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Article Title: Our Parents Were Russian German

Full Citation: William Urbach, "Our Parents Were Russian German," *Nebraska History* 48 (1967): 1-26

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1967Parents.pdf>

Date: 11/08/2011

Article Summary: The author's immigrant grandparents settled in Nebraska, drawn by the railroad's offer of cheap farm land. Getting by was a struggle that involved many moves and many jobs. The family cherished time spent with others on holidays, picnics and trading days in town.

Cataloging Information:

Names: Heinrich Urbach, Friederich Urbach, William Urbach, Schleiger family

Place Names: Saratow, Russia; Norka, Russia; Findlay, Ohio; Sutton, Nebraska

Keywords: Volga River, Union Pacific Railroad, Russian German

Photographs / Images: family of Fred and Margaret Urbach; Mr and Mrs Fred Urbach and Fred, Jr; Russian German workers in a Nebraska beet field; passport of Heinrich Urbach; TFA Williams; Dr Hattie Plum Williams, author of *A Social Study of the Russian German*

OUR PARENTS WERE RUSSIAN GERMAN

BY WILLIAM URBACH

IT WAS an early morning hour in December, 1876. The German steamer *Frisia* moved slowly into the harbor of New York and was being towed to the space assigned to it at the wharf.

Among the crowd of passengers awaiting the gang-plank's lowering were hundreds of excited, rapidly-talking foreigners, their dress, and especially the headscarves of the women, distinguishing them as emigrants from European shores coming to a new, strange country, expectant but bewildered, and facing they knew not what. But "Amerika" was the word heard most constantly and clearly in the bedlam. They showed the effect of the long, uncomfortable journey across waters in the between-deck portions of the boat, crowded into space which barely allowed movement on account of bundled possessions, meager though these were.

One of them, who appeared to be the leader of a small group, was decidedly German. Those who were evidently his family hovered close to him, depending upon his orders.

Mr. Urbach, a resident of Hamden, Connecticut, is retired from a career with the Y. M. C. A.

He would be judged to be about 30 years old, and his wife whom he addressed as "Liese", with a young child in her arms and another sobbing and clinging tightly to her full black skirt, stayed close to his side, a frightened look in her eyes, but displaying confidence in him to get her through the strange situation.

Also keeping close and attempting a brave assumption of importance, was a boy of some seven years, standing erect and holding fast with his small hands to a long, curved bundle wrapped heavily in roughly woven cloth. As he responded to his father's oft repeated question, "Friederich, hast du die sense?"¹ his childish voice could scarcely be heard in his courageous answer, "Ja Vater," and again received his father's admonition, "Friederich, halt fast die sense!" In the jostling crowd moving down the gangplank the article which the small boy clutched so tenaciously was taller than himself and obstructed his view, making its protection a valiant and desperate struggle.

Passport No. 560,² when presented at the immigration office, was in three languages, German, French and Russian, respectively, and bore the official seal of the Russian Governor, Galin Wresky, in testimony that the persons described therein had been officially released from Saratow, Russia, in the month of October, 1876. Those named in the document were: "Heinrich Urbach, 29, with his wife, Louise 30, son Friederich, 7, daughter Anna-Eliza-

¹ "die sense;" German words for "the scythe."

² Original passport is on file in the archives of Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska.

beth, 1, and brother Conrad, 20.”³ Heinrich Urbach was later to be my grandfather, and the small boy delegated to carry the scythe to America to continue the family occupation of farming, became my father.

The S.S. *Frisia* brought the family from Hamburg, Germany, the point of embarkation, but the town in which they had lived to the extent of their various years was Norka, Russia, a distance of about 50 miles from Saratow where their forebears settled as German colonists on the land along the Volga River in response to the famous “Manifesto”⁴ of Catherine the Great, the German-born Empress of Russia, in the year 1763, which invited people of other nationalities to settle in the vast uncultivated regions of the Russian Empire, offering as inducements special privileges such as freedom of worship, freedom from taxes for 10 years, and freedom from military duty during their residence. (The military exemption extending also to their children born in Russia).⁵

A photographic copy of the list of passengers on the *Frisia*, signed by J. Meyer, Master of the ship, dated December, 8, 1876 and delivered to the Collector of Customs of the District of New York, has been obtained from the

³ Letter dated Oct. 9, 1960, from Elizabeth Reisbick of Portland, Oregon, the only living member of my grandfather's family (she having been born in the U. S. A. after the grandparents' arrival and not the Elizabeth mentioned in the visa), tells me that there was a confusion of names in the visa. The hyphenated Anna-Elizabeth was actually two daughters. “Anna” was always known to us as *Alice*, who married my mother's brother Adam Heinrich, and “Elizabeth,” one year of age, mentioned in the visa, for some reason changed her name to *Margaret*. She married William Schlitts, and correspondence with the family of Mr. and Mrs. Schlitts fails to throw any light on the reason for the change. I have found in my research, however, that it was not uncommon for the given name to be changed, sometimes to distinguish between close relatives of the same name, and sometimes because it was desired to carry on a name especially dear to the family.

⁴ Full text of Manifesto appears in Bauer, Gottlieb, *Geschichte der Deutschen Anseidler an der Volga*, Saratow, 1908, pp. 10-15, translation of which, as well as the original edition of the book, is filed in the Library of Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, Nebraska.

⁵ *Manifesto*, par. 6, no. 7; par. 7.

