

Wends in Canada

Who were they? Our Wends are descended from an ancient Slavic tribe that wandered throughout west and northern Europe searching for a homeland where they could speak their language and worship as they saw fit. (The name has entered the English language—wend—meaning to wander.) They finally settled in an area now known as the Spreewald located between the Spree and Oder Rivers in Eastern Germany where they became known as “Sorbs” or “Sorbich”.

Wanderlust struck the Wends again, when in the middle 1800s, recruiters arrived promising free grants of good farmland along the Ottawa River in Canada. At the same time, Wends were emigrating to Australia, U.S.A., and South Africa. German/Prussian immigrants, including Wends, began arriving in the Upper Ottawa Valley about 1855. The first Wendish settlement was around Green Lake, a small lake located in Wilberforce Township about 10 miles south of the Ottawa River. The land near the lake was flat to gently rolling and was described as “waste land” because the best timber had been harvested. The settlers would have to clear the land of tree stumps and stones. In some places, the rocks of the Canadian Precambrian Shield were close to the surface, making farming difficult. Settlers quickly learned that they could raise a cash crop of hay in beaver meadows. (Hay was in high demand by the logging companies for the horses.) In addition to farming, many Wends earned extra money as craftsmen. The women had an excellent reputation as housekeepers and the daughters had no difficulty finding work in nearby Pembroke.

Some Wends moved further away into the Madawaska River valley, settling in Palmer Rapids and the Combermere area.

Wendish surnames can be found on the old tombstones in church cemeteries located close to the communities where the families first settled. We also see Wendish names on newer stones since many Wendish families still live on the land their ancestors had cleared.

Most of our Ottawa Valley Prussian/German settlers spoke one of three distinct dialects relating to the Slavic Language group—Low German, Kashubian, and Wendish (usually pronounced Vendish). Low German, was spoken in the homes by most Germans throughout the Valley, however, the Lutheran ministers insisted that church services and Saturday school be conducted in High German. Thus, Lutheran children became familiar with both German languages but lost their Wendish. Some of the Wends chose to become members of the German Methodist/Evangelical United Brethren Church (now United Church of Canada) where they would use Wendish or Low German. (Kashubs located in a more isolated, southwestern, part of the County and had better luck in keeping their language.)

Since the Wends didn't have ministers or schoolteachers who spoke their language, it was left to the parents to teach Wendish to their children. Possibly due to assimilation with their neighbours who spoke Low German, the Wendish language was basically lost within three generations. Many descendants here in the Ottawa Valley are not aware of their heritage.

21 families from the Government District of Frankfort on Oder are included in an 1861 list of Prussian immigrants living in the Ottawa Valley. Reverend Ludwig H. Gerndt, a Lutheran missionary was the first person to recognize and record the presence of a group of Germans

who didn't speak German. They called themselves Wends and spoke their own unique language. He meticulously recorded their names and their village of origin.

The following is a partial list of valley surnames that are probably Wendish. Spellings can vary. If you have one of these surnames in your ancestry, then consider that Wendish may be part of your heritage. If your name ends in "ke" suspect that it has slavic origins, not necessarily Wendish.

Ashick, Berger, Biesenthal, Boehme, Bramburger, Brosek, Bucholtz, Budarick, Buder, Coal, Crigger, Dobring, Doman, Eckert, Fabian, Freiwald, Goldberg, Gollick, Guese, Gulick, Haentschel, Hanschke, Heideman, Hokum, Jonas, Junop, Kello, Kaatz, Kielow, Kossatz, Krueger, Kulosser, Layman, Lehmann, Liebeck, Lisk, Loback, Luloff, Max, Markus, Melcher, Miatke, Mielke, Muller, Nagora, Neumann, Noack, Popkie, Quast, Radke, Richter, Rinza, Schilke, Schimmens, Schneider, Schonnop, Schroeder, Sell, Teschner, Urban, Woito, Waito, Witt, Yandt, Yourth, Zadow.

During the years of wandering, it is likely some Wends dropped off from the main group. In the early 1800s, some families moved from Lusatia to West Prussia and East Prussia. The UOVGG isn't limiting this study to just the group who lived in the Spreewald. No matter where your family lived in Europe, if you feel your family may have been Wendish, we welcome your input.

To make research difficult, the terms "Wendish" and "Slavic" were never used as a description in official records. Wends are listed as German and Kashubs are listed as Polish. Religion may have been the deciding point. As a general rule, Lutherans were listed as German and Kashubs as Roman Catholic. Geographical names to watch for when researching the Wends include: Lusatia, Frankfort on Oder, Saxony and possibly Brandenburg.

The Upper Ottawa Valley Genealogical Group is volunteering to be a clearinghouse for anyone interested in the genealogy of this special group—The Canadian Wends. Our experience shows us that Wends may have relocated to other parts of Canada and the United States and the Group would like to hear from these wanderers.

In the long run, we hope that one week-end a year will be set aside to celebrate our Wendish Heritage and Culture. Descendants of Wends who emigrated to Australia, Texas, etc. may want to visit us! In the short run, we would just like to get our Wends together periodically to exchange family lore and learn more about our "cousins." Garnet Miller has volunteered to chair this special interest group, assisted by Jackie Patterson. For more info, call Garnet (613-732-4376) or e-mail him at garnetm@sympatico.ca.