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The Road to Now

The passage of time and history has always been a concept both baffling and intriguing to me. Too many times have I found myself thinking about how my ancestors' thoughts and actions have entirely led to this moment in time for me; their decisions paved the way for me to live my life the way that I always have- in South Carolina, as a citizen of the United States, and even as a college student. Taking the opportunity to learn about my family's heritage has opened my mind to understand those around me, as well as offer me perspectives on just how different everybody's history is from one another's, and how their ancestry, just like my own, has played a part in the ways in which they were raised. My maternal great grandparents have been the focus of my research during the last week. After looking through ancestry data bases and interviewing their daughter, my grandma, I have learned so much more than I truly realized there was to know.

My great grandfather, Thomas Milton Laney Jr., was born in the United States in Tuscaloosa, Alabama and worked as a carpenter for most of his life. The Laney's, his line of ancestry before him, arrived in America in 1732. They sailed from Ireland to Philadelphia, and in 1752, settled permanently in Lancaster County, South Carolina ("Memorial Service & Dedication of Maker", 1981). My great grandfather's wife, however, arrived much more recently in the United States. Anneliese Monica Marchner, my great grandmother and the person I am named after, arrived from Germany in the United States in 1957. The German side of my ancestry has always been closer to me than any other; for one, I shared my great grandmother's

name, Anneliese. Beyond that, my grandma has always shared stories about my great grandmother with me. She, too, has always encouraged my journey of learning German, and has even engaged in vague conversation in German with me, as well.

To understand my great grandmother, I firstly think it is important to understand her immediate family. I interviewed my grandma about her grandparents, Josef and Berta Marchner, to learn more about them. They were both born in Eggenfelden, Bavaria in Germany, where they raised 5 children together: Monica, my great grandmother, Sieglinde, Siegfried, Werner, and Josef (“Anneliese Monica Laney Obituary”). Monica’s father, Josef Marchner, was an accountant before World War II. During the war, however, he served under Hitler. His son, Josef, was a part of the luftwaffe, or the Nazi airforce. After my grandma revealed this to me, she followed it up by telling me that before the war, her grandfather Josef was a good and kind man. This surprised me greatly after hearing that he served Hitler, a cruel dictator. My grandma told me that following the war, however, he had lost his accounting job and all of their family’s money. In a house raising 5 children, she said that the stress of this caused him to become very bitter. She then told me a story that occurred during World War II; oftentimes, American soldiers would march through the streets of Eggenfelden and were considered great because they would give the children fruit and candy bars. On one of these occasions, however, they entered my great grandmother’s home while her father, Josef, was still at work. My grandma recalled that, at this time, every family was required to have a photo of Hitler in their home. The American soldiers entered their home, turned the photo over, and then raided their wine cellar in their basement, where they drank until they were intoxicated. They then lined up my great grandmother, her mother, and her siblings and were going to kill them. A U.S. Officer entered their home in time

to prevent it from occurring. My grandma recalled that my great grandmother suffered from PTSD from this event for many years.

My great grandmother was not very religious, but she did practice Catholicism, much like most first and second wave German immigrants before her. While still in Germany, she was said by my grandma to have gotten kicked out of school because she argued with nuns, who she described as “very bitter people”. After she was kicked out of school, she began working on a farm. Soon after World War II ended, she hitchhiked her way to Kaiserslautern, a town in Germany near France. Here, she spent her days as a nanny, caring for the officer’s children. In the evenings, she worked as a bartender. It was here where she met my great grandfather, Thomas Milton Laney Jr.. At this point of time, he was an American soldier during the Vietnam War. He worked as a decoder, and decoded messages. My grandma remarked that Monica, her mother, described Thomas as “pitiful” looking because he was sick with ulcers and was far too thin when she first saw him. She was also already engaged at this time, but she broke it off to pursue my great grandfather. My grandma laughed as she told me, “my mom was a player.” In 1957, they married in Kaiserslautern, Germany, and in the same year, had my grandma, Cindy Cantrell.