National Archives and Records Service, Washington, D. C., showing on the third sheet thereof the following passengers: No. 115, Heinrich Urbach 29, male, workman; no. 116, Louise Urbach 32, female; no. 117, Friederich Urbach 7 yrs. 11 mos., male; no. 118 Elizabeth Urbach 3 yrs., female; no. 119 Catherine Urbach 11 mos., female baby; 120 Conrad Urbach 21, male, workman.⁶

Immediately upon stepping off the steamer the travelers were met by swarms of "greeters" offering to assist them in getting through the immigration red tape and in finding their trains. These were representatives of industries in the United States which on account of manpower shortage were seeking factory workers, or they were agents of the railroads—the Union Pacific, Santa Fe, and Burlington and others—all of which were trying to find purchasers for the land which had been granted them as a subsidy by federal and state governments.⁷

I have never been able to ascertain by what inducement my grandfather and his family stopped at Findlay, Ohio. It is possible that one of the solicitors representing a certain factory of that city persuaded him and placed him on a train with a ticket for that destination, or it is more probable that some of his acquaintances from Russia had settled there and had written him or his associates before they left Russia to join other colonists who were embarking for America. It is of record that emissaries from the colonists had previously visited the United States and

⁶ Photographic copy, consisting of 6 sheets, is filed in the archives of the Nebraska State Historical Society of Lincoln, Nebraska. It will again be noted that the names of the small children listed in the visa and the names on this copy of passenger list do not agree (see footnote 3). The name of the infant under 1 year of age is listed as 'Catherine.' This name appears nowhere else in any family references, and the youngest member of the group was always known to the family as Margaret, who was Mrs. William Schlitts. One guess might be that the name for the baby had not yet been chosen when the family left Russia and that in the confusion of responding to the ship's listing this name was hastily given as one easy of pronunciation in English interpretation.

⁷ Kendal Bailes, "The Mennonites Come to Kansas," *American Heritage Magazine*, August 1959, pp. 32-33.

looked for places of settlement and had returned to the Volga groups bringing samples of the soil, the prairie grass, some literature, etc., and made a glowing report.⁸

It is easy to imagine the conflicting emotions that must have traveled with these immigrants from Russia. They certainly could not but recall the stories they had heard many times from their grandparents of their journey from Germany to the steppes of Russia more than 100 years prior, and with what hope those had set forth for that land of Paradise. They had to recall also the disappointments, the failure of the Russian Government to carry out its promises; they had heard over and over again how painfully the grandparents, with other German settlers, had built their abodes and established themselves in the wilderness, only to have the little they had been able to eke out through painful toil taken from them by the wild tribes of the Kirghiz or destroyed by the barbarous hordes of the rebel Pugatshev;⁹ their horses and cattle had been spirited away in the darkness of night, and even children of the colonists had been taken in front of their eyes and held at high ransom in the camps of the robbers, or disappeared entirely.

Grandmother especially harbored these stories in her mind, but she must trust her "mann", he assured her that everything would be different in America, that there was wealth and happiness ahead for them, and asked, "Would you rather the kindern should go to war to fight for the Russian Czar?"¹⁰ He had made his choice, and it was her

⁸ *The Golden Jubilee of the German-Russian Settlements of Ellis and Rush Counties, Kansas, held at Hays County, Kansas, Aug. 31-Sept. 1 and 2, 1926*, Kansas Historical Library, North Newton, Kansas.

⁹ Gottlieb Bauer, *op. cit.*, Preface II, translation p. 2.

¹⁰ Kendal Bailes, *op. cit.*, *American Heritage*, p. 31. "In 1870 there was a great change in Russian policy. Czar Alexander II sought to assimilate these Germans as rapidly as possible. His policy was expressed in a single sentence, 'One Czar, One Religion, One Language.' In 1871 came the greatest blow of all, the passage of the Universal Military Service Act." Many of the colonists were Mennonites, and therefore pacifists, but no exemptions were allowed.

part to acquiesce, to go with him, to prepare food and clothing for him and the "kindern", and to continue to bear more children for him.

The details of the trip to Findlay, Ohio, how they obtained food along the route, how they were housed upon arrival, whether with friends they had known or in quarters furnished by the factories, are not within the knowledge of any of our family now living, but grandfather has been understood to have said that he remained there about two years.

All of the Ohio cities in this district have for many years been manufacturing centers, and it is known that many Volga Germans found employment here, but grandfather would never have taken to the stifling and monotonous jobs of the factories. He had grown up on the farm of his father whom he had left in Norka;¹¹ through constant effort he had finally obtained in Norka an acreage of his own and had begun the responsibility of his own family; his wife and children were to be the economic factor on his land toward the advancement of wealth.

The feel of the soil and the nurturing of the planted seeds to the point where they produced feed for his cattle and horses and sheep, as well as provisions for his family, were his daily inspiration.

What was a day in a factory, turning identical screws hour after hour, or feeding the flame of the pit which melted ore for the making of cold, lifeless metal, compared with the satisfaction of beholding green blades of grain come through the earth and watching them mature into ears of corn to be stored at the end of the season, and the independence of being master of one's own farm? His associates in Findlay no doubt argued and reminded him that "each week you get your pay for sure, without the risk of storms and blights and freaks of nature that can wipe out a whole summer's hard work."

¹¹ Great-grandfather came across to the United States later.

The low price asked by the western railroads for farming land finally convinced him to leave Ohio and go on to explore these promises. Grandmother again patiently packed up the meager possessions and readied the children (which had increased by one in the meantime, a boy named Conrad). As I recall, Grandfather always told us in later years that he came to Sutton, Nebraska because that was as far as the railroad went. However, it is known that the Burlington Railroad was completed to Hastings, Nebraska, a point beyond Sutton, by March 28, 1878, so he was either mistaken, or he may not have stayed in Findlay as long as we have been led to believe.

