

The German Heritage of Kansas: An Introduction
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As one travels throughout the state of Kansas, one cannot help noticing numerous place names which might lead one to believe that one is, indeed, not in Kansas anymore: Humboldt in Allen County, Bremen in Marshall County, Stuttgart in Phillips County, Marienthal in Wichita County, Windthorst in Ford County, Olmitz in Barton County, Olpe in Lyons County, Bern in Nemaha County, and many others. Whether named for famous German researchers (Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt), German political leaders of the nineteenth century (Ludwig Windthorst), cities and towns in Germany (Bremen, Stuttgart and Olpe), the capital of Switzerland (Bern), a city in the Austrian Empire (Olmütz), or a German colony in the Russian Empire (Marienthal), each of these Kansas communities is a living testament to the massive influx of German-speaking settlers who found new homes in Kansas during the period from the mid-1850s to the 1880s.

These place names also reflect the diverse background of those German-speaking settlers: They came to Kansas from throughout the German-speaking area of Central Europe, including Switzerland, Austria, Luxembourg, Alsace, Lorraine, Bohemia, Moravia, Hungary, Galicia, and Bucovina as well as from the states and regions (Bavaria, Prussia, Württemberg, Westphalia, Hannover, Saxony, the Rhineland, etc.) normally associated with Germany itself. Significantly for Kansas, they also came from German colonies in the vast Russian Empire: from those established in the 1760s along the Volga River and from those established beginning in 1789 by Mennonites near the Black Sea.

But many settlers of German ancestry did not come to Kansas directly from their European homelands. They came to Kansas from German settlements and communities in the eastern United States. Some came as part of concerted attempts to establish German cultural enclaves in Kansas by German groups in Chicago (Eudora in Douglas County) or Cincinnati (Windthorst in Ford County). Some came as individuals and families seeking a better life from Missouri, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio and other states. A very large number came as part of the westward migration of the Pennsylvania Dutch or Pennsylvania Germans who traced their origins to German-speaking settlers in colonial Pennsylvania and who were among the very first white settlers in the Kansas Territory in 1854.

More striking, perhaps, than these German place names are the monuments to the religious faith of the early German settlers in Kansas which cannot help but catch the attention of the traveler through Kansas. In nearly every county one sees from afar the steeples of the churches built by a rich and diverse variety of German and Pennsylvania German religious bodies: St. Fidelis "the Cathedral of the Plains" in Victoria (Ellis County), St. Mark near Colwich (Sedgwick County), St. Mary in St. Benedict (Nemaha County), Immaculate Heart of Mary in Windthorst (Ford County), Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church in Goessel (Marion County), Zion Lutheran Church south of Offerle (Ford/Edwards County), Willow Springs Old German Baptist Brethren Church in southern Douglas County, the Benedictine Abbey in Atchison, and many, many others.

Just as the German settlers in Kansas came from throughout the German-speaking world, they also represented just about every known religious denomination found in the United States in the nineteenth century, including Yiddish-speaking Jewish farming settlements in southwestern Kansas. German Catholics settled throughout Kansas, but established strongholds particularly in the northeastern counties from Atchison and Leavenworth to Seneca, in western Sedgwick County, in Ford and Edwards counties, and in numerous Volga German, Bucovina German and Moravian German parishes in Ellis, Rush and Barton counties. German Lutherans established congregations in many counties, but are especially numerous in the Horseshoe Bend communities of Washington and Marshall counties, in Phillips and Smith counties, and in Lincoln, Mitchell and Russell counties.

Numerous other Protestant denominations Evangelical and Reformed, Evangelical United Brethren, Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians established German congregations in Kansas. Of special interest in Kansas is the large number of congregations reflecting an origin in the Anabaptist movement during the Reformation. German-speaking Mennonites from Russia together with Pennsylvania German and Swiss Mennonites have established a concentrated settlement area extending from Marion County to Reno County. Old Order Amish districts can be found in Reno and Anderson counties. At least five separate branches of the Church of the Brethren (Dunkers) have congregations in Kansas, especially concentrated along the Douglas and Franklin County border. River Brethren colonized Dickinson County in 1879; among these Pennsylvania Germans was the family of future United States President Dwight Eisenhower. The diverse religious heritage of Kansas owes much to these German settlers.

