

# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**William W. Donner.** *Serious Nonsense: Groundhog Lodges, Versammlinge, and Pennsylvania German Heritage.* University Park: Penn State University Press, 2016. Illustrations. 208 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-271-07118-3.

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My mother grew up in a home in which Pennsylvania Dutch was spoken on a daily basis and at family gatherings (and still is among older family members). However, she and her family never talked about the social gatherings known as *versammlinge* (also known as *Fersommling* in Berks County) that can be held throughout the year or the related phenomena of groundhog lodges that meet on Groundhog Day in early February. William W. Donner's book *Serious Nonsense* thus provided me with a wonderful window into an unfamiliar aspect of Pennsylvania German culture.

Donner begins by summarizing the origins of the terms "Pennsylvania Dutch" and "Pennsylvania German" and uses "Deutsch" to identify the language spoken at the *versammlinge*. He effectively explains the origins and evolution of the "Deutsch" dialect in eighteenth-century Pennsylvania. Not until the nineteenth century did authors write using *Deutsch*, with orthography influenced by English; however, scholars who had a knowledge of standard German (i.e., *Deutsch*) used that spelling, which meant a distinction between common and academic writers.

The *versammlinge* movement, according to Donner, reflects how Pennsylvania Germans who trace their ancestry to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century immigrants, in contrast to later German immigrants, continue to celebrate the distinctiveness of their culture and heritage. Participants in these gatherings attended mainstream churches (Lutheran and German Reformed), not sects like the Amish and Mennonites. The first *versammling* was held in 1933, with the establishment of

the first groundhog lodge a year later. *Versammlinge* typically included food, songs, speeches, and presentations, with only *Deutsch* used to communicate. Groundhog (*Grundsau*) lodges primarily celebrate the weather-predicting rodent and defend his reputation. All of the groundhog lodges formed the *Grossdaadi* (Grandfather) Lodge, which coordinated activities. The *Grossdaadi* Lodge has also sponsored *Deutsch*-language classes to expand knowledge of the dialect, and it created a Pennsylvania German flag. Gender bias still exists, as only men can speak at gatherings, but participation does cut across socioeconomic boundaries. Rituals mirror those of fraternal organizations like Masonic lodges; many of the founders were members of these groups. Above all else, *versammlinge* only use *Deutsch* in their activities. Attendees pay a fine if they speak English.

Donner's fascination with the theatricality at *versammlinge* is a highlight of the book. Because groundhog lodges only have male members, men play all roles in the plays. This does lead to a bit of slapstick, as upstanding members of the lodge and community play roles quite different from their traditional persona. Skits often refer to current events; for example, the groundhog becomes a presidential candidate during election years. Program covers also reflect current events, as the one for the 1999 meeting spoofs President Bill Clinton's relationship with Monica Lewinsky.

*Versammlinge* also included speeches that focused on ordinary people. Reverend Clarence Rahn was a popular speaker until his death, using his experience growing up on a farm to connect with lodge members. The use

of Deitsch is important, as the dialect is more expressive than English; at the same time, it does not always easily translate to English. The messages typically emphasized Pennsylvania German heritage, particularly the contributions of ordinary people and traditional values.

Donner concludes by reviewing commemoration and appreciation of Pennsylvania German heritage and the Deitsch language. Such organizations as the Pennsylvania German Society, dialect literature, and heritage events contributed to a revival in Pennsylvania German culture after World War I. The versammlinge, Donner contends, developed from this renewed interest, and today they are vital in maintaining the Deitsch language. Unlike most cultural festivals that occasionally involve academics in their preparation, versammlinge are different in that they celebrate the language in addition to the heritage. He concludes that because the versamm-

linge rely on the Deitsch language, one that is less common among anyone born after 1940, he anticipates their demise within the next century. The end of the versammlinge, however, will not lead to the end of Pennsylvania German cultural heritage events.

Donner has provided an informative exploration of Pennsylvania German culture in *Serious Nonsense*. His training as an anthropologist is evident in his exploration of groundhog lodges and versammlinge, as he analyzes them from a cultural perspective and compares the activities to those he observed while researching in the Solomon Islands. The book is well illustrated with copies of program covers, photographs of meetings and groundhogs, and music and lyrics to the âSchnitzelbankâ song. Anyone who has Pennsylvania German heritageâor even those who do notâwill enjoy *Serious Nonsense*.

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