

Chapter 1:
German Roots

1300 to 1893

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The Earliest Besemers

In Germany today, *Besemer* is a common family name.¹ In the industrial world, it brings to mind the *Bessemer Process* for the mass production of steel from molten pig iron. Our family has no known connection to the English engineer, Sir Henry Bessemer, who invented the process in 1855. Our Besemer roots followed a different and much older path.

The very earliest written evidence of Besemers who were probably the ancestors of our current family are found in the ancient Swabian town of Esslingen am Neckar, just a few kilometers southeast of present day Stuttgart. Local records reveal that Besemers resided there in the 13th century.² Subsequent generations of Besemers were born there as well as in neighboring towns such as Berkheim, Denkendorf, and Kirchheim unter Teck. It seems that from the 1200s into the mid-1800s, no Besemer moved more than a few kilometers from his or her birthplace.

The same can almost certainly be said of the Schehrer's from just a few kilometers east of the Besemers. We can trace Marta Schehrer's ancestry well back into the 1700s, and nearly all of the family were born in either Schlierbach or Faurndau, two towns within walking distance of each other, located about 5 kilometers west of the modern industrial city of Göppingen.³

It is clear that until the 19th century these people rarely moved. They had centuries to develop and refine a very localized culture, much of which accompanied the later immigrants to America. All of the people in these little towns where our ancestors (as well as contemporary relatives) resided considered themselves fortunate to be *Swabians*.

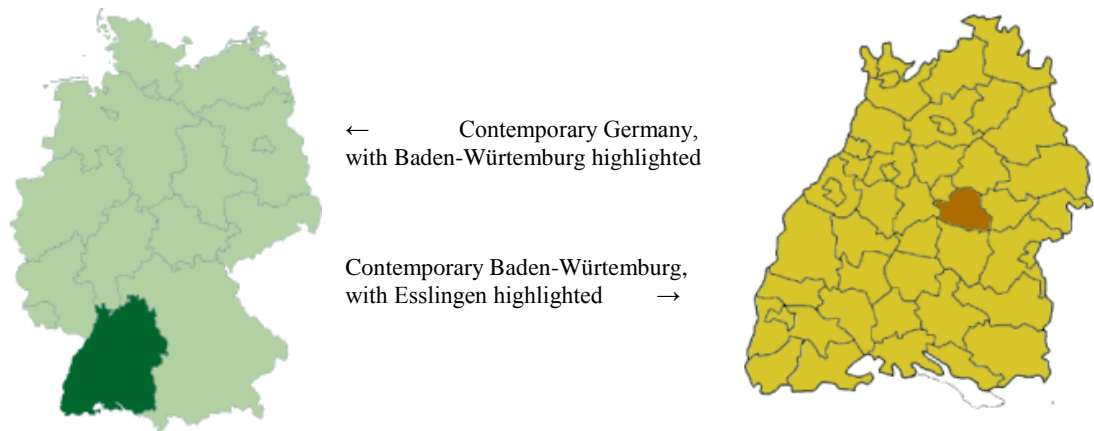
Before they each left their homeland, Wilhelm Friedrich Besemer and Marta Schehrer lived within a few kilometers of each other. However, they met only after they migrated to America about a year apart. They spoke a distinctive dialect of old Alemmanic German still called *Swabish*. The only contemporary region bearing the label *Swabia* is an administrative district of southwestern Bavaria. However, the historic Swabian culture is centered in the Württemberg part of the modern state of

¹ Spelled variously: *Besemer*, *Bessemer*, *Bezemer*, *Bezemair*, etc.

² We are indebted to Ton Bezemer, of the Netherlands, for drawing our attention to these records. His family migrated from Esslingen to Northwestern Europe's lowlands in the 14th century. He has connected his current family back to 13th century Esslingen sources.

³ As we have considerably less material on Marta's ancestry, most of her story is told in Chapter 4.

Baden-Württemberg. Our family for centuries resided there, in the very heart of Swabian culture.



