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Article Summary: The article summarizes the history of German settlements in Russia and the arrival of the Russian Germans in the Dakota Territory and Nebraska beginning in 1873. It includes translations of Friedrich Mutschkelknausôs account of their migration to Dakota and Peter Griessôs account of their settlement in Sutton, Nebraska.

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Photographs / Images: Friedrich Mutschkelknaus and children; Peter H Griess with his wife, Sophie Grosshans Griess; Saunders Avenue, Suttonôs main street, about 1873

The Russian Germans Come to the United States

Edited and translated by
THEODORE C. WENZLAFF

RUSSIAN Germans—Germans living in Russia—first began to migrate into Dakota Territory and Nebraska in 1873. In the following articles, some of the experiences encountered by the first groups leaving the Old World for the New are related.

Prior to the period of emigration, from 1763 to 1859, it had been the policy of the Russian government to invite colonists from western Europe, particularly Germany, to settle in Russia in order to bring under civilized control and cultivation the vast uninhabited areas of virgin steppe land. Extraordinary inducements were necessary to influence people to settle in these unknown wilds. The 1763 Manifesto[1] of the German-born Empress Catherine II, who

1. Gottlieb Bauer, *Geschichte der Deutschen Ansiedler an der Wolga* (Saratov, 1908), 10-15. A translation of the full text of the Manifesto as well as of the original edition of the book is filed in the Nebraska State Historical Society Library.

Colonel Wenzlaff, U.S.A. Ret'd, is a member of the State Legislature and a resident of Sutton, Nebraska. His parents, both Russian German, came to the United States with their parents in 1874.

inaugurated the policy, served as the inducement throughout the entire colonization period. The Manifesto included the following provisions guaranteed to colonists and their descendants forever: free land, initial financing, exemption from military service, complete control over their own churches and schools, and local self-government.

Well-timed and widely published, the Manifesto found ready response from thousands of war-weary Germans following the end of the Seven Years' War in 1763. Most of the first colonists were directed to the region along the Volga River in Central Russia, Catherine's primary concern. From 1764 to 1768, twenty-three thousand Germans settled there in 104 colonies.[2]

Mennonites emigrated from Germany in 1789 to the eastern part of the Black Sea region, and from 1854 to 1859 to the Volga region.[3]

After the accession of Catherine's grandson Alexander I to the Russian throne, the Black Sea region of south Russia was opened to colonization in 1804. Again the invitation was well timed, for now Napoleon Bonaparte was ravaging Europe with his conquests. Thousands of Germans left their war-torn country to settle in the Ukraine, the Crimea, Transcaucasia, and Bessarabia.

By 1859, when colonization was terminated, some three hundred primary mother colonies had been established in the various settlement areas of Russia. There were extreme pioneering hardships to endure at first, but the colonists persevered and prospered. Due to an inordinately high birth rate, their population grew from about one hundred thousand immigrants to one million seven hundred thousand in 1914. At the same time, some three thousand secondary daughter colonies were added to the original three hundred mother colonies, making a total of approximately

2. George J. Eisenach, *Pietism and the Russian Germans in the United States* (Berne, Ind.: Berne Publishers, 1946), 22.

3. Karl Stumpp, *Die Russlanddeutschen* (Freilassung, Bavaria: Pannonia-Verlag, 3rd ed., 1966); translation by Joseph S. Height, *The German-Russians* (New York: Edition Atlantic-Forum, 1967), 10, 13.

thirty-three hundred German villages in Russia at the beginning of the Bolshevist era.[4]

As an alien people living under the protectorate of a foreign government, the segregation of the German colonists from their Russian neighbors was virtually inevitable. Living in their wholly German villages with their own elected officials, attending their own German schools and churches, they lived lives distinctly separate from the native Russians. As there was no intermarriage with Russians, the colonists remained culturally and racially pure German.[5]

Suddenly, the Russian Germans found their traditions and institutions in danger. As privileged foreigners, they had been growing ever larger in numbers and in wealth, acquiring ever more land at the expense of the Russian economy. In 1871 an imperial decree abrogated their special privileges. A period of ten years' grace was granted, but even this was not honored; a second decree in 1874 instituted military conscription at once.[6]

Violently opposed to this attempt to Russianize them, thousands of German colonists migrated to the Americas. Not only did the United States welcome them, but other countries, notably Canada, Brazil, and Argentina, offered them a new home. The U. S. Census Bureau for 1920 lists 301,214 Russian Germans, first and second generation, with North Dakota having 69,985; Kansas, 31,512; South Dakota, 30,937; and Nebraska, 22,421. Other states counted lesser numbers.[7] It was estimated that in 1940 there were between three hundred fifty thousand and four hundred thousand Russian-born Germans and their descendants in the United States.[8]

4. *Ibid.*, 26.