It is impossible at this date of writing (1961-62) to learn much about his family in Sutton in the years immediately following even though my father who was then 10 or 12 years of age, grew up on the farm which Grandfather procured near Sutton. It is clear, however, that others from the Volga colonists previously arrived and settled in and around Sutton, and that there was quite a good sized group of them, so it is possible that Grandfather had acquaintances who urged him to join them, and that he and his family were taken care of for a time until he could make arrangements for a piece of farming land. The quarter-section which he leased was about six miles north and two miles west of Sutton. It was not good land, and he had a difficult time raising any crops on it. He finally purchased a threshing machine by means of which he harvested the grain of the farmers in the entire surrounding district. This also ran him greatly in debt, for it could only bring returns during the short season of the harvest and stood idle the remainder of the year. Drouth and sudden hail storms often wiped out an entire crop and deprived him of his income.

When my father was growing up there were no schools in the vicinity of my grandfather's farm and he therefore received no formal education. Later when a school was established he refused to attend because of his advanced years over the other youngsters of the neighborhood, and

consequently his writing and spelling were limited to the ability to sign his name. What he lacked in schooling, however, was certainly compensated to a great degree by the possession of a good mind, a high standard of character and morals, and a spirit of cooperation and dependability which throughout his life won him the respect of his fellow-workers and citizens. Aside from his practical knowledge of farming he developed skills in the operation of steam boilers and other mechanical devices.

When my father was reaching his late teens his marriage began to be a matter for consideration. Through correspondence with relatives and friends in Norka it was arranged that Margaret Heinrich should come over in response to a proposal of marriage. The betrothal was consummated and money was advanced for the expense of her trip. She came in the company of her oldest brother, Adam Heinrich. My father had never seen her, unless it was possible that they had been in the same neighborhood in their native colony on the Volga when very young children.

She arrived in 1887, twenty years of age at the time, about two and one-half years older than my father. They were married shortly after her arrival and lived for approximately a year and a half with father's parents on the farm.

My grandmother died in the early spring of 1889, about three months after my birth, November 14, 1888. The coming of a second wife from Russia about eight months later, a widow by the name of Krieger, with her own two children, a son, Conrad, about 10 years of age and a daughter about 12, complicated conditions in the home and as a result grandfather established my father and mother on a rented farm near by.

My brother Henry was born on February 4, 1890. Mother's parents and their family who followed her to America, stayed with grandfather for a short time and then proceeded on to the Northwest which at that time

was undergoing a great industrial expansion. Either mother's persuasion in a desire to be near her own relatives, or because "the greener grass on the other side of the fence" attracted him, father decided to leave the Sutton farm and moved to Portland, Oregon.

It was while they lived in Portland that father filed his intention to become a citizen of the United States. The Naturalization Law at that time (under the Act of 1802 and its subsequent amendments) was very simple. Any free white person, except an alien enemy, was eligible for citizenship. He must declare his intention on oath, before the proper court, at least three years before his admission. When he had lived five years in the United States and one year in the state in which he applied, he was declared an American citizen, upon taking the oath to support the Constitution and renouncing allegiance to the sovereign of whom he was a subject. The children of the applicant, if under twenty-one years of age at the time of the parent's naturalization, and if dwelling in the United States, were declared to be American citizens. In 1824, the time intervening between the declaration and the final certificate was reduced to two years; and a provision was added whereby a person who had lived in the United States during the three years preceding his majority could take out both papers at once after establishing his residence in this country.¹² Father, at the time of filing, March 31, 1892, was 24 years of age.

¹² Dr. Hattie Plum Williams, in discussing the errors which she states were common, says: (p. 404) "In 1878 in one day, eleven German Russians declared their intention of renouncing allegiance to the Emperor of Germany instead of the Czar of Russia," and further on she says (p. 405), "One of the most serious faults has been carelessness about the applicant's name. It is not strange that foreign names are misspelled. Even with the greatest care taken by the bureau under the new law and its insistence upon technical uniformity, an error may occur, especially if the applicant be illiterate." Hattie Plum Williams, "The Road to Citizenship—A Study of Naturalization in a Nebraska County," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. XXVII, No. 3, reprinted and published by Ginn & Company, New York, 1912. (pages 399-427, inclusive).

Father's Declaration of Intention had two noticeable errors: first, the name is misspelled, appearing as "Fred Orbach"; and second, he renounces forever "all allegiance and fidelity to all and any foreign Prince, Potentate, State and Sovereignty whatsoever, and particularly to the Emperor of Germany of whom I am at present a subject." He was by birth subject to the Czar of Russia, not the Emperor of Germany. It will be noted that he signed by his mark, inasmuch as he had not learned, at the time, to sign his name.

I have been unable to find evidence that my father ever filed any further papers with regard to his citizenship, but I do know that he voted in all local and other elections during the years that I recall in both Nebraska and Colorado.

The stay in Portland was short—only about two years—and they returned to Sutton, Nebraska. During the period in Portland father worked at small jobs in factories. Mother said it was because he became homesick for his own relatives that he was dissatisfied.

While in Portland their third son, John, was born. When they decided to return to Sutton father went ahead to find a house and mother followed by train with the three boys a month or so later.

Work was hard to obtain in the small town of Sutton, so after many attempts to find something for a livelihood for the family, father had charge of a stud horse for breeding. This he handled for approximately one year, and mother, left alone by his travel through the neighboring towns and farms, had a difficult life taking care of the home and children. Conrad, the fourth son, was born during this period.