The ancient kingdom of Swabia dates back to around 500 A.D., when it became a duchy within the Frankish Empire. Its status and extent waxed and waned for centuries, reaching its peak as the Swabian League in 1519. The conflicts and conquests that followed the Protestant Reformation, begun with Luther's posting of the *95 Theses* in 1517, very much affected the composition of Swabia. Thus, it is not accidental that Catholic Bavaria contains a district labeled *Swabia*, whereas the historically Protestant regions to the west are more committed than their Bavarian neighbors to their Swabian culture, even though they have no official status as such.

Most informed observers would probably agree that the Swabs are more distinctive than nearly any other cultural segment of modern Germany.⁴ They are known for their sense of humor, which is often self-deprecating. The stereotype sees them as hard working yet lighthearted, thrifty yet generous, somewhat risqué yet often pious. They are the butt of jokes and jibes of various sorts, even though the rest of the country, perhaps reluctantly, acknowledges that the region of the Swabs is also the country's richest and most productive.

Germans from elsewhere and those who learned the standard language in the classroom are initially baffled when attempting to converse with a *Swab* (which the Swab himself pronounces "Shwahb"). This is not the place for an extended discussion of dialectal peculiarities;⁵ however, a sample phrase will illustrate the point. When a speaker of standard German requests a glass of wine, it would be said as "Ein Glas Wein, bitte" ("A glass of wine, please"). The Swab would request: "Oy Glaysli Woy, bittie" Swabians today delight in making fun of their own dialect in the presence of uncomprehending listeners. Some years ago, the equivalent of the Chamber of Commerce in Baden-Württemberg put out promotional material, touting

⁴ With the possible exception of the tiny population of *Sorben*, a Slavic people located in the formerly East German area around Chemnitz. The Sorben speak a dialect more akin to Polish than to Standard German.

⁵ See en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Swabian_German

their innovative economy with the slogan: *Wir können alles, Ausser Hochdeutsch* (“We can do everything – except speak High German.” Many a Swabish home today will proudly display a plaque or a plate on the wall with the favorite humorous poem of the land:

O Schwabenland!

Kennst Du das Land wo jeder lacht
wo man aus weizen Spätzle macht,
wo jeder zweite Fritze heißt
wo man noch über Balken scheidt,
wo jede Bank ein Bänkle ist
und jeder Zug ein Zügle
wo man den Zweibelkuchen frist
und Moscht saust aus dem Krüggle
wo "doube Sau," leck mich am Arsch
in keinem Satz darf fehlen,
wo sich die Menschen pausenlos
mit ihrer Arbeit quälen,
wo jeder auf sein Häusle spart
hat er auch nichte zu kauen
und wenn er 40, 50 ist,
dann fängt er an zu bauen!
Doch wenn er endlich fertig ist,
Schnappt ihm das Arshloch zu!
O Schwabenland, gelobtes Land,
wie wunderbar bist Du.

Oh Swabia

*Y'know that place where everyone laughs?
Where one makes little noodles from wheat?
Where every other guy's called "Freddie"?
Where folks still shit over a railing?
Where every "bank" is called a "bank-lie"?
And every "train" a "train-lee"?
Where one can gobble down onion pie?
And swill hard cider from a "stein-lie"?
Where "stupid sow" or "kiss my ass"
Fits any situation?
Where folks just will not quit their toil
Until the job is done.
Where everyone saves for a "house-lie",
Even if he hasn't a bite to eat?
And when a guy is 40 or 50
He starts to build!
And when he finally comes to his end
He "snaps his asshole shut"!
Oh Swabia, beloved land,
How wonderful you are!*

[Translated by Rosemarie B. & Richard I. Hofferbert]

The Earliest Besemer Migrants to America

Johann Ludwig Besemer and his wife Anna Strauss were born in Wiflingshausen, adjacent to Esslingen, about 1785. We know nothing else about them, except that they had a son and a daughter.⁶ The son, Christian Johannes Besemer, was our direct ancestor, and we know quite a bit about him.

Christian Johannes was born in 1799. The American republic and the French Revolution were ten years old. After years of severe recession following their own revolution, the Americans were well on the way to regaining their status as the economically most well off folks on earth. In France, the after-effects of the Reign of Terror were still being widely felt.

