

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 II "The Mennonites Arrive in Kansas"

KANSAS ON THE EVE OF ARRIVAL

Political, religious, and socio-economic turmoil was certainly not alien to Kansas in the 1860's, and at first glance one would wonder why Russian-Germans in search of peace and quiet and a stable economy would move to an area notorious for its lack of law and order and infested with grasshoppers. In general terms the reason can be found in the achievements of that decade. America and Russia were both witnessing rapid population increases, but in the United States land was available and economic progress was remarkable. Kansas changed in the 1860's not only through the establishment of new frontier homesteads, but especially by the development of urban market centers and, in connection with this, the phenomenal advance of railroad construction across the state.

Acts of congress set aside eight and a half million acres of Kansas prairie to promoters on condition that railroads be built through the territory. The successful accomplishment of this task by 1872 gave the two giants, the Kansas Pacific and the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe the right to claim seven million acres in alternate sections 20 miles on both sides of their rights of way. The railroads had not only acquired good agricultural land, but had also contributed to no small degree to the creation of a more civilized urban environment. The change that occurred in the unruly frontier cowtowns was quiet remarkable. For example, one of the wildest of them all, Newton, was quickly tamed by the combined forces of the Santa Fe, the Newton Kansan (beginning publication in 1872), and the Temperance League; a local reporter boasted of the progress achieved by August, 1873, just before a small delegation of Russian-German Mennonites toured the area under the guidance and care of railroad agents. [17] Besides acres and acres of prairie grass, the visitors must have been impressed by the commercial bustle of the towns, the pace of new construction, and the efficiency and determination of both workers and officials.

But why did Russian-Germans choose Kansas over other possibilities? To answer that, perhaps other questions are relevant: what brought C. b. Schmidt and Noble Prentis to Kansas, and what inspired Boston capitalists to stick with a nearly bankrupt venture and pull the Santa Fe out of the 1873 depression?

Kansas was already well advertised by this time, though, of course, not all of the publicity was of a favorable kind. The establishment of the Kansas Immigration Society in 1871, the collection

and publication of information by the State Board of Agriculture, and the promotional activities of local newspapers, in particular by the Topeka Commonwealth, did much to extend and improve the image of the state as a suitable home for immigrants and a profitable place for railroads. [18]

With this encouragement the railroads, particularly the Santa Fe, began a gigantic advertising campaign to sell their recently earned land. They were motivated in the first instance by the need to meet payrolls and pay interest on massive floating debits, thereby avoiding collapse. Boston bakers, Joseph and Thomas Nickerson, in association with Kidder, Peabody and Company, manipulated the debts of the Santa Fe through the squeeze of 1873, while in Topeka, at 6th and Kansas, A. E. Touzalin directed the activities of the rapidly expanding passenger and land departments. [19] In the latter, at the beginning of 1873, Touzalin set up an immigration office, headed by Carl Bernhard Schmidt, a native of Saxony who arrived in Kansas in 1868 and, prior to his joining the Santa Fe, operated a grocery in Lawrence. [20] Schmidt soon established communications with German ethnic groups in the country, and, through Mennonite colonies in other states, learned of the desire of Russian-Germans to emigrate. An American Mennonite leader, Christina Krehbiel, was particularly instrumental in guiding the reconnaissance mission from Russia to Kansas in the summer of 1873. This delegation, which included Jacob Buller and Leonhard Sudermann, looked at land in several Midwestern states, but after their tour of the Santa Fe territory in the Arkansas valley, Schmidt committed them to a preliminary purchase agreement at the end of October. [21]

Railroad land sales went hand in hand with other efforts to sell the state of Kansas. Noble Prentis arrived in Topeka in 1869 to begin a long and distinguished journalistic career. He became well known throughout the region for his feature articles and editorial craftsmanship. It was either Prentis or someone inspired by his example who first brought an awareness of the Russian-German Mennonites to the people of Kansas. The following is an excerpt from the Topeka Blade of November 10, 1873, very much in the Prentis style:

THE RUSSIAN MENNONITES

The Mennonites are a class of citizens that will become more readily Americanized than many of our best classes of foreign citizens. They are liberal in sentiment, frugal and industrious in habits, peaceful from their principle, and can readily be brought to understand and adopt our American manners and customs. We may regard them as one of our very best classes of citizens. Added to this, though this is emphatically the home of the poor man, where all can get homes at a nominal cost, and by frugality, industry and perseverance, almost arrive at a competence; yet it is no disparagement to this class of citizens, nor to our young and growing State, that these settlers are nearly all well off in this world's goods. Few of them have less than \$2,000 or \$3,000, while many are reported to be worth \$10,000, \$20,000 and even more. They will make the beautiful valley of the Arkansas blossom as the rose. [22]

The writer assumes that Russian-Germans are coming to Kansas, that they will be good for the state, and that they have money, the beginning of an emphasis on the wealth of the Russian-Germans that persisted in the press through the 1870's. What began in 1873 was a two-sided publicity campaign, selling Kansas to the Russian-Germans and the Russian-Germans to Kansas.

This kind of exposure of the Russian-Germans prior to their arrival, no doubt assisted by more private and direct pressures from the Santa Fe, contributed to the passage by the Kansas legislature in March, 1874, of an act amending the militia law exempting those who objected on religious grounds from military service upon signing of a simple declaration in the county clerk's office. [23] Soon afterwards David Goertz, a Russian-German Mennonite temporarily residing in Summerfield, Ill., published a pamphlet in German describing the Arkansas valley and including the texts of the new Kansas military exemption provision and the preliminary sale terms. [24] Most likely the emigrants did not receive any copies prior to departure from Russia, but they probably obtained them along the route before their arrival in Kansas.

THE MOVE

During the winter and spring of 1874 the findings of the Mennonite delegation to the United States circulated through South Russia. The Krimmer Mennonite Brethren, the Alexanderwohl church, and other groups of Swiss-Volynian Mennonites living in Russian Poland prepared to leave for America. They were able to sell their farms, with crops in the field, at good prices to other Mennonites, and the sale of meeting houses, shares of mutual insurance funds, and other community property provided additional sources of funds. Packing personal belongings in trunks, baskets, sacks, etc., they made their way by caravans to the nearest railroad connection and from there by train to Odessa, the transfer point for the trip across Europe to Hamburg, and from there they sailed by ship to New York. Arrangements for the mass transit were made by railway and shipping agents in Odessa and Hamburg.

IF YOU WANT A FARM OR HOME

"THE BEST THING IN THE WEST"

Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe
RAILROAD
LANDS

IN SOUTHWEST KANSAS.



GOOD SOIL FOR WHEAT, CORN AND FRUIT.

The Best Stock Country in the World.

