

House Names in Goldach

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HOSTELRIES, BREWERIES, RESTAURANTS and other public places of business have preserved through the centuries the custom of using a name which attracts and identifies. The old custom of identifying private residences by a name other than that of the owner has well-nigh disappeared. Castles, manors, palaces and other abodes of the so-called aristocracy, to be sure, are still known by names, but otherwise house names prevail only in some outlying districts, or are sporadically revived in rural developments and community settlements. City houses bear prosaic street numbers; the post office would seriously object if a citizen would give his address as that of the "House of the Golden Bear" instead of 4343 Ninth Avenue.

In certain European countries house names were used until way into the nineteenth century and in some places they have survived to the present day. The Swiss poet Gottfried Keller gives an interesting account of them in his charming story *Kleider machen Leute*, written just about a century ago.

A poor tailor journeyman came into the town of Goldach. His arrival in an aristocratic coach (the good natured driver had given him a ride in the unoccupied vehicle), his sartorial outfit, and his name, Strapinski, led the good people of Goldach to take him for a Polish count. The ultra-democratic Swiss of a century ago fell just as easily for an alleged Polish count as the ultra democratic Americans of today fall for a faked French marquis. After he had adjusted himself to the situation the "count" took a walk through the town:

He observed the town in an entirely different mood than if he had come there to find employment. The town consisted largely of fine, solidly built houses, each bearing a hewn or painted symbol and a name. In these names century old customs and habits were clearly recognizable. The medieval ages were reflected in the oldest residences, or in the buildings that had been erected in their places, and they kept the old names from the times when fairy tales were real and when burgomasters were not only chief magistrates of a town but the captains of the town's militia on the battle field.

There were houses of the Sword, of the Iron Helmet, of the Armor, of the Cross Bow, of the Blue Shield, of the Swiss Sword, of the Knight, of the Flint, of the Turk, of the Sea Serpent, of the Golden Dragon, of the Linden Tree, of the Pilgrim's Staff, of the Mermaid, of the Bird of Paradise, of the Unicorn, and the like.

The periods of enlightenment and philanthropy could clearly be seen in the moralizing conceptions which shone in beautiful gilded letters above doors of the houses of Harmony, of Faithfulness, of Old Independence, of New Independence, of Civic Virtue A, of Civic Virtue B, of Confidence, of Love, of Hope, of Farewell I and II, of Cheerfulness, of Inner Righteousness, of Outer Righteousness, of the Common Weal (a clean little house in which there was a canary cage entirely overgrown with nasturtiums, behind which there sat a friendly old woman with a white jelly-bag cap and reeled yarn), of the Constitution (below lived a cooper, who diligently and noisily bound little buckets and barrels, hammering uninterruptedly); one house was gruesomely called Death—a faded skeleton was stretched between the windows, extending from the roof to the ground; this was the residence of the justice of peace. In the House of Patience dwelt the debt collector, a starved, miserable wretch, for in this town people never owed anything to anybody.

In the newest houses, finally, the poesy of manufacturers, bankers, promoters, and their imitators expressed itself in euphonious names: Rosental, Morgental, Sonnenberg, Veilchenburg, Jugendgarten, Freudenberg, of the Camelia, Henriettental, Wilhelminenburg, and so forth. The generic name attached to a woman's name always told the observer that the wife had brought a handsome dowry into the household.

At every street corner there stood an old tower with an elaborate clock, gay roof, and nicely gilded weather vane. These towers were carefully maintained, for the Goldachers enjoyed their past as well as their present and had reason to do so. The splendid little town was surrounded by the old city wall which, though it no longer fulfilled its purpose, was nevertheless kept as an ornament. It was entirely overgrown by thick old ivy and thus enclosed the city with an evergreen circle.

All this made a marvellous impression upon Strapinski; he believed himself in another world. When he read the names on the houses, the like he had never seen before, he believed that they

reflected the particular secret and way of life of each household, and that behind each door everything bore out the meaning of the inscription. He thought that he had arrived in a sort of a moralizing utopia and was inclined to believe that the strange welcome which he had found was quite in harmony with all this. For instance, the name of the Inn of the Scales, in which he had been accorded such a surprising reception, signified that there uneven fortunes are placed on the scales and balanced; and thus it could happen that a poor tailor journeyman could become a respected count.



The first imposition of Names was grounded upon so many occasions, as were hard to be specified, but the most common in most ancient times among all nations, as well as the Hebrews, was upon future good hope conceived by parents of their children, in which you might see their first and principal wishes toward them.

—William Camden, 1605



To review the sources of a people's nomenclature is to review that people's history.

—Charles Wareing Bardsley



In the phalanx of hy-
phenated names!
(Have you ever observed
That the name of Smith
Is the oftenest hy-
Phenated with?)

—Ogden Nash