

“... and Only the Third [Generation] Will Have Bread”

German Russian Immigrants in North Dakota.

Stewen, Ulrich, *ORNIS* (Berlin), June 20, 2007.

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In 1872, when Johann Bette, following a long absence, visited his former homeland in South Russia, he also brought news and information to friends and relatives. Over in America there was land to be had, land just waiting to be settled and to be put under the plow. It was nearly a quarter century since he had emigrated from the Black Sea area to North America. And now some families decided to follow Bette to begin a new life on the other side of the Atlantic – and to be free from persecution by the governments and free from the arbitrariness of the authorities.

After they completed the passage by ship, they spent their first winter in Ohio, from which they dispatched scouts to look for unsettled land and fertile soil. In the Dakota Territory they struck “pay dirt,” and soon after they began to settle in an area northwest of Yankton, not far from the Missouri River and the town of Scotland.

During subsequent years these pioneers were followed by a genuine wave of immigrants – all of them German Russians from the Black Sea region – in numbers so large that the settlers would move ever further north into what today is North Dakota, up there between Montana and Minnesota and near the border with Canada.

For the new settlers in North America, the initial years of privation and build-up actually passed more quickly than anticipated. “The first [generation] will meet death, the second will meet need, and only the third will have bread ...,” the Black Sea German adage, born of experience during those pioneer days in Russia, seemed to have lost its validity here, as by the second generation – at the beginning of the Twentieth Century – the golden years brought agricultural prosperity to North Dakota and to the Germans from Russia.

Most of them were farmers who could not imagine doing anything except agriculture. Unlike settlers from Scandinavian countries or from Germany itself, they shunned the cities and created – just as they had done in Russia – closed-off settlements in which common religion or common geographical origin would determine social ties.

In his work on the Germans from Russia, historian Jerome Tweton of Grand Forks, North Dakota underscores the point that social cohesiveness counted as the highest value for them. During a poll as late as the 1930s it was found that the respondents would select partners exclusively from their own religious communities. Tweton also cites another historian as follows, “Emigration by Black Sea Germans was foremost a case of large family groups doing the emigrating,” and he mentions that, in contrast with immigrants from Germany, Poland, or Scandinavia, only rarely did single [Black Sea] families, and even more rarely, individuals, embark on emigration.

Of the 70,000 Germans from Russia living in North Dakota in the 1920s, ninety-five percent stemmed from the Black Sea region. Germans from Crimea, and non-owner farmers from the Odessa area settled in North Dakota in rather small numbers, while large settlements of German Russian Mennonites sprang up

in neighboring Manitoba, Canada. Also settling only rarely in North Dakota were Germans from the Volga area, from the Caucasus, and from Volhynia – most of these finding new homes in Kansas and Nebraska during the early 1900s.

Among many Germans from Russia in the USA today, contact with the old homeland is maintained in many different ways, not the least via visits and group travel to the regions of ancestral origin. For thirty years, Bismarck, the capital city of North Dakota, a city of 55,000 residents, has been the home of the “Society for Maintaining our German Russian Heritage” (Germans from Russia Heritage Society), which performs historical research, organizes social events, and maintains contacts with numerous smaller organizations and societies of Germans from Russia in the United States.

In the past, many have participated in supporting the German population in Russia. Older people in particular remember stories from their parents and grandparents of how their ancestors established a foothold in the new homeland. Nearly a third of today’s population of North Dakota are of German Russian descent, reports Michael Miller of Fargo, the largest city of the State. The Librarian at the local State University manages and maintains an extensive collection of the German Russian heritage of North Dakota. “Many Germans from Russia have relatives here,” says Miller, “but they are not aware of it.”

Ulrich Stewen, Berlin

[Caption:

A railroad company advertises land purchases.]