

Christian Todenhagen, Chico, CA/USA

Names as a Potential Source for Conflict

A Case in Point from the USA: How Germantown, Glenn County, California, became Artois

Abstract: Toward the end of World War I the name of the post office station "Germantown" at Germantown, Glenn County, California, was changed to "Artois" which eventually resulted in the name change of the village itself to Artois. This paper compares current present-day accounts of the incidents leading to the post office name change with the actual course of events as they could be reconstructed from contemporary 1918 newspaper reports. It continues to trace the change as it shifted to the name of the township itself and concludes with a second look at the present-day accounts of the past historical events.

Zusammenfassung: Gegen Ende des Ersten Weltkrieges wurde in Germantown, Glenn County, Kalifornien, die Poststation „Germantown“ in „Artois“ umbenannt, welches dann zu der Namensänderung des Dorfes selbst führte. Die folgende Untersuchung vergleicht Berichte über die Umbenennung des Postamtes, wie sie heute in Glenn County gängig sind, mit Berichterstattungen damaliger Regionalzeitungen. Die Erörterungen verfolgen weiter, wie der Namenswechsel auf die Gemeinde Germantown übergriff, und kehren abschließend zu den gegenwärtigen historischen Berichten zurück.

Germantown, now called Artois, pronounced ARtois, was a small, unincorporated farming community in very rural Glenn County, Northern California, about 100 miles from Sacramento. It had its own post office and railroad station, but was too small to support its own newspaper. Instead it depended on surrounding localities like Orland, Willows, Colusa and Chico for its news.

Today, when one walks along Main Street with its beautifully cared for front yards and admires the small Lutheran church with its stained glassed windows, one is reminded of the small villages of Schleswig-Holstein, Germany. But this must be a trick of the imagination played on someone who knows that the first inhabitants arrived here after quite an arduous voyage directly from this northern German province. The citizens of Germantown did not come exclusively, though, from the Old Country. For example, E. J. Golden, the postmaster of Germantown in 1918, came

from Michigan. Still, the German Americans were sufficient in number in the 1870s to call their new villages Rixville after Karl (Charles) Rix and Germantown. The two were then merged into one community Germantown. The post office service and the railroad company as they opened up for business named their stations after the town. Germantown as a name for a town is, by the way, fairly common in the United States even after two World Wars. After all, a significant battle was fought at Germantown, Pennsylvania during the American Revolutionary War.

The summers in Glenn County are dry and hot so that the farming community depends heavily on irrigation. Today, the sight of irrigation ditches and canals, electric and diesel pumps is almost a defining feature of the landscape. It is hard to imagine that such a peaceful, relatively isolated community should be involved in the sound and fury of the world stage. But it was. The details of the name change of the local post office from Germantown to Artois are widely known. The story is quite easily accessible through a large number of publications but especially through the internet encyclopedia Wikipedia:

The name stems from the ancient province in France where the method of boring artesian wells was first adopted. Artois was formerly called Germantown,... and petitions to change the Germantown post office name were successful with Artois adopted on May 21, 1918. Local belief is that a WWI troop train stopped to water at Germantown and a riot ensued when the troops took offense at the name. The town was then re-named after the battles of Artois. (*Wikipedia*, April 2009)

Because this story is so widely accepted, it must seem curious to take a new look at the underlying historical events. But some questions simply have to be asked again. One in particular concerns the time factor. When was this story first told and when were the details assembled into a coherent text? G. W. F. Hegel held up to the historian the example of the Roman goddess of wisdom, Minerva, and famously said: "The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only at the falling of dusk." He meant to say that a historian, a linguistic historian, at that, can look at a past period or a series of past events only at their conclusion. Only when they have played themselves out, only in retrospect, will they reveal their secrets and their meaning. Unfinished business and close personal involvement will limit, distort and, indeed, foreclose many enquiries.

