GERMAN LANGUAGE AND GERMAN IDENTITY IN AMERICA: EVIDENCE FROM SCHOOL GRAMMARS 1860–1918

NILS LANGER

ABSTRACT

One of our jobs as ‘AuslandsgermanistInnen’ is to promote an understanding of German culture in the home community. In our particular case, in the UK, this involves teaching a language and concepts which are – at least on the surface – fairly foreign to the target audience. How does the transmission of cultural and linguistic knowledge take place between motherland and linguistic enclaves? This paper will address this question with regard to the retention and loss of German culture and language by recent and settled immigrants in America at the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century. In particular, evidence from German school grammars printed in the USA will be examined to investigate what kind of cultural references were taught to school children.

1. INTRODUCTION

Schon seit vielen Jahren hörte man in manchen Gegenden die Klage, dass die bis dahin gebrauchten deutschen Lesebücher für die Verhältnisse in diesem Lande nicht mehr passten; dass sie für amerikanische Kinder zu schwer und unverständlich seien.

This complaint about the inadequate provision of German-language teaching materials was published in the foreword of the Zweites Lesebuch in the series Deutsch=englische Lesebücher für katholische Schulen published by Benziger Brothers (New York / Cincinnati / Chicago) in 1909. It points to the extensive teaching of German as a native and foreign language in the USA during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and hints at a fading German language competence amongst the immigrant community. The statement needs to be seen in the general cultural context of the presence of the German language in the USA which even today is used as a native language by thousands of descendants of the immigrant community. The (rapidly fading) survival of German in the USA is of interest not only to Germanists but to anyone researching key issues such as immigration and identity, since the case of German(ness) in America shows how visual markers of a separate identity can disappear after a generation or two whilst a sense of belonging to a particular community is still retained. As recently

1 This research was made possible by a generous grant from the Friends of the Memorial Library, University of Wisconsin, Madison. Furthermore I am particularly grateful to Joe Salmons (UW Madison), Kevin Kurdylo (MKI Madison), Stephan Elspaß (Augsburg), and Cora Lee Kluge (MKI Madison) for their valuable comments.

9600 Garsington Road, Oxford, OX4 2DQ and 350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148, USA.
as 2000, the US Census showed that German was still the largest ethnicity in the USA.²

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>German</td>
<td>15.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Irish</td>
<td>10.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>American</td>
<td>7.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Whilst such census data are always problematic because of the self-reporting collection method and the issue of multiple ethnicities, it is nevertheless striking that German ranks very highly despite its de facto absence as a visually and audibly noticeable ethnicity in the country. Ignoring those German-speaking communities which deliberately distance themselves from mainstream American society for religious reasons (e.g. certain Free Protestant churches, in particular orthodox Mennonites and Amish) and which for these reasons need to be accounted for quite separately, there are no significant numbers of German native speakers under the age of, say, 50 years, even in the stronger pockets of German immigration such as the Midwest (Wisconsin, Ohio, Missouri) and Texas. Even in Wisconsin, the state often referred to as the most German of all American states, only 1.36% spoke German at home in 1990, i.e. 61,929 people (US census 1990), which had further decreased to 48,409 in the 2000 US Census.³ Thus something has happened between the waves of German immigrants in the late nineteenth century and today as regards language retention but not as regards ancestral identity. Brent Peterson, Professor of German at Lawrence University, Wisconsin, identifies the fate of Germanness as an example of ‘instructive failures’ when discussing the topic with his students, many of whom have German ancestors:

[T]he German experience in the United States makes far more sense if we regard German-Americans as instructive failures, and I offer my curious but almost completely uninformed students as proof that almost everything German in their ancestors’ lives has been lost.⁴

Similarly, scholars speak of the ‘submergence’ of German culture in the United States, as compared with the very visible Irish (e.g. St. Patrick’s Day parades) or Hispanic heritage (e.g. food), and which occurred despite the

---


fact that plenty of place- and surnames testify to the widespread nature of German immigration.⁵

On St Patrick’s Day, millions of Americans of whatever ethnic background seek identity with the Irish by wearing something green. But identity with the Germans? How many Americans even know of the existence of the annual Von Steuben Day parade in New York?⁶

