How Do You Pronounce "MUENCH"?

By Karl Muench\*

Muenches get the question often: how do we pronounce our name?

For one who speaks German, the reply is obvious: a German dipthong, “ue.” However, when English-speaking American strangers ask the pronunciation question, they are often puzzled by the dipthong answer.

The issue is especially prevalent where I live, in Miami, with its many Spanish speakers. Confronted with the diphthong, they are inclined to pronounce each vowel independently: "moo-ench." Some say, "moonch." Others simply go totally to the “u” side of the dipthong, resulting in "munch," which some Midwesterners who possess our surname use today, often to the misfortune of schoolchildren who get labelled with unfortunate nicknames such as “Munchos” and “Munchkin.”

As a non-speaker of German, I must improvise. My personal answer is, "Minch, rhymes with pinch!" That gets a laugh.

But now I can cite the authority of my great-great grandfather, Friedrich Muench. At least once, in an important context, he introduced himself as “Minch.” The story is told by Daniel M. Grissom in "Personal Recollections of Distinguished Missourians -- James S. Rollins" (*The Missouri Historical Review* XVIII, #4, 546, July 1924).

In 1860 Rollins, a Free Soiler on the slavery issue, was engaged in his first race for Congress, opposing John B. Henderson, an equally qualified speaker and politician and "sound" supporter of slavery, which was then the more popular qualification for public office in Missouri. Rollins needed to deflect the charge of being "unsound" on slavery but wanted the support of the numerous Germans in Warren and Saint Charles counties, led by Friedrich Muench, also an avowed Free Soiler.

Even though Rollins’ views against slavery were not as fervent as Muench’s — Rollins would later vote against the 13th Amendment to end slavery twice before changing his vote on a personal appeal from President Abraham Lincoln — it made sense that Muench would support Rollins in this pivotal election with the Civil War brewing. In addition to his free-soil orientation, Rollins lived in Columbia and was known as the father of the University of Missouri, which had to appeal to Muench’s fervent support for education.

Rollins and Henderson were “leaders of acknowledged statesmanship and eloquence, tact and courage,” according to the *History of Boone County, Missouri* (Western Historical Co., 1882, p. 397-400) and echoed in a story attributed to Walter Williams, former dean of the University of Missouri School of Journalism (Stevens, Walter B., *Missouri: The Center State, 1821-1915.* St. Louis: S.J. Clarke, 1915.) According to the Boone County *History*, Warren and St. Charles were the two counties with a large German or freesoil vote in an otherwise majority pro-slavery district, so the challenge for the two candidates was to set a winning course between “the Scylla of freesoilism on one hand” and “the Charybdis of Pro-slaveryism on the other.”

In a speech to a mainly German audience in Marthasville, Mo., Rollins was completely conciliatory to the freesoil cause. After the speech, Muench spoke at length with Rollins, and, unbeknownst to Rollins, wrote of his support for the Columbia candidate in a letter to a German newspaper in Hannibal. Shortly after Friedrich Muench’s letter was published, during a joint debate with Rollins, Henderson accused Rollins of bargaining with Friedrich Muench to get the German vote.

Here’s where two differing versions of the story make the situation a little murky. One version relates that Henderson said Rollins had met with a German-freesoiler named “Minch.” When Rollins denied it, Henderson read an English translation of the letter by a friendly newspaper as proof that Rollins was too cozy with freesoilers, an assertion that drew great cheers from his supporters.

Rollins asked Henderson to read the name of the author, and Henderson replied, “Frederick Minch.” “Spell it,” Rollins said, and Henderson replied, “M-u-e-n-c-h.”

“The name is ‘Munch,’ not ‘Minch,’” Rollins responded. “I know *him*; he is a gentleman and a patriot and a man of sense, which I fear Henderson is not” (*History of Boone County* and *Missouri, the Center State*).

In the Grissom version of the story, Henderson names the writer of the letter as “Munch,” and Rollins responds: "I do not know the man Mr. Henderson is talking about. I do not know ...a man in Warren County named ‘Munch.’ The only person in Warren County I am on terms of correspondence with is my friend, Mr. Frederick Minch, a most estimable and honorable citizen of Missouri.” (*The Missouri Historical Review*)

The crowd accepted Rollins’ statement without suspecting that Minch and Munch were the same person. Rollins won the ensuing election by a majority of 254 Germans of Warren County and won his home county, Boone, with a majority of nearly 500 votes.

I choose to lend greater credence to the version reported in the *Missouri Historical Review* and because our family has traditionally pronounced the surname, “Minch.” Rollins’ hearing of "Minch" from Friedrich Muench in 1860 is all the support I need to answer my inquirers, "Minch, rhymes with pinch." And if Rollins switched the pronunciation for political expediency, we can certainly forgive him for doing the wrong thing in support of the right cause.

*\*(Editorial assistance and some content provided by Jim Muench, Karl’s nephew.)*