5. G. G. Wenzlaff, *A Son of Colonia the Forgotten* (Los Angeles: David H. Schol Co., 1937), 8, 9.

6. Georg Rath, *"Die Russlanddeutschen in den Vereinigten Staaten von Nord-America," Heimatbuch der Deutschen aus Russland* (Stuttgart: Die Landsmannschaft der Deutschen aus Russland, 1963), 22.

7. Eisenach, *Pietism and the Russian Germans in the United States,* 92 footnote.

8. Stumpp or Height, *The German-Russians,* 31.

The honor of leading this exodus from Russia in 1872 belongs to three courageous groups of colonists living in the adjoining colonies of Johannestal, Rohrbach, and Worms in the Odessa District of the Black Sea region. Bidding friends and relatives good-by—they thought for all time—they left within a few weeks of one another for the United States. They became united in Sandusky, Ohio, where they spent the winter, then traveled as a single group in the spring of 1873 to settle in Dakota Territory.

In the first of the two following articles, Friedrich Mutschelknaus describes the experiences of these resolute immigrants. His article first appeared in the November 11 and 18, 1924, issues of the German-language newspaper *Dakota Freie Presse* of New Ulm, Minnesota.

In 1873, eight months after the first emigration, a larger group of about four hundred persons left Rohrbach and Worms for the United States. Peter H. Griess, the son of Heinrich Griess, related their experiences in an article for the November 18, 1909, issue of the *Freie Presse,* then of Aberdeen, South Dakota. Most of this group settled in and near Sutton, Nebraska, where many of their descendants are still living today.

MIGRATION OF THE FIRST RUSSIAN GERMANS TO DAKOTA

By Friedrich Mutschelknaus
(1852-1929)

At the beginning of the 70's in the last century, there was much unrest in the German colonies in Russia. The Germans had been given the promise by Empress Catherine that they would be exempt from military service as long as the sun and the moon remained in the heavens. This privilege was terminated with widespread unrest resulting.

Old Johannes Sailer said to us in Johannestal, "No, I'll never be a soldier. And no claw will I leave here." By that he meant his sons, as he had seven of them.

Thereupon an exchange of letters with his brother-in-law Ludwig Bette in America began. Ludwig Bette and August Scheller had migrated from Johannestal to America around the year 1849 and, on an island near Sandusky, Ohio, operated a vineyard, becoming well-to-do. Twenty-one other families had migrated to America at that time with Bette and Scheller. If all were from Johannestal, I am unable to say.[9] It may have been in the last days of June or in the first days of July, 1872, that Ludwig Bette arrived in Johannestal from America, visiting his brothers-in-law Johannes Sailer and Jacob Steiger. Following discussions with him, four families pledged themselves to migrate to America. They were his brothers-in-law Johannes Sailer and Jacob Steiger, Michael

9. Rath, *"Die Russlanddeutschen . . ,"* 26; Wenzlaff, *A Son of Colonia the Forgotten,* 90. Bette was born in Johannestal in 1821 and married in 1840. He wanted to emigrate to the United States with his family, his widowed mother, and a younger brother and sister in 1842, but for some reason the plan was abandoned. In 1849 however, Bette, his family, and a small following of friends embarked from Odessa on a stormy 103-day voyage to the United States. The reason for their emigration is not clear. After a short stay in Cleveland, Ohio, Bette and his next of kin went to Kellys Island, an island in Lake Erie near Sandusky, Ohio, where they became successful winegrowers. Apparently some of Bette's friends settled in Burlington, Iowa, for Peter H. Griess, in the following article, recalled meeting a number of his countrymen there in 1873 who had come to America twenty-four years before.

Schatz and Matthaeus Sailer, the son of Johannes. At this time numerous gatherings were held at which many people were present. Firstly, many were happy to see this old acquaintance again, and, secondly, they were also inquisitive to learn about America.

The czarist government naturally looked upon the presence of Ludwig Bette with a jaundiced eye. He was also the guest in the country of various landowners, and it is possible that he incautiously made unfavorable comparisons between the United States and Czarist Russia.

