

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 IV "Impact of the Russian-Germans Upon Kansas"

The first Russian-Germans arrived at a critical time in Kansas history, at the end of a depression, severe drought, and terrible grasshopper infestation. More people were leaving Kansas than coming in as discouraged homesteaders pulled up stakes and headed for urban employment or new territory. The business community and especially the railroads were becoming desperate, and the first special session of the Kansas legislature met in Topeka in September to deal with the problem. Many Kansans found solace in the arrival of the determined new immigrants and saw even more reason to advertise their presence. Where the Mennonites settled it cannot be bad was the message heard across the state and all across the country and to Europe in 1874.

Although the immediate impact of the Russian-Germans in dollars and cents cannot be easily calculated, to the Santa Fe alone they paid \$332,509.72 between February 15, 1873, and May 31, 1877 according to C. B. Schmidt. [59] Most of it came in 1874 and may actually have saved the railroad from bankruptcy. But this figure obviously does not include the outright purchases of land from previous farmers. Even more immediately recorded, however, was the boost in local business, first in Topeka:

Notwithstanding the chronic complaint of hard times and scarcity of money, our merchants are now doing more business than at any time for the past three months The Mennonites now here are very busy laying in supplies of all kinds, and their custom is very valuable to our dealers. They are also purchasing horses, cattle, wagons and agricultural implements as well as household goods, and their purchases will aggregate a very handsome sum. [60]

And this picture passed on down the line to other towns:

We know to three one thousand dollar bills having been exchanged for smaller currency [in Newton] on Friday, and it is safe to say that a good many extra hundred dollars have been put in circulation by their appearance. [61]

In those localities there were reports that people who had lost crops and were preparing to leave the state were now staying because of employment opportunities afforded by the new arrivals. Estimating the purchases of equipment and new construction at double that of the price of land, the claim can be made that the Russian-Germans brought over \$1,000,000 into a nearly destitute state in the last half of 1874. [62]

An article written by "Traveler," published in November, emphasized the surprising prosperity of that region of the state:

A ride over Marion county showed a very large breadth of fall grain in better condition than I have ever seen. . . .

Commercially, Peabody is one of the most promising little towns on the line of the A. T. & S. F. road, and socially and morally is one of the pleasantest towns in the state. . . .

From Peabody I passed on to Harvey county and found the same evidence of prosperity there that I found in Marion. . . . The merchants in Newton say that their business continues good. [63]

And on November 17, the Commonwealth quipped: "Anarchy has been revived in Arkansas, creation in Ohio, the crusade in Indiana, and business in Kansas."

Although the Russian-Germans were not the only immigrants to come to Kansas in 1874-1877, they were definitely among the first in key agricultural areas, and where they went others followed. Mennonites from eastern states, especially Illinois, joined the settlements in Harvey and McPherson counties:

For two or three days past very many wagons filled with emigrants have passed through the streets of Topeka bound south. The tide seems to have turned, heretofore wagons were going out of the state; but there seems to be about as many coming in. [64]

Obviously, some Kansans saw a connection between the arrival of the Russian-Germans and the wave of other settlers coming into the state.

The Chicago Tribune, after reprinting a long article on the Russian-German Mennonites from the Commonwealth, added:

The importance of this valuable accession to the wealth and industry of Kansas can hardly be overestimated. The emigration will probably be completed next year, and will add to the population of Kansas two thousand of the most skillful, intelligent and thrifty farmers upon the face of the globe, who will bring into speedy cultivation 100,000 acres of wild and rice prairie land, which will be broken for the first time this fall. [65]

And a tendency to carry this to romantic extremes also prevailed:

The mowers that had been laid by for the season are brought into requisition again to cut the waving grass for the thousands of work horses, oxen, and milch cows to subsist on during the short winter season; car load after car load of breaking plows and other implements are sent down the road, and it seems as if the working season for the farmer had just begun. The wild prairie is to be broken doubly deep in October, yet to receive a dressing of wheat and rye. No one thinks of drouth and grasshoppers everybody is happy and energetic, and hope and energy will find their reward. [66]

But the immigration wave and accompanying capital investment were transitory phenomena. The Russian-Germans are most famous for having brought wheat to Kansas, or more specifically the red, winter, hard wheat, called Turkey Red, a strain that was particularly suited for the Great Plains and became the major export of the wheat belt of the central and western states. The real origins of this wheat are obscured by legend, but it is not true that any quantity of significance was brought directly to Kansas by the Russian-German immigrants of the 1870's. In the first place it was logistically impossible for them, burdened as they were with families and belongings, to bring enough wheat to plant many of the 200,000 acres that they brought under cultivation in the first years. [67] Secondly, the Russian-Germans were accustomed to planting spring wheat in Russia, in the case of the Molochna colony a soft wheat called girka. [68] Only very small quantities of a spring, hard, red wheat, called arnautka, were planted in the Berdiansk exporting area. [69] The arnautka or one of the "utka" varieties such as "White Turkey" (actually red grained), which was grown in the Volga region as a spring wheat, was probably the kind that was adapted for winter planting in Kansas within a few years after the Russian-German arrival. [70]