Hegel's metaphor itself with its verbal picture of "the falling of dusk" seems to suggest that it is at least relatively easy to mark the end of an

event. But it is not. This is true in no small measure because there is on the human level not just the time of clocks and calendars but also the time of hearts and minds. Using this reasoning the following study is based on two assumptions:

1. The present popular accounts of the events surrounding the name change of the post office from Germantown to Artois were formulated at their inception too close to the incidents themselves in terms of the personal experience of the storyteller and storytellers. This point will be taken up again at the conclusion of this essay using C. G. Jung's "retrospective fantasy".
2. The second assumption is that now, 90 years after the historical events, it is possible to synchronize logical and personal times and look back at them from Hegel's vantage point. This assumption will form the main body of this investigation.

The accounts of the events that occurred in late spring of 1918 as given by the residents of Glenn County can be found both in written and in oral form. In 1965 the "Colusi County Historical Society" offered this account in a special issue on "Rixville – Germantown – Artois":

During World War I the name became rather unpopular, particularly with the troops passing through. On one occasion when a train was stopped in Germantown, the soldiers swarmed off the train and to the accompaniment of loud yells tore down the sign from the station. Following this incident William Shaw, a rancher in the area, took matters in hand. On his ranch was an artesian well which may have suggested to him the name of Artois, after in ancient province in France where the method of boring artesian wells was first adopted.

Indeed the word artesian is derived from the name Artois. Mr. Shaw circulated a petition to change the name of the post office from Germantown to Artois. According to some of the German residents he was careful to avoid those he felt did not favor the change but obtained signatures from others, even from transients who were just passing through. On May 22, 1918 the post office department accepted the new name Artois. (*Wagon Wheels* XV,1 [1965], 24, paraphrased in *Wagon Wheels* XXXXIII,1 [1993], 26)

Representative of the oral narratives as they might be recounted in Artois is the following (oral communication, April 2009):

A train stopped at Germantown to resupply with water and fuel when the soldiers saw the sign "Germantown" across the street. They left the train, charged through the

streets, roughed up the town and tore down the sign. Thereupon the city fathers got together and decided to do something about it and the best way was to change the name of the town.

Artois: There are two versions. One is because the fighting took place in France and in Artois, they thought the name was appropriate. The other explanation is that there were quite a number of artesian wells in Germantown and since they were first exploited in Artois, the name "Artois" was chosen, there already being an "Artesia" and they did not know the French pronunciation of "Artois".

A side by side comparison of these two present-day accounts immediately generates the impression that the stories are virtually identical, their differences just adding color, charm and authenticity to them: The American storytellers observe a common cultural grammar with which their American story recipients are quite familiar. They recognize in them their own American identity. The stories express their American values and ideals which they had made their own as they learnt their language and lived their lives. They reflect the American preference for quick pragmatic decisions, the traditional values of loyalty and patriotism and democratic action, and the American admiration for spontaneity and youth. Together with the ultimate success of the action taken these propositions ensure that this historical experience will endure as an inspirational model for present-day and future American citizens. These stories are and will continue to be cherished instances of American folklore.

The above accounts of the incidents at the Germantown railroad station and its consequences are present-day accounts. How did contemporary ones chronicle them? Here are two representative records:

Germantown News

Petition Is Being Largely Signed For Adoption Of New Name For Village

Over a half hundred names have been signed to a petition being circulated in Germantown to have the name of the post office changed. The total number of signatures yesterday, after only one day's presentation of the paper, was 56, and the list is expected to grow till it contains practically all the patrons of the post office. So far only two have refused to sign.

The S. P. [i. e. Southern Pacific Railroad] authorities have had the matter under consideration for some years, and it is understood that as soon as the post office name is changed the railroad will quickly follow suit.

...

Artois is the name receiving the most generous support, and it is an appropriate one, in consideration of the artesian wells in the neighborhood of the place, artesian wells having derived their name from Artois, the district in which flowing wells first were discovered. Following Artois the names of Grainville and Walker Creek were favored. There are already a Grainville and a Graniteville in California and there would be danger of confusion which it is believed will lead the Post Office Department to turn this name down. The name of Walker Creek is open to the same objections. There is a Walker, and a Walnut Creek either of which might be confused with Walker Creek. The only name among the post offices of California that might be confused with Artois is Artesia in Los Angeles County, and there is not believed to be much danger of trouble between these two names.