In this paper I will investigate the perception of Germanness within the immigrant community. In particular, I will focus on the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century, i.e. the period around 1870 to 1918, and I will concentrate on one particular type of data, namely textbooks and school grammars. The primary data for this study are located in the Ellis collection of German textbooks, housed at the Memorial Library of the University of Wisconsin-Madison. The collection consists of some 1,100 works, with publication dates spanning the period between 1857 and 1980; most of them were collected by Frances H. Ellis, formerly professor of German at Indiana University, who donated the books to the library in 1981. Most of the collection consists of editions of literary texts aimed at school children and undergraduate students but there are some 150 works, which form the corpus of my study, which are more directly concerned with the teaching of German grammar and reading skills (‘Lesebücher’). Since they were all printed in the USA, were authored by German-Americans, albeit in some cases in collaboration with scholars based in Germany, and were clearly aimed at the American market, these data provide a valuable source of how German was taught in American schools – both to native and non-native speakers of German.⁷

Crucially, school textbooks were used not only to teach actual linguistic skills such as reading and writing but also to transmit cultural knowledge, and thus they can help us understand how Germans perceived themselves, either as new Americans, as members of the German nation, or as immigrants in transfer between two national identities.

2. GERMAN IMMIGRATION TO AMERICA

As is well known, German immigration to America began in the seventeenth century, at first to the East Coast, where Franz Daniel Pastorius founded Germantown, now a part of Philadelphia, in 1683. Germans started to settle in the American Midwest, i.e. in the states on Lake Michigan and the northern Mississippi, from the 1830s, since these areas provided similar farming conditions to those in Central Europe. They entered the country

---

either via New York, travelling westwards by coach, or boat, and later train, and via New Orleans, travelling northwards on the Mississippi. The 1880 US census shows that more than half of all German immigrants had settled in the Midwest. The largest wave of German immigrants occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century, with several million people arriving in American ports. The reasons for leaving Germany and for going to America can be grouped into three principal categories: religion, politics, and socioeconomics, with the last category being the most important. Religious and political freedom were enticing attractions for those persecuted in Germany, in particular before the creation of the Wilhelmine Empire. Socioeconomic reasons affected not only the poor but also those who were suppressed by semi-feudal laws in many German states, e.g. the inheritance laws in many rural areas which practically enslaved the first or second son (inheritance laws varied from region to region) to the estate owner; a life in America would be hard but at least it would enable anyone to buy property (see *Germania Kalender*, Milwaukee, 25, 1905):


Like other immigrant groups, the Germans stayed together in their new ‘Heimat’. There were large urban communities of Germans in cities like Philadelphia, PA, St. Louis, MO, Chicago, IL, and Milwaukee, WI, where 69% of the citizens were of German extraction in 1890. In rural areas, whole villages were founded by mono-national communities, often because of the wholesale settlement of an area by a single – often religious – group freshly arrived from Europe. In the case of Wisconsin, for example, this led to the perception of quite distinct communities even amongst the Germans who would usually refer to themselves as ‘Hessen’, ‘Schwaben’ or ‘Plattdeutsche’, rather than Germans *per se*:


The sheer scale of German immigration had certain repercussions for the linguistic landscape of the country. As late as 1910, realistic estimates calculate that up to 25% of German Wisconsinites, i.e. those who were not recent immigrants, were monolingual German speakers, suggesting that German was the preferred language in large parts of Wisconsin. However, it was never in any doubt that the language of official business was English and, throughout the history of German immigration, we find ample statements to testify to the importance of learning English. An early source of this ‘Alltagsgeschichte’ is the *Auswanderer am Niederrhein*, a brochure aimed at enticing European Germans to migrate to the US, which was published periodically in the middle of the nineteenth century (1848–). It contains short essays and letters from German farmers who had emigrated and who reported back – in a somewhat biased way, as one would expect – what life in America was like. On the issue of linguistic competence, we read in 1850 the suggestion that there might be the possibility that German would become more important than English:

Die deutsche Nation […] ist von den Eingeborenen ihres Fleißes wegen sehr geachtet. Sie nimmt schon jetzt eine schöne Stellung in der Union ein, die den Amerikaner dahin gebracht, jetzt deutsch zu lernen, während früher das einzige Mittel, sich zu verstehen, darin bestand, daß der Deutsche englisch lernte.

