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Linda A. Fisher

Physician and Medical Historian, Washington D.C.

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Getting Started: An Editor's Search for One Diarist's Place in History

ADE Annual Meeting, Chicago, 15 November 2003

Linda A. Fisher

My introduction to documentary editing differs from that of other scholarly editors. They are scholars who became editors; I am an editor who found a project in medical history. With an M.D. degree, I had written many articles on health issues and had edited a medical society journal.

In 1999, I began researching the manuscript of Joseph Mersman (1824–1892), an obscure man who was a whiskey rectifier.¹ From 1847 to 1864, Mersman kept a diary and made entries in English, French, and German. His 300-page record, at the Missouri Historical Society, describes life in Cincinnati and St. Louis, including the 1849 cholera outbreak.²

After the epidemic, Mersman visited a brothel. Soon he had secondary syphilis and described his treatment: tea made from sarsaparilla and hot baths. After fifteen months, when his doctors pronounced him cured, Mersman married and then sired eight children. My article in the spring issue of *Documentary Editing* discusses this story at length.³

I thought Mersman's journal of antebellum bachelorhood would make a great single-volume edition and that I would finish the project in a year. I was hooked: What happened to the diarist? Did his wife and children get syphilis?

¹Rectifying whiskey, the process of distilling spirits to remove contaminants or increase the alcohol content, was a common nineteenth-century practice. See Gerald Carson, *The Social History of Bourbon: An Unhurried Account of Our Star-Spangled American Drink* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1963), 66, 235–37, and Leonard Monzert, *Monzert's Practical Distiller: An Exhaustive Treatise on the Art of Distilling and Rectifying Spirituous Liquors and Alcohol* (Bradley, Illinois: Lindsay Publications, Inc., 1987), 51–52, 64–68.

²The Diary of Joseph J. Mersman, 1847–1864, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis, Missouri.

³Linda A. Fisher, "A Patient's Point of View: Nineteenth-Century Syphilis Treatment," *Documentary Editing*, 25:1 (Spring 2003) 15–32.



Agnes Lake, Mersman's sister, shown here circa 1865, was the first woman in America to own a tent show and is mentioned often in the diary. She married Wild Bill Hickok in 1876.

Courtesy of Kansas State Historical Society

Wild Bill Hickok, shown here circa 1872, was, therefore, Joseph Mersman's brother-in-law.

Courtesy of Denver Public Library
Z8870



So, I set out to establish the identity of Mersman, his business partner, John Clemens Nulsen (1824–1906), and their wives, sisters named Claudine (1829–90) and Albertine (1831–98) Kreuzbauer. Today, the Diary of Joseph J. Mersman Project has a staff of only me and one part-time research assistant, Veronica Fletcher, but during the past four years, I have had the help of several archivists, genealogists, and language scholars.

To put Mersman into context, I tracked three families back to Europe: the Mersmans, Nulsens and the Kreuzbauers. To locate photographs, I scrambled down the family trees for five generations and located living descendants. Then, I better appreciated the document's value.

Mersman mentions his sister, Agnes Lake (1826–1907), an equestrian and rope walker who married the circus clown known as Bill Lake (c. 1817–69). After her first husband's death, Agnes became the first woman in America to own a tent show: Madam Lake's Hippo-Olympiad and Mammoth circus. Following her retirement from the ring, Agnes Lake married Wild Bill Hickok (1837–76), the one-time marshal of Abilene, Kansas. Thus, Joseph Mersman was Wild Bill Hickok's brother-in-law, and his diary provides evidence of the origin of Hickok's wife. Many books have been written about Wild Bill, but none have been published about *Mrs.* Hickok, who used at least eight surnames during her life. Mersman's record puts Agnes into the context of her family.

This project has taken me to archives in twenty-five states and Germany. I received a one-year grant from the National Library of Medicine and attended Camp Edit in 2000. This year the project received NHPRC endorsement and limited funding from the Missouri State Historical Society.

There are three lessons that I would like to share:

1. Context profoundly affects interpretation. The more research I do, the more I understand the diary. For example, in an 1849 entry, Mersman writes that an associate "went to Peru." Otto returned in ten days, so I surmised that his destination was not South America. However, fourteen states have populated places named Peru, including Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio, where Mersman was active. Which one was it? I contacted four historical societies and received negative answers. However, months later, I found in the 1850 census that Otto had a married sister who lived in Peru, *Illinois*. Finding out more about his relatives helped me figure out Otto's activities.

Another example: Mersman mentions "Fanny" in Louis Vandermal's household, but her identity is uncertain. A servant, perhaps? The 1850 and

1860 census enumerations did not help. However, the Civil War pension records of Vandermal's son revealed a sister, Stephanie, who was called "Fanny." So, an 1890 file at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., provided information that explained a diary entry made forty years earlier in St. Louis.