For the student of the German language, however, these German settlements in Kansas offer a window on the full spectrum of German dialects from the Low German dialects spoken from the Dutch border in northern Germany to the Vistula Delta of West Prussia now Poland to the Upper German dialects of Switzerland and Bavaria as well as varieties of German which emerged in colonial settlements, whether in Russia or in Pennsylvania. Many of these dialects have ceased to exist; after one generation in Kansas, many descendants of the first settlers had already assimilated to the dominant English-speaking culture. The anti-German sentiment of two world wars, especially the nearly hysterical efforts against the German language and speakers of that language during the First World War, accelerated the process of assimilation. Most importantly, the break up of our rural communities and the increased mobility of our population since the Second World War have served to nearly eradicate the immigrant languages from the landscape of Kansas.

Today we are faced with the gradual dying out of the last remnants of the German settlement dialects in Kansas. In many areas where German settlement was particularly concentrated and unified the older generations are still quite fluent in their various dialects: Volga German dialects (Deutsch) in Ellis and Russell counties; Low German (Plattdütsch) in Missouri Synod Lutheran settlements in Marshall and Washington counties, Mennonite Low German (Plautdietsch) in Marion, McPherson and Reno counties; Schweitzer dialect (Schweitzerdeutsch) in Moundridge (McPherson County); Swiss German (Bäärntütsch) in Bern (Nemaha County); and Bavarian dialect (Deutsch-Behmisch) in Ellis County.

The major group which continues to teach a German dialect to the younger generation in Kansas are the communities of Old Order Amish. As long as their religion and life-style require the use of standard German in their worship services, they will probably continue to speak Pennsylvania German (Däätisch) in their families and communities. Of course, the incorporation of numerous words and even grammatical features of American English in Pennsylvania German remains an ongoing process. In the last decade migrant farm workers from Mennonite colonies in Mexico have entered the scene in the counties of southwestern Kansas. Here children speak a Mennonite version of Low German (Plautdietsch) as their first language. Only time will tell whether these newest of the German-speaking immigrants to Kansas will establish any cohesive settlements and maintain the German dialect.

For some it may be surprising that nearly 40 percent of Kansans claim German ancestry according to the 1990 United States census. For others, who note that this figure may not include those who claimed Pennsylvania German, Russian German, Austrian or Swiss ancestry, the percentage of "cultural" Germans in Kansas is even larger. Kansas, one might say, benefited from being settled by European-Americans at precisely the period which saw the high-water mark of emigration from German-speaking regions of Europe to the New World. A large number of those immigrants who arrived in the United States between 1850 and 1890 headed to the settlement frontier and during that period the frontier was in Kansas. German immigration to the United States nearly reached one million for the decade of the 1850s and surpassed one million during the 1880s. During the 1870s and 1880s a wave of emigration from German colonies in Russia and from German settlements in the eastern areas of the Austrian Empire came on top of emigration from Germany. By 1880 some 12,000 Russian Germans had settled in Kansas, for instance.

One factor which must be mentioned in the context of German settlement in Kansas is the role played by the railroad companies. Both the Kansas Pacific and the Santa Fe railroads were completing their rail lines across the state during the 1870s. Both companies undertook massive recruitment efforts to attract settlers to the lands available along the railroad lines. Recruitment agents were sent to Europe and even to the German colonies in Russia. In order to entice Germans to Kansas, the Santa Fe promised to establish a German cultural colony called "Germania" which was to be located in the Barton-Rice-Reno-Stafford County area. The colony was to have a German administration and German cultural institutions. The town of Ellinwood in Barton County was to become the center of German culture in Kansas. Today one can still see the strong presence of those early German settlers in Ellinwood with its streets named after prominent Germans although the nineteenth-century German poet Ernst Moritz Arndt has been replaced by John F. Kennedy on one of the streets.

There can be no doubt that Kansas is what it is today as a result of the intermingling of many diverse ethnic groups. Among them the German group represents, historically, the largest of the non-English-speaking groups. Researchers in a variety of fields are beginning to recognize the importance of America's ethnic roots in discovering the complexity of our cultural fabric.