Then one day it was reported that the authorities were looking for him for stirring up the people. Of course the officials thought it would be easy to arrest him for, as an American, he was easily recognizable, wearing a tailored suit and a cylinder hat. But good friends helped him. The cylinder hat was hurriedly discarded and a cap substituted, such as we wore, and his fine clothes were exchanged for German farmer clothes. Friends hustled him to the border, and then one day we heard that Ludwig Bette was gone.

The above-named four families sold their crops, though even yet standing in the fields. Because they were the first to leave, they encountered many difficulties in obtaining passports. Robert Levi, the church secretary, first had to write out the application and other papers, and it was necessary to go to Nikolajew, to Odessa and even to the city of Cherson, to obtain the necessary papers from the authorities. It took so much time that these first emigrants had left only a short time before the departure of a second party.

To the second party belonged my father Jakob Mutschelknaus, Gottlieb and Ludwig Sailer, sons of old Johannes Sailer, Gottfried Mehrer and others whose names I cannot recall. From Rohrbach, there were the families of Peter Moos, Adam Zimbelmann, Jacob Huber and others; from Worms, there were Jacob and Johann Kusler and others. This second party, before leaving, reaped their crops, threshed and sold them, and sold or auctioned off their belongings.

Friedrich Mutschelknaus with ten of his eleven children.

On the 17th of October, 1872, the second party left Johannestal to board the train at Odessa. It was a beautiful, sunny autumn day; only our hearts were sad. Especially for me, Friedrich Mutschelknaus, and for my parents-in-law, Gottlieb Delzer. On the 3rd of October of that year, I had been married, and now we were making the long trip to America. My parents-in-law had only one thought, that they would never again see their daughter Caroline.

Among the other families, too, there was much sorrow; for America at that time was a much greater distance from Russia than it is today.

"She is leaving and I'll never see her again!" So said my father-in-law. But he was wrong for in September, 1874, my parents-in-law also came to America.

On the evening of the 18th of October, we arrived in Odessa, and on the following morning, at about 7:00 o'clock, we boarded the train for Germany. It took about three days until we arrived at Hamburg where we stopped off for two days. Next a steamboat took us to Hull on the east coast of England. The North Sea was very lively, giving us our first experience with seasickness. From Hull we went to Liverpool by train.

On a Saturday evening, at about 7:00 o'clock, we arrived in Liverpool where we had to wait four days until we were driven to a large ocean liner. Up to now the trip had been tolerable. But after we had steamed three days and three nights toward the west, we encountered terrible storms. Doors were fastened securely so that no one could go out on deck. High waves swept over the ship, damaging it extensively. Much of the superstructure was torn from the deck, and finally the propeller was so damaged that it could no longer be used.

It was for us during that awful night as it was for the tribe of Israel in the Wilderness, and all our people cried out in their anguish and fright, "There were no graves for us in Russia; we had to come here to drown." But where one's misery is the greatest, there God's help is the nearest. No one drowned and the storm calmed itself. Because the ship was damaged too extensively, it could no longer proceed and must, therefore, turn around even though at night. When we came on deck the next morning, we saw that instead of proceeding toward the west, we were going toward the east. Because the machines could not be used, the ship had to set sails. The return to Ireland required six days and nights.

We had to wait three days in the Irish port until another ship arrived. Then there was another delay of three days to transfer the stores of the ship, and on the fourth day we were again ready to sail toward the west. Because we again encountered high seas throughout the onward voyage, we were a total of thirty-six days on the water.

Early in December, we arrived safely in New York. On account of the shipwreck, we had lost so much time that a third party leaving from Johannestal had passed us and was already on the way to Sandusky, Ohio, by the time we arrived in New York. In the third party were my uncle George Jasmann, George's son Christian Jasmann, Henry Sieler, Dominic Stoller and others.

"Where do you wish to go?" we were asked in New York. But we were strangers in this country and did not know ourselves. We were told that others of our people had preceded us and had gone to Sandusky, Ohio, so we decided, too, to go to Sandusky. We arrived in Sandusky some time between the 10th and 15th of December, 1872. This was a large manufacturing city, so we found enough empty lodgings to accommodate us.

Because no report of us had been received, those at home in Johannestal thought nothing else than that we had drowned in the ocean. As soon as we arrived in Sandusky, I wrote a letter to my parents-in-law. This letter was the first evidence of our safe arrival which those in our homeland received, and interest in it was so great that Pastor Birnbach read the letter from the pulpit so that all Johannestal would know of our safe arrival.

