdalena (Lena) made the best home possible for Georg. The effluvium from the steel mills made life a rather short occurrence. After she had lived in the United States for about 15 years she began to show symptoms of Tuberculosis, and died on October 20, 1907.

Here he met and married Anna Katharina Hossfeld-Glenz, the widow of John George Glenz a German emigrant of St. Louis, MO. They were married on July 22, 1908 in Pittsburgh, PA. In the United States Georg, now called George, went to work as a cobbler. He was also very active in the Methodist Church and was ordained as a lay preacher in that organization.