

1983

Schiffbruchsgottesdienst  
Trinity Lutheran Church, Jenera, Ohio  
The Church with a 152-year Vow

Jon Rossman

Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary Library  
11831 N. Seminary Drive. 65W  
Mequon, Wisconsin

### SCHIFFBRUCHSGOTTESDIENST

"If we are saved, the 17th of each September shall be kept as a Holy Day by us and our descendants, even unto the third and fourth generation." This vow was made by a group of German immigrants in the year 1831. When they made this vow, they were off of the coast of Virginia in the midst of a treacherous storm. This storm had caused a large hole to be torn in their ship. As the ship filled with water, and as the storm raged on, they turned to their Lord as their only hope. They realized that their efforts were useless without the help of the Almighty God, the same God who stilled the storm on the Sea of Galilee, the same God who gave his Son as a ransom for their sins, the same God who had led them to the coast of Virginia.

God saved them in 1831, and their vow is still being kept today, 152 years later. Every year during the second week of September, the descendants of these German immigrants gather to thank God for saving their forefathers. Every year in the little village of Jenera, Ohio, there is a special service in memory of the salvation which God brought to these people. This service has traditionally been called the "shipwreck service." In this paper I will examine the events leading up to the shipwreck, and some of the events which took place after they were rescued. I will trace the path of the German immigrants from their homeland in Germany, through the raging storm, to their new home in Ohio.

Before I go any farther, I will turn to the beginning of the story, back to the homeland from which this group of German immigrants originated. They had their roots in the Granddutchy of Hesse-Darmstadt in the southern part of Germany. They lived in the wooded hills of the Odenwald just east of the Rhine River. Most of them came from the villages of Gadernheim, Lautern, Raidelbach and Reichenbach.

These villages were located along the Lauter River about fifteen miles west of the city of Worms.

Within this group of villages was a small church on a hill overlooking the village of Reichenbach. This church served the Lutherans from all four of the previously mentioned villages. The church itself was erected in the year 1426, and rebuilt in 1747. In the year 1540, the church followed Luther's Reformation and turned Lutheran. The church suffered a great deal during the first half of the 17th century. First, there was the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648). Then, the congregation was left unoccupied by a pastor from 1634 until 1669. In the year 1630, the plague hit this part of Germany. It took the lives of 100 persons, among them whole families from Reichenbach. Reichenbach had a population of about 300 at this time.<sup>1</sup> The Arras family, one of the families which came to America, was almost wiped out by the plague. Only one person was spared. This was Balthaser Arras, who was a forefather of John Peter, one of the leaders of the German immigrants.

The people of the Reichenbach congregation made their living from a number of different trades. The Tracht family, another forefather of the immigrants, ran a mill. In this mill they extracted oil from a certain variety of nut which was peculiar to that region. Later, this mill expanded to a saw mill. Farming was the most common occupation. Many of these farmers were drawn to America by the cheap land and the fertile soil.

In 1820 things started to get tough for the people of this area. The economy of Germany was very poor. At this time, a pair of high top boots cost as much as an acre of farm land. This was one of the reasons which motivated the people to migrate to America. They also wanted to get away from the forced military service. It was mandatory that once a boy was sixteen, he had to serve three years in the service. Other reasons for leaving Germany were high taxes and an unfair government.

Since times were tough, two men decided to organize a group of friends and neighbors to travel to America. One of these men was Johann Adam Tracht. According to a geneology of the Tracht family, Johann Tracht was a military man. He was known as "der alte Soldat." He served a long and distinguished career. First, he served three years in the regular army of Germany. He was a member of the body guard of Prince Ludwig of Hesse-Darmstadt. In 1807 he was drafted into the Grand Army of France. While with the Grand Army of France, he spent five hard years under Napoleon in the Spanish campaign. After Napoleon surrendered, he returned to Germany. In 1815 and 1816 he was a grand-ducal Hessian guard at Darmstadt. During his time in the military, he was imprisoned twice, but he was never wounded. A descendant of Tracht, Rev. Edwin G. Ackerman said that his great-grandfather had a strong faith. He attributed the fact that he was never wounded to his faith in God. Mr. Tracht used Psalm 91 as a prayer every day at dawn and sunset until he died at the age of 91.<sup>2</sup>

Tracht urged many of his relatives and friends to make the trip with him to America. Unfortunately, times were tough, and very few of them had enough money to make the trip. Apparently Tracht was a fairly wealthy man, because he paid for the passage of eighteen adults. Finally, he had a group gathered. They planned to leave in 1830, but due to unavoidable circumstances, they had to postpone their trip twice. Even though Mr. Tracht had to postpone his trip, a sister and her family did leave for America in 1830. They later settled in Hamilton County, Ohio.

