

German Migration: An Ethnic Immigration of the Great Plains

A Review Essay by Dale A Davis

Luebke, Frederick C. "Ethnic Group Settlement on the Great Plains," Western Historical Quarterly 8 (1977): 405-430.

Jordan, Terry G. German Seed in Texas Soil: Immigrant Farmers in Nineteenth-Century Texas. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1966.

Sallet, Richard. Russian-German Settlements in the United States. Translated by LaVern J. Rippley and Armand Bauer. Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1974.

Rath, George. The Black Sea Germans in the Dakotas. Freeman: Pine Hill Press, 1977.

Arends, Shirley Fischer. The Central Dakota Germans: Their History, Language, and Culture. Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1989.

Sherman, William C., and Playford V. Thorson, Eds. Plains Folk: North Dakota's Ethnic History. Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1986.

The majority of immigrant descendents within the Great Plains region have roots in English-speaking, Scandinavian-speaking, and German-speaking countries. The focus of this essay will be on the German-speaking immigrants who established farms and communities within the Great Plains. The authors of the books used in this essay will give support to a ground-breaking article which provides insight into the ethnic diversity among immigrants and their descendents. The essay examines government influence (U.S. and foreign) on settlement within the Great Plains; settlement patterns based on language, religious affiliation, and country of origin; and the customs and cultures the immigrants tried to hold onto as their descendants began the inevitable assimilation of becoming Americans.

According to Frederick C. Luebke, in his 1977 article, "Ethnic Group Settlement on the Great Plains," "The importance of foreign-born immigrants and their children for the settlement of the Great Plains has been largely overlooked by historians of the frontier

and of the trans-Mississippi West. While an extensive literature exists treating Indian history and Indian-white relationships, white populations have usually been treated as homogeneous” (405). This important observation is central to his discussion about the foreign-born immigrants and their descendents populating the Great Plains.

Within the Great Plains, Luebke designates Nebraska as the dividing line of foreign-born settlement when he states, “the percentages of foreign-born persons were greater in states north of Nebraska and lower in those to the south” (406). Below the southern border of Nebraska, the number of foreign-born immigrants becomes less as one travels through Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas.

Although by 1900, 47% of Nebraska’s population was foreign-born or children of foreign-born parents. Seventy-eight percent of North Dakota’s population consisted of immigrants and children of foreign-born settlers from all nationalities. In the preface of “Plains Folk: North Dakota’s Ethnic History,” the editors support this observation when they claim “the U. S. Census of 1890 indicated that not only were almost half of the state’s population (42.7 percent) of a decidedly ‘ethnic’ background, but they were brand-new ethnics—born in a foreign state.” Luebke identifies German-speaking immigrants as being the most numerous to settle the Great Plains, with some county populations being predominately German-speaking. According to “Plains Folk,” three German-speaking carpenters were among the first settlers at Jamestown settlement. They were the first of what would eventually be over seven million German-speaking immigrants arriving in the United States.

Why would people leave their homelands and venture to a new land, often thousands of miles from anything familiar? Luebke claims economic reasons were the

major cause of the out-migration within Europe. The editors of "Plains Folk" believe the personal push/pull factors to emigrate were "influenced by social, political, and economic circumstances both in the homeland and in the United States." (93).

According to Terry G. Jordan, author of "German Seed in Texas Soil: Immigrant Farmers in Nineteenth-Century Texas," several factors created a German-speaking migration to Texas. He describes the factors as being economic, over-population, crop failure, and industrialization. Surprisingly, the greatest reason to immigrate to Texas was literature praising the land and climate of Texas. Land promoters and writers of emigrant guidebooks praise the climate while others attribute the fertile soils of Texas as being the reason a paradise existed in what was called a "land of milk and honey" (40). By 1850, German migration had created a fragmented belt across the south-central region of Texas. This "German belt" saw an increase in German migration due to the familiarity of the German language, because people settled near people who spoke the same language.

Although Jordan uses language as a catalyst in the settlement pattern, he is more concerned with the agricultural adaptability of the German-speaking immigrants. Texas was being populated by white southerners interested in expanding the cotton, tobacco, and slave industries. What the German-speaking immigrants were interested in was land and lots of it. The German immigrants were able to adapt their farming practices to the Texas soil and climate. They would be able to produce tobacco, cotton, rice, potatoes, vegetables, or any other agricultural commodity better than the white plantation owners. And, they accomplished this without the use of slave labor. As the Germans improved their farming situation, more family and friends were encouraged to migrate to Texas. An increase in population, through natural means and immigration, enlarged the area of the

German Belt every year during and after the antebellum period. Trade and immigration ceased during the Civil War, but once the war was over, began anew.

