

## Origins of the Aschenbrenner Surname



*The mountain-top Aschenbrenner Berghaus (Guesthouse), Kufstein, Tirol, Austria (Photo by SAM 1993)*

The Aschenbrenner name is of Germanic origin and dates back to the late Middle Ages. German surnames initially reflected the individual's occupation, appearance, or place of residence. The nobility were the first to use family names. Among common citizens, surnames began to be adopted in the 1300s, but did not come into general use until the 1500s.<sup>1</sup> The surname Aschenbrenner belongs to the category of surnames derived from the trade or profession pursued by the initial bearer. In this instance, the name is derived from the German word "asch", meaning ash tree, ashes or embers, and the verb "brennen", meaning to burn. Aschenbrenner means "he who burns ashes." The aschenbrenner made a potash product to be used in glassmaking.<sup>2</sup> There is the suggestion that the ash-burner's craft was also used in the process of smelting iron ore as well. In the Middle Ages, iron ore was smelted in the woods.

Beginning in the 1500s, most surnames were inherited, that is, passed down from father to son. So there were Aschenbrenners who followed other occupations, as well as men with other surnames who were employed as *aschenbrenners* or ash-burners. There were Aschenbrenners who distinguished themselves in other professions as early as the sixteenth century. Michael Aschenbrenner was an apothecary who served in the court of Johann Georg (1525-1598), Elector of Brandenburg and Duke of Prussia, in the late 1500s.<sup>3</sup> Christian Heinrich Aschenbrenner was a violinist, composer, and court conductor. He was born in Altstettin, Germany in 1654 and died in Jena, Germany in 1732.<sup>4</sup>

Numerous baptisms, engagements, marriages, and deaths for individuals with the Aschenbrenner surname are found in the parish records of the Maria Hilf Church in Markt Eisenstein, Bohemia (now Železná Ruda, Czech Republic).<sup>5</sup> These begin with the first entries in the book in 1694. In this register, the surname had a number of variations in spelling: Aschenbrenner, Aschenbrener, Aschenprener, Aschnprener, Aschprener. For most, the occupation given is other than "ash-burner." Wolfgang Aschenbrener and Johann Aschenbrenner were two men who came to the Eisenstein valley from Eisenhammer, near Regensburg, Bavaria just before 1700. Both were listed as *bauers* (farmers) in the church records. People with other surnames worked as aschenbrenners (ash-burners) by trade in the valley. In the Bavarian-Bohemian borderlands, local glassworks employed these men to fell and burn the trees in the forest to make potash for glassmaking. In the process, they created fertile farmland. This encouraged the development of agriculture in the Böhmerwald and the migration of farmers to the area.

Variations in the spelling of the surname in the United States include: Aschenbrenner, Aschenbrener, and Ashenbrener. Of course, there is even more variety in the spelling of the name in census records and other public documents; people unfamiliar with German often find the name difficult to spell.

<sup>1</sup> Powell, Kimberly. "German Surnames – Meanings and Origins." *Genealogy. About.com*. Web 25 June 2014.

<sup>2</sup> "Germanic Genealogy: Old Occupations." *German Languages About.com* Web 25 June 2014.

<sup>3</sup> Janssen, Johannes. *History of the German People after the Close of the Middle Ages*. Vol. XV. London: Dryden House, 1910.

<sup>4</sup> Hughes, R., D. Taylor, and R. Kerr. *The Biographical Dictionary of Musicians*. Garden City, NY: Blue Ribbon Books, 1940.

<sup>5</sup> Häupler, Hans-Joachim. *Die Personenstandsmatrikel Des Catholischen Pharrantes Markt Eisenstein 1694-1810*, (Parish Records for the Catholic Church of Markt Eisenstein) Sauerlach, Oktober, 1990.