

Sarah Lacher
Dr. Isern
Coyote Culture

Boardman, Edna. *All Things Decently and in Order and Other Writing on a Germans from Russia Heritage*. Minot: North American Heritage Press, 1997.

Coomber, James and Sheldon Green. *Magnificent Churches on the Prairie: A Story of Immigrant Priests, Builders and Homesteaders*. Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1996.

Eisenberg, C.G. *History of the First Dakota-District of the Evangelical-Lutheran Synod of Iowa and Other States*. Translated by Anton H. Richter. Washington D.C.: University Press of America, Inc., 1982.

Friedemann, Jene. *Bread for the Third Generation: An Early History of Salem Lutheran Church Stillwater, Oklahoma*. Stillwater: Western Publications, 1987.

Gross, Paul S. *The Hutterite Way*. Saskatoon: Freeman Publishing Company Limited, 1965.

The landscape of the Great Plains reveals the German Russian legacy. Churches, steeples, crosses and cemeteries adorn the vast landscape. This German community lived in Russia until the conditions became too unbearable and then they immigrated to the United States. German Russian immigrants brought with and held on to their religion in order to make the transition from Russia to the United States easier and to make the United States more like their true home.

Jene Friedemann in *Bread for the Third Generation* sets out not only to write the personal story of her family and its connection to the German Evangelical Lutheran Church but also to explain the development of this Lutheran church. The German Russians left Russia, in the 1860s, because they sought religious and personal freedom. Many felt persecuted for being German and for being Lutheran. They set out to establish a community in Oklahoma in which they could be Germans openly and worship according to their faith (34-43). Until a permanent church existed, parishioners held

services in their homes. This community named their church “Friedens Kirche” or “Peace Church,” the same name it held in Russia (63).

Throughout Friedemann’s book, she notes the importance of religion for this ethnic group. The church gave many immigrants support. Immigrants experienced a high rate of child mortality. A number of deaths also occurred in the summer due to immigrants being unable to handle the heat compounded by drought. The Lutheran church was a place of empathy for these immigrants (72).

German Russians used the Bible for their rules. In fact, if they disagreed with something they would say, “*Meine Bibel sagt das nicht*” or “My Bible doesn’t say that.” (72) Furthermore, Friedemann notes that these German Russians held church in German. Worshipping in German allowed them to use their own language, which they often were not allowed to do in Russia, and to worship in the language that had the most meaning to them. Through the church, they also had German school that met during the summers to teach the children how to speak German (97-100).

Friedemann further illustrates the importance of the church through the concerns of German Russians about their pastor. Often the German Evangelical Lutheran Church had difficulties finding a pastor to serve only its parish. The scarcity of a pastor for this parish resulted in the church merging with other churches until in 1911 when they settled as the Salem Evangelical Lutheran Church in Stillwater, Oklahoma. This final merge allowed the church enough members that they could afford a pastor that only served their parish. German Russians wanted to have as much access to their church through services and interactions with the pastor as possible; this final merge aided their goals.

While Jene Friedemann provides a brief history of the German Russian community's interaction with the Lutheran church, she stresses the underlying connection between the two entities. She also provides convincing evidence of the church's role in German Russian acculturation to the United States. The support and interaction from the church helped immigrants find their niche in the US. The German Evangelical Lutheran Church provided a friendly face in a nation of strangers for these immigrants.

First Dakota-District of the Evangelical-Lutheran Synod has several items in common with the Salem Evangelical Lutheran Church. C. G. Eisenberg provides an extensive history of the Evangelical-Lutheran Synod, along with his personal memoirs, in *History of the First Dakota-District of the Evangelical-Lutheran Synod of Iowa and Other States*. Eisenberg's goal is to commemorate this religion and the men who ran it. While he devotes much his attention to the hardships experienced by pastors, he also picks out the necessity of religion on the plains. He notes that almost no pastors in the Evangelical-Lutheran Synod wanted to go to North Dakota. They did not care for the weather or the crop failures that often led to poverty (vi).

Parishes in North Dakota began as missions until they reached enough members to have their own church and pastor. Eisenberg is quick to note the importance of these missions in providing support for the members. The mission pastors had a difficult time with German Russians because as he remarks, German Russians had to have things their way. Yet he also details the struggles each mission had with its finances. Large portions of his book are devoted to the business side of the church.

Eisenberg chronicles each parish's and congregation's history, focusing from 1879 to 1891. While the history is only a page or two, each sketch provides considerable

information about the parish and congregation. Each history lists the number of parishioners, difficulties they faced (usually financial), pastor information, and in some cases personal stories. These histories are one of the few places that mention parishioner's by name, rather than just stating generalities.

Overall, the majority of this book centers on the business side of churches, which includes gathering parishioners and their struggle to raise money to pay all the finances. The finances reveal a sense of community involvement. Parish members selected parishioners to be in charge of the church. Since these parishioners came from the community, it kept the church responsive to the communities needs. Although Eisenberg complains about the hardship of pastors, he also notes they cared about their parishioners and they worked to instill and foster morals among them.