2 years after my great grandparents married and had my grandma, they left Kaiserslautern to come to America after my great grandfather was restationed. They arrived in New Jersey on an airforce airplane, where they then travelled to a military base in North Carolina (“Staff Sergeant Thomas M Laney Jr”). My grandma told me that, because they lived on a military base, my great grandmother did not experience prejudice because many other people in the community shared a similar immigration pattern with her at this time; they married American soldiers, had children, and arrived in the United States. My grandma recalled that there were many different

ethnicities living in one community together: German, French, Japanese, and Hispanic were some that she named. My great grandmother learned English through vague conversation and practiced it by reading the *Readers Digest* and completing the vocabulary tests in it. When asked about what German traditions remained a part of their lives, my grandma laughed. She said that my great grandmother largely took on the American identity. She took my grandfather's religion, converting from Catholicism to Protestant. She, too, said my great grandmother did not speak German around the house. As far as my grandmother could remember, her mother did not feel pressured into shifting her culture and religion. While she was Catholic as a child, my grandmother said that her mother never followed the religion closely and willingly converted to Protestant. The only German traditions my grandma could recall being exposed to at home was during Christmas, or what Germany called St. Nicholas Day. It was, and still is, a German tradition for children to leave their shoes outside on St. Nicholas Eve for St. Nicholas to leave treats in. My grandma also described what is known as a candle pyramid that they had in their house.

My great grandmother's journey and immigration to America was a much different experience to first and second wave German immigrants that came before her. Unlike them, there were no push factors pushing her away from Germany. First and second wave German immigrants were pushed from Germany as a result of political turmoil, economic struggles, and demographic transitions (Haager, 2025). She differed in regard to pull factors as well. She came to America to be with her husband and his family, while many first and second wave German immigrants were pulled to the United States in search of jobs and religious freedom. Throughout the course of her life, my great grandmother returned to Germany several times. My grandma was even taken to Germany in 1969, where she attended and graduated high school in

Zweibrücken before returning to the United States. First wave German immigrants did not yet have steamships, so the trip from Germany to the United States was often a one-time trip because of the high costs, long durations, and the poor conditions of the ships that often had a high mortality rate and left many arriving in America very sick. Second wave German immigrants had more of an opportunity to return home on occasions with the invention of the steam engine because the trips were much shorter now. The quality of the journey was largely dependent on how much money one put towards it (Haager, 2025). My great grandmother, however, was flown to America. Instead of days or weeks, the journey was only a few hours in good conditions. Upon arrival in America, too, first and second wave German immigrants often faced prejudice revolving around American nativism, especially about religion (Haager, 2025). Protestants were worried that Catholicism was dangerous and went against what they believed. Unlike first and second wave German immigrants, who often settled in ethnic enclaves to avoid this prejudice and nurture their religions, traditions, culture, and language, my great grandmother arrived and lived on a military base with many different ethnicities who all had little in common with one another (Haager, 2025). My grandma remarked that this community, despite its linguistic, cultural, and religious differences, was very close and often celebrated together. She claimed that they would throw “stairwell parties”, where all the children in the community would play while the adults would cook food and drink together. After their time on the military base, my great grandmother, my great grandfather, and my grandma moved to Tuscaloosa, Alabama to live with my great, great grandparents- my great grandfather’s parents. Here, they had my ‘grand’ aunt, Mitchy.

While both of my great grandparents have now passed away, I am lucky enough to have been old enough to have memories with both of them. My great grandmother passed away when

I was 5 years old (2010) in Seneca, South Carolina from complications with scleroderma (“Anneliese Monica Laney Obituary”). My great grandfather lived until 2021 (“Mr. Thomas Milton Laney Jr. Obituary”), and during those 11 years spent apart, he kept her memory alive by telling her story and showing off her paintings and garden that she worked hard to tend to during her life.

Following all of my research and questioning, I feel much more connected to family members I knew while growing up by understanding their childhoods and their journey to America. Understanding our heritage is important when it comes to understanding our own roots and culture, as well as keeping our family’s memory alive. Learning about my own ancestry was a journey of emotions; from the conflicting unease of knowing that my great, great maternal grandfather and uncle were Nazis to the comfort of finding out that my great grandmother had a much happier journey and experience than many other German immigrants throughout history, all of my research has led me to want to continue to understand history and how it plays a role in the timeline of my own life. While some of these stories have lost their details over the years, I am lucky enough to have my grandma, my great grandmother’s daughter, to share them with me regardless. Furthermore, while I was interviewing my grandma for my research, we discussed the documents and papers that she referred to and has collected over the years and she determined that I will be the inheritor of our family’s history. One day, I may be the next to be interviewed about my family’s past, and that is beyond exciting.



One of my great Grandmother's paintings. It is known as Tole painting!

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