

## **A Gift from Heaven**

### **German Russian Immigrants in the State of Kansas.**

**Stewen, Ulrich, *ORNIS* (Berlin), July 5, 2007.**

*Translation from the original German-language text to American English is provided by Alex Herzog, Boulder, CO.*

---

By the time he was to become police chief of Hays City, the infamous killer James “Wild Bill” Hickok was already reputed to have a few dozen men on his conscience. It had been years since his heyday. His eyesight was not so good anymore, and so the inevitable happened – during a shooting with a gangster he mistakenly killed his own deputy, and he was chased out of his job and out of the city of Abilene, with a bounty on his head for anyone who could find him, dead or alive. For a pistol shooting hero like Hickok there was only one place left: Hays, City, the most disreputable locale around, a hotbed of buffalo hunters, railroad workers, vagabonds and desperados of every kind, with tavern after tavern, innumerable dancing dives of questionable reputation – just the place for Wild Hickok’s” kind and others who might land there and often find an inglorious end.

The year was 1867. No one in those days would have bet a cent on the fact that only ten years later Hays would become a respectable place of trade – and a place that would draw god-fearing Germans from Russia who would use the place as a starting point from which to carve out a new home for themselves. The Fort Hays military camp, which for a long time had helped to bolster the bad reputation of Hays City, and which for many years had supplied the numerous garrisons in the West and Southwest with provisions and various wares, had reached surplus status and was shut down. The State of Kansas had reached a difficult situation as months of drought had decimated harvests and a grasshopper plague had done the rest. As a result, many fled Kansas to develop land elsewhere or to find income in the cities. New settlers would be just the right thing, especially if they knew something about farming and were willing to put a bit of money into circulation.

Within six years about 12,000 Germans from Russia immigrated to Kansas. In 1874, after a five-week journey via Odessa, Hamburg, and New York, the first 800 of these reached this destination. The initial groups of immigrants were Mennonites from South Russia. During the prior year they had sent a scouting mission to Kansas to check out land for settlement and to determine soil quality and to conduct price negotiations.

The director of the Immigration Bureau at the time was Carl Bernhardt Schmidt, a German from Saxony and by then an employee of the Santa Fe Railroad Company. Several railroad companies had acquired lands they now wished to sell to new settlers, in smaller or larger parcels. Wherever a new railroad track was laid, land prices would inevitably rise, a factor that facilitated the financing of the railroad companies’ push westward.

For Santa Fe [RR Company] Carl Bernhardt Schmidt would turn into a gift from heaven. He, who by then had established good contacts with the Mennonite colonies, set up several deals between the railroad company and the settlers. At the time, Santa Fe Railroad Company apparently was close to bankruptcy, and the more than 332,000 dollars the German Russian settlers spent within the first three years – for land, transport, and buildings – are said to have saved the company. Expecting even more business, the Santa Fe Company transported gratis whole colonies of immigrants, including all their belongings and months’ worth of supplies, to their destinations.

Kansas Pacific, another railroad company, provided German Russian handlers with up to fifty percent rebates for transporting goods. Land parcels intended for schools and churches were gifted to the colonies, and on the way to their new settlements, the railroad companies would house the immigrants for free. In 1874, as the Mennonite community from Alexanderwohl in South Russia reached Kansas, the railroad company expressly built two large structures in the city of Newton in which the settlers would spend the winter.

Business people could hardly wish for better customers than the German Russian settlers. They paid in cash, did not waste time in tough negotiations, and always made large purchases – not just parcels, but whole tracts of land; not a cow or two, but whole herds; and they bought entire contents of warehouses.

The new settlers did not come to America unprepared, and they -- at least not the initial immigrants from South Russia -- did not come without money. Land tracts in the old homeland not infrequently comprised a hundred hectares [nearly 300 acres] per family, three times the average plowed by German families in the Volga area. Many colonies had hired a large number of Russian and Mennonite-German farm workers – so, it would seem, there was no compelling reason to move away to start a new life on another continent.

Still, by that time considerations for emigrating were by far not merely a matter of economical concern. Importantly, the price of wheat had fallen dramatically after 1840, and the emerging competition from the United States had placed the colonies in some distress. However, there was the added problem of the Russian State rescinding many a privilege that had been granted in earlier times, as for example an exclusive license for brewing beer. And in general, at least in the opinion of the Mennonite communities, the authorities were beginning to meddle far too much in their own affairs as, for example, via the decree on land distribution, according to which prosperous colonists had to cede arable tracts to landless community members.

Not surprisingly, the Mennonite colonies began to fear the loss of their social and economic autonomy, especially since exemption from military service would also be ended. No wonder, then, that especially the more prosperous landowners would be at the head of the emigration movement.

