

THE PIONEERS WHO HELPED BUILD FREEMAN



Daniel Unruh was one of the influential pioneers who first arrived in what would become the East Freeman community in 1874. He built a home in the Turkey Ridge Valley about eight miles southeast of Freeman.

For history buffs, these excerpts from a history of Freeman compiled in 1954 by the late Dr. John D. Unruh, a native professor, author and former mayor of Freeman, provide an excellent review of the rich history of this community.

In our agricultural sections a city can never be greater or more prosperous than the farmers surrounding the city.

Naturally one would ask what kind of people live around the city of Freeman? Where did they come from? What was the reason for locating on these virgin prairies even before there was any railroad or any sign of a city

nearby?

The nearest towns were Yankton some 30 miles and Sioux Falls 40 to 50 miles away. The pioneers began to pour into this state in the early 1870s, while the railroads to this part of the state did not come until 1879 and later.

Would these pioneers become permanent settlers, break the virgin sod and establish homes, or would they, like many others have done, stay only long enough to cash in and move on to greener pastures? Let us take a closer look at the pioneers surrounding the Freeman area.

With Freeman as a hub or center, let us start with the rising sun in the east and fol-

low the sun on its daily round (figuratively speaking).

Beginning in the area to the east of Freeman or what we generally call East Freeman, we have a large group of settlers known as the Swiss Germans. They are so called because they originally came from the Canton Bern in Switzerland. They are German because they spoke German or some dialect of the German language. They were often referred to as Russians, but like most of the other German-speaking people did not have any Russian blood in them, but were called Russians because they lived in Russia around 75 to 100 years before coming to America.

Their history goes back to the days of persecutions because of religious beliefs. Persecuted in Switzerland, they migrated to France, to Austria, to Russia and finally to America. This particular group came from the province of Volyhnia in Russia. They had settled in Russia upon the invitations of Czarina Catherine II, as did many other German-speaking people, including Reformed, Lutherans and Catholics. Knowing about the thrift and industry of the German people, she herself of German blood, invited thousands of German-speaking people to settle in her vast domains, the steppes of Poland, the Ukraine, and the Crimea in

South Russia. Much of these vast areas she had recently acquired by conquest from Turkey in the Russo-Turkish war.

To induce these people to settle in Russia, she offered special privileges to the people from Germany and Switzerland. Some of these were freedom from military service for all time, tax exemption for 10 years, the right to own and hold property, and permission to use their own language in their churches, schools and local government.

Besides the Swiss Germans, many other German-speaking people took advantage of the privileges granted by Catherine II. The Low Germans,

who originally came from Holland and were now living in Danzig and Prussia, migrated to Russia and settled along the banks of the Dnieper and the Molotschna Rivers. Many others settled in the Crimea in South Russia.

The Hutterites who originally came from Tyrolean Alps settled in the province of Tschernigov. During the period of 75 to 100 years, these German people prospered in Russia.

