Creation and Development of the AHSGR Obituary and Genealogy Card Files as Recalled by Arthur Flegel on August 21, 2001

While in the process of gathering information for the proposed Flegel-Pflugrath Kinship Book during the 1960s and 70s, it suddenly dawned on me that a valuable resource could be the well-detailed obituaries of the German Congregational Church weekly publication DER KIRCHENBOTE. Recalling that my mother, Juliana Pflugrath Flegel who was in her 80s, had been a regular reader of that journal over the years, I called her to learn if perchance she had saved copies. However, along with other items of less importance to her life, she had disposed of nearly all of them, but volunteered to contact her friends and acquire whatever they might be willing to give up for my purpose. A sizable number did accumulate those obits and I was able to use them. I also soon realized that the total content of every KIRCHENBOTE could be historically beneficial and determined to acquire all possible issues, place them in binders and preserve them for posterity.

Upon creation of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia in 1968, emphasis was added to my research endeavors which up to that time had consisted of personal interviews and accumulating data from the Germans in Russia collection at the Hoover Institution at Stanford University as time taken from my business might permit. With the advent of Dr. Karl Stump in 1971 and the printing of his famous book became a reality, my emphasis on the acquisition of data that would connect with the material in his production became accentuated. Personal needs and desires became secondary as AHSGR conventions afforded an opportunity to encourage membership to locate and send whatever copies of DER KIRCHENBOTE they might acquire to Menlo Park, California, which in due time became a sizable collection dating from the early 1900s until its demise in 1964.

By 1973 the Golden Gate Chapter could boast of a very active membership which was eager to share its talents in every way possible. Moreover, at this time photo copying had become available, and it seemed prudent to use this development in the preservation of these precious documents. Consequently, three dedicated chapter volunteers proceeded to devote at least one evening each week to identifying the pages that were to be photo-copied with appropriate marking after which the stacks of KIRCHENBOTES were taken to the copier shop for reproduction of the obituary pages. Having completed this process, teams of volunteers gathered at the Flegel residence over a period of time for the obituary mountings. The photocopied obits were carefully cut and mounted on 5 X 8 cards, male gender on the left and female on the right to assure uniform thickness within the files. They were then submitted to typists who could read German and typed the names, the source and dates of the publication as appropriate headings on the cards with duplicate cards for the feminine gender. Finally, other workers placed them alphabetically in the 5X8 metal files provided for that purpose. As time progressed these German cards were augmented by others from the Baptist SENDBOTE and the Mennoite ZIONSbote publications as well as those taken from newspapers all over the country.

In 1973 Gerda Stroh Walker and Phil Legler, AHSGR Board Members, crated the publication CLUES and initiated the surname exchange by encouraging the AHSGR membership to submit names for interaction with others engaged in similar research. Due to ill health Phil Legler gave up his work with the Surname Exchange in 1976 and Arthur Flegel assumed that responsibility. It seemed appropriate at that time to also institute a genealogy card file in a dimension compatible with the established obituary files. Under Flegel’s guidance Ancestral and Family Group Charts were devised and from them data was transcribed by volunteers to the appropriately designed 5 X 8 genealogy cards to also be in a repository at Menlo Park.

While a guest at the Flegel home in preparation for the 1977 AHSGR Convention, the President, Ruth Amen, viewed both sets of files and after giving permission to bring them to San Francisco for the first Genealogy Consulting Workshop, requested that duplicates of the cards, both obituary and genealogy, be sent to the AHSGR Headquarters in Lincoln, Nebraska, thereby creating two identical repositories for membership research. Shepherding and expanding of the files, however, continued at Menlo Park until 1983 when it was decided to receive the originals at Lincoln and send duplicates to Menlo Park. This procedure continued until the transfer of the west coast repository files from Menlo Park to Fresno, California, in September 1995.