

“Carl Renatus Wilhelm Erbe: Sheboygan County’s Fascinating Itinerant Minister”

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It is difficult to undertake research into Sheboygan’s early history without encountering Carl Renatus Wilhelm Erbe (b. April 13, 1810, d. February 22, 1887). His name appears on countless county records as the officiant for baptisms, weddings, and deaths—usually with his title “Minister of the Gospel.” Early histories, like those by Frank P. Franke and Carl Zillier, mention him only in passing as a reverend who ministered to the spiritual needs of the early settlers.¹ The family records on which his name appears attest to the true scope of his zeal and itinerancy. From 1850 until his death in 1887, he went mostly on foot to conduct hundreds of ceremonies throughout Sheboygan County, and beyond. Yet, he was never affiliated with any church. He lived on 40 acres of land in Section 26 of Town Rhine. Nevertheless, he played no role in the founding, services, or membership of any of the relevant nearby parishes, even though each existed during the period that he was making house calls: Immanuel German Reformed was founded in 1848, Saron Reformed Church in 1855, St. Peter’s Evangelical in 1858, and the Zoar Reformed Congregation in 1862.

Little is known about Erbe’s personal life. He was born in Schwallungen, Saxe-Meiningen, Thüringen. When he immigrated to America in 1849, he was a thirty-nine year old student of theology.² His departure assured that he would never complete the degree. Soon after arriving in Wisconsin, he married Julia Maria Elonore Genssler, and they had two children: Edward (b. September 2, 1851, d. April 18, 1896) and Mary (b. August 30, 1853, d. December 21, 1934). His wife sadly died in 1853, and he married again to a Bavarian named Anna Sophia Auernheimer on February 3, 1854. They had four children: Julius (b. January 26, 1856, d. May 12, 1916), Caroline (b. August 2, 1857, d. November 2, 1857), Sophia Louise (b. November 22, 1858, d. February 27, 1873), and Sophia Renata (b. May 10, 1863, d. January 31, 1922).

In the early years, Erbe conducted services in a cabin across the road from where the Civil War monument now stands in Town Rhine, a cabin that later served as a Town Hall.³ There he was recalled as “a stern good-looking man” who “pronounced the service with much solemnity.”⁴ However, from the 1860s on, when he was not “on the road,” he worked from his home. Carl Renatus Erbe died on February 22, 1887, and he was buried at Liberty Cemetery in Town Rhine.

Such are the basic contours of his life. Nevertheless, a few external facts shed a bit more light on our subject. The first, is that in Germany one could not preach, counsel, lead a parish, and administer sacraments without the

¹ Frank D. Franke, *Geschichte von Sheboygan County* (Sheboygan, WI: Demokrat Printing Company, 1898), p. 184; Carl Zillier, *History of Sheboygan County, Wisconsin, Past and Present*. Vol. 1 (Chicago, IL: S. J. Clarke, 1912), p. 263.

² Found in Kreis Meiningen Nr. 697. *Regierungsblatt für das Herzogtum Sachsen-Meiningen*, 1849, Bl. 095; *Hildburghausen, Regierungsblatt* 1849, Bl. 086.

³ According to the *Sheboygan Press*, April 29, 1927, he also taught school in a log cabin on the northeast corner of Section 26. The structure appears in the 1862 plat map.

⁴ The quotation comes from the *Sheboygan Press*, July 28, 1913, which posthumously published the journal entries of pioneer settler Laura Smith (nee: Chase) and her commentary upon them in 1873. She reports that on Sunday, May 4, 1851: “We went over to the school house for church. Arrived there we found the desk occupied by a German Lutheran Priest. He preached a sermon and then gave the communion... This must have been one of the first ever held there.’ Mr. Boecher says he has no idea who the minister was. During this year a Mr. Erbe (not a Lutheran) held services here in German.” Since only Erbe was known to use that building, Mrs. Smith must have met Carl Erbe. Rev. Carl Christian Wilhelm Schmitz of Milwaukee and Germantown intermittently preached in the cabin in the late 1840s, but he was no longer active when Erbe arrived. Schmitz died in 1854.