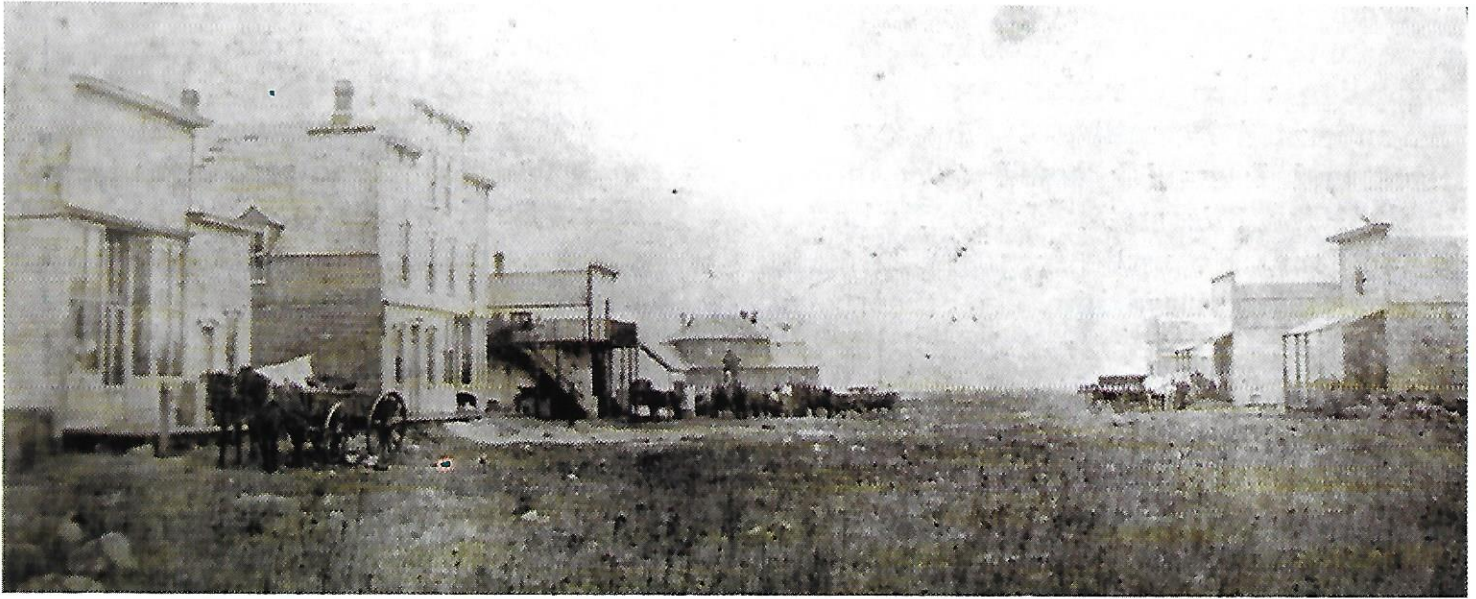
But all good things come to an end sooner or later and so did some of the privileges. Around the year 1870 freedom from military service came to an end in Russia. Up till now all foreign settlers

had been free from military service. The passing of a general subscription law caused thousands to leave Russia and to migrate to America.

Almost to a man the entire congregations of the Swiss Germans decided to emigrate to America.

Some of them settled in Kansas and some in South Dakota, in 1874 and 1875. One group of Low Germans under the leadership of Daniel Unruh came to East Freeman one year before the Swiss German group came, and settled in the Turkey Ridge Creek Valley. This group came from Crimea. The Swiss German

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This photo shows Freeman's Main Street looking north in the earliest years of its life — the 1880s.

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PIONEERS: DIFFERENT GROUPS CONVERGE IN FREEMAN

group settled east in Rosefield township and southeast along Turkey Ridge Creek in Childstown township and continued almost due south of Freeman, with one or two even southwest of Freeman.

Immediately beyond the Swiss German settlers to the southeast of Freeman was a group of Danish settlers.

These came mostly as individual settlers from Denmark, without any organized church group. Among the Danish settlers we find family names of Jorgensen, Christensen, Andersen, Hansen, Olesen and others.

Proceeding farther west in our trip around Freeman we find some more German settlers; these came mostly from Iowa and were of the Catholic faith. They organized one of the first Catholic congregations here. Family names here are Dangel, Weier, Goettertz, Heirigs, Bauer and others.

As we proceed farther west

and almost due south of Freeman we find another group that came largely from Norway. Here we find the names of Carter, Mosby, Gullickson, Jorstad, Wek, and others. These also soon organized themselves into a congregation of the Lutheran church.

Then as we follow the sun around to the southwest of Freeman we find a number of German Lutheran settlers who came largely from south Russia and the Crimea. Here we have such family names as Heckenlaible, Keller, Delzer, Dubs, Ellwien, Huber, Hein, Knittel, and others.

Then as we proceed farther west and northwest we find still another group of settlers — the Hutterian group. This group has a similar history to that of the Swiss Germans in East Freeman.

They also came from the Alps and were persecuted and driven from country to country. Their leader was Jacob

Hutter. They came from the Tryolean Alps and were near neighbors of the Swiss people.