Early in 1893, a severe drouth struck the country, resulting in 1894 in what was known as The Great Depression. The seriousness and depth of this calamity to the people of Nebraska is well described: "In May, 1894, a

late and severe frost had ruined thousands of acres of early corn. Rainfall throughout the spring and early summer had been far from adequate, and late in July a furnace-like wind withered the remaining corn crop. . . . In Omaha they could comprehend what it meant in terms of an urban area, large numbers of unemployed seeking jobs, houses with boarded windows, newspaper columns filled with notices of foreclosures and sheriff sales".¹⁸

Through friends in Superior, Nebraska, by the name of Schleiger, who offered to share their house with us, my father was encouraged to locate in that town in the hope that work could be found. This, however, did not materialize. I remember during the winter of 1894-1895 how very early in the morning, father would dress as warmly as possible and go where help was needed to cut and store ice. Later in the day he would return, despondent over his failure to be picked out of the hundred or more who presented themselves at the project.

It was a desperately hard winter for the family. The only income was produced by mother who went out and did washing for families more fortunate. Later in the spring father finally secured a position as caretaker on a farm situated on the banks of the Republican River. There we had a home to live in for about a year, although he was never able to collect all the pay he had coming to him.

We survived during this very difficult time on a minimum subsistence, and on occasions some food was received from Grandfather's farm. It was at Superior that Henry and I started to school. We had spoken German in our home and most of our associations were with German friends and neighbors, so we could neither understand nor speak English. As a consequence we became the targets of ridicule by the other children and had a rough time.

¹⁸ Richard Lowitt, "Populism and Politics: The Start of George W. Norris' Political Career," *Nebraska History*, June, 1961, Vol. 42, No. 2, pp. 81 ff.

When we were forced to retaliate in self defense on the playground it often led to punishment. I vividly recall standing in a corner with our backs to the class, bringing us deep humiliation.

Christmas brought us few playthings, but we always looked forward to it because of the neighborhood gatherings and singing. The first Christmas which I especially recall, Mrs. Schleiger came to our house before we children went to bed, dressed as a witch, with a branch of a tree in one hand and in the other a bag of candy. She asked mother whether we had been good boys, and mother praised us. Then she opened the bag of candy and threw the pieces on the floor. We were frightened at the witch, but we tried to grab the candy. As Henry reached for a piece she switched his hands and he drew back, so mother got into the game and got it for us. After considerable coaxing on our part, assisted by mother, Mrs. Schleiger removed her mask and the evening was spent in a jovial atmosphere.

After the brief stay in Superior my father was offered, and accepted employment as a section worker at Buda, Nebraska, on the Union Pacific Railroad. This came through another Mr. Schleiger, a cousin of mother's, who was foreman of the section work at that time. During the time after Dad began this job and the search for a house was completed, Mother with her four boys stopped off at Minden, Nebraska, where her widowed brother Philip had his home. She was again expecting a child, and on April 22, 1896, a fifth son, Fred, was born. In July, Dad came to Minden with a borrowed two-seated buggy and took the family to our new home in Buda, a very small village four miles east of Kearney. There he worked for four years on his job with the railroad.

These were four happy years for the family. While father earned only \$30.00 per month, from which he had to pay \$3.00 per month for rental of our four-room house, the family was able, with modest and efficient living, to

get along. Here we acquired a horse and a second-hand buggy which gave us means of transportation for our weekly shopping at Kearney. We had a garden, some chickens and a cow, so we never lacked good food and plenty of it.

Henry and I had uninterrupted school attendance at the small school where one teacher taught all grades from first to eighth. Spelling bees were held on Fridays, and the school was the center of social life of the community. It was here that the first phonograph was introduced to us by a fellow who came from another town with his small machine.

Father always emphasized the fact that he was going to see that all of his children had an education. On the other hand he talked of the economic asset his boys were going to be when they became old enough to work. Boys usually began to work at about 12 years of age, so he was a bit inconsistent, but his idea of an education was ability to read and write and do simple arithmetic.

Adam was born at Buda on April 19, 1898. There were thus six boys. By coincidence the Schleiger brood was a family of six girls. For each girl in the Schleiger family there was a boy of almost corresponding age in ours.

Henry and I walked with the Schleiger girls to the schoolhouse a mile and a half by a road which ran parallel to the Union Pacific Railroad, and I recall that it was at this time that the U. P. first put gravel on their road bed along this route.

On February 14th, I recall, when we met the Schleiger girls along the way they were carrying home-made valentines which they were taking to school for the 'valentine box'. Henry and I had never heard of a valentine, and they attempted to explain its significance to us. I was jealous and afraid I would not receive one, but when the teacher handed them out as the names were called, I was

reassured when I heard her say, "Willie Urbach", and I went forward proudly to receive mine from 'Your Valentine, Elizabeth Schleiger' and Henry was also the recipient of a tender message from Emma.