Sandusky was a large city even then. Even as many families as we were, we found good lodgings for all. We younger men soon found employment and worked for wages by the day, and the old men would assemble, smoke their pipes and hold conferences as to what was next to be done. In that way the winter passed and the spring of 1873 came into the land.

By the beginning of March, it was resolved to choose scouts and send them to the West in order to determine where to settle. Among the scouts chosen were George Jasmann, Christian Jasmann, Henry Sieler, Gottfried Mehrer, Jakob Mutschelknaus and Gottlieb Sailer. There were twelve men in all. The Reformed minister in Sandusky, Pastor Schaf, to whom we always went to church, drew up the route for the scouts. He also sent letters in advance to pastors and members of his church so that when the Sandusky scouts

arrived, they could assist them by taking them in and showing them salable land.

The scouts first went to Michigan, Illinois and Wisconsin. They found there that one could buy eighty acres of land here and several miles away additional acres. "No, this isn't what we want;" they said, "we want to all be together so that we can have our own church and school." Then was said to them, "Well, people, if that is what you want, then you must go far west of here, as far west as Nebraska." Because it would be too expensive for twelve men to make the trip, it was decided to send six men back to Sandusky, and the remaining six then set out on the trip to Nebraska. Those making the trip west were George Jasmann, Christian Jasmann, Henry Sieler, Dominic Stoller, Jakob Mutschelknaus and Gottlieb Sailer.

They went to the region where Sutton, Nebraska, is today. But again they didn't find land in Nebraska according to their wish. There would be a section of government land and then a section of railroad land alternating, and the railroad land would have to be bought. Because there were poor people among our group who would not be able to buy railroad land, the people again would be scattered too widely. It was our wish on account of the church and the school to remain close to one another.

After stating their wishes, they were advised to go to Dakota to the city of Yankton; there, very likely, they would find land to their liking. Because, as previously mentioned, these trips cost so much money, they decided again to separate two from the remaining six scouts, and only four men went to Dakota. By this arrangement, Jakob Mutschelknaus and Gottlieb Sailer returned to Sandusky.

The other four went to Dakota where they found the land as it had been described to them. Around Yankton and along the Jim (James) River, the land was somewhat settled, but farther out there was nothing but the sky and the land. After they had traveled around, looked at the land and acquainted themselves with the law for taking up land, they returned to Sandusky.

It may have been the 25th or the 26th of March, 1873, when the four scouts returned to Sandusky. An afternoon assembly was called in which all Russian Germans took part. The four men reported about the land and how the law for homesteading had been explained to them. They related that they already had seen green crops, and that a farmer near Yankton had told them that the crop was sowed at the end of February. This was almost like it had been for us in Russia.

The scouts declared, "We are firmly resolved that we all go to Dakota Territory, to the city of Yankton. If you have faith in us, then let us go." To that others replied, "If it is good enough for you, then it is good enough for us." All but about four families decided to go to Dakota. Of the families that remained, some came along later. Those who remained were the families of old Johannes Sailer, Adam Shaefer, Michael Stoller and Johannes Will. Sailer by then had already bought land near Sandusky.

While in Sandusky, because we always attended church services with the German people there, we had become well acquainted. When they heard that we had decided to go to Dakota Territory, we were very much pitied by them. "Oh," they said, "what will you people do there in the wilderness? You won't be able to make a living there. Buffalo and bears and wolves and other animals wander around out there!" The four scouts replied, "We went out on the prairie and saw nothing of all those animals. We shall go." But just to be sure, however, every family provided itself with weapons to defend their lives from the buffalo and bears.

For the trip from Sandusky to Yankton, we obtained a special train. All household goods acquired during the winter were taken along. Nothing was sold. As well as I can remember, we had one railroad car for our household goods and two cars for our people. On about the 14th of April—it was about 6:00 or 6:30 o'clock in the evening—we left Sandusky. It was raining lightly when we left, and when we arrived in Chicago, it was snowing and the farther west we got, the more it snowed.

Two businessmen of Yankton, Henry Hoefner and Jacob Brauch, met us in Chicago, and when we arrived in Yankton, lodgings had been arranged for us. Transportation for the women and children as well as for our baggage met us at the railway station. The trip from Sandusky to Yankton took about three days.