Originally Jacob Hutter founded the society known as "Brederhoeft" one of which settled in the Freeman community at the junction of the Wolf Creek and the James River, and was known as the Wolf Creek Colony. This colony supplied the flour for many miles around, as they built one of the first flour mills in the Freeman area.

There were many individual farmers of the Hutterian people who lived outside of the colonies in Russia, but lived independently in villages, these also migrated as entire congregations, and so we have the Hutterthal, Neu Hutterthal, Hutterdorf and Krimmer Mennonite Brethren congregations. Paul Tschetter and Lorenz Tschetter were delegates for these people in 1873. Rev. John L. Wipf was one of their first teachers, and

minister.

Once more we proceed on our trip around Freeman and now almost due north and northwest we have our last group, the Low German settlers. As we have already mentioned before these people originally came from Holland, but left Holland during the 16th century, settled in Danzig and Prussia. They followed the movement to Russia and then, in 1874 under the leadership of Tobias Unruh, settled in the Silver Lake area.

In addition to the groups that came from across the sea we had a few individual settlers who came here by covered wagon from the eastern states.

Most of the pioneer settlers who came from the eastern states simply followed the advice of Horace Greely. When asked about the opportunities of the future in America, he advised them "Go west, young man, go west."

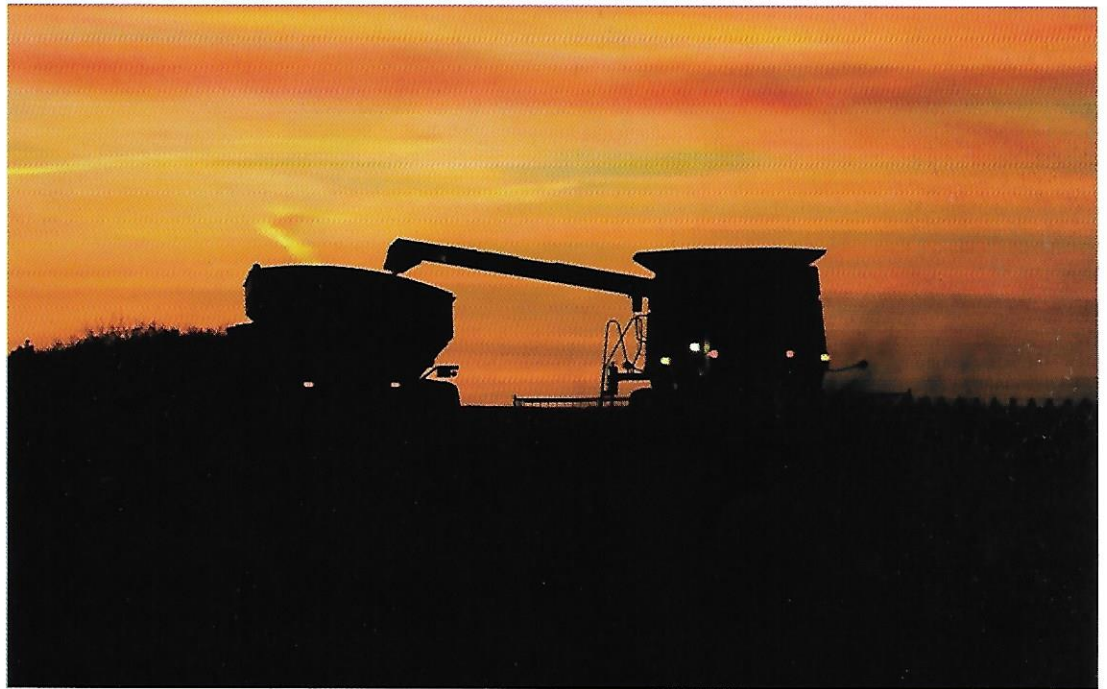
FREEMAN'S CORNER OF THE WORLD

Freeman is located in southeastern South Dakota and nestled in the center of a triangle formed by Sioux Falls, Yankton and Mitchell -- the state's largest population center. Its location is ideal: Freeman is far enough away from larger cities that it is able to maintain its own identity, yet close enough that it's an easy drive for a visit. And with its proximity to Iowa, Minnesota and Nebraska, Freeman also enjoys a strong regional position.