The kind of wheat to plant was actually a subject of much debate in Kansas prior to the Russian-German arrival [71]; most natives preferred corn, however, for its greater household use and as feed for livestock, especially pigs. Land promoter T. C. Henry was one of the first to plant winter wheat on a large scale, in virtual plantation style, near Abilene in 1873. The question of which was to be the dominant grain for Kansas was actually being settled upon the Russian-German arrival, and the grasshoppers deserve some of the credit for wiping out the corn crop and most of the spring wheat. Only winter wheat was generally successful in 1874. [72] And at the time the Volga Germans were settling down around Victoria, the Hays City Sentinel proclaimed that the question was now resolved: winter wheat was the kind to plant. [73]

But the Russian-Germans undoubtedly increased the pace of adoption of wheat and helped make possible the rapid expansion of the wheat export and milling industries in the state. They were accustomed to dry, prairie type agriculture the only settlers in Kansas of such background and to the raising of wheat for export. And so it happened that most of the Russian-Germans arrived in Kansas in late summer or early fall anxious to commence planting. The railroads also had a vested interest in their early start and arranged the distribution of large quantities of winter seed wheat. The new arrivals also planted corn and spring wheat the next year and went on to try other crops, such as mulberries for silk culture, tobacco, and even cotton. Strangers to corn foods, but already conscious of the importance of wheat exports, the Russian-Germans quite naturally devoted a large percentage of their ground to wheat.

The most lasting and important gift of the Russian-Germans to Kansas, however, was their determination to stay. They brought families, invested all their resources, and immediately began the construction of substantial houses and churches, whole communities, many of which have survived for a century. In Ellis county in 1875 only four out of 72 farmers had families. [74] This unstable situation changed drastically with the arrival of the Volga Germans. While many other settlers drifted on from county to county, from state to state, as itinerant homesteaders or tenant farmers, the Russian-Germans stayed on through good times and some of the worst droughts in American history to cultivate the Plains and establish their own particular "good society."

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.

[59] C. B. Schmidt to A. s. Johnson, June 9, 1877, "Santa Fe Papers," KSHS.

[60] *The Commonwealth*, September 26, 27, 1874.

[61] One example, Peter Wiebe spent \$320 of the \$1,000 that he brought to Kansas on land. He paid \$145 for a span of oxen and wagon. And with the remainder he hired a Negro to "break sod" and purchased winter supplies. "A Voyage Report," in David Wiebe, *They Seek a Country*, pp. 81-87. The Alexanderwohl community paid \$34,688 for the construction of 64 houses, and those leaving Topeka on October 8 required 30 freight cars for livestock and 12 more household goods and implements. *The Commonwealth*, April 25, 1876, and October 8, 1874.

[63] *Ibid.*, November 10, 1874.

[64] *Ibid.*, October 20, 1874.

[65] As noted in *ibid.*, November 6, 1874.

[66] *Ibid.*, October 15, 1874.

[67] This agrees with Professor Malin's conclusion. See James C. Malin, *Winter Wheat in the Golden Belt of Kansas: A Study in Adaptation to Subhumid Geographical Environment* (Lawrence, University of Kansas Press, 1944), pp. 163-168.

[68] I. Palimpsestov, ed., *Sbornik Statei o Sel'skom Khoziaistve Iuga Rossii* (Odessa, Frantsov, 1868), pp. 271-273, 311-312.

[69] Klaus, *Nashi Kolonii . . .*, p. 164.

[70] This is the opinion of a Russian agricultural expert. See S. M. Bogdanov, *Illustrirovannyi Sel'skokhoziaistvennyi Slovar'* (Kiev, Barskii, 1895), p. 1087.

[71] For example: "Will some of our experimental farmers who have tried wheat raising in this part of the State, give the Kansan their ideas upon the best season to plant the same, and what quality to plant." *Newton Kansan*, August 14, 1873.

[72] *Kansas City (Mo.) Journal of Commerce*, November 18, 1874.

[73] Hays City Sentinel, April 12, 1876.

[74] Fred C. Cook, "Settlement and Economic Development in Early Hays City and Ellis County, 1867-1880," typescript, Forsythe Library, Fort Hays State College, p. 19.