

The Many Surnames of Matilda Zimmer of Marshall County, Indiana

Researcher: Tyler Finlayson

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Introduction

Matilda Amelia Zimmer was born in the small town of Bremen in Marshall County, Indiana on November 22, 1860.¹ Census records from 1870 - 1940 suggest she spent her entire life in the county, dying in the county seat of Plymouth on May 26, 1940.² Although Matilda always lived in Marshall County, she appears in family and public records between 1870 - 1940 with four different surnames - "Zimmer", "Beyler", "Miller" and "Smith" - making it difficult at times to research and document her life.

By focusing on civil registration records in Marshall County, Indiana from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it may be possible to answer the question: *Why does Matilda Zimmer appear in family and public records with four different and distinct surnames over the course of her life?*

Research and Techniques

Civil registration record searches were focused primarily on Marshall County, Indiana vital records. The majority of these records were obtained through *FamilySearch.org* and *Ancestry.com*; however, some 20th century records had not yet been made available online. Those records were retrieved directly from the Marshall County Clerk's office via phone and email.

U.S. federal census records obtained through *FamilySearch.org* helped narrow the time frames during which various surname changes occurred; and records from the family's personal collection provided additional context for surname changes and timing.

Discussion

Beginning with the 1870 U.S. federal census for Marshall County, Indiana, Matilda Zimmer appears as a 9 year old child living in the household of her father and mother, George and Dorothe Zimmer.³ Their surname is incorrectly spelled "Cemmer" on the census, likely the result of their Alsatian accent. Matilda appears in her parents' household again in the 1880 U.S.

¹ "Indiana, U.S. Death Certificates, 1899-2011," database with images, *Ancestry.com* (https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/60716/images/45232_356156-01213 : accessed 02 December 2022), database entry for Matilda A Smith, died Marshall County, 26 May 1940; citing "Indiana State Board of Health. Death Certificates, 1900–2011. Microfilm. Indiana Archives and Records Administration, Indianapolis, Indiana."

² Ibid.

³ "1870 United States Federal Census," database, *FamilySearch.org* (<http://www.familysearch.org> : accessed 02 December 2022), entry for Matilda Zimmer, German, Marshall, Indiana.

federal census, this time as a young woman of 19. Her surname is correctly spelled “Zimmer” on this census.⁴

Her surname changes for the first time a year later during the winter of 1881. A civil marriage record from the Marshall County clerk indicates she married Moses Beyler on January 27, 1881.⁵ Like Matilda, Moses was a lifelong resident of Marshall County, Indiana. He was born January 10, 1859 in Bremen and died September 12, 1895, fourteen years after his marriage to Matilda.⁶ His obituary reads, in part: “He leaves a wife, four children, a father, mother and scores of relatives and friends to mourn his death.”⁷ Although not mentioned by name, Matilda is the wife who is referenced.

A widow in the fall of 1895, Matilda Beyler doesn’t appear in any records again until early 1898 when she marries her second husband, Henry Miller. Her surname changes for the second time on January 19, 1898 when she becomes Matilda Miller.⁸ The civil marriage record from the county clerk’s office refers to her as “Tillie Beiler”, using a nickname for “Matilda” and an incorrectly spelled version of “Beyler”.⁹ Henry’s marriage to Matilda was his second as well; his first wife, Caroline Keenley, died in 1895.¹⁰ Henry and Matilda next appear together on the 1900 U.S. federal census, this time with her four children from her first marriage.¹¹ The children appear with their father’s surname “Beyler” – “Alvin E Beyler”, “Ada E Beyler”, “Lillie A Beyler” and “Ruth B Beyler”.¹² The “Beyler” surname on the census helps confirm that the “Tillie Beiler” who married Henry Miller in 1898 is in fact the same Matilda Zimmer who married Moses Beyler almost two decades earlier. Henry Miller died on October 18, 1925 at the age of 71.¹³

⁴ “1880 United States Federal Census,” database, *FamilySearch.org* (<http://www.familysearch.org> : accessed 02 December 2022), entry for Matilda Zimmer, German, Marshall, Indiana.

⁵ Marshall County, Indiana, Marriage Records, Moses Beyler-Matilda Zimmer, 27 January 1881; image, “Indiana Marriages, 1811-2019,” *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HT-6FM3-BVX> : accessed 02 December 2022).