What we think of today as “Germany” could not until much later be considered an integrated political system. Rather, it was a rump of the Holy Roman Empire, carved up a century and a half earlier by the Congress of Westphalia, the gathering of petty and grander nobles who brought to a close the bloody Thirty Years War. The result was an assortment of religiously more or less homogeneous little kingdoms, dukedoms, and principalities that generally viewed each other with suspicion and often came to blows over issues that now seem unworthy as sources of violent conflict. With the ruling that “the religion of the prince shall be the religion of the people,” the 1648 Congress of Westphalia had imposed a sort of solution on Catholic – Protestant rivalries. Even so, those conflicts were never far below the surface.

Conflicts between religions and regions associated with them were augmented by a rigorous class system, ill-suited to the coming industrial and democratic revolutions. German serfdom took many forms, but those who worked the land seldom owned the land they worked. This dependency of the peasants was reinforced by a rigid social hierarchy, requiring overt signs of deference by the lesser to the higher German. Thus, the peasant would bow or lower his or her head when passing a person of higher status. The cap would be appropriately doffed. Given names were used by those above when addressing those below, but certainly not vice versa.

Great-Great Grandfather Christian Johannes worked as a vintner, although we cannot know if he owned his vineyards and equipment. As a craftsman, even if he did not own the land, he would have been due a certain respect. Let us assume that he did indeed own his land. The growth of a large family would still mean that most of the children could not be accommodated with the father’s occupation. Württemberg, as with most of the Germanic states, did not follow primogeniture, whereby the eldest son inherited the estate. Rather, all male offspring were entitled

⁶ The daughter, Christine Magdalena Besemer was born in 1806 and in 1836 married Johann Friedrich Betz in the town of Oberesslingen. They then had five children in seven years. (See Appendix I.)

to equal shares. This guaranteed the spread of ever smaller agricultural holdings, except for those that were in the hands of some feudal overlord.

In the seven years they were married Christian Johannes and his first wife, Anna Maria Margold, whom he wed in 1832, produced seven children, but at least four died in infancy – all named *Johann* or *Johannes*. Anna Maria herself died in 1841, at the young age of 33. Their children were:

Johann (1832, died in infancy)
Georg Friedrich (1832 – 1909)
Johann Christian (1835, died in infancy)
Anna Maria (1837, died after 1854)
Johann Ludwig (1837, died in infancy)
Johannes (1839, died in infancy)
Carl Friedrich (1840, died ?)

One could imagine a gothic novel about such a family, titled perhaps *The Curse of Johann*. A superstitious person might assume that the family would have considered another name, rather than have four Johanns (including one *Johannes*) die in infancy. The mother of this ill-starred family, Anna Maria Margold Besemer, herself died at 33, one wonders if it were perhaps due to a broken heart. While infant deaths were common in 19th century Europe, to have lost four out of seven was uncommonly tragic, even in those hard-pressed times.

Apparently not a man to give up easily, however, her widower wasted little time after Anna's March, 1841 death. In October of the same year he wed 22-year-old Christine Margold, who was probably his first wife's cousin.⁷ Nine months later, their firstborn was christened *Christian Friedrich*. This son survived and thus encouraged the parents to continue trying. That resulted in the birth of our great grandfather, optimistically named *Johannes*. This Johannes survived to migrate in his middle years to America and to become, eventually, the grandfather of Wilhelm Friedrich Besemer. Alas, Christine, the young bride and mother, died at twenty-seven, when her youngest was but sixteen months old.

So Christian Johannes, at age forty-seven, was widowed for the second time, leaving the single father with the five surviving children, ranging in age from sixteen months to thirteen years. This time, however, he waited a full year and a half before taking his third bride, Anna Margarete Wied. No more child brides; Anna Wied was thirty-nine at the time she joined the home of Christian Johannes and his five children. Our guess is that she was probably also widowed. Whether she brought any of her own children into the union is not known to us. We do know, however,

⁷ At first inspection, we thought that Anna and Christine Margold might be sisters, however, after further investigation we found that they had different parents. Anna was the daughter of Adam and Kathrina Claus Margold. Christine's parents were Johann Christoph and Christine Rosina Bayer Margold. Since they all came from the tiny Swabish village of Wiflingshausen, we concluded that Christine and Kathrina Margold were probably sisters, making their daughters cousins.

that the run of tragedy was not finished. Christian Johannes himself died less than a month after his wedding to Anna Wied. Great Grandfather Johannes and his surviving siblings were orphans.