2. Research requires gumshoes (or, you have to get OUT and look for evidence!) This project has used primary sources extensively: court records, parish registers, vital records, census data, credit reports, city directories, and passenger manifests. Some are posted on the Internet, but there is no substitute for examining the originals. For example, Mersman's father-in-law, who immigrated with his wife and six children to St. Louis in 1839, disappeared after 1851. Unable to find Friedrich Kreuzbauer (1793–1870) in Missouri, I searched records in Illinois, Ohio, California, and Texas without success. Correspondence with German archives yielded nothing. Then I went to Karlsruhe, Germany, and examined city directories myself. I discovered Kreuzbauer had returned to his home town: he left his family behind in the United States to live with his elderly relatives in Baden!

Another example: the 1850 census lists Mersman's birthplace as Germany, and his naturalization records indicate he came from Oldenburg, a grand duchy in the northwest part of that country today. However, *every* published source states that Agnes Lake originated in Alsace, France. Since Joseph and Agnes were just two years apart in age, I decided to establish Joseph's birth place, and look there for documentation of Agnes. Mersman's diary indicates his religion, birth date and siblings' ages. Using parish registers at the Family History Library in Salt Lake City, I searched every Catholic Church in Oldenburg until I located a family that matched. This is what I found: in Europe, the family lived on the Polschneider Farm, so, as local custom dictated, they took the farm name as their surname: Polschneider. The diarist was the son of Catherine Polschneider (1789–1833) and Friedrich Messmann (1782–1864). In 1833, when the widowed father immigrated to America with his children, they dropped Polschneider and used the father's surname, Messmann. Ohio land records from the 1830s and the federal census from 1840 listed them as the Messmann family. Later, the name evolved to Mersman, perhaps better for business. This story was revealed by church registers written in Latin and German: it is not on the Internet.⁴

⁴The records appear in the Kirchenbuch, 1650–1875, Katholische Kirche Damme (Amtsgericht Vechta), Microfilms 909911 and 909912, Family History Library, Salt Lake City, Utah.

3. Knowledge from other disciplines aids documentary editing.

Since I am new to historical research, I have benefited from joining several organizations. Not only the ADE (which introduced me to Esther Katz, Marianne Woceck, Candace Falk, and Tim Connelly, all of whom have encouraged my work and given advice), but also the Society of German-American Studies, the Circus Historical Society, four genealogy societies, and other groups. Each had members who helped me and referred me to others.

Understanding Mersman's diary required expertise far from the practice of medicine—not only foreign language skills, but knowledge of whiskey production, cigar making, theater arts, and many other fields. To start, I recruited a German language expert who teaches at Northern Virginia Community College. I found him by calling the school and inquiring if they had any native Germans on the faculty. Initially, Reinhard Hennig met with me twice a week. He translated passages in the diary and helped me plow through documents and publications that I uncovered in my research.

Hennig encouraged me to contact others. For example, I found the wonderful scholarship of Jürgen Schlumbohm in a book with a title that translates as *Lives, Families, and Farms*,⁵ and Hennig helped me read it. I wrote to the author, telling him how helpful I found his publication, and when I subsequently visited the Max Planck Institute in Göttingen, Schlumbohm met with me. He referred me to his former student who now does archival research, Sylvia Möhle. She later retrieved documents for me from Berlin. So you see, Hennig led to Schlumbohm, who led to Möhle, who helped me get answers hidden deep in Germany—answers that I could not have found on my own.

In preparing comments about this paper, Beverly Palmer, the moderator of the session, asked, how had I learned to be persistent in tracking down information? Although some people consider medical education merely trade school, it does prepare one for a lifetime of self-directed learning. My experience at Harvard Medical School encouraged me to have an inquiring mind, open to new ideas. After all, AIDS, SARS, and many other diseases were unknown when I received my medical degree. I had a solid liberal arts education, high school instruction in Latin, college-level German—all of which have helped me with this project. As you know, historical research

⁵Jürgen Schlumbohm, *Lebensläufe, Familien, Höfe: Die Bauern und Heuerleute des Osnabrückischen Kirchspiels Belm in proto-industrieller Zeit, 1650–1860* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994).

does not follow a formula. You have to go—literally and figuratively—where the clues lead. Reading Nancy Drew mystery stories in childhood was good preparation for this mid-life challenge, and now I also read many journals that deal with subjects far from medicine.

Applying for an NHPRC grant had unexpected benefits. Although I did not receive Commission funds in 2003, the critical review of my application provided suggestions and led to secondary literature that augmented my own research. One comment was that the staff for the Mersman Diary Project—just me at that time—was “ridiculously small.” That prompted me to seek help at George Mason University. Jane Censer (formerly with the Papers of Frederick Olmsted) agreed to advise me and aided the recruitment of a graduate student assistant for my project.

By now you may ask, what will I do after I finish the annotated version of Joseph Mersman’s diary? I think I will complete Agnes Lake’s biography: by now, I have developed skills as a researcher, and know where and how to look for information!



Work on the Mersman diary will likely lead to a biography of Agnes Lake. Her daughter, Emma Lake, was billed as “America’s Side-Saddle Queen” by P. T. Barnum in 1879–81.

Courtesy of Somers Historical Society and Library