After the Civil War, immigration and settlement was greatly enhanced throughout the Great Plains by the Homestead Act of 1862. Luebke claims thousands of immigrants homesteaded on land in Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakota and Montana Territories during the 1870's and 1880's. The editors of "Plains Folk" describe the lure and acquisition of free land, not weather or business climates, as being the reason for establishing homesteads. Three-fourths of North Dakota's land was government land, so many settlers rode the train to the end of the tracks in search of free land. Once at the railhead, the settler would walk out and locate a piece of unclaimed land, mark it with a pole or stick with his or her name written on it, and then make the trip to the nearest land office to make the claim against the land.

According to George Rath, author of "The Black Sea Germans in the Dakotas," there were four ways to claim land: Preemption, the Homestead Act, the Timber and Culture Act, and the Desert Act. It is important to understand how these Acts affected the homesteading process. The editors of "Plains Folk" explain the three methods of obtaining land in Dakota Territory as pre-emption, homestead, and tree claim. Pre-emption allowed anyone over the age of 21 to purchase 160 acres, pay a filing fee of \$2 and live on the land for a year. After the year was up, they could buy the land for \$1.25 per acre. If the land was in the alternate sections of a railroad tract, the individual would have to pay \$2.50 per acre. After six months, but before a year had passed, the pre-empter had to show proof of residence, cultivation, a habitable dwelling, and improvements, along with two reliable witnesses to the fact that all was correct.

Homesteading allowed a head of the family, widow, or single individual of 21 years of age or older to file a claim and pay \$14 (\$10 for the entry fee and \$4 for commission). Only one homestead privilege per adult individual was allowed. Within six months of filing the claim, the claimant had to make improvements, live on the land, have plowed ten acres, and a crop put in. After residing on and improving the land for five years, the individual paid a “proving up” fee of \$4 (\$2 for each land officer) and then received a patent for the 160 acres. Two reliable witnesses had to verify the conditions were fulfilled and the procedure had to be completed within seven years of filing.

A tree claim was the result of the Timber Culture Act of 1873, which allowed an individual who qualified for the other two acts to claim 160 acres of land in a section devoid of trees. The individual paid a \$14 entry fee and had to break up five acres the first year and five acres the second year. In the third and fourth years ten acres of timber, seeds, or cuttings had to be planted and kept in good condition for a period of eight years. Two reliable witnesses had to verify the fulfillment of the requirements, and then a patent for the land was issued to the individual. A further requirement of all the land acts was that the claimant must be an American citizen, or if a foreign immigrant, the individual must file papers of intent to become a citizen of the United States.

According to Luebke, “much of the best land on the Great Plains was not available for homesteading” (410). Rath explains the amount of land involved when he writes, “To the railroads were granted by the Federal Government 181,000,000 acres of land; to the states 140,000,000 acres. The Federal Land Office sold 100,000,000 acres to settlers” (86). The federal government granted the land to the railroads in order to subsidize the building of the rail lines.

According to “Plains Folk,” the government land grant policy was created on July 2, 1862. Abraham Lincoln signed a bill that authorized construction of a transcontinental railroad from the Great Lakes region to the Puget Sound. The law granted, on both sides of the track, every odd-numbered section of land to the railroad. This checkerboard pattern was implemented to discourage groups of settlers from developing close-knit ethnic colonies. Within a state, the track had to be at least twenty miles long or forty miles long within a territory. If land had been purchased by someone prior to the railroad’s acquisition, the railroad was given an additional ten miles of “indemnity land” to offset the loss of land to the railroad. In North Dakota, the Northern Pacific claimed over ten million acres, which was almost a quarter of all lands within the state. The railroad sold large tracts of land to speculators as well as smaller tracts to individual immigrants who wanted to settle along the rail line.

In addition to railroad advertising, Luebke credits state boards of immigration for enticing immigrants to settle within their boundaries. Rath indicates from 1869 to 1877 an immigration office operated in Dakota Territory, and the office was reopened in 1885 and continued until 1925. Rath emphasizes the importance officials placed on persuading German Russians to migrate as they were recognized for their agricultural skills.