The sentiment in Germantown in favor of the change seems to be almost unanimous. It is stated that there is not a single American, whether native or foreign born, who is not enthusiastic over the proposition. (*Orland Unit*, May 3, 1918)

Germantown Anxious To Change Its Name

Germantown, May 3. – A petition to change the name of Germantown is being circulated among the patrons of the post office.

With only twenty-four hours' work the signatures of more than one-half the patrons of the post office have been signed to the petition.

The name most favored as a substitute is Artois.

...

The agitation to change the name was hastened by the action of a trainload of draftees who passed through the village the first of the week, when only the stern vigilance of the railroad police kept them from tearing the sign from the station building. (*Chico Record*, May 4, 1918)

(This report seems to have appeared in this wording also in the *Willows Journal*: It is reprinted in the *Colusa Sun*, May 7, 1918, except for the headline "Germantown Asks Another Sobriquet" and the addition of "reports the Willows Journal" at the end of the first sentence. – The 1918 tranche of the Willows paper is incompletely preserved.)

The two newspaper articles appeared one or two days respectively after the collection of signatures first started. Neither of them mentions military personnel swarming off the train, their rampaging through the streets of Germantown, roughing it up, etc. In neither of them is the station sign torn down. The very term is not mentioned at all in the first article and in the second one it features in a non-event perhaps existing only in the

mind of the reporter and perhaps primarily so to perform the rhetorical function of tying the concluding paragraph to the initial one to complete the circle of the cliché “out with the old, in with the new”.

Both newspapers strongly stress the democratic aspect of the occasion: The canvassing of signatures and the positive response to it (and “the action of a trainload of draftees”). There is no mention, however, of elected officials such as “city fathers” who were mentioned in the oral report. Indeed, there could not have been any in Germantown, it being an unincorporated community. It is true that the supervisors of Glenn County could have taken the matter of name change into their hands in the manner of this 2009 article:¹

The Sacramento Bee

LA County urges name-change for Negrohead Mountain

The Associated Press

Published Tuesday, Feb. 24, 2009

LOS ANGELES – County leaders approved a resolution asking a federal agency to rename 2,031-foot Negrohead Mountain near Malibu with the name of black pioneer Jon Ballard, who settled there in the 19th century.

The peak would be known as Ballard Mountain if the U.S. Geological Survey’s Board on Geographic Names grants the request by the Los Angeles Board of Supervisors.

...

... settlers are believed to have been thinking of Ballard when they named Negrohead Mountain, which is the tallest peak in the area. The name originally contained a racial slur that even was found on early government topographic maps but it was changed to “negro” in the 1960s.

...

Information posted on the USGS Web site states that name changes are not encouraged, but on its recognized classes of name changes are “those made to eliminate particular name problems as in cases involving derogatory names ...”

...

After a proposal is received, all interested parties will be asked to comment, the site says. It notes the process takes about six months.

...

1 <http://www.sacbee.com/state.wire/v-print/story/1649525.html>, April 2009.

The Glenn County Board of Supervisors, however, did not discuss the issue of Germantown and neither did the Glenn County Grand Jury (one of whose function is “to protect minority opinion or unpopular causes from personal persecution and prosecution.”²).

The phrase “was hastened by” in “The agitation to change the name was hastened by the action ...” in the second newspaper article suggests that the petition drive was preceded by a period of deliberation. This is confirmed by the first one when it discussed the rejection of a number of alternative proposals. The needs of the Post Office Department were, however, not just considered. Rather the Department must have been directly involved in the discussions. Otherwise it would have been impossible for it to approve the new name as immediately as it did. On May 10, 1918 the *Orland Unit* reported:

Over 100 signatures were secured to the petition to change the name of Germantown post office to Artois, and the petition has been forwarded to the Post Office Department in Washington. If the petition is acted upon favorably the matter of changing the name of the railroad station to correspond will be taken up at once with the S. P. Company, and an early action is expected.