The scouts had reported that the fields had been sown in February and that green crops already stood in the fields, but when we arrived in Yankton, there was only deep snow. [10] Dissatisfaction about the report of the scouts was very great. "They didn't tell us the truth," said Peter Moos of Rohrbach, "they said the farmers sowed their fields in the last days of February, and here it is the middle of April and they are still having snow! No, sir, I won't stay here." But stay he did, and when the snow melted away, the green crops did appear.

Lodgings for us had been arranged in the building of "Wien and Buchwalder." There was a hardware store below and a large hall above in which we found shelter. Some families set up stoves which they had brought along from Sandusky to cook their meals; others ate at the hotel.

Several families purchased horses and wagons in order to drive out into the country to look for a place to settle. The old surveyor Maier always went along on these drives. My father, Jakob Mutschelknaus, also bought a team right away, and so I was always along on the drives. Generally in the morning after breakfast, we would take off across the prairie. We would take our noon meal along, but by night we would have to be back in Yankton; for out there away from the city, there was nothing but the barren prairie.

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10. Coincidentally, the Seventh U. S. Cavalry with General George A. Custer in command was on its way from the South to take station at Fort Abraham Lincoln, Dakota Territory, and arrived in Yankton in the same blizzard. The regiment was camped on the outskirts of town when the storm broke. General and Mrs. Custer, with their maid, took shelter in a small house nearby, and the soldiers were directed to ask for shelter for themselves and their horses anywhere they could find a welcome. The officers found rooms in the hotel, and later General and Mrs. Custer took rooms there also. After the storm had expended itself, the regiment continued up the Missouri River to Fort Lincoln. Elizabeth B. Custer, *Boots and Saddles* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, new ed., 1962), 9-22.

On an afternoon in the last days of April—it may have been around 3:00 o'clock—Gottlieb Sailer said, "We have driven around long enough; get down off the wagon and start measuring." The wagon was stopped and we all got down. Old Mr. Maier took his survey tools in his hand, and another person and I pulled the chain as the first claim—it was for Gottlieb Sailer—was surveyed. This place is located about three miles northeast of Lesterville. Lesterville did not exist then, nor did any of us have any idea that a town would be located there.

One claim after another was surveyed, going four miles north, then turning about and surveying the claims going south. So it went, up and down, always toward the west until claims had been surveyed for everyone. I believe it took us two half days to do all the surveying. This colony received the name "Odessa Settlement" because all of our people had lived in the Odessa District in the old country.

Those who had no horses or cows endeavored as soon as possible to obtain them in order to put their places in order.

Up until that time, this is the full account of the settlement of the first Russian Germans in Dakota. As more than 50 years have passed since that time and as no diary was kept at the time, it is easily possible that I have made slight errors here and there. Should I have erred, I beg the reader to forgive me.

As was already mentioned, there were those in Sandusky who pitied us for wanting to go out to Dakota into the wilderness where they feared we could not make a living. We sowed the little land in the spring of 1874 that had been broken up in 1873, and then in the month of July, the heads were bounteously filled with grain. At that time, August Scheller, who also had pitied us so very much, came out from Sandusky for he was very inquisitive to see in what kind of wilderness his countrymen had settled. When he saw how abundantly the grain was standing and what kind of land we had, he said to my father, Jakob Mutschelknaus, "Jakob, you could not have found anywhere in the United States a more suitable place for your vocation; and knowing German

industry and thrift well, I do not hesitate a moment to say that here you will become well-to-do people."

And so it was. With industry and thrift and with God's blessing on the work of our hands, the most of us have become well-to-do people.

THE FIRST SETTLEMENT OF RUSSIAN GERMANS IN NEBRASKA

By Peter H. Griess
(1851-1917)

In June, 1873, a larger number of families, about 400 individuals, joined together from Worms and Rohrbach to follow those families which had already gone to the United States. Leave-taking from the Old Country and from relatives and friends who remained behind was a painful one, yes, and for many, a never-to-be-forgotten one. At the station Wradiewka, we boarded the train to journey through Austria and Berlin to the glorious land of freedom. Besides my family, there were, among others, the families of John Grosshans, Schoolmaster Jakob Orth, Schoolmaster Nuss, H. Hofmann and my parents, Heinrich and Margarethe Griess, with their children and brothers and sisters.