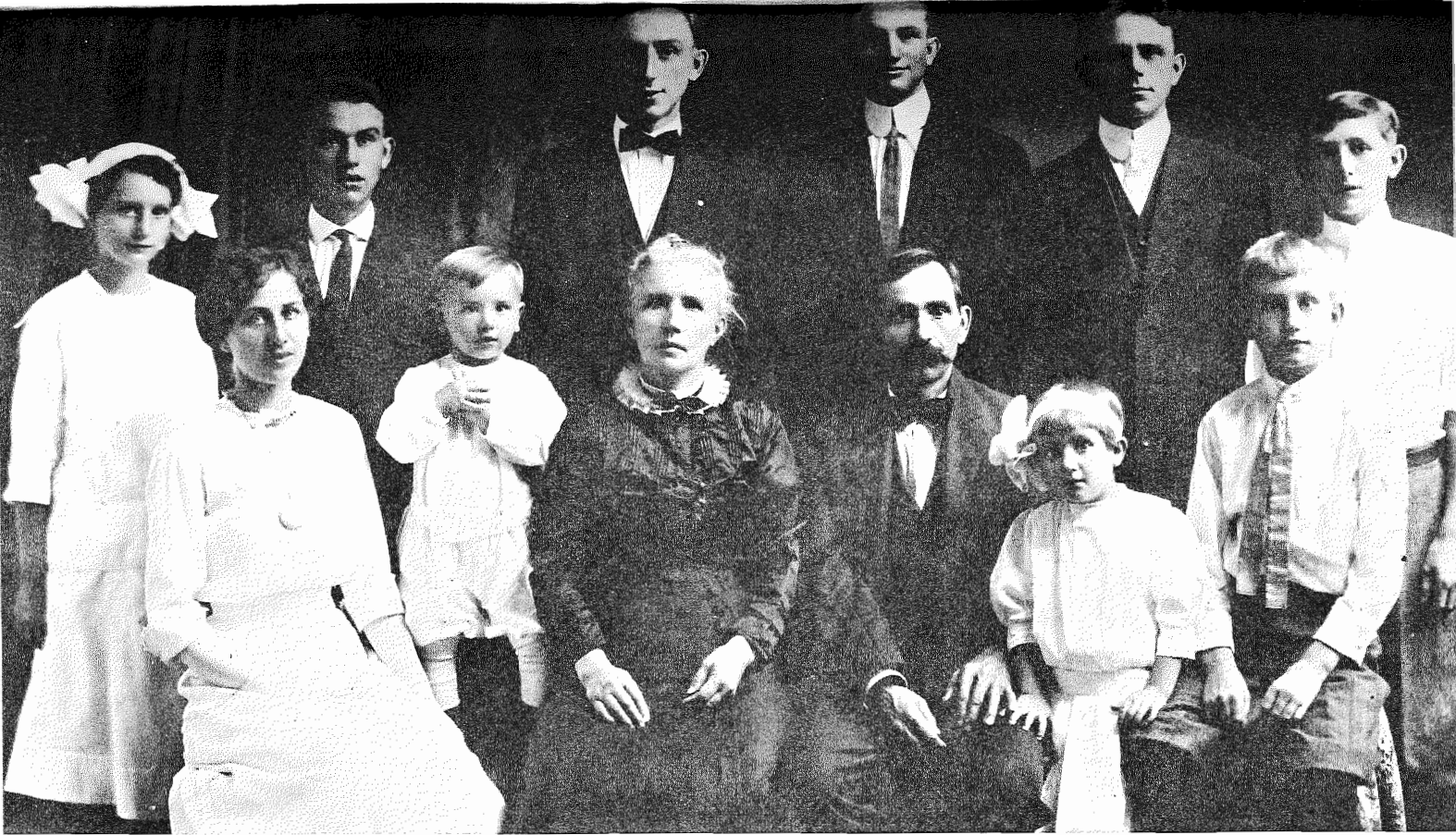
At West Kearney, approximately seven miles from Buda, was a cotton mill.¹⁴ Dad learned that there were openings there and that Henry and I could obtain employment as well as himself, which would increase the family income, so the result was that after the four years at Buda we moved and for about a year father worked as a mule-spinner in the mill. We two boys were also hired, and the three of us working twelve hours per day, six days a week brought the munificent sum of nine cents per hour for father, and four and a half cents per hour for the children. On the pooled income of \$9.72 per week we lived comparatively well.

The reader has no doubt stopped to take a second look at this. A cotton mill in Nebraska? A bit strange, yes. A canal was constructed a number of miles above the Platte River and a large reservoir was built to hold the water available for operation of the mill. The raw cotton supply was shipped up from a southern firm. The engineering venture and establishment of such an industry was to attract settlers to the area where the water power was available.

The experiment lasted for probably ten years or more when it closed down, evidently because it could not compete with southern manufacture.

As a 'bobbin-boy' I had an experience which impressed upon me a lesson in frugality. As I worked through the day, scraps of cotton sometimes fell to the floor. From my youth I had been taught to keep things neat, so in order to get rid of the light debris I picked up the small pieces from the floor and put them in my pocket. On the

¹⁴ See Charles Jenkins, "The Kearney Cotton Mill—The Bubble That Burst," *Nebraska History*, September 1957, pp. 207-219.



Family of Fred and Margaret Urbach



Mr. and Mrs. Fred Urbach and Fred, Jr.



Russian German workers in a Nebraska beet field

Предъявитель сего, *исключительный*
издатель *России* *печать*
наименований *Саратов*
своими *руками* *Коллежскому*
регистратору *Морки* *Полушки*
Удальцов *Ивану* *Степанову* *Ан*
дреевичу *Семину* *Фридриху*
Григорьевичу *Андреевичу* *Евста*
фийе *и* *его* *брату* *и* *брату*
Коллежскому *регистратору* *Ивану* *до*
уверенности *на* *всегда*

во свидетельство чего и для свободного

пропуска данъ сей паспортъ съ приложен-
нымъ печати. Въ *Саратовск.*
Октябрь для 18 *го* года.

Губернаторъ *А. И. Мухоморов*





Mr. T. F. A. Williams



Dr. Hattie Plum Williams,
author of *A Social Study of the Russian German*

way home I discovered them and pulled the light fluff out, scattering it along the path of travel.

The next morning I was called to the superintendent's office who stated that he saw me throwing cotton away, and he reprimanded me severely for wasting the valuable product. He informed me that it was shipped from a great distance in the South and cost the mill six cents per pound, and he never again wanted to see me wasting any of it in any way.