approval of the Royal Consistory and an ordination license.⁵ For those from poorer families, a theology degree could take two years to complete, but for those of means, it might take five to ten years. Since established clergy families had political clout and were connected to the administration, a longer education in theology often came with social and financial gains.⁶ It is unclear which of the two tracks Carl was charting, but the fact that he was thirty-nine suggests that he might have been on the latter. Regardless of what convinced him to stop his progress to degree, his lack of completion meant that he never had official authoritative status, but obtained his position in Wisconsin solely through declaration and tradition. This is confirmed by Rev. Louis von Ragué, whom the German Evangelical Synod sent to Town Rhine in December of 1864, and who soon raised the funds to erect St. Peter's Church. In von Ragué's memoirs, he states that when he arrived he learned that Town Rhine already had "einen freien Pastor," i.e., one not affiliated with any synodical denomination.⁷

Additional insight into Erbe's life and work comes from the recent recovery of Erbe's hand-written register of baptisms, confirmands, marriages, and deaths.⁸ Since the record was mislabeled, most researchers interested in Town Rhine probably have never thought to consult it.⁹ Moreover, a close reading of the manuscript reveals that its folios were dislodged from the binding long before it was microfilmed and reconstituted with little attention to its original order. Consequently, the register jumps forwards and backwards in time in no less than sixteen places, often by several decades, and always without warning. The register's disarray makes it difficult to use and has helped to keep many of its records hidden. This is unfortunate, as it contains a veritable gold mine of genealogical and historical information. For this reason, I soon shall publish and make available through the SCHRC an English translation of the entire manuscript (in its corrected order) that also details the ways in which it sheds light on Erbe and the early immigrant settlers of the region.

For the nonce, I highlight here a couple of the more interesting finds. For one, the register reveals the extraordinary extent of Erbe's work and influence throughout the region. Though the aforementioned early histories refer to him only in passing, he officiated 1418 baptisms, 275 marriages, and 361 burials over a thirty-five year career. He also performed confirmations for 567 children mainly in the Towns of Rhine and Sheboygan Falls (at Johnsonville), but also at Schleswig and periodically elsewhere. No less than 1156 family names appear in the register. The data shows that, despite the existence of several nearby churches, Erbe remained the officiant of choice for many families for nearly four decades. This likely relates to the Freethinking views of many of the region's settlers who resisted the influence of organized religion in the New World.¹⁰ In fact, Town Rhine and nearby Plymouth each had their own Deutsche Freie Gemeinde (German Free

⁵ I thank Dr. Prof. Manfred Gailus of the Technische Universität Berlin for confirming this. For a detailed overview of German Pfarrergeschichte, see Oliver Janz, *Bürger besonderer Art. Evangelische Pfarrer in Preußen 1850-1914* (Berlin/New York 1994).

⁶ See Nicholas Hope, *German and Scandinavian Protestantism 1700-1918* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 109-115.

⁷ See Louis von Ragué, *Lebensbilder aus der Innern Mission! Pastor Louis von Ragué. Erinnerungen aus seinem Leben und Wirken* (Hoyleton, IL: Evangelische Waisenheime, 12, 1912), p. 26.

⁸ I thank Jim Schultz for suggesting to me that Erbe's records might be those mislabeled "German Church Records from Herman Township, Wisconsin, 1851-1886" (LDS film 1377864, Item 3). While translating the register I was able to confirm it. I shall provide additional evidence for the identification in the book mentioned below, but for now I note the fact that Erbe records many self-references, including that he baptized, confirmed, and married his daughter, Maria Renata, at his home.

⁹ The records were incorrectly identified, because the photographer noticed that the first event took place in Town Herman, but he did not read much beyond that point.

