

A Family divided – Emigrants to Two Continents

As part of South Australia's History Festival, Barossa historian Geoff Saegenschnitter presented the fascinating story of his **Biar** ancestors. Geoff has been researching his Saegenschnitter and Biar ancestry over many years.

Two Biar brothers migrated from Germany, but one went to Texas while the other came to South Australia. To learn their story at this event, members of the Wend/Sorb Society were joined by a number of Geoff's cousins, and several interested folk who learned of the talk through History Festival publicity.

Geoff began his talk with a display of the various spellings of the Biar surname. The original Wendish was Bjar. However, the ancestor on the shipping list of the *Steinwarder* which arrived in South Australia in 1854 was recorded as Biach. Other spellings included Baer, Bär, Bähr, Bihar and Biehar, all of which can make genealogical research challenging.

The Biar family originated in the village of Gröditz, in Saxony, Germany. While visiting this village in recent times, Geoff shared that he had been able to play the organ in the church where his ancestors worshipped. His Biar great-great-grandfather tragically had only one of his 12 children survive to adulthood and his first wife died in childbirth. With his second wife, the great-great-grandfather had two further sons named Andreas and Johann.

These 2 sons eventually left Germany for distant lands – Andreas to Australia, Geoff's great-great-grandfather, and Johann to America. Why did they go in different directions? Although the reason is not known, Geoff has a theory that it may have been from a dispute about their inheritance, listed as amounts of taler, but split unevenly between them.

In November 1854 Andreas Biar arrived in South Australia on the *Steinwarder*. His future wife Magdalena Lehmann arrived in 1855 and they were married in 1856. They finally settled at St Kitts. Geoff was able to show a photo of them in front of their thatch-roofed whitewashed wattle and daub home, taken in 1894. Unfortunately, it is now a ruin as the roof and walls have deteriorated and collapsed. Geoff mentioned that a visiting USA relative was delighted to locate some hand-made nails from the site of this ruin.



The Biar home at St Kitts

Geoff also showed an interesting group photo of his great-grandparents on their golden wedding anniversary in 1930 with their children, including his grandmother. However, since she had died 8 years earlier in 1922, an earlier photo of her had been added – similar to editing photos these days! Geoff's father had been born only 6 weeks before her death, yet another sad story.

When the American Dr George Nielsen came to Australia in the late 1960s to research the history of Wends in Australia, he interviewed August Biar, Geoff's great uncle. Nielsen mentioned that he had gone to school in Texas with a Biar. This led to Geoff writing simply to the Harold Biar family in Thorndale, Texas, and amazingly making contact with these distant relatives.

He learned that in September 1854, the other brother, Johann Biar, had sailed on the *Ben Nevis* via England to America. It had been a very different voyage from that of Andreas, with 81 deaths from illness, including a cholera outbreak on board the ship. Johann had reached the Wendish settlement of Serbin in Texas by December 1854.

Geoff then visited the Biar family in Texas in 1977, meeting 90 relatives in the 3 weeks he was there, and taking photos of the area where they lived near Serbin. We saw images of the heritage Wendish Lutheran church with gallery on 4 sides including behind the pulpit. The colour blue, typical in these churches, featured on the internal pillars with feather painting.

Yet another interesting story related to Geoff's photo of a 2-storey weatherboard house on the property where the Biar family had lived for a number of generations. Upstairs in a writing desk (which was dismantled to carry downstairs) an amazing number of letters was discovered, sent from the family settled over in Australia. They were written from 1881 to 1926. *Cont. next page*

A Family divided (cont.)

The Wendish Heritage Society in Victoria has published a 300-page translation from the German of these and many other letters from Australia to Germany and USA.

One of the Biar cousins in Texas, Bill Biar, with 12 brothers and sisters, has gathered Wendish and family history resources. Geoff encouraged him to donate these records to the Texas Wendish Heritage Museum, which is in a lovely house with verandah. Geoff has also taken donated Australian Wendish family histories to Serbin on yet another visit. The Harold Biar family farm in Thorndale has

also been identified by the Texas government as a “Texas Century Farm” with a large sign indicating it has been in the same family for over 100 years.

Finally, Geoff confirmed that he is the only private member from Australia of the Texas Wendish Heritage Society. It is also likely that he is the only person with Biar ancestry from South Australia who has also visited Biar family properties in Germany and Texas. Sharing his knowledge of his Wendish ancestry and current connections across three continents provided us with a fascinating, informative and entertaining afternoon.

Pauline Burger