Luebke explains the German-speaking immigrants were more than just people from a particular country. They were a cultural group of German-speaking peoples from different areas of Europe. Most Swiss, Alsatian, and Austrian immigrants were of German-speaking culture and the German Russians were Germans whose families migrated to Russia at the invitation of Catherine the Great and her grandson Alexander I.

These German immigrants settled exclusively in German-speaking colonies in Bessarabia, the area north of the Black Sea, and the Volga River region.

Thus the German Russian immigrants were able to maintain their ethnic heritage developed within their native area of the German states. Catherine chose the area around St. Petersburg and the Volga River region for the first German colonies. The Volga River region flows from the Caspian Sea northward towards Moscow. In 1764 it became the first major agricultural area settled by German-speaking people. The majority of these settlers were from the Hesse region, but people came from all areas of the German states. Eventually they would become known as the Volga Germans. In 1804 Catherine's grandson, Alexander I, called for new settlements to be established in the northwestern area of the Black Sea. These German settlers became known as the Black Sea Germans.

Shirley Fischer Arends, author of "The Central Dakota Germans: Their History, Language, and Culture," claims the majority of the Black Sea Germans migrated from the Württemberg area, a southwestern German state, in large numbers between 1804 and 1807, with 1818 as the year of highest migration to the Black Sea area. Arends explains the German immigrants settled into colonies, which consisted of a village surrounded by farmland. The people did not live on individual farms. Their homes were built in the village and they farmed the surrounding land. The Black Sea colonies were established in the Territory of Odessa, which was divided into four districts or regions; thus the colonists "were named according to their region. Thus one was a Liebentaler, a Glückstaler, a Kutschurganer, or a Beresaner, which provided a regional identification" (21). This designation followed them over into settlement areas of the Great Plains, as

Arends points out: “if you were not from the same dorf ‘village’ in Russia you were not apt to be friends in Dakota” (21).

According to Richard Sallet, author of “Russian-German Settlements in the United States,” the German Russian settlement pattern within America was similar to the pattern established during the German colonization of southern Russia. The German colonies were established according to religious beliefs and the geographical area from which they had migrated from German territory. The colonies were known by their religious affiliation. They were Evangelical, Catholic, or Mennonite. As the German Russians began migrating to the United States, they migrated as a religious group, establishing areas of settlement based on their religious beliefs.

Even though they migrated as religious groups, religion was not the key reason for migrating to the United States. Russian officials granted significant privileges to the German Russians to entice them to migrate to Russia. However, they learned in 1871 their special privileges were being withdrawn by Alexander II. Luebke believes the major reasons for German Russian migration to the Great Plains were Russification and conscription into the Russian army. The Evangelical Black Sea Germans began migrating to the United States in 1872-1873. The Evangelical Volga Germans settled in Nebraska and Kansas in September 1874. Arends does not separate them by religious affiliation. According to Arends, the Volga Germans and the Mennonite Germans arrived in the 1870’s and settled in Kansas and Nebraska. She notes the Black Sea Germans began arriving in Yankton, Dakota Territory in 1873.

Luebke corroborates her findings when he says the Volga Germans migrated to Nebraska, Kansas, and Oklahoma. The Black Sea Germans established themselves in the

Dakotas. German Russian Catholics migrated predominately to North Dakota and Kansas. Sallet writes that the first Volga Catholic Germans arrived in Topeka, Kansas, in December, 1875, and Topeka became the base area of the Catholics just as Lincoln, Nebraska, had been for the Volga Evangelical Germans. Luebke mentions Lutheran and Congregational German Russians settled in Nebraska, Colorado, North and South Dakota. Mennonite German Russians settled in Kansas, Oklahoma, and South Dakota, although a few did settle in North Dakota, Colorado, and Nebraska.

Additionally, Luebke claims German Russians settled along the Burlington Railroad westward from Lincoln, Nebraska. The German Russians provided a substantial labor pool in the construction and maintenance of the railroads throughout the Great Plains region. Many of the communities along the rail lines were populated by the German Russian railroad worker and his family. German Russians settled the North Platte Valley around Scottsbluff, Nebraska. German Russians migrated to the South Platte Valley all the way to Denver, Colorado. Mennonite German Russians settled north of Wichita, Kansas. Catholic German Russians migrated to Ellis County near Hays, Kansas. German Russians are found northwest of Oklahoma City, Oklahoma.