¹⁰ This was particularly the case in Towns Rhine, Sheboygan Falls, and also Town Schleswig in Manitowoc County. Summarized well by Helmut Schmahl, *Verpflanzt, aber nicht entwurzelt: Die Auswanderung aus Hessen-Darmstadt (Provinz Rheinhessen) nach Wisconsin im 19. Jahrhundert* (Mainzer Studien zur Neueren Geschichte, 1; Peter Lang Verlag Frankfurt am Main, 2000), pp. 312-334. The *Sheboygan Press*, September 19, 1958, recalls that early church records indicate that "Frontier life frequently encouraged individuals to oppose restraints and regulation, including restraints of a religious nature..." and that von Ragué's predecessor, "the Rev. Mr. Zeller became discouraged and left the newly-formed congregation after two years of struggle." I shall discuss the Deutsch Freie Gemeinde in greater detail in the book.

Congregation) at this time.¹¹ Rev. von Ragué observes the community's Freethinking leanings in his memoirs when he records the following response of one of the settlers after learning he was a pastor: "We need no pastor here, we are in a free land."¹² Another settler saw pastors as living "high on the hog" at the expense of poor farmers:

In Germany they were the bosses, but here we are. What does he do for the four hundred dollars (a year)? During the week he instructs and beats our children, and on Sundays he preaches to us for an hour. Plus, we are all young fellows and have lots of kids. For every baptism he gets two dollars. And then he comes to the baptism with his whole family, and when they are ready to travel home, he gets a sack of potatoes or apples, a ham, a mettwurst, a rooster, or a drake. That's more than plenty for his work.¹³

Given the Freethinking nature of the community, it is no wonder they preferred a "freien pastor." Thus, from a sociological perspective, one might say that Erbe filled a niche. He met the traditional, sacramental and legal needs of the community, but required no commitment in terms of parish attendance, responsibilities, or financial collections, other than his fees, which also were cheaper by half.¹⁴

Study of the manuscript also reveals the complex nature of Erbe's religious views and commitment to reform. In addition to administering the sacraments to those with normative needs, he baptized children born out of wedlock and provided services to those of various religious affiliations. Though the majority of families that Erbe served were neighbors in Town Rhine with at least nominal connections to the German Evangelical Reform church, he also provided services for Lutherans, Baptists, and Catholics. Others whom he served possessed no denominational affiliation. He appears to have served anyone who knocked on his door, though for weddings in which a young woman's age might raise eyebrows, he records parental consent. Some members of his flock also clearly were in no hurry to baptize their children. One finds many baptisms that have been postponed from five to seventeen years. Such practices reveal the complex nature of Erbe's religious views, his commitment to reform, and the diversity of his flock. Indeed, a look at the faiths of his own children is equally instructive. His daughter Mary was Lutheran, and his daughter Renata was German Evangelical, whereas his son Julius was a member of the Congregational church.

As one might imagine, Erbe's lack of official affiliation has led to a number of strained efforts to provide him with one. Later accounts label him variously as "Lutheran," "not Lutheran," and "Evangelical Reform."¹⁵ Nevertheless, Rev. von Ragué's description of a "freien Pastor" is closer in time and also the most accurate as it

¹¹ See Eduard Schröder, "Die zweite Auflage der Freien Gemeinde zu Plymouth (Wisc.)," *Blätter für freies religiöses Leben* 14/11 (1869) pp. 172-174.

¹² "Pfaffen brauchen sie hier nicht, wir seien in einem freien Lande." See von Ragué, *Lebensbilder aus der Innern Mission!*, p. 24.

¹³ See von Ragué, *Lebensbilder aus der Innern Mission!*, p. 32, who also captures the dialect: "In Dütschland wören sie die Herren, hier sind wi dat. Wat döht he denn för die 400 Daler? In de Weeke lehrt he und prügelt use Jungens und det Sundags predigt he uns ene Stunde was vor. Dann sind wie alle junge Kerls und hebben veel Kinner. För jede Kindäupe (Kindtaufe) kriegt he zwei Daler. Dann kömmt he mit sine ganze Familie up de Kindäupe, und wenn sie no Hus föhrt, dann kriegt he noch einen Sack Kartuffeln oder Aepfel, nen Schinken oder Mettwurst, nen Ruster (Hahn) oder'n Draken (Enterich) met. Das ist genug för sine Arbeit."