In Berlin we stopped for a few days in order to negotiate with the steamship company for the trip. We utilized these days in seeing the sights of beautiful Berlin. We visited the zoological garden, the museum, the armory, the townhall cellar and the King's Castle. Then, on a Sunday evening, we went by train to Hamburg from where we planned to sail on the following Wednesday on the steamship *Thuringia.* But before the steamship sailed, on account of the sickness of my youngest brother and several of the Hofmann children, we had to make an unpleasant change. We had to divide ourselves into two parties; the larger party sailed on the *Thuringia* as planned, whereas we proposed to sail on the steamship *Cymbria* on the following Wednesday, a week later. The week passed quickly for us as there were many things to see in the large Hanseatic city of Hamburg. Unfortunately, the Hofmanns could not even then accompany us as the sickness of their children delayed them for four more weeks.

Our sea journey was very pleasant, and after a 13-day voyage we arrived safely at the harbor of New York on the

6th of August where we were amicably received by the harbor missionary, Pastor Schweigert, and to whose care we entrusted ourselves until we set out the next day on our long journey to the Far West. Our destination provisionally was Burlington, Iowa, as Mr. Schweigert had informed us that our first party would await us there. After a long trip we finally reached our destination and celebrated a happy reunion with our comrades. There we also met a number of our country people who had come to America 24 years before, and the most of whom our parents still knew. At best, I can remember only Abraham Sprenger and his family.[11]

From here, after we had provided ourselves plentifully with guns and ammunition because we had been told that it was extremely wild in the West, our route took us to Lincoln, Nebraska. Having arrived there, we next concerned ourselves about lodgings. We rented several small houses and as far as possible made ourselves comfortable until we could find suitable land for our purpose. In the meantime, our less wealthy comrades were housed in the Immigrant House.[12] From here, excursions in all directions were then made in order to find a suitable region in which to settle.

Lincoln then was still a small city, but a good future was promised it since it was already a junction point of the Burlington Railroad. Land was available at that time for $12 an acre, but our leaders, having those of our countrymen yet to follow us more in mind than themselves, believed that they had not yet found the desired region. They wanted to find a region in which later they could have their own churches and schools, and in which, following the custom and usage of the Fatherland, they could maintain their German mother tongue without interference.

After we had been in Lincoln for two weeks, the Hofmanns, who had stayed behind in Hamburg, arrived. Unfortunately, the joy of reunion was saddened by the shadow of death. The Hofmann's 18-year-old son had died on the sea journey and was buried in a watery grave in the depth

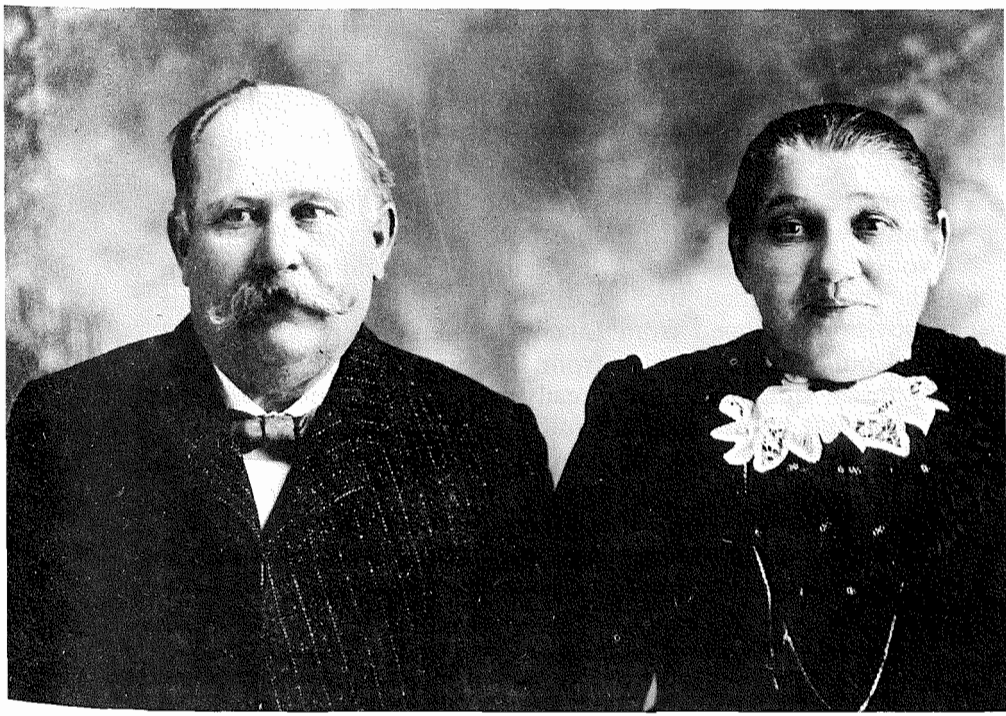
11. See footnote 9.