In the following year, 1831, Tracht and his group started out on their journey. The other leader of the group appears to be John Peter Arras. These two men led a party of about 162 people. It is unknown whether this number included the crew of the ship, or just the immigrants. It appears that there were at least 150 people leaving Germany for America.

It is unknown exactly what date they left their homes. It took place some time in June or July. The first leg of their journey took them through Darmstadt and Kassel to Bremen. This was about a 300 mile trip. This must have been a long, difficult trip. They were leaving behind family and friends, many of whom they would never see again. They were leaving behind possessions and jobs for a completely new way of life. They were leaving behind the security of their home for a land in which they didn't have a home. Yet, they went on.

They arrived at Bremen some time in July. On July 29 they left Bremen for Bremen<sup>h</sup>afen<sup>A</sup>. This was the seaport of Bremen. From here they would set sail. Two days later they loaded their belongings onto two ships. One of these ships was a British ship. The name of this ship appears to have been the "James Beacham." Later it became known as the "Famous Dove" or the "Famous Pigeon." This ship was sailing for Baltimore. The other ship was a Dutch ship which was sailing for New York.

The British ship was a new ship. Since it was newer and faster than the Dutch ship, everyone wanted to board it. This ship was 118 feet long, 28 feet wide, and 20 feet high. It had two masts and 24 sails. These sails were so big that one of the passengers said that the richest farmer didn't have as much cloth as was used for the sails. The ship was neatly arranged with sleeping rooms and other rooms for convenience. It cost about \$35,000 to build this ship. It could carry 7800 tons of cargo.

The ship was soon loaded with the possessions of the immigrants. They also loaded many provisions for the trip. This excerpt from a letter written by John Peter Arras tells what some of these provisions were.

We needed potatoes, beans, peas, barley, rice, white flour, tea, sugar, coffee, the herring are very good, eggs, cheese, sausage, vinegar, wine, white and dark Zweiback, the white is tastier than the dark. We could take bread for 15 days also beef for 14 days,

you salt it some, or else it would sour and could not be eaten. The water was terrible. Pork kept better, it would not sour as fast.<sup>3</sup>

After the provisions were loaded, the passengers went on board. Here is a partial list of the passengers. The number in parenthesis is the number of people in that family.

Arras, Adam (10)	Heldman,
Arras, Peter (4)	Kruchbaum (Krichbaum) (8)
Arras, Johs (3)	Luniack (Luneack) (6)
Bauer, Heinrich (3)	Pifer, Peter
Bauer, M. (4)	Preis (Price), Christian
Bauer, John ( )	Preis (Price), Nicholas (4)
Bauer, Wm.	Repper, Gero
Bietsch (Beach)	Repper, Lich
Bosse,	Repper, Peter (7)
Blumenschein, (3)	Rettig, Adam
Dillman, Peter (3)	Rauch, Johnnes
Essinger, Adam ( )	Schaller,
Essinger, Nick ( )	Schmidt, George (5)
Fullhart, Jacob	Tracht (Traucht), Adam (12)
Gaszman (Gossman), John (5)	Tracht (Traucht), Philip (4)
Griner, Philip (3)	Willisch (Wilch), John Peter (4)
Gossman, A.	Willisch (Wilch), Michael
Haszman,	Von Stein, (2) <sup>4</sup>

After everything was loaded, they began their journey to the New World. In his letter home, John Peter Arras reports that they left port on August 1. The captain said the trip would take 32 days. When they began the trip, it appeared as if they would make it in that time.

...we took off with a strong wind and traveled very fast, within a few hours we were seasick, although some did not, in a few days we recovered. It took six days to go through the channel. When you get out to sea, you feel like you are traveling in a valley and you can't see very much.<sup>5</sup>

Unfortunately, the trip didn't continue to go as well as it began. After they were out at sea for a number of days, they encountered some problems. They did not have any wind for twelve days. On these days, the ship didn't make any forward progress. There were also a couple days when the wind blew in the wrong direction. While at sea, they were also hit by a couple of storms, but it doesn't sound like they were too serious.

