

The Migration of the Russian-Germans to Kansas

Note From the Editor: This article is being presented in four sections as monthly features for May, June, July and August 2004. It was written by Norman E. Saul and first published in the Spring, 1974 (Vol. 40, No. 1) of the Kansas Collection: Kansas Historical Quarterlies. It has been digitized with permission of the Kansas State Historical Society. Endnotes to the article will appear in Part 4. Mr. Saul was reared on a farm in Indiana, received his B.A. degree from Indiana University and his doctorate from Columbia University. He has published widely on Russian-American relations and has served as a faculty member of the History Department, University of Kansas. Although the article refers at times to the Swiss-Mennonite, it also provides a much broader perspective of Russian-German immigration into Kansas.

Part III "Settling In"

KANSAS AND THE RUSSIAN-GERMANS

The first year of life in Kansas set a pattern for the Russian-Germans that would last for two generations and to some extent survives to the present day. In order to analyze this critical period one must examine how the people already resident in the state greeted the new arrivals as well as how the Russian-Germans adapted to a country with different social, economic and political basis from Russia. What occurred was an interaction of factors that resulted in the community consciousness and exclusiveness being preserved in what one normally thinks of as a much more open society.

The language barrier was an important cause of the initial separation of Russian-Germans from other Kansans. Only a few could speak or understand English within the largest blocks of Mennonites and Roman Catholics, such as the Alexanderwohl community and the Volga Germans who arrived at Victoria in 1876. For the most part they had to rely upon local interpreters, but probably none of those could understand the conversation low German spoken by the immigrants among themselves. The language difficulty made it impossible to ordinary Kansans to carry on a conversation with the new arrivals, but it did little to impede business negotiations, in part because of the concern of railroad agents, but also because of the experience that most of these people had in Russia with non-German speaking neighbors. To the Russian-Germans, a language problem was nothing new, no was it unexpected.

Unlike most other immigrants to Kansas, the Russian-Germans generally arrived in separate groups, often by the trainload. Debarking at depots in Topeka, Newton, Hays, and Victoria, they caused something of a sensation and attracted a great deal of curiosity. The Mennonites at the bridge shops in Topeka found themselves looked upon as animals in a zoo.

They were visited on Sunday by a great crowd of people, which, it may be suggested, must be somewhat annoying, as it would be to any one to have their domicile invaded without leave by a curious, gaping crowd of strangers. [39]

But newspaper descriptions must have been partly responsible for this kind of turnout. For its initial reports the Commonwealth relied on the New York Herald's account of the arrival of Russian-German Mennonites.

They were all Germans, but having lived all their lives in Russia, their German has a curious Russian flavor, which did not at all improve the harsh Teutonic sounds. They were dressed in their primitive, homespun garments, which were usually of coarse wool, and of the most primitive style. Our crack tailors would have been puzzled at the droll appearance of these ancient dresses. The women and children the young ones were all consuming huge pieces of bread and butter with a rapidity which argued well for their digestion had funny old handkerchiefs tied round their heads, and certainly no Broadway milliner ever supplied one of the quaint bonnets which the fair Mennonite beauties wore. [40]

At every step of the road the Russian-Germans attracted attention by their number and appearance.

For several days our streets and vacant grounds (in Newton) were alive with them, and they appeared to make themselves at home at once and prepare for business. A great many of those who brought no teams or implements with them, supplied themselves here, and a surplus team, wagon or cow is now hard to be found. [41]

The Hays City Sentinel described the arrival of the first group of Volga Germans, under the heading "Mennonites":

The whole outfit, wagons, horses, dogs, cows, women and children of the men folks of the Russians, who had taken claims in this county, arrived last Wednesday night, and a queer looking set they are. . . .

They are strong looking animals, and seem capable of any work, especially the women, who seem to perform as much menial labor as the children, which are numerous. It is refreshing to see one of these females with a small child slung to her in a pouch, in very much the same manner in which the American Indians carry their young, harnessed to a yoke with a bucket of water at each end get down to business! [42]

And later that summer as immigration in Ellis county began to reach the level of an invasion, the Sentinel was even more condescending:

THE NEW COMERS

They are here; they are there; and at every corner they may be seen gathering, jabbering about this and that no one knows what. Their presence is unmistakable; for where they are there is also something else,--a smell so pungent and potent as to make a strong man weak. What the material is, from which that smell is manufactured, no one seems to know; but there is a striking similarity of opinion as to the existence of something. It is as penetrating as a west wind, and everything is pervaded with it. . . . Even now our olfactories are protesting; and to our knowledge, there isn't a Russian within twenty rods of us. [43]

But the Sentinel also noted redeeming features: "One of the pleasing features of the Russian presence in our town, is their singing. All have good voices, and none have any hesitancy in

displaying their vocal accomplishments." [44]

Such personal notes were part of the journalism of the day, especially in small rural towns, but even in the pages of the more urbane Topeka Commonwealth can be found items betraying prejudice: "If any one wants to read a history of the Mennonites, the most important is said to bear the simple and pleasing title of 'Gescheidens der Doopsgesindnen in Friesland, Overyssele en Oostvriesland,' etc., and is written by the eminent author, Blaufot Ten Cate." "Six hundred is good many nites, but we can stand a few more." "Fred Fensky says a Russian can shovel more pure dirt in a day than a white man can in two." [45]