12. Provided for immigrants by the Burlington and Missouri River Rail Road.

of the ocean. The Bachmann family had attached themselves to the Hofmanns on leaving Russia, and they too were joyously welcomed by all of us.

Meanwhile, our hunger for land grew ever larger, and here in the State of Nebraska, except for the extreme West which was entirely in the hands of big cattlemen, there were no prospects for government land. As a consequence, one family after another took leave of Nebraska to turn to unsettled Dakota, leaving only a small number remaining here.

After more land areas were inspected which were not suitable for settlement, there came one day to Lincoln from Omaha a Pastor Dickmann through whose assistance the land owned by the Burlington Railroad in the vicinity of Sutton was shown to us. Our leaders liked this land very much, so,



Peter H. Griess with his wife, Sophie Grosshans Griess.

without further deliberation, immediately on their return to Lincoln, a contract for 3,690 acres was made at the land office. Under favorable sale conditions, the land was priced at $5 to $12 an acre, but because we were prepared to pay cash, the entire complex was sold to us for $4.25 an acre.

Besides ourselves, the families of Grosshans, H. Hofmann, M. Griess, Joe Roemmich, Jacob Billigmeier, P. Gemar, Peter Huber, Schoolmaster Joh. Geo. Nuss, Joh. Bachmann, Geo. Sera and M. Nickolaus settled here. There were 22 families in all.[13] This first colony in Clay County, Nebraska, was founded in September of 1873. The other families who left Russia with us all settled in Dakota.

Then a busy period began for us. Houses were built; the grass was mowed and barns and granaries were erected. We had given over the building of all the houses to a carpenter in Lincoln, who also had to arrange for the materials.

Sutton was only a very small place, not even having a railroad station building. An old boxcar had been placed alongside the railroad tracks through which the telegraph wires ran, and this had to serve as the station building. It was reported that all of Sutton could count only 60 men and three women as inhabitants; but even for that I will not vouch for the place was very small. We could not buy even the most needed necessities there, and had to have our provisions shipped from Lincoln until we were settled and had our wives follow us from Lincoln. Toward the end of October, our homes were ready and were occupied without delay. But before we were fully settled in our homes, it was the middle of November. How much easier those who came later had it, such as Heinrich Griess and Johann Griess and others who arrived in September, 1874, and found comfortable lodgings among friends and relatives until their

13. Rath, *"Die Russlanddeutschen . . . ,"* 34. The number leaving Russia consisted of fifty-five families. Thus, thirty-three families settled in Dakota Territory. On their arrival, a cholera epidemic broke out from which six children died. All but two of the families returned to Nebraska, also settling in the Sutton area. Accordingly, fifty-three of the original fifty-five families eventually settled in or near Sutton.

own homes were established.[14] For us, at first, the sky was our roof and the haystack our lodgings while our families had to remain in Lincoln. And though warned about swindling soon after arrival here, they only became wiser through bitter experience.

In the fall of 1874, Mennonite immigrants settled north of Sutton in Hamilton and York counties,[15] but since at that time there was no railroad north of Sutton, Sutton profited from this contingency as the Mennonites were obliged to transact their business in Sutton. The first Mennonites settling here were the following families: H. Epp, Jacob Friesen, H. Penner, Peter and Gerhard Abrahams, Gerhard Toews, P. Wahl, H. Pankratz and others.

In the summer of 1874, a schoolteacher, Emanuel Jose of Neusatz, arrived here. He taught our children in their mother language and on Sundays he lead us in divine services.