Since all these problems arose, it soon became apparent that they were not going to make the trip in 32 days. Those days at sea when they didn't make any progress must have been very trying. They were caught between their old home and their new home. Thoughts of Germany must have often crossed their minds. I'm sure they must have often asked themselves why they left. They also must have had thoughts about their new home in America. What was it going to be like? What would the people be like? What problems were they going to face there?

They also had other problems to deal with during the trip. Some of these had to do with the captain and the crew. The captain was young and inexperienced. (Some of the sources suggest that his name was Galt, but there is not definite proof.) This was said to be his first trip at sea, and he had a taste for strong liquor, so he couldn't be trusted. Some reports say that he was often drunk and that he stole some of the provisions from the passengers for himself and the crew. There were also complaints about the cook. Apparently, he didn't serve up delicious meals like mother used to make. It was also reported that he didn't keep his kitchen very clean either.

While they were at sea, they were struck with two other tragedies. There were two deaths. Heinrich Bauer lost a child, and Philip Griner lost a daughter. It is unknown what caused the death of these two.

Even though they had all of these problems, the worst was yet to come. This took place on the last day at sea. On September 16, a strong gale struck. During the storm, the ship hit a sand bar. The sand bar tore a large hole in the bottom of the ship. The ship quickly filled up with water. The following story about the shipwreck has been handed down from generation to generation. After all of these years, it is difficult to separate the facts from fiction, but I think there is a great deal of truth throughout the entire story.

It was said that when the ship began to fill up with water, the captain quickly sobered up. That evening he had been hitting the bottle and had gone to sleep.

When he realized that the ship was sinking, he ordered his crew to launch a life boat so that they could escape. At this time they weren't too concerned about their passengers.

When the immigrants realized what was going on, Johann Tracht took control. He took seven guns out of his trunk. (These guns were not brought along for protection or to fight the Indians, but to hunt wild game. This was a pleasure which they were forbidden to enjoy in Germany.) He armed six men and kept one gun for himself. He then gave orders to shoot anyone who attempted to abandon ship. Needless to say, the seven armed men easily persuaded the crew to stay on board.

Now that one ordeal was taken care of, they had to take care of another. The ship was still being tossed about by the storm. In order to stop the ship from being tossed about, the brother of J. P. Arras ordered the men to cut down the mast. When this was done, the wind no longer had complete control over the ship.

Still, the storm raged on. The ship was quickly filling up with water, and it appeared as if it would sink within a couple of hours. The people feared that they would not see the next morning. It was at this time that the faith of a little child shined the brightest. As fear gripped the hearts of everyone, Margaret Arras, the thirteen-year-old daughter of Johann, reminded the people of how Jesus quieted the waters of the Sea of Galilee and saved his disciples. She said, "Maybe he will save us also." When the sailors heard this, one of them told the people to slap the girl in the mouth for talking so foolishly because everyone could see that the ship was sinking fast. Then Margaret started to sing a hymn. Some reports say that she began to sing, "A Mighty Fortress is Our God." Others say that she sang this hymn:



This I believe, yea, rather  
 Of this I make my boast  
 That God is thy dear Father  
 The friend who loves me most.

And that what e'er betide me  
 My Savior is at hand  
 Through stormy seas to guide me  
 And bring me safe to land.

Indeed, both of these hymns would have been appropriate during their hour of need, but I didn't find any definite proof whether she sang either of these two hymns.

Her singing and prayers soon became contagious. Pretty soon all of the immigrants joined in the singing. It was even said that the hardened sailors joined in singing and praying. Sometime during the storm they made their vow. They said, "If we are saved, the 17th of each September shall be kept as a Holy Day by us and our descendants, even unto the third and fourth generation."

By the next morning the storm had stopped. When they looked out toward the west, they discovered that they were only 100 yards from land. They had wrecked off the coast of Virginia just south of Cape Henry.

It is unknown how much of this is fact, and how much is pious fiction. The only written eye witness account of the shipwreck is found in J.P. Amras' letter home. This was written in September of 1831. He described the shipwreck in this way:

On September 16th at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, there was a good strong wind, seems as if it always started out strong. By nightfall the captain had drunk too much and was asleep and left the steering of the ship to the pilot, it was dark and all we could do was leave it in the hands of our Lord. At 11 o'clock that night the ship hit a beach and the sailor yelled we found land. Every one jumped up to see, but it was too late. The ship started to thrust, knock and crack. We believed here was our grave sight within two hours. Since everything was getting out of hand, my brother got out of patience with the captain. The masts had to be cut down. Within minutes the captain had the masts cut

down, and the sails were in the water so the wind had no power any more. The ship was buried in the sand and filled with water to the water line. We did not suffer any disaster. Everyone was saved by the hand of our Lord and Father. So as daylight came we took our belongings and headed for land in a boat. It was about 100 steps from land. If our captain had been alert, he would have seen all this about 8 o'clock the night before and saved the ship.<sup>6</sup>