But the overall impression in the press is that Kansas is lucky to have these people. The Commonwealth described the Mennonites before they arrived as follows:

They are the most peaceable foreigners that arrive on our shores. In their colonies there are no quarrelings, no fightings, no murders, no lawsuits, no lawyers, no juries, no courts, no police, no officers or governors; and crimes even of the smallest character are of the rarest occurrence. The expense of their government is trifling, because they have no government. [46]

In Hays, the Sentinel, for all of its other real or pretended sensitivities, corrected its original impression that the "new comers" were Mennonites as follows:

The Russians who have settled in Ellis county, on Big Timber and north fork of Big Creek, resemble their Mennonite countrymen except in religion, they begin Roman Catholics. Like the Mennonites they are industrious, can live in a frugal manner, readily conform to our customs and manners, and before long we will be obliged to class them as among our best citizens. Encourage them to come. [47]

And several examples of Kansas hospitality can be cited. For example, during the stay of the largest group of Mennonites in Topeka, the city omnibuses were placed at their disposal for a grand tour of the city on September 28 that included a reception by the governor and other state officials. [48]

Even this display seemed to go hand in hand with the knowledge that these people from Russia were not going to stay in town long but that they had money to spend on supplies before their departure. Without these inducements, the attitude of Topekans might have resembled that shown by the Commonwealth to a hundred Negroes from Tennessee who arrived in the spring of 1876:

If these people will only go into the parts of the state where lands are cheap or where homesteads can be procured, instead of trying to live in the towns and cities, they will prove a valuable addition to our populations. There is plenty of room in Kansas, but little of it about our towns and cities for those who must depend upon their labor exclusively. [49]

Money, then, was another factor that eased the transition, improved the hospitality, and at the same time made independence and exclusiveness easier. They had the cash to buy railroad land rather than scramble for remaining homesteads. By dealing in volume and paying cash, they got a better price and other benefits from a happy railroad management. The Santa Fe provided free

transportation for the Alexanderwohl community, not only for the trip from Topeka to Newton, but also for themselves and supplies for the remainder of the year. In Victoria complaints arose over the granting by the Kansas Pacific of a 50 percent discount on freight to a Volga German grocer. [50] The railroads also provided as part of the package, free land for churches and schools, and in the case of some of the Mennonite groups temporary housing en route and at the places of settlement. The Alexanderwohl immigrants, for example, lived during the winter of 1874-1875 in two large "immigrant houses" that were built 15 miles north of Newton near the present church buildings. [51] And another important contribution of the railroads was a supply of seed wheat for the first year.

Ready cash made it possible for the Russian-Germans to get a substantial start with horses, livestock, implements, and buildings. In this respect they had a much easier time than the average homesteader in Kansas. Some were able to contract the construction of homes and hire labor to plow the virgin prairie, while they supervised, shopped for implements, and made other arrangements. Community action produced a large bulk order of Russian threshing stones from a nearby quarry. At Gnadenu the Russian-Germans lived in distinctive A-frame type dwellings initially, but within a few years these were either abandoned or converted to farm buildings. [52] Some built Russian-style adobe houses themselves, a few of which survive around Hillsboro and Buhler, while most settled down in the standard American frame house, erected for them by local builders.

It is also true that among the Russian-Germans were several people of considerable wealth, and their prestige and influence helped others in the community. They assisted particularly in the negotiations with railroad agents and local officials, in planning community buildings, in establishing mills and lumberyards, and in making loans to the less fortunate. Notable among the Mennonites were Bernard Warkentin and David Goertz of Halstead, Jacob Funk, and Jacob Wiebe. Among the Volga Germans were the Dreilings and Brungarts of Herzog and John Jacob Krug of the Landon creek Lutheran settlement. Perhaps the richest of all, at least in anticipated largess, was Andreas Meyer of Katherinenstadt, whose cash holding were estimated at \$700,000 upon arrival. Though greatly exaggerated, Meyer's wealth did assist his fellow Russian-Germans and provide the capitol to purchase five sections from the Kansas Pacific and set up a lumberyard. [53] But the wealth of the Russian-Germans was exaggerated at the time and only large in comparison with that of an average American homesteader. Frugality and care in making purchases made dollars go far. Many were quite poor upon arrival and other spent all they had in the initial investments. [54] On the whole the Volga Germans had fewer resources than those from South Russia, though they were able to benefit from the Kansas Pacific's policy of delaying title claims and thereby avoid paying taxes for several years. [55]

Beside financial leaders, the immigrants from Russia also included people of intellectual stature, who were interested in preserving the cultural and religious heritage. They had been active in promoting emigration from Russia for the purpose, and it is no surprise to note how quickly schools, churches, and even printing presses were founded in the Russian-German settlements. The inauguration of a German newspaper in Halstead in 1875 by David Goertz is a remarkable achievement at a time when many Kansas towns of that size did not have a newspaper. [56] And the fact that several German-language newspapers were being published in Russian-German areas in the 1880's and 1890's attests to the high literacy rate of the first and second generations.

