

THE NAME

Fastnacht means Shrove Tuesday in German. According to a Swiss authority, the family name Fassnacht denotes, "One born on Shrove Tuesday." The association of doughnuts or Fastnacktkuchen with the surname came about because of the part these delicacies have played since antiquity in the activities preceding Lent. Among the Pennsylvania Germans in particular, the word Fastnacht has become synonymous with the deep-fried morsels.

In many parts of the Christian world, doughnuts or pancakes were and still are made on Shrove Tuesday. The custom originated as a matter of thrift. Since no meat or lard was permitted to be eaten during Lent, an attempt was made to use up all the household fat the day before the fast began.

During his visit many years ago, a German salesman whose name I have since forgotten recited from memory, in dialect, the following ditty:

Heinde isch die Fassenacht
Wenn mei Muhda Kuchla bacht
Wenn sie aber keine bacht
Dann pfeif e' auf die Fassenacht

Which loosely translates to:

This is Tuesday of Shrovetide
When my mother bakes doughnuts
If, however, she bakes none
Then Shrove Tuesday I will shun

In many ethnic German areas of the globe, Fastnacht is the last day of Fasching, or carnival, the period during which everybody feeling so inclined lends more or less free reign to indulgence, participating in masquerades and hilarious celebration without parallel in America except for the Mardi Gras in New Orleans. One of the best known Fastnachts takes place in Basel, Switzerland, where masquerade and music clubs spend twelve months preparing for their three-day event, in much the same way the Mummers of Philadelphia prepare for their annual New Years Day extravaganza. On Weiberfastnacht in Germany, women have the right to chase men and, according to a newspaper item, a man is often not safe on the streets alone. No wonder the faces of Teutonic Europeans light up when they hear our name. Some sources trace these activities to pre-Christian times when pagan tribes of northern Europe celebrated the passing of winter in boisterous rites of eating, drinking, and noise making.

It is interesting to note the similarity between the first syllable of the family name and the German word for pheasant, *Fasan*. This phonetic coincidence probably

influenced the selection of pheasants for two of the three different Fasnacht coats-of-arms recorded in the Seibmacher Wappenbuch. The third shield features a vulture. Since we do not know which of these armorial bearings, if any, was awarded our direct ancestor, according to heraldic custom, it would be improper to use any of them as being representative of our lineage.

Just when the name was adopted or assigned is not known. The oldest references found date back to the period from 1268 to 1329 and appear in the *Mittel Hoch Deutsches Namen Buch*, pages 446 and 635.

Thirteen persons of various localities are listed with no less than six variations in spelling as follows: Vasnacht, Vasenacht, Vasnachtes, Vasinat, Vasnacht, and Vastnacht. It is obvious that even from the earliest times there was no agreement on the spelling. Of interest in these old listings is the use of the letter V in place of F. Even today, the V at the beginning of a word in German is pronounced the same as an F. There was little concern originally for the permanency of a surname. This curiosity is born out by an entry in the same volume on the inconsistency of family names. The example is given of a father whose name was Berchtoldus Vasnacht while his son was known as Nocolaus Lirker. Seemingly of New World origin are spellings which substitute o's for a's or which add a *u* resulting in Fosnocht, Fausnacht, Faustnacht, etc.

Of the three men migrating to these shores in 1749 and 1750, only one, Johann Conrath, signed his own name to the oath of allegiance, and he clearly spelled it *Fassenacht* in the old Gothic script. The names of the other two men were entered behind their marks by clerks and, therefore, do not necessarily reflect the spelling in use at the time in the old country. Confirming the above spelling, in the *Fasnacht Family Tree* compiled by E. Spencer Fasnacht in 1920, reference is made to a baptismal certificate of a son born, named John (the Johannes of Generation III in this booklet) in 1775 to John and Eva Fassenacht. The parents, John and Eva, are our direct ancestors and, as explained later, were probably the son and daughter-in-law of Johann Conrath mentioned in the paragraph above.

By the third generation, the e had been dropped and on Samuel's tombstone in Mellinger's Lutheran Churchyard at Schoeneck, Pa., the name appears *Fasnacht*. To add to the confusion, copies of Samuel's family record, inscribed on a Currier and Ives form of the period, spell the name *Fasnacht*. It would appear, therefore, that the second s was not dropped from the name before the fourth generation. Census and tax records of the 18th century show no consistency in spelling, ranging from Fasnaught to Fasnackt. Much of this variation can again be attributed to clerical error. Without exception, all contemporary Germans we have met spell the family name *Fasnacht*.