⁶ Tippecanoe River Chapter DAR, *Bremen Cemetery*, database with images (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:3Q9M-CSGD-13M6-V> : accessed 02 December 2022), entry for Moses Beyler.

⁷ *The Plymouth Republican* (Plymouth, Indiana), 19 September 1895, obituary Moses Beyler; photocopy provided by Marshall County Historical Society, Plymouth, IN, without identification of page or column.

⁸ Marshall County, Indiana, Marriage Records, Henry Miller-Matilda Beyler, 19 January 1898; image, “Indiana Marriages, 1811-2019,” *FamilySearch* (<https://www.familysearch.org/ark:/61903/3:1:S3HY-6F79-3G8> : accessed 02 December 2022).

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ancestry, Find A Grave*, database with images (<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/181866510/caroline-miller> : accessed 02 December 2022), memorial 181866510, Caroline Miller (1860 - 1895), Oak Hill Cemetery, Plymouth, Marshall County, Indiana; gravestone photograph by Verkins.

¹¹ “1900 United States Federal Census,” database, *FamilySearch.org* (<http://www.familysearch.org> : accessed 02 December 2022), entry for Matilda Miller, Plymouth, Marshall, Indiana.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ “Indiana, U.S. Death Certificates, 1899-2011,” database with images, *Ancestry.com* (https://www.ancestry.com/imageviewer/collections/60716/images/44494_350102-00223 : accessed 02 December 2022), database entry for Henry Miller, died Marshall County, 18 Oct 1925; citing “Indiana State Board of Health. Death Certificates, 1900–2011. Microfilm. Indiana Archives and Records Administration, Indianapolis, Indiana.”

A widow once again in the fall of 1925, Matilda Miller next appears in the 1930 U.S. federal census in Marshall County.¹⁴ She is 69 years old and widowed, living alone as the head of household. Her name appears as “Matilda Miller” on the record.¹⁵ Shortly thereafter she marries her third husband, Charles Swain Smith, and her surname changes for a third and final time on August 11, 1930.¹⁶ The civil marriage record from the Marshall County clerk’s office refers to her as “Tillie Miller”,¹⁷ using the same nickname from her 1898 marriage record. The 1930 civil marriage record confirms her identity, listing her father’s name as “George Cimmer”, highlighting that she’d been married “twice before”, and describing her previous husband’s death year as “1925”.¹⁸ Matilda and Charles appear together again on the 1940 U.S. federal census as husband and wife,¹⁹ shortly before Matilda’s death in May 1940.²⁰ Her county death certificate displays her name as “Matilda A Smith” and her father’s surname as “Zimmer”;²¹ and on her gravestone her name is also written “Matilda A Smith”.²²

Conclusion

Taken together, civil registration records - primarily vital marriage and death records - track the progression of Matilda’s surname from “Zimmer” to “Beyler” and eventually “Miller” and “Smith”. These various surname changes appear to be the result of three different marriages over the course of her life, each marriage and subsequent name change the result of a previous spouse’s death.

Although civil registration records paint a fairly definitive picture of Matilda’s surname changes over time, it might be helpful to find an obituary or family record to further confirm the progression. This may require an in-person visit to the Marshall County Historical Museum in Marshall County, Indiana, where newspaper clippings and obituaries from the 1940s are housed on microfilm.

¹⁴ “1930 United States Federal Census,” database, *FamilySearch.org* (<http://www.familysearch.org> : accessed 02 December 2022), entry for Matilda Miller, Plymouth, Marshall, Indiana.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Marshall County, Indiana, Marriage Records, Charles Smith-Matilda Miller, 11 August 1930; photocopy provided by Marshall County Clerk’s Office, Plymouth.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ “1940 United States Federal Census,” database, *FamilySearch.org* (<http://www.familysearch.org> : accessed 02 December 2022), entry for Matilda Smith, Plymouth, Marshall, Indiana.

²⁰ “Indiana, U.S. Death Certificates, 1899-2011,” database entry for Matilda A Smith, 1940, Marshall County.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Ancestry, *Find A Grave*, database with images

(<https://www.findagrave.com/memorial/96111906/matilda-a-smith>

: accessed 02 December 2022), memorial 96111906, Matilda A Smith (1860 - 1940), Bremen Municipal Cemetery, Bremen, Marshall County, Indiana; gravestone photograph by Nancy.