¹⁴ The young man that von Ragué quotes states that clergymen receive \$2.00 for every baptism. Erbe's records show that he received on average \$1.00 for baptisms, confirmations, and burial sermons, and \$2.00 for marriages. He often received even less—sometimes nothing. However, after the late 1860s, he began to receive on average \$1.00 more per marriage and 50¢ more for the other sacraments.

¹⁵ The obituary of his son Julius in the *Sheboygan Press*, May 12, 1916, states that Carl was former pastor of the Reformed Church at Town Rhine. According to *75jähriges Jubiläum der Sheboygan Klassis*, p. 85, he offered the Heidelberg catechism. The 1860 federal census for Town Rhine records his occupation as "preacher." The 1880 census reads "minister (Lutheran)." A piece on the history of Town Rhine in the *Sheboygan Press*, April 29, 1927, labels him "Evangelical Lutheran." See also n. 4 above.

attaches him to the Freie Gemeinde movement. Indeed, Erbe's religious views and practices resist easy classification. He appears to have come to America with a liberal sense of the authority of his calling and denominational boundaries.



Gravestone of Carl Rhenatus Wilhelm Erbe in Liberty Cemetery, Town of Rhine, Sheboygan County, Wisconsin

Such views were not unique among Wisconsin's German pioneers, especially in the early period of settlement.¹⁶ In the 1860s, a Presbyterian minister served the needs of St. John's German Evangelical Congregation in Germantown. Karl Dürr, a German immigrant farmer at Sauk City founded a German Free Congregation without a theology degree. In Thiensville, another long-standing Freethinking community, all funerals were non-religious, civic leaders performed all marriages, and leaders of the community baptized their children in the name of "the United States of America."¹⁷ Town Rhine's own Rev. von Ragué records an even more ecumenical pastor living only eight miles from his home, a German from Neuwied, who identified himself as "Bishop of the (United) Evangelical and Roman Catholic Brethren, Prince and Chief of the Tuscarora and Susquehannock Indian tribes."¹⁸ Though more unorthodox in practice and belief than Erbe, such figures provide a backdrop for why the synod was anxious to send pastors like von Ragué to Town Rhine.¹⁹ Yet like Erbe, they embody the sort of creative adaptation of religious ideas that was taking place in early Wisconsin and the freedom of thought to which many immigrants felt entitled in America. Perhaps more than anything, they remind us that Sheboygan County's pioneer past was far more colorful than black and white photos might suggest.

¹⁶ Schmah, *Verpflanzt, aber nicht entwurzelt*, pp. 297-298, also makes reference to the influence of various itinerant preachers on Rheinhessians in Washington County. For insights into the life of an itinerant preacher (in this case Methodist) in early Wisconsin, see W. G. Miller, *Thirty Years in the Itinerancy* (Milwaukee, WI: I. L. Harvey and Company, 1875).

¹⁷ See "Village of Freethinkers 'Godless' for 80 Years," *Milwaukee Journal*, October 13, 1940. The article also reports that when John F. Gierach and John Bublitz tried to canvass the town to raise money for a church, they were offered \$50 to keep the church out of the town. Thiensville also was founded by Forty-Eighters. No church appeared in Thiensville until 1919.

¹⁸ "Bischof der evangelischen und römisch-katholischen Brüder, Prinz und Häuptling des Indianerstammes der Tuskarora und Susquehannot." See von Ragué, *Lebensbilder aus der Innern Mission!*, p. 35. The man had married a Native American daughter of a chief. He also had studied theology under Ragué's uncle in Langenberg.

¹⁹ Ragué, *Lebensbilder aus der Innern Mission!*, p. 26, notes that "die Synode wüschte so sehr in Wisconsin Fuß zu fassen," i.e., "the synod wants to seize a foot(hold) in Wisconsin." More than once he logs his desire to leave Town Rhine for a community more receptive to the church. His predecessor, the Rev. Mr. Zeller, became discouraged and left the newly-formed congregation after two years of struggle. On the competition between various missionary movements and Protestant leanings towards free thinkers, see Richard N. Current, *The History of Wisconsin. Volume II: The Civil War Era, 1848-1873* (Madison, WI: State Historical Society of Wisconsin, 1976), pp. 545-550.