

# A Perspective on our Surname

By James Spainhour

Back when surnames were created, they often were coined to reflect the person's occupation or their place of residence. Back when I took a college class in the German Language, my professor asked me if I knew anything about the origin of my surname. When I replied "no" he offered his conclusion:

*Your name is two words, the first of which probably began as "span or spahn", and which translates as "chip". The second word is "hauer" which translates as "carver". So, perhaps one of your ancestors was noted as one who carves figures from small pieces of wood or as one who chipped wood to a special shape, such as shingles for roofing on a cabin. The professor pronounced the first word in the name so that it would rhyme with "man", and the second so that it would rhyme with "shower".*

The German name in America is spelled **Spohnhauer**, rhyming with "swan".

So, how did the sound of the "a" get from rhyming with "man" to rhyming with "main"? I am told that many German words have such a difference in pronunciation between Germany and Switzerland. So in Germany we have **Spahnauer** and **Spänhauer** – these sound the same, with the first part rhyming with "man".

And in Switzerland, we have **Spänhauer** and **Spaenhauer**, which both are pronounced alike, but different than in Germany -- with the first word rhyming with "spain".

In Holland, the sound of the Swiss name was recorded for the emigrant ships as **Spoenhauer**.

English Clerks would spell the Swiss pronunciation as **Spainhower**.

How about other spellings?

If Spoenhauer is hand-written, it might easily be read as **Spoonhauer**, then written that way or as **Spoonhower** or **Spoonhour**.

If Spänhauer is written down without the umlaut – **Spanhauer**, then its first part might have the German sound (rhyming with "man") or a third "a" sound, making it rhyme with "swan" – and this sounds very close to **Sponhauer**.

Some of the Swiss folks who were living in German-speaking sections of early North Carolina did not like the way their name (Spainhower) was pronounced by English speaking neighbors. The second word was pronounced too slowly, making it sound like three words – "spain – how -were", rather than with a "rolling single syllable" rhyming with "shower". To remedy that, some changed the spelling to **Spainhour**. That made the English speaking neighbors pronounce the second word more quickly, but they also silenced the sound of the "h", making the name sound like "Spain" "our".

Then, somehow, a few families who were early migrants into Kentucky, caused a "d" to be added to the end, creating a sizeable number of cousins who spell the name as **Spainhoward**.

Some of the Spainhour/Spainhower families who lived in Indiana, then migrated to Arkansas and Texas, changed the spelling of their surname to **Spainhouer** – apparently to distinguish themselves as "different" from some of their "cousins" which they did not like.

The Dutch spelling of Spoenhauer generally disappeared after a couple of generations in America, but the other 14 spellings are all still in use.

In addition to all this, the name on birth records, marriage records, census records, death records, and gravestones, may be spelled differently for the same individual.

Clearly, over the years, it's now how you spell it – just pronounce it correctly!