While the city of Freeman has a population of 1,308 (2010 census), it serves about 8,000 residents in all directions. Throughout its history, this small town has attracted men, women and children from across the region, thanks, in large part, to its quality of life and the wide range of services.

Established as a railroad stop in 1879, Freeman quickly became a center for immigrants -- primarily Lutheran and Mennonite Germans from Russia -- who had arrived in the mid-1870s. The town was not officially incorporated until 1893. By that time, however, Freeman had already become a center for residences, education, commerce and services. And that foretold the town's destiny.

Today, Freeman enjoys a strong sense of history and tradition, and places great value on the customs, culture and commitment to community that came from those before. Look no further than three of Freeman's crown jewels: The Freeman Area Veterans



Memorial along Sixth Street, Heritage Hall Museum and Archives located on the southwestern corner of the city, and Schmeckfest, the annual celebration of ethnic foods and traditions held every spring.

This progressive community also continues to serve the agricultural sect. Here, traditional methods mix with new ideas and a host of businesses offer products and services that cater to its biggest industry: farming.

But Freeman is about more than just agriculture. Its broad-based economy includes strong retail, professional and health services and a diverse group of manufacturing enterprises that deal in national and international trade. Freeman boasts an attractive quality of life with a strong sense of community, active service organizations, recreational

opportunities, many churches and well-maintained homes and neighborhoods.

Freeman has a solid commercial business base. Local businesses include three banking facilities, Freeman Regional Health Services (which includes a hospital, extended care facility, clinic and retirement apartments), dental and vision clinics, a lumber company, feed-seed-fertilizer businesses, two grocery stores, two pharmacies, two implement dealerships, trucking firms, oil distribution companies (with statewide and several states distribution) and numerous retail stores, specialty shops, restaurants and motels. Freeman is home to a number of manufacturing companies with regional, national and international markets. Freeman has approximately 120 businesses, 50 of them are retail.

Freeman has two strong and vibrant schools: Freeman Public School District (K-12) and Freeman Academy (1-12). The community's commitment to education is balanced by its appeal as a retirement center. The comprehensive medical services and sense of community appeal both to families seeking a good environment for raising children and senior citizens wanting to retire in comfort and security.

While the surrounding rural communities reflect a decline in population that is all-too-common in South Dakota, Freeman's population has remained remarkably stable. The 2010 census shows Freeman with a population of 1,308; that is down nine from 2000 but consistent with population figures throughout the growth decades of the 20th century.

WHAT'S IN A NAME? SOME GREAT STORIES

Many communities in South Dakota were named because of natural landmarks, like Sioux Falls. Others were named through American Indian heritage, like Yankton. Freeman, on the other hand, has a different story behind its name.

In fact, there are several.

No one really knows for certain the true history behind the naming of this community. There is even some speculation whether Freeman is really Freeman, or if it should have been named Menno. The history behind Freeman's name may never really be known, but does provide for some interesting stories.

Nearly every story involves the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railway Company, whose station was constructed in Freeman in 1888 and retired in 1974.

Many sources say a railroad officer mistakenly put up the "Freeman" sign here and took the "Menno" sign to the next town 11 miles down the line, which happened to be Menno. Freeman was supposed to be called "Menno" because of the large Mennonite population in the area, which still

exists today. This has been claimed as truth by the South Dakota Guide, compiled by the Federal Writers Project in 1938; The South Dakota Journal of County Government, September 1958; South Dakota Place Names by Virginia D. H. Sneve; and by George Rath in The Black Sea Germans in South Dakota.

The railroad built its branch line from Marion to Running Water in 1879, and in the fall that same year, the first train pulled into Freeman. This transformed Freeman from more than just a settlement into a town. Freeman was first thought of as a city in 1893, five years after the railroad dropped off the "wrong sign."

The railroad company, however, does not agree or disagree with this, and cannot settle the score for those who wish to know. In two letters written to Freeman residents in 1977 and 1978, Communications Resources Manager Jim Scribbins says he cannot "confirm or deny that what you speculate may or may not

have occurred."