On May 21, 1918 the name of the post office was officially changed to “Artois” according to the records of “The Appointments of Postmasters” kept by the National Archives. The time frame set by this date and that indicated by the forwarding of the petition to Washington is quite narrow. How narrow it is one can appreciate by considering the more recent experience of R. C. Evans who documented a period of two years to successfully conclude a post office name change (EVANS 1976). This difference in the time available for deliberating the name change to Artois suggests that the signature drive itself had turned into an artful vignette at the end of a chapter already written.

The *Orland Unit* reports the name change on July 12, 1918:

Germantown is no more. No more will mail come to the old familiar name. It is now Artois. The new designation has been officially adopted by the post office department and mail sacks now bear the label Artois. The word should be pronounced “Artoy”, the last syllable just like the word for a child’s plaything. This is the accepted English pronunciation of the word. The real meaning is said to be “the place where the people

2 http://www.glenncourt.ca.gov/court_info/grand_jury.html, April 2009.

are always generous and loyal, where the crops never fail and where they give more to the Red Cross, according to the population, than in other sections of Glenn County."

The last statement on the "real meaning" of Artois must not be understood as a process of rebranding in the modern sense. Rather the real meaning of Artois is the same as that of Germantown ennobled earlier by the same paper (*Orland Unit*, May 31, 1918):

Germantown has certainly paid its tribute and its share to the Red Cross and showed its loyalty to the country last Sunday afternoon when it gathered in the sum of \$ 1,814.62 as its Red Cross contribution. It shows it has tripled, nearly quadrupled its apportionment. The amount allotted to it was \$ 500. Let the outside look upon us with suspicion, let them sneer at the name Germantown, those who live there are as much per cent American as any other place.

The name Artois was chosen mainly because Mr. William Shaw, the rancher who circulated the petition and whose name was mentioned by the "Colusi County Historical Society", owned an artesian well which in turn suggested the French province to him. It was not just Mr. Shaw who was the proud owner of an artesian well, but Mr. French had one too:

Artesian flows were obtained from two wells in this area. The Shaw well, at Germantown, yields a flow of about 200 gallons per minute, and the French well yields a flow of about 100 gallons per minute. These wells are about 800 feet deep. The area in which artesian flows can be obtained extends about 6 miles north of Germantown and probably covers 5 to 10 square miles. (BRYAN 1923, 92)

Those were the only artesian wells near Germantown:

North of Willows the French and Shaw wells have flows of sufficient volume to be useful for irrigation. In this locality irrigation from artesian wells is possible, but the initial cost of the wells is likely to be high – from \$ 3000 to \$ 4000 each in 1913 – because the coarse material of the alluvium makes hydraulic drilling hazardous. The interest on such an investment is so large that in many places it will be cheaper to pump from shallow wells. (Ibid. 195–196)

Whatever Mr. French's contribution was to replacing an American name by a French one, it must be noted that one of the many ways to hide things appearing German consisted in giving it a French dressing. Thus - for example - RIEdel became RieDEL, WIRtel turned into WirTEL, and BOEsche into BoSCHE. The last name acquired an interesting graphic

makeover relatively recently by the addition of an accent aigu. This new form is featured in the label FREEMONT ABBEY CABERNET BOSCHÉ, Napa Valley, a wine elegant enough to be served at some White House dinner functions.

The name Germantown, on the other hand, experienced a less exalted fate in this literary commentary:

So Joanne is going to drive her aunt to the Amtrak stop at Soissons, pronounced "Soyzens" in Mesa County and known as "Hammeldorf" until World War One. (BROWN 2009, 159)

Hammeldorf expresses two associative meanings (LEECH 1974, 10 ff.): The stylistic meaning which is "German" because quite obviously the name is composed of German lexical items, and its reflected meaning, the lexical meanings of "Hammel" and "Dorf". One may render "Hammeldorf" in English here as "Clodsburg" but then, of course, its stylistic meaning is lost in translation.