At West Kearney we lived for the first time in a community with a large number of Russian Germans. Their social behavior was slightly different from what ours had become. I remember one New Year's Eve we were awakened shortly after midnight by the firing of shot guns. We youngsters could not imagine what was happening, and were frightened, lest the Indians we had heard about were coming upon us. We soon learned that it was one of the New Year traditional celebrations practiced by the colonists in Russia. Father went to the door, no doubt well informed on the nature of the occasion, and there stood a conglomerate group of males (boys as well as men) with shot guns in hand. They were invited in, and each was served a glass of whiskey (my father always kept this on hand, although it was used sparingly as a 'nip' or appetizer), and with it was served a piece of liverwurst and bread. This was a house-to-house visitation. Dad and Henry and I were invited to join the group. We were provided with the semblance of a cane, and we noted that a number of small white ribbons were tied on those carried by some of the members in the group. We learned that the purpose of the ribbons was to show the number of drinks of whiskey the possessor had taken and was still able to remain in an up-right position.

Henry and I thought it was a great honor to be asked to join the celebration, but after a drink or two I became fully aware of my limitations and left the party and returned home. Henry was never one to give up, and the

next time we saw him he was helped into the house with his cane full of ribbons, completely intoxicated.

Since I was the oldest child in the family I always had to help mother at home with the housework. The biggest drudgery was helping with the washing. Wash-day was not only Monday, but almost every day of the week; a team of lively boys made a lot of washing. Aside from the obligation of keeping the woodbox filled, I had to stand on a chair and stomp the clothes in the boiler with a broom handle so the suds would not boil over; then the tiring process of turning the old fashioned wringer, and the climax chore of scrubbing the kitchen floor. Mother taught me the fine points of speed in motion, and I gained the reputation of being the 'best little scrubber' in the neighborhood, an honor no other child ever cared to challenge.

When I went to visit at Grandfather's farm for one week in the summer time, it was only a few minutes after my arrival when I was presented with a pail and scrub brush. Grandmother had saved the job for me because I was 'such a good little scrubber',—a compliment slyly intended to inflate the ego of a ten-year-old boy but how much more I would have gloried in being the best little catcher on the open sand lot team!

However, these visits were the thrills of my young life. One of the earliest recollections in connection with the farm is the steam engine standing on a selected site in the yard. It was mysterious and awesome. As I matured I learned about the grain threshing business Grandfather conducted. During his lifetime he owned three of these threshing outfits. The symbol of the J.I. Case eagle standing majestically erect on top of the world characterized the make of the machine. In his early days father was the engineer and manager of the jobs under the supervision of Grandfather. It was Grandfather's custom to drive around in a one-horse buggy overseeing the operation of his various projects while the harvesting was going

on. His status was similar to the 'Edelmann' of the old country.

In addition to father, on the farm, were Uncle Conrad, (born in Findlay, Ohio) and also a step-uncle by the same name, the son of Grandfather's second wife, who carried on the farm labor; and Aunts Margaret and Elizabeth often assisted in the plowing and cultivating when work became heavy during the short season of harvesting. There was another Uncle Henry, who was about three years older than I, but because of poor health he was unable to give much assistance beyond the light tasks. He died when he was about 18 years of age. The threshing started in the early part of July when the grain was ripening, and continued several months.

Father often related some of the experiences the threshing crew encountered, especially commenting on the congregate noon meal. The host family where the work was being done gained a reputation either for excellence of food or for sloppy methods and poor cooking. The men always looked forward to a good meal because they were genuinely hungry from the work which began early in the morning, and because it was a slight respite from the heat. Hilarity always accompanied the gathering around the table which was always placed outdoors in a shady spot. The girls, the daughters of the farmer, or neighbors who came in to assist in serving the meal, were targets of attraction for the young unmarried men of the crew. Sometimes a 'match' resulted which later culminated in marriage.

Among the memories of these adventures on the farm are the sounds of the noisy geese and ducks organizing themselves into a single file to waddle their way to the little pond in the meadow; watching the feeding of the stock and the harnessing and hitching of the horses to the farm implements; the windmill which stood some fifty feet erect with its whirling wind-driven wheel, pumping cool and thirst-satisfying water for men and animals (and

small active boys),—all these were the highlights in the wonders of my young life and the other youngsters in the family as they reached the age to enjoy them. I shall always remember my feeling of importance in being allowed to sit with the 'grown folks' around the large table at meal time, the heaped dishes of delicious food, and the give and take of tall tales and jokes concerning the activities on the farm and in the neighborhood. I never had to be coaxed to get out of bed in the morning, I didn't want to miss a thing!

Sunday on the farm was always a day of rest and worship. Grandfather was a pious man and very faithful in his church attendance. The Sunday fineries, simple as they were, were brought out from their sheet-covered hangings in the closet and Grandfather's two-seated buggy was filled to capacity for a long day at a small Baptist church eight miles away. The only persons remaining at home were those who were needed to take care of the livestock on the farm.

After services in the German language, tablecloths were spread on the grass and picnic dinners brought by each family were shared. It was the great social event of the week. Frequently, in the afternoon everyone would gather on the banks of the small creek at a spot where it had been somewhat enlarged, for the performance of the sacrament of baptism by immersion of those who confessed to having been converted from their sins. The Biblical example of the ceremony of the washing of feet was also conducted. A song befitting the ceremonies was sung in German, and the holiness of the occasion was most impressive (and to me a bit frightening because it made me wonder about my own 'sins of disobedience'). Altogether, it was a great day.

Monday was the day for hanging all the dusty Sunday apparel on the clothesline for brushing, in readiness for the next church attendance.

Saturday was trading day. Again, buggies were loaded, but this time the space was filled with eggs, butter, cheese and other farm products to be taken into town and exchanged for sugar, flour, kerosene and other necessary articles not produced or refined on the farm. Material by the yard was purchased from surplus on the trading or from savings, to be made into clothing for the family. Upon payment of the bill, sticks of peppermint candy were usually given by the grocer for us children.