In contrast to books such as Eisenberg's that focus on the business side of a parish, Edna Boardman focuses on the heritage of her religion. *All Things Decently and in Order and Other Writing on a Germans from Russia Heritage*, explains the Mennonite Brethren Heritage. Although she is no longer a member of the Mennonite Brethren, she still feels that her upbringing in this faith is responsible for who she is today (ix). According to her, all members in her faith felt this way. Boardman notes, "Because the church fulfilled such great needs, almost nobody stayed home from the services if they could help it. The church had an intrinsic relevance to our daily lives." (2) Although the church building was simple in design, Boardman remarks that the faith was not.

The faith provided not only help and comfort to immigrants but also the rules by which to live their lives. Each member had a personal relationship with God. The brethren read the Bible, which many had at home to find answers and messages. It was

acceptable and even encouraged that members had this personal relationship and understood the Bible and God on their own through the Bible. When the debate over the language that should be used in church arose, members turned to their personal relationship with God. Members saw the change from using German to using English as a personal attack on their identity. It meant, to a degree, that they needed to form a relationship with God using someone else's language, which upset many parishioners.

Boardman highlights the Mennonite faith with an assumption of superiority and piety but little corroborating evidence thereof. Paul Gross, on the other hand, in expressing a small degree of pride in being a Hutterite, also includes evidence. Gross grew up Hutterite and eventually became a Reverend. Hutterites share a similar immigration story to other German Russian immigrants. However, they compare their journey to Lincoln, Nebraska in 1874 with Moses's journey to the promise land (18). Throughout the book, Gross provides examples of Hutterites paralleling their lives to the Bible. The Bible was and is a staple to not only their religion but also their entire way of life. They built their homes simply, because the Bible forbade vanity. Each home was and is furnished with only the basic necessities because the Bible teaches that each person should have only what is needed (21-22). The Hutterites' lives have not changed much over the centuries, because the Bible has not changed.

Even the organization and rules for church service were justified through the Bible. As Gross notes, the Hutterites spoke German in their communes; this is also something that has not changed. Hutterites also used German during church services. During services, the women sat on the right side and the men sat on the left (95). In deciding surnames, too, the Hutterites used the Bible, (116) Gross is quick to mention

that these traditions are still followed even today; since religion is central to their way of life, the Hutterites' way of life will only change if their religion does.

Hutterites did not face as many obstacles on the Plains because they moved their entire way of life from Russia with them to the United States. The Hutterites found the rules for living within the Bible. When they moved to the United States, they brought the same Bible with them, thus ensuring their way of life remained the same. They were and still are successful in living life in a commune, which also blocks out the influences from the outside world that would have jeopardized their way of life.

Catholic German Russian immigrants also included church as part of their lives. James Coomber and Sheldon Green in *Magnificent Churches on the Prairie*, write about Catholicism on the plains from the perspective of the priests. The authors note that many Catholic German Russian immigrants felt isolated on the farm because they were not used to living on the land they farmed. Previously they would live in a closer community and walk to their land. The isolation mixed with priest unable to speak German, worried Bishop John Shanley (Bishop of North Dakota, 1889-1909). He worried that parishioners would begin attending other churches held in German or just stop attending mass. As a result, Bishop John Shanley pushed for German speaking priests in North Dakota to insure masses in German. He also pushed to have more parishes, so German Russians would not feel as isolated (7).

Coomber and Green do focus on the business side of the parishes but not in the sense of money, rather in the sense of what each priest's duty was to the parish. The authors explain how priests got parishioners involved with church committees and events. The book provides insight into what Catholic priests did on the North Dakota plains to

help German Russian immigrants feel at home and adjust to living in a new country. Due to the outreach of the Catholic Church to Catholic German Russians, these immigrants took ownership over their church. For example, in Strasburg, North Dakota, the parishioners did most of the labor to finish the church (37).

Although this book is from the perspective of the church, it still demonstrates the role of religion among German Russian immigrants. Coomber and Green also include sections on other Catholic immigrants, such as the Irish, which differ from German Russians. The Catholic faith has many holidays and traditions celebrated by German Russians. The authors needed to discuss the importance of these holidays in bringing people together to worship. The church also provided comfort during the hard times, again the authors needed to elaborate on this important role.

Regardless of specific faith, German Russian immigrants on the plains held on to similar things. The German language was extremely important to these immigrants both in church and at home. Church in German was a crucial element to worshipping. Each faith felt that worshipping in anything but German lessened their prayers. Each faith also built its churches according to its interpretation of the faith. Mennonites and Hutterites had simple churches because they believed the Bible instructed them to keep all material items simple, Lutherans had modest churches, while Catholics built extravagant churches because they believed God deserved the best house, literally. Finally, each religion provided comfort to German Russian immigrants as well as helped them to acculturate to the United States. Without religion, the German Russian legacy on the Great Plains would be invisible.