We assume that Anna Wied Besemer maintained and raised the children her husband had brought into their brief marriage. We have no further records of her life. We know, however, that at least four of Christian's children eventually moved to America: Anna Maria's children Georg and Anna Maria; Christine's children Christian and Johannes. Their travels spanned a period of nearly 40 years.

The picture that emerges is one of a family hit by multiple tragedies and, in effect, being scattered across the globe. The impetus to emigrate, however, was not the only disruption within the family. The political and economic situation of the German states and principalities was also motivating people of very different personal circumstances to migrate across the Atlantic. That ocean would often later be called *die blaue Band* – the blue ribbon that linked Americans and Germans.

Eighteen-forty-eight was a year of revolution across continental Europe. The lesser classes rose up against the more privileged. These sporadic but widespread uprisings were often viciously put down. The German system of lower class deference was becoming increasingly out of place as waves of democratic movements swept across much of the rest of Europe. The preeminent kingdom of Prussia was sweeping up lesser principalities into what would be, by the 1870s, a unified German state. In the interim, the condition of ordinary people was multi-layered misery.

Nature played its role in that misery. The late 1840s saw successive years of terribly cold winters, adding famine to the political and social turmoil. Throughout most of human history, such misery was simply endured on the assumption that the life of ordinary folks was always destined to be, in the words of the philosopher Thomas Hobbes, "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short." By mid-19th century Europe, there was an option: Migrate to America.

Everyone knew of the promise of America. One estimate is that over one hundred million letters were sent from the United States to Germany between 1820 and 1914. Typical of those letters is one described in an account of Germans in South Bend, Indiana:

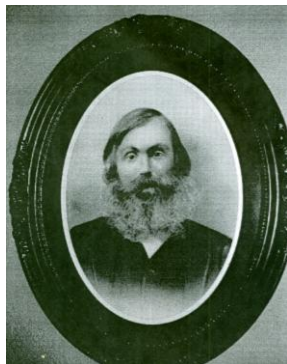
Emigrant letters -- not agents, not advertisements, not books or periodicals -- were the major factor that made people decide in favor of emigration. The letter Johann Wolfgang Schreyer wrote from South Bend to Arzberg in 1846 stressed the equality and independence everyone enjoyed, which were in stark contrast to the oppressive semi-feudal social system under which his readers suffered in Germany. *All men are equal here and no one thinks that he should have greater respect shown him or that he should enjoy some higher title than his neighbor.* No one had to cheer public officials as one had to do in Germany, since they are all *sovereign citizens who recognize no superior but God.* He concluded that *everyone is filled with enthusiasm, especially a German who hears all of this for the first time. It seems impossible to him that there is really a country on earth where the worth of the individual is*

*so recognized, and it is to him a delight to hear people say, "Thank God I, too, am an American."*⁸

Georg Besemer was 20 when he and his 17 year old sister, Anna Maria, boarded the "Peterhof" and came to America, arriving at New York on October 7, 1854. The family lore is he somehow lost track of his sister in the teeming city. None of our extensive family records gives any indication what might have become of her.

We do know, however, that Georg made his way to Berrien County, Michigan and began working as a farm laborer. But that young farm laborer could dream. He could have a belief in the potential for progress that was unheard of back home. He must have worked hard and saved, because within a relatively short time he acquired extensive farmlands, larger and more fertile than he could possibly have ever hoped for in Germany. We do not know precisely when he acquired his first plot of land, but we do know that he soon acquired more near the west bank of the St. Joseph River in Bertrand Township. And, true to the family tradition, he kept a vineyard.

In 1875 he added to his holdings with the purchase of a 160 acre parcel about two miles east of the river in Niles Township. Still a bit later, he bought another 115 acre farm in Hagar Township, which he sold to his younger half-brother, Christian, who had arrived in 1864.