It is significant that he didn't make too big a deal out of the events which took place during the storm. One possible explanation is that this is only pious fiction. The events really didn't take place that way. At times it does almost appear like a movie script. Yet, there is another possible explanation. The letter that J. P. Arras wrote home sounds like a good public relations letter. He spent a great deal of time describing the wealth which could be found in America. Perhaps he didn't make much of the wreck so that he wouldn't scare his relatives and friends. Many of them were planning on following Arras over to the New World in the coming years.

We also can gain some reliable information from a newspaper article which appeared in "The Norfolk Herald" on Monday, September 19, 1831.

The brig, "James Beacham," Galt, of and for Baltimore, from Bremen whence she sailed 1st August with 160 passengers went ashore about 15 miles to the south of Cape Henry on Friday night last at about 11:00 o'clock in a gale from the northeast. The crew and passengers have got ashore--vessel bilged and full of water. When our informant left the wreck, exertions were being made to save the baggage of the passengers, cargo, etc.<sup>7</sup>

Many people had gathered on the shore to help the immigrants. (Among the people who helped the immigrants were a number of black people. This was the first contact they ever had with blacks, and at first they were uneasy around them.) The people from shore came out to assist them. They fastened cables to the wrecked vessel, and then fastened the opposite end of the cable to trees along the shoreline. The immigrants then made the trip by small boats to shore.

First, the families left the ship, then the single men. It is said that Johann Tracht, the organizer of the party, was the last to leave the ship. Everyone was rescued.

When they were all safely gathered on the shore, they thanked God for saving them from the storm. This must have been a very joyful occasion. They were snatched from the jaws of death. It was at this time that they repeated their vow. They swore that they would keep their vow until the third and fourth generation. Even though all of the people were saved, many of them lost some of their possessions.

Although they had many problems on their journey, they didn't lose sight of their goal. They still had a long way to go before they reached their home in Ohio. Before they went on any farther, they set up camp in the Norfolk area. They needed some time to recoup from their trip. At this time they were befriended by some families who sound like they were quite wealthy. J. P. Arras describes them this way:

The people that lived in the area came and took us to their homes and gave us something to eat. Here we saw how these people lived. In the morning, they took their guns and went horseback riding, they have colored help them cook and do housework, the wife does not do anything but set the table and when the cook brings in the meal they sit down and eat, I did not see much other work being done.<sup>8</sup>

They stayed in this area until September 21. Then they went to New York and arrived on the following day. They stayed in New York one day and left for Baltimore on a steamship at 6 o'clock of the 23rd. In Baltimore they exchanged their German guilden for American dollars. Many of the people stayed here for a time. Since they lost many of their possessions, the people split up and decided that each family would have to earn its own way to Ohio. J. P. Arras writes that he left Baltimore on September 29 and went to Friedricktown. He was still here in November because a second letter was sent to Germany from here on Nov. 7.

From there the families worked their way to Ohio. For awhile a number of the families settled in Pennsylvania and Maryland.

The journey from the east coast to Ohio also presented many problems. As I mentioned before, many of them had to earn some money before they went on. Work was abundant for those who wanted a job. J. P. Arras made this comment in his second letter home:

There is work to be had if you want to work. A day laborer can earn more here than a farmer can in Germany. Lich and Gero Repper are working as hand laborers, they work with railroad tracks. They each earn \$1.00 a day. They are building a new track to Friedricktown.<sup>9</sup>

A dollar a day doesn't sound like much compared to today's dollar value. Today, it is common to hear of people earning \$10.00 or more an hour, but back then a dollar a day was a pretty good wage. J. P. Arras lists the price which he paid for certain goods: a dollar for a bushel of apples, a dozen eggs for 25¢, butter was 20¢ a pound, a barrel of kraut was \$1.75, a bushel of potatoes was \$1.25. Beef was 4¢ a pound, and pork was 6¢ a pound. Land in Ohio was about two dollars an acre at this time.

