

## **German Immigrant Ancestors Database**

### **What is the Immigrant Ancestors Project?**

Most persons living in the United States are descendents of immigrants. The 2000 United States Census shows that roughly 96% of Americans claim foreign ancestry. Tracing this immigrant ancestry can often be discouraging. Port and naturalization records from the United States rarely mention more than the immigrant's name, birth date and arrival date. Without the name of a town or city, the search comes to a stop. The mission of the Immigrant Ancestors Project is to provide information regarding immigrant birthplaces and/or residences.

Immigrant Ancestors was founded in 1996 with a long-term goal of searching for German, Irish and English immigrants. The first phase of the project focused on the identity of present-day locations of records identifying German emigrants and their ancestors. According to census records, German descendents are the largest ancestry group in the United States. Citizens desiring to leave Germany were required by local and state law to apply for permission to leave. These applications prevented emigrants from leaving the country with outstanding obligations. Upon applying for departure, government officials began a file under the emigrant's name. By the time the emigrant received clearance to leave, this file could contain dozens of documents from pastors, employers, family members and government officials verifying the identity and status of the applicant. The records created by departing emigrants are found in local and state archives in Germany, Poland and France and provide a description of the emigrant.

The next part of the project is the Immigrant Ancestors Database. Traditionally immigrant records are located on microfilm in archives or Family History Libraries. Researchers visit these sites to access the microfilm records and extract immigrant data such as name, birth date, birthplace, occupation, marital status and names of dependents. Genealogical information is handwritten onto a data form that must be mailed to organizations to be entered into databases.

Immigrant Ancestors is attempting to simplify this process by developing an all-computer extraction method. The goal of Immigrant Ancestors is to send digital microfilm images over the Internet to interested volunteers. These individuals will then extract information directly into data entry software. This information is sent back through the Internet and uploaded into the Immigrant Ancestors Database. The project's intent is to make the extraction as simple as possible to allow any level of computer user to volunteer.

### **Who Will Extract the Data from the Records?**

Individuals will be selected to receive training as Immigrant Ancestors extraction supervisors from the group of trained genealogists and language students attending Brigham Young University. The supervisors will receive instruction on reading the old German script found in emigration records. Volunteers will be recruited through genealogical associations, libraries, and archives in the United States and Germany. Individuals may also volunteer through the project's web page. Potential volunteers are asked to fill out an application screening their language and computer skills. They are also given a short language

proficiency test. Upon acceptance as a volunteer, an individual must complete a training tutorial on the Immigrant Ancestors web page teaching them to read and analyze German emigration records.

### **Microfilm Scanning Procedure**

Silver negative microfilm is scanned into digital form using a 4100 Scanstation and Rolfilm scanning software developed by Wicks & Wilson. Each page is enhanced using contrast features available in the scanner software. Every attempt is made to preserve the quality of each image. The images are scanned in grayscale and saved as JPEG files. Each image is roughly 1MB to 1.4MB in size. Compression software is used to minimize the image size, helping to decrease the cost of Internet time to volunteers. Immigrant Ancestors uses MrSID Photo Edition 1.1, created by LizardTech, Inc., to compress the images. MrSID is capable of reducing image sizes to almost 10% of their original size. Unfortunately, this software has an image dimension limit of 1600 by 2100 pixels, requiring the microfilm images to first be reduced using PhotoShop. Once MrSID has compressed the images, they range from 100KB to 160KB in size. The original JPEG images and MrSID images are backed up on CD. The images are compiled into batches of 50 to send to volunteers.

### **Data Entry Software**

Upon completing the extraction tutorial, the volunteer will download the data entry software and first batch of images from the project web page. The software presents the image and data entry fields on one interface. When volunteers first open the software, they are required to enter identification information about themselves and the images with which they are working. An image is opened in the software and below it are fields to enter extracted data. These fields include: name, birth date, birthplace, destination to, residence, occupation and religion. A comments field is included at the end for any additional information. Each new individual is entered on a different line and tied to the principal entry through a relationship field. Once an image has been extracted, it can be closed and a new image opened without resetting the data entry fields. The data is saved as a text file and sent back to the Immigrant Ancestors server using FTP.

### **Accuracy Checks**

An extraction team leader performs accuracy checks on the returned data. The leader reviews the microfilm images and extraction data. If the data passes inspection it is submitted for entry into the database. A different team leader performs a second accuracy check on every third data set.

### **Database**

The Immigrant Ancestors Database is currently under construction. The database will be searchable through the project web page. A search will require a name and a birth year. With these items, a researcher can view any other data extracted on that individual. Researchers desiring a copy of the microfilm pages naming their ancestor must contact the archive directly.