←

Georg Friedrich Besemer, born in Esslingen, Württemberg, 1833; died in Bertrand Twp., Berrien County, Michigan, 1909

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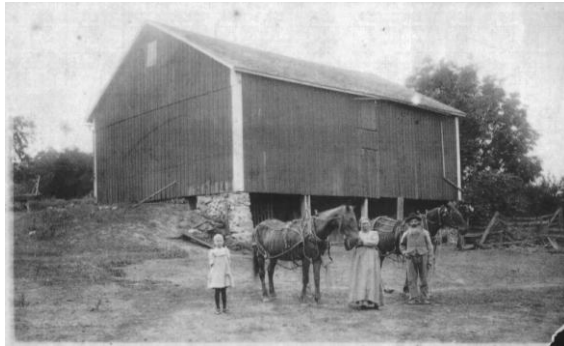
Margaret Louisa Bader Besemer, born in Saxony (Germany), 1844; died in Niles, Michigan, 1922



When we consider the nature of farming in southern Michigan, these loom as very large holdings. Most of the land was planted in fruit and vegetables -- produce that yielded high value per acre. The climate and soil were ideal for these purposes. The proximity of the Great Lakes mitigated temperature variation. The sandy soil combined fertility with good drainage. To this day, Michigan's lower peninsula is the fruit basket of the Midwest.

⁸ Gabrielle Robinson, *German Settlers of South Bend* (Chicago: Arcadia Publishing Co., 2003), p. 22. Today, Arzberg is the official sister city to South Bend.

To make a good living off fruits, in particular, requires a special mind-set. One must be willing to defer today's rewards for greater returns in the future.. The returns are long in coming after a high initial investment and years of hard work. But once trees and vines come to fruition, the rewards for patience and effort are substantial.



Georg Friedrich Besemer, his wife Margaret Louisa, and an unidentified young girl. The barn stands to this day.

It was not only the land, however, that was fertile. In 1862, Georg married Margaret Louisa Bader, a 17-year-old Saxon girl. They produced eight children over the next fourteen years. Unlike the family pattern back in Germany, though, Georg and Louisa had the good fortune to see all their offspring survive through childhood. However, the family was not entirely to escape tragedy. In 1882 their oldest son, 17-year-old George, was killed when thrown from a horse. In 1902, their 26 year-old daughter Rosa died in childbirth. The baby also died, just two hours after her mother.

Christian Frederick Besemer came to America, as we have mentioned, a decade after his half-brother Georg. He was twenty-two when he arrived in southern Michigan. Like his brother, he waited a few years before getting married. We know from the narrative history of brother Georg that Christian acquired at least the 115 acre spread he bought from Georg around 1875. At about the same time he married a widow named Caroline Schlegel Schneck. She brought two small sons, aged eight and four, into the marriage. Between their marriage in 1875 and the birth of their last child in 1883, Christian and Caroline produced four more children.

As their family trees show, the children of Georg and Christian Besemer contributed substantially to the population of the area in and around Berrien County, Michigan.⁹ Christian Friedrich was not the last arrival from the Swabish homeland. Thirty-eight years after Georg sought out the promised land, and twenty-nine years after Christian Friedrich joined him, their youngest sibling, Johannes, his wife Barbara, and most of their large family migrated from Kirkheim unter Teck to southern Michigan. Their eldest son, Wilhelm Friedrich, remained behind. In 1922 his son, also Wilhelm Friedrich, would be the last Besemer emigrant from Swabia to America. His story is told in Chapter 3 and in much of the rest of this volume.

⁹ See Appendix I.

Left to right: Charles, Helen, Mary, William,
and Christian Friedrich Besemer



Before that, however, there is yet one more story of migration to be told. While Johannes, Barbara and family came in 1893, a year or so earlier, their second son, nineteen-year-old Carl August traveled alone to join the family of uncles and cousins in Michigan. His adventures intrigued us from the beginning of our research, so we have explored his history and made contact with his descendants in order to fill out the story. In keeping with the migration pattern, Carl August's story is the subject of the next chapter.