But more important this self-sufficiency slowed the adoption of English language and American customs and helped retain community integrity.

Schools and churches were obviously great strengths to the Russian-Germans. Settling on large block of railroad land and buying up or homesteading the intervening sections, they were able to monopolize contiguous areas and determine the religious and social institutions to be located there. The simple, well-kept churches of the Newton-Marion-McPherson region and the spire of the Volga German villages of Ellis county are lasting tributes to that heritage. Community bonds were also fostered by the land tenure system brought with them from Russia, concentrating homes in a village pattern with neatly arranged farm strips on the nearby sections, or, as was more common with the Volga Germans, living in larger villages but commuting to the fields either on a daily or weekly basis. This was a distinctive "un-American" practice, preserved still to some extent, especially in Ellis county. This village environment was a major factor in the Russian-German ability to retain their language and culture through the second generation. [57]

With collective strength and with individual industry and leadership, the Russian-Germans were able to fulfill successfully the prophecy of the Commonwealth:

From the Cottonwood river to the Little Arkansas, a scope of magnificent prairie country fifty miles in length, is now one colony, composed of the thriftiest and most intelligent class of foreigners that ever landed upon our shores; and "in three years "to use the language of one of their elders" that ocean of grass will be transformed into an ocean of waving fields of grain, just as we left our Molotschna colony." Kansas will be to America what the country of the Black sea and Sea of Azov is now to Europe, her wheat field. [58]

Ironically, 100 years later Kansas had also become the wheat field of Russia.

End of Part III of IV

ENDNOTES

NORMAN E. SAUL, reared on a farm in Indiana, received his B. A. degree from Indiana University, and his doctorate from Columbia University. He has written a book on Russian interest in the Mediterranean and several magazine articles on Russian-American relations, and although a member of the history department faculty at the University of Kansas, he is presently an exchange professor at University College, Dublin, Ireland.

[39] **The commonwealth, September 24, 1874**

[40] **Ibid., September 10, 1874.**

[41] **Newton Kansan, October 15, 1874.**

[42] **Hays City Sentinel, March 1, 1876.**

[43] *Ibid.*, August 16, 1876.

[44] *Ibid.*

[45] *The Commonwealth*, September 10, 1874; February 13, 1876.

[46] *Ibid.*, July 29, 1874.

[47] *Hays City Sentinel*, April 5, 1876.

[48] *The Commonwealth*, September 29, 1874.

[49] *Ibid.*, March 23, 1876. *The Commonwealth* also noted (March 29): "It is much less remarkable that the Mennonites of far-off Russia should have heard of Kansas than it is that the colored people of the rural districts of Tennessee should have got hold of the same piece of information. Special pains was [sic] taken to induce the Mennonite settlers to come here, in fact all Europe has been traversed by active and intelligent agents, and a flood of reading matter about Kansas has been distributed; added to this, thousands upon thousands of letters are yearly written from settlers in Kansas to their friends beyond the ocean. The poor farm hand in Giles or Maury or Davidson counties in Tennessee has, as a rule, no Kansas friends to write to him, and none of the land grant railroads extend an invitation to him in the shape of a pamphlet, map or circular."

[50] *Hays City Sentinel*, March 9, 1877.

[51] *Newton Kansan*, October 8, 1874.

[52] C. B. Schmidt published an illustrated pamphlet in 1878 that captured the life of the early Russian-German Mennonite villages. See C. B. Schmidt, "Kansas Mennonite Settlements, 1877," translated by Cornelius Krahn, *Mennonite Life*, v. 25 (April, 1970), pp. 51-58; illustrations, pp. 65-79. In a later edition, probably published in 1881, most of the A-frame dwellings at Gnadenau had disappeared only one was left and that is apparently a barn. *Neuestes von Kansas und Seinen Hilfsquellen mit Besonderer Berücksichtigung der Ländereien der Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fé Eisenbahn* (Hamburg, T. F. Richter, n.d.). A copy is in the regional history division of the University of Kansas Library.

[52] *Hays City Sentinel*, September 27, November 15, 1876, and March 9, 1877.

[54] Of the nine Alexanderwohl "villages," one, Gnadenfeld, consisted of poorer families, many of whom worked on other farms or in nearby mills.

[55] Paul Wallace Gates, *Fifty Million Acres: Conflicts Over Kansas Land Policy, 1854-1890* (Ithaca, N.Y., Cornell University Press, 1954), pp. 264-267.

[56] *The Commonwealth*, November 11, 1876.

[57] *The Kansas City reporter*, covering the foreign settlement areas of Kansas in 1911, contrasted the resistance to adaptation of the Russian-Germans to others such as French, Swiss, and Bohemians. "Foreign Feet in Kansas Furrows: The Russians," *Kansas City (Mo.) Star*, December 17, 1911, p. 4B.

[58] *The Commonwealth*, October 15, 1874.