

Interview with John Wagler

ERIN ROTH, INTERVIEWER:

Can you tell me how old you are?

JOHN WAGLER:

I am 101, and my birthdate is July 25.

ROTH:

You came from Germany; when was that?

WAGLER:

I was born in Alsace-Lorraine and we came over in 1904. My dad was born a Frenchman and I was born a German, as was my grandfather, in the same place. When he was 20, my dad had to go and serve in the German army—for three years. He said he made up his mind that if he had any boys he is going to see that they don't have to serve the Kaiser the way that he had to. That's why we moved.

DAUGHTER:

Did you know anybody in Iowa? Why did you pick Iowa?

WAGLER:

Well, my dad had his third wife—he lost two others—and his third wife had an uncle over here, and they were writing back and forth, and that's why we came to this country—it was my stepmother's uncle—yeh. I was 10 when we came.

ROTH:

And you spoke German then?

WAGLER:

Yeh—I was in the 4th grade; when we got over here they put me in primer for two years. I had to learn the ABCs.

DAUGHTER:

You told me you had to memorize a poem in English at that time and you didn't know what the words meant.

WAGLER:

My first poem—"Come little leaves said the wind one day/Come over the meadow with me and play. . . ." I had to learn that by heart, and I didn't know what I was saying. But that was my first English words.

ROTH:

So your father farmed?

WAGLER:

Yeh, and he was a preacher too; he was a preacher in the church in Germany; when we came over here he joined the Sugar Creek Church. They took him in as a minister. He preached in French or German—High German. Lots of people could not understand him.

ROTH:

Because the people here spoke a different German?

WAGLER:

Lots of the Germans here were the Pennsylvania Dutch. A local barber told me that I was the only one who spoke real German—the others spoke Pennsylvania Dutch.

ROTH:

Are there still people here who speak Pennsylvania Dutch?

DAUGHTER:

Yes—that is what our German is.

WAGLER:

You see, the High German is the real German, and I went to school for four years. I learned High German at school. At home we talked Lorraine German. Now Lorraine German and Alsace are different. Alsace has a different dialect.

ROTH:

Was it hard to learn English when you came here?

WAGLER:

Yes, it was. If I could have read German, I would have been better off.

DAUGHTER:

He had an interpreter. Didn't you have someone that helped you?

WAGLER:

Yeh—my wife—she went to the same school and she could talk English and German, and when I wanted something I would raise my hand and the teacher would ask me what I wanted, and I told her in German, and then she would ask Ada, "What does he want?" She was 8 at the time and I was 10. I married her because I needed her. We were married for 66 years and 8 months.

ROTH:

From reading your book you sound as though you were very happily married?

WAGLER:

Yes, I was. She always wanted me to write the book about our family for the grandchildren and great-grandchildren to use. And when everyone heard I was writing a book, everyone wanted one. But I waited too long and she was gone. I was 89 when I started and when I finished it I was 90. It took a lot of writing. . . .

Note: "Dutch" in "Pennsylvania Dutch" is derived from the term "Deutsch," meaning "German." It does not refer to the language or people of Holland, now The Netherlands.