My grandfather had hidden in the middle of his cornfield, a patch of watermelon and muskmelon vines. When ripe, the melons were brought in and placed in tanks of cold water early in the morning and served as a treat in the cool of the evening. How we all loved this evening of feasting and fun!

One of the institutions which characterized farming was the collection of cream saved in large cans. This was picked up by employees of the creamery which was then being established in town. Milk was stored in five gallon cans and put in the large watering tank through which cold water was piped from the windmill to the trough for the farm animals to drink. The creamery men came at intervals and skimmed the cream off the milk, leaving the skimmed product to be fed to the pigs or other animals, some of the yellow accumulation being retained, however, for table use with sorghum, and for the making of butter and cheese. Buttermilk was a table beverage, as was also the soured milk called 'clabber'. It was not until the latter part of the first decade of the 1900's that cream separators came into common use on the farms.

Grandfather retired from the farm when his family, consisting mostly of girls, married and he had little help to carry on the heavy work. He built a house in Sutton on a four acre lot, but in later years he deeded this house to our father, and once more returned to the farm, a new one which he rented, about three miles from town. He could never entirely divorce himself from the farm, but

finally had to give it up entirely and live in the town of Sutton until his death on February 9, 1933. He broke his arm shortly after moving to the second farm. It was improperly set and remained stiff, so that he used it with great difficulty.

At the time we were living in West Kearney a large sugar refinery had been constructed at Leavitt, a small town about three miles north of a smaller town of Ames on the main line of the Union Pacific Railroad, approximately seven miles west of Fremont, Nebraska.

Contiguous to Leavitt vast acres of land were converted to the raising of sugar beets. The planting and cultivation of these require the labor of many adults and older children, and West Kearney, among other towns, provided a reservoir for recruiting suitable laborers for this work.

It is highly probable that a representative of the sugar company came to West Kearney to entice the Russian German people through an offer of a more favorable opportunity to raise their economic status from that which they were experiencing in the cotton mill, and that this golden opportunity appealed to my father and mother because it gave them definite assurance of meeting not only their immediate needs, but also held a more promising future for them and their growing boys. I do not recall that we boys were aware of this prospect, because it seems to me that it was not until about the time that we were in the actual packing stage for moving that we were conscious of what was before us.

Leavitt had a permanent population of about three-hundred. Aside from the company-owned dwellings and factory installations there was a community Methodist church where infrequent services were held and a small Sunday School was conducted.

To the east of the central establishment of the factory and homes of the officials was an artificial ditch, coming

from the north and heading toward the Platte River about four miles to the south. The amount of water flowing in this ditch depended largely upon the amount of rainfall during the season. Here, in a more or less secluded spot a natural swimming pool had formed, which later became popular for our use. Beyond this ditch were established the necessary facilities for the actual farming of the lands in the raising of beets, and here the stables with the horses and mules were kept and other equipment was stationed.

On this large acreage, more or less temporary dwellings were spotted here and there for the housing of the migrant Russian German workers brought in annually, mostly from Lincoln, during the beet-working season. They remained on the place for approximately four months, returning to their homes at the end of the season after the crop had been delivered to the refinery.

The group with which our family was coming to the industry was, however, to be employed on a year-round basis. We arrived at the village one early spring morning after a night-long trip, the families crowded into a single railroad coach hooked to a freight train. Russian German families were large, our own then consisted of six children, and there were probably about 110 men, women and children packed with much baggage into an old coach built for the seating of much less than that number. The furniture was packed in a freight car.

There had been no possibility of sleep for the adults under these crowded conditions, with the noisy, nerve-shattering bumps of the train stopping at almost every station to switch off a car or take another on. The switching was done with a vengeance, making a tremendous impact. It was the general impression of the adult travelers that the force of the connecting of cars was deliberate by the train crew to give emphasis to their contempt for the 'Roosians'.

The switch engine delivered us on a three-mile spur between the town of Ames and the site of the factory. The

morning was bright with a brisk wind, but it had rained during the night, leaving pools of water in the gumbo soil. We had evidently arrived ahead of schedule and the local officials were not ready to assign us immediately to our places of residence. We spent the greater part of the day around the coach and freight car.

The housing arrangements for us were two rows of buildings of three different types. Some were two-story houses which we learned were the homes of the officials, engineers, chemists, etc., and beyond these, facing the same street, were about twenty box-like dwellings; then there was a second line made up of about fifteen square houses, at one end of which were three bunk houses. Each bunk house had three sections, the middle section containing one large room and two bedrooms, and the end sections two large rooms, the larger of which was intended for a kitchen, dining room and living room combined. The fronts of the second row faced the rear of the first row, with a road between them. These two rows ran the length of the sugar refinery buildings which had a large yard. A large barn and a small hotel completed the eastern end of the two rows. Later we were to learn that there were five large and well-built homes on the other side of the refinery, occupied by Mr. Leavitt, the president of the company, for whom the town was named, and the general manager and superintendent of the plant, and other persons of importance.

Our family was assigned to the middle section of one of the bunk houses. This we occupied for the next three years, when my father was allowed to rent one of the box-like houses, where we had more room. There were then in the family, myself, the oldest of the children, aged 12; Henry, John, Conrad, Fred and Adam.

No work was immediately ready for the men and consequently a great deal of time was spent playing 'horse-shoes'. Usually 15 to 20 men and boys could be seen centered around the open horseshoe area. After about four

days, one morning while the contest was on, some officials of the company arrived on the scene for the purpose of selecting a teamster for trucking and miscellaneous work around the factory. My father was standing in the group, and after they had sized up the men they called him aside and he was chosen for the job. This he held for around five years. He probably was the only one in the group who could speak English, and was somewhat more careful about his dress and appearance than most of the men. I have been told by Henry that Dad wore a Woodmen of the World pin on his coat lapel indicating his membership in the Lodge, which may have influenced the selection, but I do not recall that Dad ever mentioned that as a feature.