Certainly for some, religious considerations were also a deciding factor convincing them to leave the land of their birth. Strict believers among the Mennonites also feared pietistic influences from Western Europe which in the 1850s and 1860s had led to some controversy and even to the break-up of congregations. And it was not uncommon in Mennonite tradition that conflicts or other causes would suffice to start up daughter colonies and to begin a new life at another location.

Many possibilities [for emigration] were examined: Canada, Brazil, the near East, and of course the United States. The Russian government was still accommodating and was not putting up impediments toward emigration. That would change later on. In the early 1870s the American Congress in Washington had set aside more than eight million hectares [more than 22 million acres] of land for purchase, but with the proviso that the area was to be opened up for transport and for the building of railroad lines. This information had also made its way to Russia, and the North American landmass had certainly not been a complete no man's land for some time.

Within this context, plans for moving to the other side of the Atlantic were not scuttled, even when, during the mid-1860s, the Russian government came up with a special offer for the Mennonites for settlement in the Amur River region of Eastern Siberia accompanied with promises of free land, tax reductions, and exemption from military service. To be sure, Bernard Warkentin and some of his followers had undertaken a scouting trip to Siberia, but they had returned disappointed, having observed

that agriculture depending on selling its products would be very difficult there since there were neither roads for transporting them nor potential customers to purchase them. Besides, the thinking was, travel for resettlement in America might be no more difficult than land-based travel to a still undeveloped Eastern Siberia.

This must have also been the thinking of Germans in the Volga region, whose emigration would be much more risky than that of the Mennonites of South Russia. Their route would lead by sea via Bremen to Baltimore, and on land from there to new settlement regions. These immigrants consisted mostly of single persons or single households, more rarely of entire church congregations. Moreover, they were not as well equipped, brought along less money, and undertook the trip during an unfavorable time.

During the emigration year of 1875, most were still waiting for the harvest and for the sale of their grain in order to be able to afford the transportation cost of roughly 200 dollars per family. All of this caused their arrival to occur during winter months. Furthermore, the railroad companies did not offer the Germans from the Volga area the same special rates they had provided to the Mennonites.

The very first Volga German group of immigrants to arrive was from Katharinenstadt (which would become Marxstadt at a much later time). They had begun their journey in October, 1875 and reached the Kansas capital city of Topeka toward the end of November. Since they deemed the land offering by the Santa Fe Railroad Company to be too expensive, they acquired lands from the Kansas Pacific Company in rural Ellis County, while others acquired the rights to a specific piece of land by working it, fencing it in, and then claiming ownership rights to it (“homesteading”), a practice that was certainly customary in the pioneer regions, where there was still land without owner.

Toward the end of 1875 around 1,200 German Russians from the Volga, most of them Catholics, had settled in rural Ellis and Rush Counties, both of which to this day number the most Kansas residents of German ancestry.

During the later 1880s, immigration slowed, with considerably fewer large group arrivals such as entire colonies or whole church congregations. These German Russians would live in relative self-sufficiency in their new settlement regions, which often comprised large territories and compact villages in which the residents were largely shielded from external influences, enabling them to retain their language and culture at least through the generation after the next one.

American ways and the English language would therefore make only slow inroads, particularly as the German Russians had already been accustomed from their Russian environment to maintain themselves amidst other-language environments. In 1875 David Görtz in Halstead published the very first German-language newspaper – and this at a time when newspapers per se were still largely unknown even in larger cities in Kansas. Other papers soon followed, with names like “Courier,” “Volksfreund [The People’s Friend],” “Staats-Zeitung,” “Zur Heimat [For the Homeland],” and “Freie Presse [Free Press].”

Those German Russian settlers contributed decisively to the fact that Kansas would become an agrarian center. It has often been mentioned that the immigrants had brought along a certain kind of wheat and had thereby established the underpinnings for the meteoric rise of agriculture. With other settlers coming and going, and moving sporadically from rural county to rural county, the possibly most significant achievement of the German Russian immigrants to the State of Kansas was the tenacity with which they developed their land, the way they erected and maintained their buildings for permanency – churches, schools, private and commercial structures – the manner in which they overcame droughts and the steadfast way they hitched their own destiny to that of their new homeland.

Ulrich Stewen, Berlin.

**Postscript:**

The 2000 census showed that of the 2.6 million residents of Kansas exactly 868,801 persons indicated that they had German ancestors, and 17,734 persons indicated that they had Russian origins. Among the nationality groups of the territory, those with German origins comprise the largest. During the census ten years prior, some 22,887 residents indicated that they were German-language speakers, and 893 persons indicated that they spoke Russian.

[Caption:

*Carl Bernhardt Schmidt expended great efforts toward immigration of German Russians. ]*