The Southern Pacific Railroad held on to its station name of German-town for six months after the Post Office Department had adopted Artois. This may be the reason why the *Orland Unit*, October 18, 1918, found it newsworthy to note

The Liberty train passed through Artois on Wednesday, but did not make a stop.

and to continue further down in the same news column

Quite a crowd of Artois people went to Willows on Wednesday night to see the special Liberty train and to listen to the veterans who spoke at the armory in the evening. Some fine speeches were made by the soldiers and music given by the naval band accompanying the train. The armory was crowded to the doors by the throng who came to join in the demonstration and cheer for those who have done their share in making the world safe for democracy.

An article in the *Orland Unit* (July 25, 1918) which announced the willingness of the railroad authorities to discuss its case against the choice of Artois for the railway station ends in these words:

... If such a name can be decided upon, a petition can be sent to the post office department and the name of the office changed to something that will probably suit the patrons of the post office better than the present designation and be free from the objections raised by the railroad company.

Any dissatisfaction with the name Artois did not, however, find its expression in an appeal to the Glenn County Grand Jury.

In December of 1918, after Southern Pacific like all American railroad companies had come under the authority of the US Railroad Administration, the Federal Government stepped in and decided the issue in favor of the Post Office Department. This occasion was recorded by the *Orland Unit* (December 13, 1918) in these words:

Artois is now Artois both as to the post office and the railway station. The Southern Pacific took nine months to consider and at last acceded to the generally expressed will of the people and changed the name of the station from Germantown to Artois. The old Germantown sign was taken down from the depot this week and a new one bearing the new name was put in place. It will not be necessary to longer send freight to Germantown and mail to Artois as has been the case for several months. The contention of the railroad officials that the name could not be changed because of there being a blind siding somewhere in the southern part of the state by the name of Artois did not hold with the government when it took the matter in hand as administrator of railroad affairs.

Note that Southern Pacific took nine months to make up its mind. Does this mean it was approached on the matter two months before the petition drive?

The station changed its name to Artois on November 24, 1918, effective December 10, 1918. As an aside, the Southern Pacific circular *Officers, Agencies and Stations*, No. 47, January 1, 1918, lists Germantown as station A 157 with the telegraph call number GN. Circular 48, January 1, 1919, lists the new name Artois but keeps the same station number and the same telegraph call number GN.

The article on "Negrohead Montain" above explained which two agencies on the federal level served as gatekeepers watching over the admission of a new geographical name to replace an existing one. However, an inquiry with the U.S. Board on Geographic Names yielded the information that in all likelihood the issue of Germantown vis-à-vis Artois was not discussed by the Board. (Telephone call, April 2009) This conviction was confirmed in an e-mail (April 22, 2009) from the U.S. Geological Survey-NGTOC. This e-mail also offered the argument which convinced the Survey to proceed without further action and enter Artois in its data base of geographical names.

During USGS field operations we would usually just ask what things are called and note them in quadrangle reports. There are notes when there is a name discrepancy, and in those instances, name reports would be created and the Board on Geographic Names would be asked to render a decision on which name should be used. In this case, since the post office was labeled as Artois, we accepted that the name had been changed and noted it in the quadrangle report. Agencies were not generally required to give us reasons as to why a name was changed, especially if they represent the authoritative source, the Post Office Department in this case. There was no controversy about the name and the BGN was not asked to render a decision so there are no case records. There are no other notes about the name in our field records.

It is not historically accurate to state that the village of Germantown changed into Artois in May of 1918 for it was only the post office name which was replaced. In this sense, E. J. Golden, Postmaster of Artois, on July 24, 1918 filled in a form sent to him by the Post Office Department, Division of Topography, in the following manner:

The name of my post office is ARTOIS

If the town, village, or site of the post office be known by any other name, state that other name here:

GERMANTOWN

...