Travel to Ohio also presented a difficulty for the immigrants. They didn't have fine paved roads to travel on. Today, we complain about all of the potholes in our roads and bridges, but compared to the mud paths of their day, our roads are wonderful. There were even times when they didn't have the mud paths to travel on. George Price, the son of one of the immigrants, gave this report to the Findlay Daily Courier. He describes their trip from Washington County, Pennsylvania to their new home in Hancock County, Ohio:

Mr. Price was taking the lead when his team reached what was then called Potato Creek Swamp, near Mt. Blanchard. Here one horse sank to his sides in the mud and could not move. Darkness was already settling over the unhappy immigrants and, surrounded as they were by a howling wilderness, the women broke down and cried in despair. But the animal was finally

pried out of the mud and the travelers moved on to Mt. Blanchard and put up for the night. The next day they were able to get seven miles farther west and spent the night at the tavern on Eagle Creek, kept by Mr. John Diller.<sup>10</sup>

The immigrants began to arrive in Hancock County in 1834. It is noted in an Essinger family history that Indians still camped in this area, but they didn't cause any problems. Twelve families arrived in the first year, and their deeds went on record May 20. An example of this was found in the Hancock County record book.

Peter Pifer and C. Price, both of Penn. on the 20th of May, 1834, made entries of land, the one took up the northeast quarter of Section 8 and the other the east half of the northeast quarter of Section 9.<sup>11</sup>

The following year, eleven more families arrived, and then in 1836 three more finished their journey. All of the immigrants finally arrived with the exception of one or two families. Much of the land bought by these families has been handed down from generation to generation. Many of the farmers still have the deeds which were signed by President Andrew Jackson. The population of Hancock County grew greatly during this decade. In the census of 1830 there were only 814 inhabitants in the county. By 1840 that number grew to 9,986.

At this time, Hancock County was very heavily forested. The timber consisted principally of walnut and different varieties of oak, ash, maple and elm, with beech, sycamore and (of course the state tree) the buckeye. The soil on the low lands is a black loam, on the uplands, clay, but all mingled and enriched by other substances as to be very fertile. From this land, they carved out the farms and built their homes. It was in this area that they established a church. In 1834 the congregation organized and adopted a constitution. "Zion" was chosen as the first name. In 1853 the congregation split. Part of the congregation formed St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church (ALC), and the other part formed Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church (WELS).

The vow which was made off of the coast of Virginia was kept throughout the history of these two congregations. The first recorded shipwreck service was held September 17, 1836. This was possibly held in the home of Jacob Vollhart or at the Funks's Mill. The early church services of the German immigrants were held at these two places until they built a church in 1852. The text for the first shipwreck service was Psalm 50:15 - "Call upon me in the day of trouble: I will deliver you, and you will honor me." This same text was used in 1881 for the fiftieth anniversary. At that time, ten of the original survivors attended the service.

The early days of the shipwreck service seem to have been very festive events. Eva Grieser, 80, a fourth-generation descendant of John Peter Arras, said that as a girl she was often told the story of the shipwreck.

When I was a girl growing up, the observance of shipwreck day was just like a Sunday. It was a day of thanksgiving for the safety of our forefathers. I have always had a deep feeling about the day. The children are now more foreign to the feeling than I am, I am sure. But it seems to be just as important and means as much in this community as it did when I was a girl.<sup>12</sup>

Today, the shipwreck service is still being observed. The descendants of those German immigrants still take time out to remember how God rescued their forefathers. Today, many of the same family names from the passenger list of the "Famous Dove" are on the membership roles of Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church and St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church. Names such as Bauer, Beach, Essinger, Heldman, Rettig, Schaller and Von Stein, to name a few, are still very common in these churches and around the community of Jenera.

God has blessed them by keeping them for 152 years. God willing, they will also be able to celebrate the 200th anniversary, not remembering the greatness of their ancestors, but remembering the power and grace of God who not only saved them from death in the storm, but more importantly, saved them from eternal death through his Son.

ENDNOTES

1. Information from Tracht Genealogy. This was from Dr. of Theology Ernst Wagner, pastor at Bensheim, Hesse, Germany, 1934.
2. Newspaper Interview, Sept. 1849.
3. Johann Peter Arras - first letter home.
4. Passenger list. Compiled by Vernon Arras, 1982.
5. Johann Peter Arras letter
6. Johann Peter Arras letter
7. Norfolk Herald, Norfolk Virginia, Sept. 19, 1831.
8. Johann Peter Arras letter
9. Johann Peter Arras - second letter, Nov. 7, 1831.
10. Findlay Daily Courier, Findlay, Ohio.
11. Hancock County History Book, Hancock County, Ohio.
12. Quote from Lutheran Standard