However, there were compelling financial reasons to acquire English: ‘ein Arbeitsmann verdient im Monat 8–10 Dollar […]’, und wenn er die

---

11 Cf. Miranda E. Wilkerson and Joseph Salmons, *op. cit.*
12 *Auswanderer am Niederrhein*, No 7, 1850, 26.
Englische Sprache versteht 12–13 Dollar [...]'. In one of the reading passages – taking the form of a fictional letter from an immigrant back to Germany – of Witter’s *Neues Drittes Lesebuch für Amerikanische Freischulen* (1881), we learn about the practical uses of knowing English – and about the emerging linguistic differences between first-generation and second-generation immigrants:


Here we have our first example of how school textbooks conveyed cultural knowledge, in this case about the reader’s own culture of being a German in America who can relate directly to the ten-year-old boy in the short passage. This example also shows how different the cultural experiences of living in the US were between first- and second-generation immigrants, with the latter being much more comfortable in bilingual surroundings and thus, perhaps, already a little more distant from the European motherland than the parent generation.15 A key question in this context is how the immigrants would identify themselves: are they German, are they American, or are they both? Today the use of complex terms such as Afro-American or British-Asian is generally accepted as descriptive labels of national or cultural identity. However, many Germans still find it quite difficult to ‘understand’ how someone can claim to be a ‘Turkish-German’ who – although ‘ethnically’ Turkish – is a native speaker of German, was born in Germany, and whose parents were born in Germany. Thus to claim ‘hyphenated’ identity is by no means generally acceptable and the situation in nineteenth-century America was similarly a mixture of both feelings, i.e. a belonging to the new home of America whilst retaining a link with fellow Germans.

### 3. LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

One of the most fascinating things for a European visiting the USA and talking to Americans is the fact that, within a short period of time, Americans will reveal their ‘ancestry’, i.e. the motherland and nationality of their original immigrant relatives. In this sense the notion of the ‘hyphenated

---

13 Auswanderer am Niederrhein, No 2, 1848, 6.
14 Witter’s *Neues Drittes Lesebuch für Amerikanische Freischulen*, St. Louis 1881, p. III.
15 This is by no means ‘selbstverständlich’. Often generations down the line have a much more romantic and emotionally charged relationship with the land of their ancestry than those who chose to leave the country and immigrate elsewhere.
American’ (Italo-American, German-American, Chinese-American) is still very current. Americans appear to be both proud to describe themselves as citizens of an independent state or nation (= USA) whilst at the same time remaining true to their non-American roots. Incidentally, this is most notable in the Upper Midwest where far higher percentages of people list ‘ethnicity’ in census data than in other regions. Here the history of the USA can help us to understand the complexities of immigration, in particular the pressures immigrant communities felt (and created) in balancing the demand to become good citizens of the new host country, whilst, at the same time, not losing family and emotional ties with the country of origin.

The established, power-wielding community, which, in the case of the USA, consisted of fairly recent immigrants themselves, often feels that the only acceptable way of immigration is assimilation, i.e. rescinding one’s immigrant identity and embracing the new ‘Heimat’ wholeheartedly at the expense of any loyalty to one’s non-American roots. President Theodore Roosevelt summed up this view with the following words in 1907:

In the first place, we should insist that if the immigrant who comes here in good faith becomes an American and assimilates himself to us, he shall be treated on an exact equality with everyone else, for it is an outrage to discriminate against any such man because of creed, or birthplace, or origin. But this is predicated upon the person’s becoming in every facet an American, and nothing but an American. [...] There can be no divided allegiance here. Any man who says he is an American, but something else also, isn’t an American at all. We have room for but one flag, the American flag [...]. We have room for but one language here, and that is the English language [...] and we have room for but one sole loyalty and that is a loyalty to the American people.

This was aimed not just at the Germans but at all immigrant communities. For Roosevelt, however, this also meant that there was only one American flag and, crucially, one American language, namely English. Interestingly, many German-Americans at least partly agreed with this view. Wilhelm Hense-Jensen (1900/02) in his well-known history of German-Americans in Wisconsin stated:

Wer auswandert, der giebt sein Vaterland auf und geht ihm verloren. Man kann so wenig zwei Vaterländer als zwei Väter haben. Also entweder Deutscher