Or to

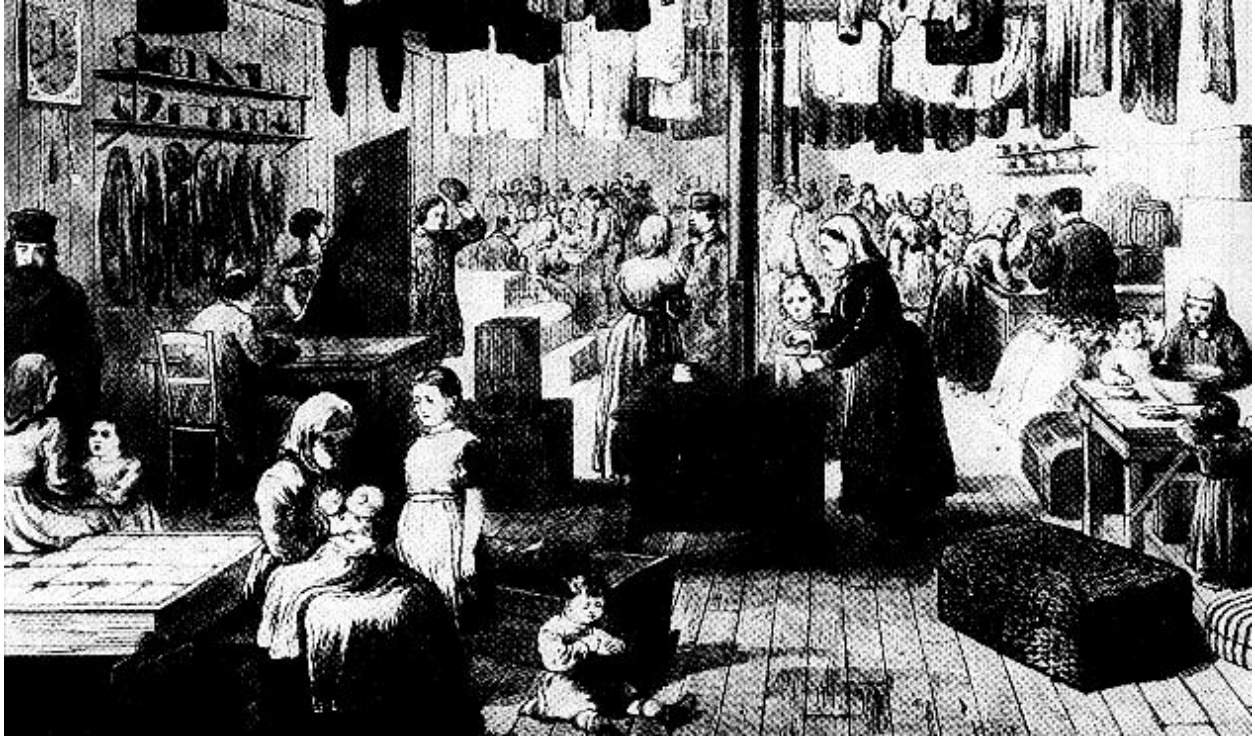
For Full Information apply to

Agent,

LAND COMMISSIONER,

A. T. & N. F. R. R., Topeka, Kas.

An advertising poster of the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe railroad in the 1870's telling the world of the good railroad land to be had "in southwest Kansas."



The interior of one of the temporary immigrant houses provided at Alexanderwohl, and Gnadenau, Marion county.



A public well, located between two of the houses. The sketches are from Frank Leslie's Illustrated Newspaper, New York, March 20, 1875.



CARL BERNHARD SCHMIDT, a German-speaking Santa Fe railroad land agent, who did much to encourage the coming of the Russian-Germans to Kansas.

The first group of around 800, composed mostly of the Krimmer Brethren but including some Swiss-Voynian Mennonites, departed home in June and arrived in New York in late July, a journey of about five weeks by cart, train, and ship, which cost each family around 250 rubles (\$200). [25] Staying in New York only long enough to change rubles for dollars, most of the Russian-German Mennonites stopped along the route with American Mennonites in Indiana and Illinois. Only 200 were at first expected to settle in Kansas. A few families arrived in Marion county in the second week of August and settled in the vicinity of Hillsboro, while another group of 240 traveled directly to Peabody. [26] Then the main party, led by Jacob Wiebe, arrived in Topeka on September 8, where they spent one night encamped at the King bridge shops before resuming their journey to Marion county to found the town of Gnadenau. [27]

A larger party of 1,100, mostly from Alexanderwohl in the Molochna colony, landed in New York in August on the Teutonia and stopped at Summerfield, Ill., before journeying farther west. They at first intended to settle in Nebraska, where they were offered lands by the Burlington railroad, but reports from those who had already arrived in Kansas, some unfavorable aspects of the Nebraska location, the salesmanship of C. B. Schmidt, and perhaps the Goertz pamphlet persuaded the Alexanderwohl community to come to Kansas. [28] Arriving in Topeka on September 23, they were joined two days later by another shipload of 800. Not having made any advance arrangement for the purchase of farmland in Kansas, this party stayed in Topeka for a longer period, housed at the King bridge shops, while leaders inspected the terrain and bargained with the Santa Fe. [29] Several more smaller groups passed through the Kansas capitol in November and December, raising the total in the state at the end of the year to around 3,000, perhaps as many as 4,000. According to the Commonwealth, 6,356 Russian-Germans arrived in North America in 1874: 2,980 to Kansas, 1,000 to Dakota, 750 to Eastern states, 400 to Nebraska, 75 to Minnesota, and the remainder to Canada, but these figures probably did not include 600 who passed through Topeka on New Year's Eve. [30]