Since this story has not been proven as the "real" reason Freeman is known as Freeman, other stories have surfaced regarding the city's name heritage.

J.J. Mendel, former publisher of the Freeman Courier, claimed both Menno and Freeman were named for the men from whom the railroad bought plots of land. Fred Reiser was from Menno and was a miller in one of the Mennonite colonies near Menno. The railroad officials decided to name the city "Menno" because of Reiser and the number of Menno-

nites in the area. There is even speculation as to whether Menno was named for Fred "Reiser" (as stated by Olga Stucky and Lillian Graber in Freeman Facts — Freeman Fiction 1879-1979) or Fred "Heiser" (as stated by Mendel in History of Freeman from 1879 to 1958).

Mendel asserted that Freeman was named after Fred Waldner, who sold land to the railroad company. Freeman was supposed to be "Fredman," but the "d" was inadvertently changed to an "e," and the city became "Freeman."



50 REASONS WHY FREEMAN IS SPECIAL

In 2011, a Tour de Kota bicycle event made an overnight stop in Freeman, and for the hundreds of visitors to Freeman who didn't know what we know about our community, the Freeman Courier editorialized on 50 reasons why the Freeman community is such a great place. Here's an update.

1. The 40-acre Prairie Arboretum, located on the southwest 40 acres of the community, that continues to develop.

2. Freeman Regional Health Services, a local independent health care system that includes a hospital, nursing home, congregate living facility and a clinic with a medical staff of physicians and

mid-level practitioners.

3. A healthy, proven, successful and up-to-date public school system that produces plenty of "Flyer pride."

4. A vital community development corporation.

5. The Emergency Services building on the north end of Main Street that houses Freeman's rescue services, which include an active, well-staffed vibrant fire department and ambulance service.

6. Homegrown businesses that have grown and developed over the years including AMPI, Rural Manufacturing, Stern Oil and Wildcat Manufacturing.

7. Fred Haar Company/C&B Operations, established

in 1882 and Freeman's oldest business, expanded and remodeled on the highway not long ago. For most of its life it was under control of the Haar family and represented five generations.

8. Housing developments that have extended Freeman's city limits.

9. Two grocery stores.

10. Two pharmacies.

11. Two farm implement dealerships.

12. Three banks, including Merchants State Bank, a family operation that began in 1899.

13. A track and field complex on the grounds of Freeman High School which hosts numerous track meets. Many

believe it's the nicest facility in the region outside of Sioux Falls, Yankton and Rapid City.

14. Home of one of the greatest football dynasties in state history; from 1996-1999, the Freeman Flyers went 51-1 and won four straight championships.

15. Low crime.

16. A clean town.

17. 24-hour recycling service.

18. A well-organized landfill just outside of town.

19. An active summer recreation program.

20. A strong and active baseball tradition that includes the Freeman Black Sox, an

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amateur team that lights up spring and summer nights.

21. A spectrum of eldercare ranging from independent living to skilled-care.

22. A strong, diverse retail district that includes unique stores like Fensel's, 81 Metal Art, the Et Cetera Shoppe and The Vintage Vault.

23. Multiple eating options, from downtown to the highway.

24. A strong ag business community that serves the diversified agricultural community that continues to be our economic base. Freeman community farmers grow primarily corn and soybeans, and we have balance of dairy, hogs and livestock producers.

25. Volunteers, volunteers,

volunteers.

26. Heritage Hall Museum and Archives.

27. Plenty of tree-lined streets.

28. Ethnic pride.

29. History; Freeman celebrated 125 years in 2004.

30. A nine-hole golf course a mile south of town.

31. Location; situated on Highway 81, Freeman is less than an hour from Sioux Falls, Yankton and Mitchell.

32. A strong agricultural heritage, which includes hard work and optimism as strong as you'll find anywhere.

33. Entrepreneurial spirit.

34. Strong church life.

35. Growing Dreams, offering a day care and pre-school environment usually reserved