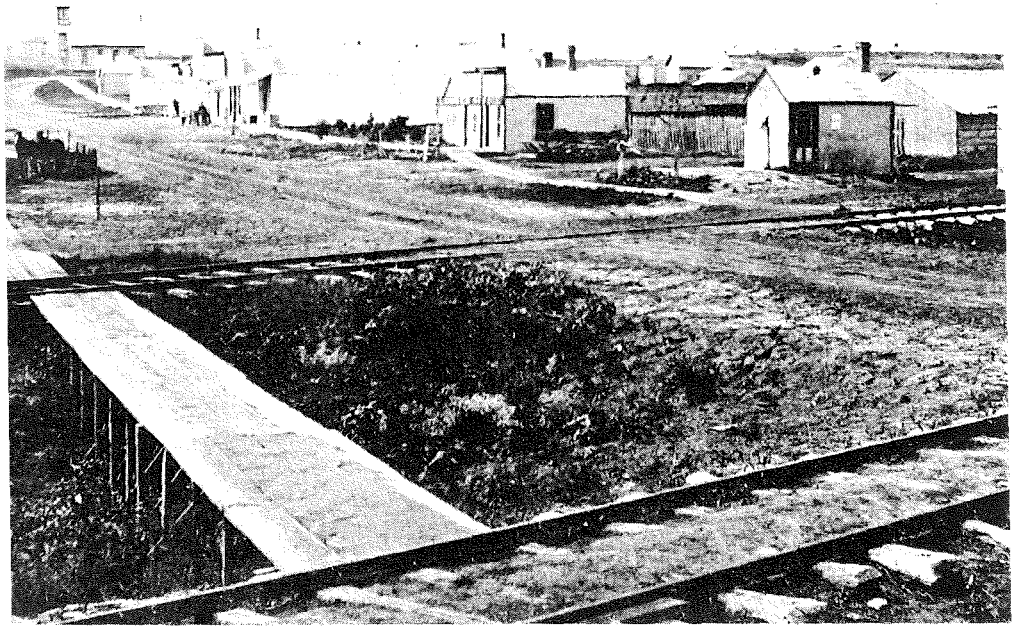
Today Sutton numbers 2,500 inhabitants[16] with a long row of business houses: doctors, dentists, lawyers and even a hospital. We have two large schoolhouses with more than 500 students, nine churches, three grain elevators, two coal dealers, an ice company and a steam-electric plant. In Sutton and vicinity, there are now about 500 Russian-German families and as many, if not more, Mennonites, so that in the surrounding counties of Clay, Hamilton, York and Fillmore, the Russian-German population is estimated to be about 1,000 families.

Though Sutton is a German community, we must say to our sorrow that it is very poorly disposed toward German

14. *Ibid.*, 34. In 1874 a group of eighty-six Russian-Germans families settled in the Sutton area. This was the largest group to come to Sutton at one time. The following family names were represented in the group: Ochsner, Schwarz, Roemmich, and Griess. In 1875 another, much smaller group came to Sutton. Among these immigrants were Friedrich Nuss, Adam Trautmann, and Johann Rath.

15. John D. Unruh, Jr., "The Burlington and Missouri River Railroad Brings the Mennonites to Nebraska, 1873-1878," *Nebraska History*, XLV, No. 2 (June, 1964), 186. Some thirty-five families of Mennonites, numbering between 205 and 207 persons, settled in 1874 on land purchased from the Burlington and Missouri River Rail Road in Hamilton and York counties.

16. The 1960 population of Sutton was given as 1,252.



Saunders Avenue, Sutton's main street, as it looked to the first Russian German immigrants in 1873.

schools. In 1879, Mr. Eberhardt left Germany with his sons and settled north of the city. In 1884, he moved to town and founded a German school which he ran until his death in 1899. Unfortunately, his endeavors were not continued after his death, and today the German school is completely abandoned.

Sutton at this time has two Reformed churches. The Emmanuel Reformed Church, which was incorporated in 1878[17] was served by Pastor W. Bonekemper as its minister during the entire time from its establishment until it split into two parts on August 7, 1908. The part remaining, on Pastor Bonekemper's resignation, issued a call to Pastor Kunst of Cincinnati. The separated part organized itself the

17. The church was organized, however, in 1877.

same year as a Free Reformed church, electing Pastor Ulrich Zogg as its minister.

Since the settlement of this area by Germans, land prices have steadily risen so that it is quite unlikely today for anyone to be able to buy a good improved farm in the vicinity for less than a hundred dollars an acre.

In the years 1875-1877, the first Germans from the Russian Saratov District along the Volga River arrived in the United States, but as many were poor, many had to settle in the larger cities like Lincoln, Omaha, Hastings and even in Colorado in order the better to find employment. Some came here and now have fine farms; others are trying their lot in business with success.

Often our little town is called "Russian Town," but this cannot bring us shame for while other cities which were as large or larger than Sutton at first, now have fallen behind [,] Our little town has steadily flourished and is esteemed today as the best along the Burlington Railroad between Lincoln and Hastings.