However, according to Luebke, the largest concentrations of German Russians are within the Dakotas. Black Sea Germans dominate the south-central counties of North Dakota and the north-central counties of South Dakota. Another strong Black Sea German presence flows northwesterly from the southeastern corner of South Dakota where the German Russians first entered Dakota Territory. According to Arends, two counties that border each other, McIntosh County, North Dakota, and McPherson County, South Dakota, have the largest concentration of Black Sea Germans within the

Great Plains. She also mentions many German Russians left the Dakotas and homesteaded in the Canadian Provinces of Alberta, Manitoba, and Saskatchewan.

According to Sallet, the first Catholic Black Sea German immigrants established a settlement at Ipswich in 1885. He considers Ipswich to have the greatest percentage of Catholic Black Sea Germans in South Dakota. In North Dakota, the Catholic Black Sea Germans are primarily settled west of the Missouri River. In Sallet's estimation, 85% of the Catholic Black Sea Germans live in the Dakotas.

Another important factor Luebke credits the German Russians with, is their introduction of Turkey Red wheat to the southern plains. The wheat is particularly suited for the Great Plains. Arends focuses on wheat production of the German Russians of the northern states when she states, "into the 1890's Eureka, South Dakota, was the 'Wheat Capital of the World'" (49). Both agree the German Russians were successful agriculturally because of their work ethic, which was particularly thrifty, hardworking, and persistent. Luebke credits the German Russians emphasis of the entire family laboring together, which "made sugar beet culture a success in Nebraska and Colorado" (414). Sallet emphasizes the role of the Volga Germans in developing the sugar beet industry in Colorado, Nebraska, Montana, and Wyoming.

Another influential institution was the church. According to Luebke, "the church was the easiest to establish, the most effective in its mission, and hence the most long-lived" (411). In the early days of settlement and before any churches were built, the immigrants held prayer services in the home. The majority of the itinerant preachers traveled incredible distances in establishing their affiliated church districts. It was rare that an ordained minister or priest held services at the same location more than once a

month. Due to distance and lack of qualified preachers, many of the religious functions were performed by a layperson. Usually the man who knew the Bible better than anyone else conducted the service. Most of the funerals and weddings were held in the home. These events always drew a large crowd; it was not uncommon for 300 or more people to attend a wedding or funeral. They became social events where everyone came to pay their respects and visit with people other than their own family or their closest neighbor.

As the German Russians increased in population and affluence, so increased the number of churches they built. The church was central to the German Russian culture, but as more people began to leave the area due to crop failure and low prices, many of the small country churches could not maintain the membership needed to be financially independent. As time went by, another reason membership became less was due to the dying off of the older generations. The more the younger members spoke English in their everyday life, the more the church services would be conducted in English. During this transition period, it was common to have the sermon spoken in German and then the same sermon spoken in English to appease all concerned within the church. Eventually, the practice of having a German-speaking service was discontinued, as more of the population became Americanized.

Another cultural influence Luebke mentions is the significance of German-language newspapers. The longest running and probably the most influential newspaper of the German-speaking people of the Great Plains was the "Dakota Freie Presse." Sallet writes the newspaper "was established in the spring of 1874 in Yankton, South Dakota" (92). The newspaper was established by Reichsdeutsche or Germans from Germany, but it soon became recognized as a Black Sea German newspaper. German-language

newspapers in America kept German-speaking people informed about ancestral lands as well as people from the homeland kept in touch with those who migrated to America.

According to Sallet, the one custom German Russians held onto in Russia was their language, and they did not want to give it up in America. The German-language newspapers allowed them to hold onto their language, and much cultural history is contained within the pages of these old newspapers. One huge factor, World War I, became pivotal in decreasing the “German” influence within the family and many Great Plains institutions. Because of the war, anti-German sentiment was rampant. Most of the German-language newspapers had to cease publication or change the name of the paper and write the majority of the paper in English. After WWI, there were fewer German-language newspapers, and as the older German-speaking settlers died off, so did the need to have a newspaper written in their language. With fewer German-speaking readers, the newspapers either folded or began to publish more of the paper in English, until it was no longer a German-language newspaper.

Although the German Russians were able to maintain their language and culture in Russia, the Homestead Act of 1862 would not allow the majority of these immigrants to settle the Great Plains in the colonist style of Russia. Just as their ancestors were drawn to a land full of promise and hope in Russia, so were their heirs drawn to a land full of promise and hope in America. Throughout the Great Plains, folklore lays claim to countless reasons to migrate to America. Be it economical, political, military, religious, or a combination of all, one reason stands far above the rest. The lure of free land.