Appendix 1.1
An Album of the Georg Friedrich Besemer Family



The family of Georg Friedrich and Margaret Louisa Bader Besemer. Georg, second from right in the front row, was born on October 30, 1833 in Esslingen , Württemberg (Germany). Margaret, second from left in the front row, was born on March 9, 1844, in Saxony (Germany). Georg emigrated to America in 1854, taking up farming in southern Michigan . We do not know the circumstances of Margaret's migration to America . They were married in Berrien County , Michigan on February 28, 1862. In the picture are, top row, Louisa Fredrika (1870-1915), John Friedrich (1867-1949) and, Wilhelm Ludwig (1884-1938). Seated are Charles (1875-1952, Margaret Louisa (Mother), Ludwig Wilhelm (1889-1942), Georg Friedrich (Father), and Rosa Katherina (1873-1902). Two children are missing from the picture, the eldest daughter, Anna Maria (November 7, 1862 - ?) and the eldest son, George Friedrich (1863 - 1882). Judging from the fashions, the picture was probably taken around 1900. Father Georg died in August, 1909, and mother Margaret Louisa in August, 1922.

Georg (right) and friend on the farm,
enjoying a bit of liquid refreshment



Louisa Fredrika Besemer Abbiehl
(1870-1915), Georg & Margaret's
4th child and 2nd daughter.

Rosa Katherina Besemer Abbiehl (1873-1902),
3rd daughter of Georg & Margaret,
and husband, Peter Abbiehl
(b & d dates unknown)





Wilhelm Ludwig ("Lute") Besemer (1884-1938),
4th son of Georg & Margaret, and his wife,
Wilhelmina Vetter Besemer
(b & d dates unknown)



Margaret Louisa Bader Besemer,
in her later years
(probably about
1910)



Wedding of Andrew Jacobs and Joyce LouEllen Besemer, 1950

The bride is the daughter of Wilhelm Ludwig Besemer, son of Georg Friedrich Besemer, and mother of Craig Alan Jacobs, who has been of invaluable assistance in providing data regarding the history of the family of Georg Friedrich Besemer

Appendix 1.2
An Album of the Christian Friedrich Besemer Family



In 1864, when Christian Friedrich Besemer (1842-1917 - center, standing) was twenty-two years old, he left Germany to join his elder half-brother, Georg, who had established himself as a prosperous farmer in southern Michigan. Eleven years later, he married Caroline Schlegel Schneck (1839-1920 – left, seated), a widow with two young boys, Gottlieb and William Schneck. The third person in this picture is Caroline's sister, Lena Herman. Throughout their life in America, Christian and Caroline farmed a 115 acre farm in Berrien County, Michigan. Together, they had four more children: Charles, Edith, John, and Mary.



Mary M Besemer (1883-1955),
4th Child of Christian Friedrich
& Caroline Schlegel Besemer

Caroline Schlegel Besemer
and her chickens





John Friedrich (1880-1962 - 3rd child of Christian F. & his wife Caroline Schlegel Besemer) with his wife Henrietta Agnes Curtis Besemer, daughter or daughter-in-law, and grandchildren, 1952

John and Henrietta Besemer.
Picture from 1962 in Coloma, MI.



Left to right:
Bernigene Pearce Besemer, daughter of
Charles & Nellie Haut Besemer;
Cheryl Jean (b. 1945), daughter of
Howard & Bernigene Pearce Besemer;
Howard Christian Besemer (b.
1918), son of John F. and Henrietta
Curtis Besemer;
Janice and Diana , daughters of William
H. and Virginia Fabrick Besemer.
1948/49 in California



William H. Besemer (1916-1991),
son of John F. & Henriette Curtis Besemer,
and his wife,
Virginia Fabrick Besemer with their
daughters, Diana, Cynthia (Cindy), and
Janice
Picture from March, 1963

Howard Besemer family:
Standing – daughter, Cheryl Jean &
husband William R. Thomas, Sr.
Seated: Son Howard Christian
Besemer, Jr., wife Bernigene
Pearce Besemer, Howard Christian
Besemer, and grandson Scott
Richard Thomas (about 1977)





Howard Christian Besemer (b 1918 – son of John F. and Henrietta Besemer; grandson of Christian Friedrich Besemer); during visit with Martha Besemer (1903 – 2002), wife of William Frederick (Wilhelm Friedrich) Besemer (1897-1983). About 1990 (?)

William H. and Virginia Fabrick
Besemer/
Picture taken 1988