If the number of Mennonites immigrating in 1874 greatly exceeded local expectations, that of 1875 fell far below an optimistic projection of 6,000, [31] as departure from Russia became complicated by drought conditions. In addition, the imperial government's decision to allow alternative service late in 1874 may have arrested the desire of many to leave. The departure of 15 percent of the Russian-German population of South Russia would have alleviated some of the population pressure, and there was a natural tendency to wait and hear how things were going in the United States. In fact, letters extolling the benefits of the new land did contribute to continued migration in later years. The disruption of communications in South Russia by the Russo-Turkish War (1877-1878), the difficulty of selling land to those remaining, the decline of the ruble, and increased restrictions by the Russian government also slowed emigration. The Santa Fe immigration chief claimed that by May, 1877, 8,000 "Mennonite and other Russian-Germans," had settled on Santa Fe land in Kansas, purchasing a total of 88,000 acres, but he also noted that additional Russian-German colonists were more likely to come from the Volga region. [32]

By the time the first large groups of Mennonites arrived in Kansas, representatives of the Volga Germans were inspecting lands in the United States. After meetings in Herzog and nearby villages in the spring of 1874, a delegation was sent to survey settlement possibilities. Perhaps instinctively, these Russian-Germans concentrated their search farther north in Canada and the Dakotas, but some took soil samples from western Kansas and Russell county. [33]

The trek of the Volga Germans was generally more difficult than that of the Mennonites, because they did not move in established church communities. In the case of the Roman Catholics, for example, parish churches were left behind in Russia and new ones had been established under a local diocese in this country. On the whole they were not able to command as many resources since land holdings around the Volga were smaller and values lower than in South Russia. This is probably the reason why the majority waited until after the harvest of 1875 could be sold before departing Russia, but the delay added extra hardships of traveling and finding new homes in winter. Another problem was the slower and more awkward transport from the Volga region and the Volga Germans did not have the opportunity to secure free lodging en route as did the Mennonites. But like their Russian-German predecessors in Kansas, the Volga Germans did tend to come from particular towns and villages Herzog, Katherinenstadt, Liebenthal, Pfeifer, Schoenchen, Obermunzorand found towns of the same or similar names.

The first contingents of Volga Germans left Katherinenstadt in October 1875, and, traveling via Bremen and Baltimore, arrived in Topeka on November 28. While the families lived in temporary quarters in North Topeka, the leaders searched for suitable lands to purchase. They first went with C. B. Schmidt to inspect Santa Fe territory around Great Bend but considered the price (\$5 an acre) too high. Then with the assistance of Adam Roedelheimer and Martin Allen they were attracted to lands of the Kansas Pacific in Ellis county. [34] Even there, however, many depended on homesteading rather than purchasing from the railroad. [35] Settlement began in February 1876, with the arrival in Hays and Victoria of the first families. [36] Other groups followed the path of the first, arriving at intervals during the spring and summer, especially in August. By the end of the year about 1,200 Roman Catholic Volga Germans had located in Ellis and Rush counties, and another group of Lutherans had settled along Landon creek in Russell county. [37]

After 1877 it is more difficult to distinguish large immigrant parties of Russian-Germans, either from South Russia or the Volga region. They were no longer as newsworthy, and, in fact, the paths to the new frontier were both numerous and well charted, once the Russian border was passed. By this time, too, many were branching away from the first areas of concentration and finding homes in a large number of counties of central and western Kansas. The total number of Russian-German immigrants to Kansas in the 1870's can be estimated at about 12,000. [38]

End of Part II 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.

[16] Klaus, *Nashi Kolonii . . .*, p. 187; C. B. Schmidt, "Reminiscences of Foreign Immigration Work for Kansas," *Kansas Historical Collections*, v. 9 (1905-1906), p. 494.