As the season advanced and work developed all able-bodied men found work either in the factory or in the fields. By the time the sugar beets reached the stage in their growth when they needed to be bunched and thinned

and hoed,¹⁵ whole families were drawn into the job and additional Russian German families were brought in from Lincoln.

After the harvest many of our group returned to Lincoln, the capital city, where at that time there was a large concentration of Russian German people. The Urbach family remained employed at Leavitt until the fall of 1907 when the sugar factory at Leavitt was moved to Scottsbluff, Nebraska.

¹⁵ The beet-working process was as follows: The ground was plowed and harrowed as early in the spring as the ground was conditioned for it. A planter drawn by a team of horses then dropped the seed in a continuous stream in rows which were about a foot apart. The sugar beet seed is of a brownish-white color and about the size of a pea and as wrinkled as a very old man's face. The planter had a long hopper from which the seed was poured from bags attached. There were about six spouts running from the hopper into the ground, and the seeds were planted an inch or an inch and a half deep.

After the plants grew to the height of about an inch, men and women with hoes having a four-inch blade cut out sections of the rows, leaving small bunches of plants about four inches apart. This was called 'bunching;' later children on their knees straddled each row and pulled out all but one of the small plants of each bunch. This was the 'thinning,' and children were used for this because they could be hired at a lower price than the adults.

Between this thinning process and the time the beets were ready to harvest, hoers went through occasionally and cleaned out the weeds which had sprung up in the rows.

The beets reached maturity and were ready for harvest about the middle of September. A beet puller drawn by horses was used for loosening them. This was so constructed that it loosened and raised each beet so it could later be pulled by hand. The roots of the beets are fairly long, sometimes reaching as much as a foot or more into the ground and this machine-loosening was necessary. Then adults and the older children passed through and pulled them by hand and cut off the leaves at the top with a 'machete' (Spanish type knife) and the beets were thrown into piles.

By wide-pronged forks they were then scooped up and put into wagons and hauled to the refinery where they were fed into flues and were floated by water into the factory for processing.

Gradually most of this hand work has through the years been replaced by automatic machinery, and by about 1920 the Russian German workers had become well assimilated into American life; many of them had reached the stage of economic structure where they had purchased much of the sugar beet acreage and they themselves became employers of the Mexican migratory workers who were later imported annually to do the manual labor required. Many of the former Russian Germans who worked as children in the beet fields rose to positions of importance in the factories of the Great Western Sugar Company.

During these intervening years a country store had been erected at Leavitt and a new four-room schoolhouse was constructed in which classes through the eighth grade were conducted. Thus, we children were able to pursue our elementary education although we older ones were handicapped by having to make up hours lost during the beet-working season. Henry, because he was too young for constant employment in the refinery, was able to attend without much interruption. Parents who had children of high school age started a private school of high school subjects, hiring a young woman (who herself was probably only a high school graduate), but the experiment lasted only one semester and was discontinued.

Another family which remained at Leavitt until the refinery was moved was that of William Frieauf. He came to Leavitt with his bride of one and one-half years and his firstborn son, and we became good friends. He was a blacksmith and his services were valuable to the Company. He later accompanied the transfer of a group of workers to Brush, Colorado, where another branch of the Great Western Sugar Company was located. There he bought a small farm to occupy his spare hours and also as an investment for the future. He was a good farmer, and through his work at the refinery and the additional production of the farm he soon accumulated quite a nice sum of money, putting some of it into additional farm land. Shortly before his death (about 1948) he told me that he was worth about \$200,000. I cite this as an example of thrift and foresight and devotion to American opportunity. A trip through the middle-western states will show many thriving farms owned by German Americans, and city directories are well filled with names of successful business and professional men and women whose ancestry is traced to these early emigrants from the Volga region of Russia.

When the Leavitt plant of the Sugar Company was abandoned after the campaign (as the beet production season was called) of 1906-7 the family felt uncertain

about the effect of the change on our chances for future employment. Henry and I were getting restless and desired to try a new occupational field. We wanted to get away from 'small town stuff' and go to the city. The fact that we had relatives in Lincoln finally led to the reluctant consent of our parents to seek employment with the Burlington Railroad shops located at Havelock near that city.¹⁶

As the years have gone by I have often reflected upon our family. How our parents raised a large family in the often crowded conditions of the home is beyond the understanding of us who are now accustomed to modern comforts. We had very few departures from the most simple food, much of it fashioned, at least in our early years, after the Russian German colony method of preparation. Clothing was handed down from one child to the next younger as we grew into it, but it was always patched and clean; wash day was almost every day of the week; sleeping was often four to six boys in a row crosswise of the bed.

However, it was perhaps this rugged manner of living that has helped us, as we have grown to maturity, to discipline ourselves to life's rubs and snubs and to overcome physical set-backs of one nature or another; to appreciate the fact that we are American citizens, and to respect and revere the small boy who carried the scythe from Russia to the United States.

¹⁶ William Urbach, encouraged by Mr. and Mrs. T. F. A. Williams and others, enrolled in Cotner College. Later he transferred to the University of Nebraska and was graduated in 1918. He served in the Army during World War I and was discharged on January 4, 1919. He states "Upon return to Lincoln I was made acting Secretary of the YMCA on the campus for a four month period pending the arrival of a General Secretary who had been appointed, and from that time on my life service was dedicated to the YMCA."

Henry Urbach remained with the Burlington Railroad for forty-seven years. He retired on March 1, 1956 as Assistant Vice President (Mechanical).