---

16 Joseph Salmons, UW Madison, personal communication.
17 Note that the only non-immigrants (at least non-recent ones) in the USA, the Native Americans, were not part of the established community. In fact they were subjected to years of aggressive ‘assimilation’ policies ever since the nineteenth century which included, e.g. that their children be sent to boarding schools off reservations where they were prohibited from engaging with tribal customs and from speaking their native language (cf. James Olson and Raymond Wilson, Native Americans in the Twentieth Century, Univ. of Illinois 1986).
Thus the existence of a ‘hyphenated American’ was seen as a transition between two nationalities, not a lasting state of self-identity. This stands in some contrast to other statements on the issue. Hense-Jensen himself sees German-Americans as something quite distinct, separated ‘[...] von den eingeborenen Amerikanern [= Anglo-Americans!] durch Verschiedenheit der Sprache, der sozialen Anschauungen, Sitten und Gewohnheiten.’ This use of the term ‘Amerikaner’ for Anglo-Americans is quite common in German-American writings of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries but it is striking considering that many German commentators considered German-Americans to be American, too! Contemporary views are often riddled with contradictions and inconsistencies, demanding for example that German-Americans should integrate into American society and lose their distinctiveness whilst at the same time insinuating or even claiming openly that the German race, nation, and culture is superior to those around it. In this context, Hense-Jensen is one of the more conciliatory voices asking the German element to make a positive contribution to, not separate itself off from, American society:

Eine deutsche Nation in der amerikanischen kann sie [= die deutsche Einwanderung, NL] nicht sein, aber den reichen Inhalt ihres Gemüthlebens, die Schätze ihrer Gedankenwelt kann sie im Kampf für die politischen und allgemein-menschlichen Interessen in die Waagschale werfen, und ihr Einfluß wird um so tiefer gehen, ein um so größeres Feld der Bethätigung sich schaffen, je weniger tendenziös sie auftritt, je mehr sie aber zugleich an dem festhält, was Deutschland der Welt Großes und Schönes gegeben hat.

Voices of warning about a decline in visual and audible German culture are to be heard in about the same period. In his defence of the German language, Lohmann (1904) lines up quotations from a number of prominent authorities, not just from the German-American segment of society, who lament the Germans’ declining enthusiasm for their own language. In a speech by a former American ambassador to Germany on the occasion of the bicentenary of the foundation of Germantown, PA, we hear that, whilst it is commendable that German-Americans aim to Americanise as speedily as possible, they are also asked not to forget and forego their ‘Deutschtum’:

Wie oft hört man die Rede, es sei die erste Pflicht jedes Deutschen nach seiner Landung, sich so schnell wie möglich zu amerikanisieren. Dieses ist wohl wahr; aber unglücklicherweise wird damit das Verlangen verbunden,
He continues with a plea to parents to raise their children as American patriots who are ‘soaked through’ with the spirit of Anglo-American literature but who are also aware of the treasures of German literature and culture:

> Seid gute Amerikaner; keiner kann Bürger zweier Länder zugleich sein. [...] Erzieht eure Kinder zu amerikanischen Patrioten, durchtränkt mit dem Geiste der Literatur der Englisch sprechenden Völker, aber entzieht euren Kindern nicht den Einfluß der deutschen Sprache mit ihren wissenschaftlichen und literarischen Schätzen. Lessing, Goethe und Schiller sind ein unschätzbares Vermächtnis.  

It is well-known that older generations always complain about modern trends and the perception of a lack or decline of German culture may well be exaggerated. But there is a noticeable increase in assimilation at the expense of retaining distinctiveness from around 1900 or so, and Louis Viereck, in his report on German instruction in schools, written for the federal commissioner of education, was probably too optimistic when he stated: ‘The determination to require German immigrants against their will to relinquish at once their nationality, instead of assimilating them gradually in an appropriate way, has, fortunately, been now completely set aside.’

4. A DECLINE IN USING GERMAN

Where German-American lobbyists appear to differ fairly consistently from Roosevelt’s absolutist belief in assimilation is with regard to language, an element of particular importance, since it not only demonstrates distinctiveness but also separateness from the Anglo-American community. Retaining German as a native language amongst German-Americans was seen as an honourable and worthwhile pursuit and great efforts were made to teach the language to second- and third-generation immigrants not just in church schools but also in state schools. But, as so often, what parents want and what children achieve are often at odds with each other, and in many comments by teachers and educationalists from the turn of the nineteenth to the twentieth century we hear pessimistic accounts of the actual situation

in the uptake of German amongst the young immigrant generation. In 1906, the Cleveland school commission noted that ‘the reason for the teaching of German in the primary and grammar grades [...] is not educational, but chiefly national and sentimental’, thus suggesting that the practical value of knowing German was declining yet the school provision for teaching it was not.\(^{26}\) In 1896, the Lutheran Church Friend (Chicago) describes the situation in (far-away) Nebraska as follows:

As far as the language is concerned, it is a general fact that children want to speak English, and when they attend English day schools they do not even learn to understand German properly. Even when German is spoken in the family, children have only the barest knowledge of the language, of literature, and of religion, and if they understand it lose all interest, because they can not express themselves fluently. [...] The parents desired to remain German and be faithful to their own church, but the children felt a greater attraction toward other churches simply because of the language. [...] The truth is that children born and raised in America do not love German.\(^{27}\)

Similarly, Karl Knortz, Superintendent for Public Schools in Evansville, IN, reports:

My place of residence, Evansville, has about 60,000 inhabitants, of whom 30,000 are said to be of German extraction. The public schools are attended by 7,000 pupils; as German-Americans usually have more children than Anglo-Americans, it would be supposed that at least 4,000 children would study German in the public schools; as a matter of fact, however, the number is only 2,500, and 900 of these are of English parentage. [...] Of all German born pupils in public schools only 11 per cent speak German to their parents at home.\(^{28}\)

This didn’t go unnoticed by friendly Anglo-Americans, who lament the fact that some Germans are ashamed to speak their native language. Lohmann quotes the Catholic bishop of Peoria, IL, John L. Spalding, as saying:

Wie töricht wären die Deutschen, auf einmal ihre Muttersprache preiszugeben, die innig verbunden ist mit der Religion ihres Herzens, mit den Träumen der Kindheit und deren Literatur ein Californien klassischer Reichtümer


\(^{28}\) Ibid.
geworden ist. Es tut mir immer herzlich leid, sehe ich einen Deutschen in Amerika sich schämen deutsch zu sprechen.\textsuperscript{29}

Similarly, Professor Marion Dexter Learned, one of the leading educationa-lists in the USA, reported in \textit{Pedagogical Monthly}, December 1899:

Within the last few years the Germans have awakened to the fact that they have made a great contribution to American culture, but that, while Americans have been appropriating German culture, going by hundreds to study at German universities, the German youths in this country have been discarding and even despising the ‘Muttersprache’, thus imperiling the future of the German language and life in America.\textsuperscript{30}

These voices are typical of statements of a time when German-Americans crave to become accepted by the majority population yet retain their cultural separateness. It is not clear to what extent these high-brow discussions and publications informed the cultural awareness of ordinary German-Americans. From the early twentieth century onwards we see more and more comments which point to a decreasing interest in things German, in particular in the German language, which is of particular importance for the retention of any meaningful links with the immigrants’ families back in Europe. The US commissioner for education, W.T. Harris, stressed in his federal report on the instruction of German in school (1890):

For if his children learn English only, there must be a too sudden and abrupt breaking off the continuity of race and a consequent great evil wrought upon his character. The consciousness of the history of one’s ancestry and the influences derived from communication with the older members of one’s family are very potent in giving tone to the individuality of youth and ripening age.\textsuperscript{31}

What is particularly striking in this discussion is that the percentage of school pupils learning German was steadily increasing during this period. In 1900, German was taught to 600,000 pupils in 5,000 schools, with many teachers coming from Germany during this ‘Blütezeit des Deutschenunterrichts’ to support the efforts of the local German-American communities.\textsuperscript{32} The following table demonstrates how German was always – until the entry of the USA into World War I – the most important modern foreign language with an ever-increasing percentage of learners in American secondary schools:\textsuperscript{33}

\textsuperscript{29} Lohmann, p. 5. Presumably Lohmann translated Spalding’s excerpt from English into German.
\textsuperscript{30} Quoted in Viereck, p. 577.
\textsuperscript{31} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 548.
\textsuperscript{33} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 369.
What this table does not show, however, is the relationship between the numbers of native speakers, other members of the German-American community, and members of other communities. Several major cities such as Cincinnati, Cleveland, Indianapolis and Baltimore had been operating bilingual public schools for several years, where half the day’s lessons were taught in English and the other in German.\(^3\) Initially aimed at the German-American community, many Anglo-American parents started sending their children to these schools, too, when it became quickly known that students’ grades were on average better than those achieved elsewhere. This was partly due to the fact that bilingually raised children tend to achieve better grades in general but also partly because the German teachers had enjoyed particularly good training, either in Germany, or at teacher training colleges in the US such as the very successful and famous ‘Lehrerseminar’ in Milwaukee, WI founded in 1878 and the ‘Nationale deutsch-amerikanische Lehrerubund’ (1878–1919). Nonetheless, after about 1900 when German ceased to be used as a language of instruction in the larger cities, the acquisition of German as a living language started to decrease.\(^3\) We read in the preface to a new school textbook in 1909:

Höchstens lernen die Kinder noch deutsch lesen, aber weil sie zu Hause und auf der Straße fast kein deutsches Wort mehr hören, können sie das Gelesene nicht verstehen; daher der Wunsch nach neuen Lesebüchern, welche diesen Verhältnissen angepasst sind.\(^3\)

The retention of cultural distinctiveness can best be measured in its existence in the younger generation. Kazal’s case study of early

\(^3\) Fessler, op. cit., pp. 273–94.
\(^3\) La Vern Rippley, The German-Americans, Boston 1976, p. 122.
\(^3\) Zweites Lesebuch, Deutsch=englische Lesebücher für katholische Schulen, New York / Cincinnati / Chicago 1909.
twentieth-century Philadelphia investigates why citizens of German descent distanced themselves from their ethnic origin. He argues that

in the first third of the twentieth century, many German Philadelphians, especially the children of immigrants, retreated from a ‘German-American’ identity and instead crafted new multiple identities keyed to particular understandings of race, religion, mass culture, and the American nation.37

The transmission of the German language to American-born Germans was considered an important aspect of the attempt to promote Germanness across generations.

5. AMERICAN GERMANNESSE IN AMERICAN SCHOOL GRAMMARS

In the last section of this paper, we see evidence of what kind of Germanness was presented to German-American children. Germanness as presented in the grammars contained in the Ellis collection covers three major areas: Christianity, life in Germany, and life in America. Many textbooks were written explicitly for particular Protestant communities or Catholic schools: ‘Das vorliegende Buch ist das zweite einer neuen Serie von sechs deutschen Lesebüchern für katholische, deutsch-amerikanische Pfarrschulen.’38 Consequently, many of the reading passages in these books deal with religious themes, be they stories about the correct moral conduct of good Christians in all walks of life, retellings of Bible stories, or historical accounts of important figures, such as Martin Luther in books aimed at Protestant schools. Importantly, they do not contain any reference to life in Germany or America.

However, from the earliest textbooks onwards, we find accounts of life in the new ‘Heimat’. The oldest book in the Ellis collection, Woodbury (1857), is clearly aimed at the foreign language market, recognising that there is already ‘an immense and daily augmenting German population [in America]. The language of this people is spoken extensively among us, and has hence come to have a high practical value.’39 Most early textbooks, however, are aimed at the native-speaker market. The anonymous Buchstabir- und Lesebuch zum ersten Unterricht der Kinder, printed in the Amana colonies of True Inspiration in Iowa in 1872, is a basic device to teach reading and writing to native speakers.40 This is different in the more advanced

38 Zweites Lesebuch, Deutsch=englische Lesebücher für katholische Schulen, New York / Cincinnati / Chicago 1909, preface.
39 W.H. Woodbury, Woodbury’s Elementary German Reader: Consisting of Selections of Prose and Poetry, Chiefly from Standard German Writers; With a Full Vocabulary, Copious References to the Author’s German Grammars, and a Series of Explanatory Notes; Designed for Schools, Colleges and Private Students, New York 1857, preface.
40 Buchstabir- und Lesebuch zum ersten Unterricht der Kinder, Amana 1872.
In its preface, Klemm states explicitly that his book aims to forge a link between the experiences and views of the parents and the children. He includes essays on topics from Germany, including the first use of potatoes or coffee, general topics, such as ‘Das Wetter’, but also passages on the gold rush in California, the Mammoth cave in Kentucky, and the natural properties of cotton; these are clear references to the children’s new ‘Heimat’ in America.