[17] *Newton Kansan*, August 14, 1873; *The Commonwealth*, Topeka, July 26, 1874. And even a Kansas City reporter was impressed by the change in Newton: "Four years ago it was the 'red-hot' town of Kansas. Its streets were witnesses almost daily of acts of violence and bloodshed." *Kansas City (Mo.) Journal of Commerce*, December 29, 1875.

[18] Thelma Jean Curl, "Promotional Efforts of the Kansas Pacific and Santa Fe to Settle Kansas" (M. A. thesis, University of Kansas, 1960), pp. 21-23. See, also, Cornelius J. Dyck, "Kansas Promotional Activities with Particular Reference to Mennonites" (M. A. thesis, University of Wichita, 1955).

[19] Curl, "Promotional Efforts . . .," p. 56; Arthur Menzies Johnson, *Boston Capitalists and Western Railroads* (Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press, 1967), pp. 290-293.

[20] Schmidt, "Reminiscences of Foreign Immigration Work . . .," pp. 485-488.

[21] *Topeka Blade*, October 31, 1873.

[22] Prentis worked for several Topeka newspapers before joining *The Commonwealth* in the summer of 1874. Caroline E. Prentis, *A Kansas Pioneer* (Newton, Kansas Printing Co., n. d.), pp. 14-15.

[23] A copy of an early declaration is found in *Mennonite Life*, North Newton, v. 25 (April, 1970), p. 68.

[24] *Die Mennoniten Niederlassung auf den Ländereien der Atchison, Topeka und Santa Fe Eisenbahn-Gesellschaft in Harvey & Maribidion Co., Kansas* (St. Joseph, Mo., David Goertz, 1874). A copy is in the library of the Kansas State Historical Society.

[25] David V. Wiebe, *They Seek a Country: A Survey of Mennonite Migrations With Special Reference to Kansas and Gnadenu* (Hillsboro, Mennonite Brethren Publ. House, 1959), pp. 81-87.

[26] *Marion County Record*, Marion, August 15, 1874; *Atchison Daily Champion*, September 10, 1874.

[27] *The Commonwealth*, September 10, 1874; *Marion County Record*, Marion, September 12, 1874.

[28] *The Commonwealth*, September 24, 1874.

[29] *Ibid.*

[30] *Ibid.*, April 25, 1875. A count of those registered in *The Commonwealth* as coming through Topeka in 1874 is 3,600; this figure may not include smaller parties who traveled directly to their destination, but on the other hand may contain some American (Illinois) Mennonites.

[31] *Ibid.* Earlier, during the height of the immigration in 1874, the *Commonwealth* boasted that all 40,000 Russian-German Mennonites would settle in Kansas. *Ibid.*, September 24, 1874.

[32] C. B. Schmidt to A. S. Johnson, June 9, 1877. "Immigration (Foreign)," "Santa Fe Papers," Kansas State Historical Society, Newspaper reports of purchases of over 100,000 acres were apparently or included options taken.

[33] The chief sources on the Volga-German settlement in Kansas are: the Rev. Francis S. Laing, "German-Russian Settlements in Ellis County, Kansas," KHC, v. 11 (1909-1910), pp.489-528; Sister Mary Eloise Johannes, "A Study of the Russian-German Settlements in Ellis County, Kansas," The Catholic University of America Studies in Sociology, v. 14 (Washington, D.C., 1946); and J. c. Ruppenthal, "The German Element in Central Kansas," KHC, v. 13 (1913-1914), pp. 513-533. Local historians such as Lawrence Weigel and Father Burke in Hays are building on the solid foundation erected by the above, but much remains to be done, especially in the collection of personal papers and analysis of state and local records.

[34] Laing, "German-Russian Settlements . . .," p. 494; The Commonwealth, January 15, 1876.

[35] Hays City Sentinel, August 9, 1876.

[36] Ibid., March 1, 1876.

[37] Ibid., October 4, 1876; Ruppenthal, "The German Element . . .," p. 530.

[38] The census statistics of 1880, which record 8,082 born in Russia, are misleading since many of the Mennonites who arrived from "Russia" were actually born in Poland, Prussia, Switzerland, or other German states. Nearly all of the 1,200 who gave their birthplace as Poland (which did not exist as a state) should be counted as "Russian-Germans."