There has never been a definite date at which Germantown, the village, changed into Artois like a calendar date at which the U. S. Board on Geographic Names in an open meeting approved of an application to do so. Rather with the action of the U.S. Geological Survey Artois, the name of the post office, eventually replaced Germantown, the name of the village, on a national scale as map companies began to use the corrected name and old maps were replaced by new ones. It is for this reason that Kirk Bryan, author of the *Water-Supply Paper 495* quoted above, could refer to Germantown throughout as late as 1923. One feels reminded of F. Nietzsche's aphorism "It is the mighty ones who bestow the names", but one is reminded also of J. Lacan's modern day awareness that every authority has its limits. The influence of federal agencies did not extend into the realm of religion and worship. To this very day, when one stops in front of the little church on Main Street in Artois, one can read on its plaque: "St. Paul's Lutheran Church of Germantown". And outside of town there is still the well-tended "Germantown Cemetery".

It would be too simplistic just to note the tension that exists between this account of the events in Artois in 1918 and those given in the popular stories recounted initially. One should be rather aware that they had their own significant human function which gives Hegel's retrospection a definite psychological turn. For S. Freud retrospection evolved into an important concept because his patients would often revisit past events and in this way retroactively invest them with their own meaning. The difficulty for Freud later on was to prove that the uncovered childhood events had actually occurred. It was at this point that C. G. Jung stepped in and objected to any view which regarded remembering a plain and simple action. Rather for him retrospection became a specific creative activity, namely: "... the fact of creating a past to meet current needs, perhaps in an attempt to avoid present difficulties and to conceal them from oneself ..." (LAPLANCHE 1989, 118).

This retrospection he called "zurückfantasieren" or retrospective fantasy.

The local stories had to perform two important functions. To begin with they had to translate the events into a text that followed the American cultural-grammar rules. They had secondly the task of reuniting the community.

World War I confronted American ideals, values and beliefs with those of the enemy. The storytellers found themselves in a situation similar to that of the American Carl Bernard Dietrich Kaiser who petitioned to have his name changed to Carl Bernard Alf and who gave these reasons (*Chico Record*, May 2, 1918):

The United States is at war with the imperial government of Germany whose ruler is known as the Kaiser; which name is synonymous with autocracy which is the opposite of democracy; cruelty, which is opposed to humanity; barbarism, which has no respect for civilization; Prussian militarism, which hates christianity.

The storytellers worked on a subconscious level and their task was quite a complex one. They were committed to express their distinctly American identities and wanted their American story recipients to discover in the stories those values that were distinctly theirs.

Moreover, the stories told of the past were really designed for the present. The common ground of identical ideals, values and beliefs formed the idealistic foundation on which to build bridges within the community. The name change did not become the cataclysmic event in which neighbor

savaged neighbor. It was rather presented as a problem situation which had been handled with characteristic American pragmatism. And the people who initiated the situation came from outside the community – the draftees and the soldiers passing through.

The oral account significantly stresses the active involvement of local elected officials in the process of name change from Germantown to Artois. Sigmund Freud's case history of the Wolf Man elucidates the special role played by this mention of the involvement of elected officials which

was meant to efface the memory of an event which later seemed offensive to the ... [narrators' democratic] self-esteem, and they reached this end by putting an imaginary and desirable converse in the place of the historical truth.³

According to this phantasy public officials had not stayed passive, remained indifferent and uninvolved. Rather they had actively participated and taken on leadership roles. Thus the decision to change the post office name was reached in a democratic, peaceful and civilized manner.

The extent of the success which the storytellers achieved can perhaps be gauged by considering that even today – 90 years after the Great Name Change – its memory is very much alive in the public consciousness of the Northern Sacramento Valley. The storytellers set out to reconcile a community and beautifully succeeded so that it could continue to function as a whole.

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3 FREUD 1996, 176.