Witter’s series of ‘Lesebücher’ was published with the explicit aim of providing textbooks which could be used both by German-Americans and Anglo-Americans in German-speaking schools. Witter introduced them as ‘eine neue Serie Lesebücher [...], welche den Bedürfnissen der Anglo=Amerikaner ganz besonders Rechnung tragen und zugleich den Anforderungen, welche Deutsch=Amerikaner an eine solche stellen können, vollständig genügen soll.’ Its contents appear to do justice to this desire, with many passages written not just from an American but also an Anglo-American perspective, e.g. essays on ‘the squatter’, Daniel Boone, or anecdotes involving American Indians and settlers, as well as letters from Americans to Americans, or letters from America back to Germany.

Another striking example of presenting German-American life is the anonymous Drittes Lesebuch für Evangelisch=Lutherische Schulen, published by the Missouri Synod in St. Louis, MO in 1893. It contains numerous articles on American wildlife, such as ‘der amerikanische Panther’, ‘der Wiesenhund’, ‘das Truthuhn oder der Puter’, ‘der Mustang’, ‘der Waschbär’, ‘die Klapperschlange’, but also pieces on non-American fauna, for example on elephants and lions. Famous figures in American history are presented, such as William Penn, Pocahontas, and Abraham Lincoln, but including, too, German-Americans, such as Baron von Steuben, Baron de Kalb, and General Nikolaus Herckheimer. Reading passages are devoted to important American cities such as Cleveland and St. Louis, which contained sizeable German communities:

Sonderlich gestärkt wurde das deutsche Element der Stadt durch die Einwanderung der Sachsen im Jahre 1839. […] St. Louis ist seit jener Zeit ein Hort des reinen Luthertums und auch des Deutschtums gewesen. Zwölf deutsch=lutherische Gemeinden gibt’s in der Stadt, und gerade durch die deutsch=lutherischen Gemeindeschulen ist die deutsche Sprache gepflegt und hier erhalten worden, wie durch nichts anderes.

Other textbooks contain a similar mix of topics, which clearly suggests that their authors are portraying America as the new ‘Heimat’ for its readers,
but without negating any real link to the Germany back in Europe. This is particularly true for distant historical events (Barbarossa, Luther, Charlemagne) and literature (Goethe, Schiller, Hauff, Fontane, the Nibelungenlied). Reference to America is commonly made via the retelling of historical events, in particular the German contribution to the War of Independence – but not, however, to the Civil War (1861–5) during which thousands of Germans fought for the Union, when German generals played an important role. As mentioned above, reference is made to American wildlife and, occasionally, to American nationality and holidays: ‘Während des Schuljahres haben wir vier Feiertage: das Dankfest, Lincolns und Washingtons Geburtstag und den Gräberschmückungstag’, or to the American flag:

There is nothing to suggest that teachers of German did not identify with the American nation, though references to German history and literature feature prominently. The evidence from early American school books provides a convincing example of how German-Americans bridged the problem of two separate identities by bringing up their children as ‘modern’ Americans with a German history. However, as alluded to above, the expectations of teachers and other members of the German-American establishment were not always met and, from around 1900, interest in retaining German as a native language began to dwindle. Increasingly, school books were published for descendants of German-Americans who no longer spoke German as a native language and for those who wished to learn German as an academic subject in recognition of the fact that the German Empire had great prestige.

45 Lewis Addison Rhoades and Lydia Schneider, Erstes Sprach- und Lesebuch. A German Primer, New York 1906, p. 64. I am very grateful to the Special Collections Department at the Memorial Library, U W Madison, for their help with the reproduction of this picture.

in the field of higher education and that a year at a German university
or even a doctoral degree from there greatly enhanced one’s chances of
landing a job at an American university. This shift of target readership
can be seen in textbooks, too, which ceased to include reading passages
about General Steuben or ‘Danksagungstag’, and instead introduced texts
on life as a student in Heidelberg, accounts of the war of 1870/71, and
printed photographic images of ‘Der Kaiser mit seinen Offizieren Unter
den Linden’.

In conclusion, this paper demonstrates how German school grammars
printed in America in the late nineteenth century married aspects of the
ethnic heritage of recent immigrants with cultural knowledge of their new
‘Heimat’, thus teaching the immigrants’ children about their mixed identity
as German-Americans. This mirrors the meta-cultural discussions of the
time when German-Americans argued that a mixed identity could only be
transitional but at the same time claimed that a knowledge of the German
language and an awareness of the military, cultural, and educational con-
tributions made by Germans in the world and in America were important
elements to be retained and promoted.