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Article Summary: *Weltblatt*, was a short-lived low-German literary magazine published by G M Hein of Grand Island, Nebraska. It received international exposure, was published in the late 1880s and ceased publication in 1890. This article addresses its short history, with a particular emphasis on Mr Hein's two novels.

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Photographs / Images: Map showing the areas in which "high German" and "low German" were spoken; the G M Hein family in the late 1890s: daughters Hattie, Minnie and Lillie, son Fritz, wife Wilhelmina, and G M Hein; masthead of the *Weltblatt* from 1889

GRAND ISLAND'S *WELTBLATT*: AN EXPERIMENT IN LOW GERMAN

By Edith Robbins

It might seem startling to find a German language literary magazine in central Nebraska during the late 1880s. Local historians know little about it. Only once is it mentioned in a Hall County history, and not a single copy has been found in Nebraska.¹ Fortunately a nearly complete set of the issues of this magazine exists at the public library in Hanover, Germany.²

The Low-German *Weltblatt* was an indirect product of a nineteenth century literary movement in north Germany during which a literature in the Low-German language evolved. Inspired by a rural unspoiled experience, it contrasted sharply with the more sophisticated urban literature written in High German.

Grand Island merchant G. M. Hein was an admirer of this Low-German literary movement. Born in Windbergen, Holstein, in 1840, he came to Grand Island during the 1880s and began working as a department store manager. The Grand Island German newspaper *Der Herold* includes occasional Low-German poems of Hein's advertising merchandise. In 1888 Hein gave up his job, which had never been very successful, and with just a few hundred dollars he "bought letter, paper and printer's ink and on January 1, 1889, was sending the Low-German *Weltblatt* out from Grand Island, Nebraska, into the four corners of the world."³

During the previous thirty years the

study of the Low-German dialect had monopolized his spare time, and he had often written and published his poetry and prose articles. He knew about the failures of others in Germany and America who had started such literary magazines. Nevertheless, he had the courage to publish a sixteen-page periodical from a small town like Grand Island.

Our fellow country men on the other side [of the ocean] might be wondering why somebody dares to publish a magazine like this in America. With the assistance of so many good writers one had tried that in Germany several times . . .

In Germany the Low-German language and the High-German language are in opposition . . . Since here on this side of the ocean all nations are represented it [the Low-German dialect] is equal to any other language, at least it was never in conflict with High-German. Foolish prejudice — that perhaps Low-German is not so stylish or elegant — does not exist here.⁴

It was Hein's intention to preserve the mother tongue among Low-German speakers in the United States. He reasoned that without constant use, the language would be lost to the north German immigrants. Yet the title *Weltblatt* [World Paper] suggests that it was written for an international audience. Hein expected that with this magazine (which would have contributors not only from the United States but more importantly from different regions of the north German plain), he could sustain the contact between the "Old Country" and the "New World."

One of the German authors Hein secured to write for his publication was especially noteworthy. In 1852 the Holstinian Klaus Groth published a collection of poems entitled *Quickborn* [Fountain of Life] and revitalized the Low-German literature. Hein wrote:

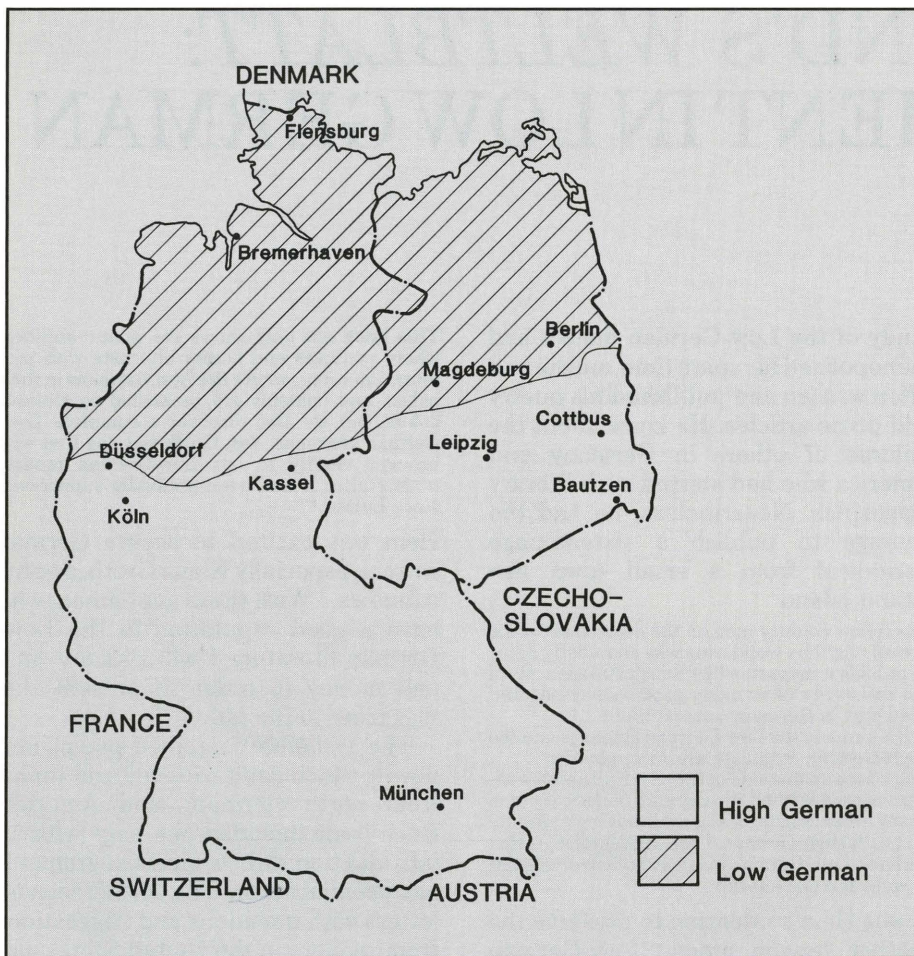
This book not only shows the poetic abilities, where wittiness and humor alternate with profound emotions, where the Low Germans in their habits and customs are presented in glorious colors, but we also discover a complete Low-German grammar. Yes, Groth was the first who brought vitality to our Low-German mother tongue after it had been gradually suppressed since Luther.⁵

Hein was excited to secure German writers, especially Klaus Groth, as contributors. "With these gentlemen, who have a good reputation in the Low-German literature I will risk my time and money in order to present this magazine to the public."⁶

The *Weltblatt* contained poems and novels which dealt with cultural topics from north Germany and America. Each issue included one page with an introduction to Low-German grammar and pronunciation. The editor received letters with questions and suggestions from readers in the United States and Germany, and space in the magazine was reserved for replies to these letters. Low-German materials could be ordered from Germany through the *Weltblatt*. Low-German societies, whose aim was to preserve the Low-German language, existed not only in Germany but in 1889 in Kansas City, Missouri; Port Clinton, Ohio; Sandusky, Ohio; Chicago; Denver; Omaha; and Grand Island. In September of that year at a general meeting in Omaha, Hein's paper was recognized as the official organ for these organizations in America. With services, contributors, and readers on two continents, *Weltblatt* differed from any other German publication in the United States.

Although the *Weltblatt* contained a wide variety of poetry and fiction, I have chosen to concentrate here on two

Edith Robbins, a native of Germany, is interested in the literature of immigration and assimilation.



The terms "high German" and "low German" reflect not the quality of the languages, but the landscapes in which they evolved. High German is the standard, official form of the German language. Low German remains as a dialect in various regions of north Germany. Map by Dell Darling from Victor Stevenson's *Words, The Evolution of Western Languages* (1983).

novels written by Hein, since they are representative of the work with which he tried to bridge the gap between Low-German speakers on both sides of the ocean.

Hein as a realistic writer valued the common man: The heroes in his novels were everyday people on the land, the north German immigrants in rural America. They were not exceptionally talented, but they were upright, respectable, and had a practical outlook. The transition from village life in north Germany to farming on the North

American prairie did not always come easily. Emigration took these people out of a familiar surrounding and placed them on strange ground. Some immigrants saw wonderful opportunities, and in order to take advantage of these opportunities, they broke rapidly with the past and adjusted painlessly. Others, still home-oriented and sometimes disillusioned after their settlement, only reluctantly gave in to the change; they would, as long as conditions permitted, preserve their heritage.

It is this adjustment to American life, this process of assimilation, that Hein used as the main theme in his stories. In the short novel *De Marschbur und sien Knecht* (*The Rich Farmer and His Farmhand*), he described the insurmountable class differences in Germany between the rich farmer and his farmhand.⁷ Johann, the orphan boy, is given "bread and bed" by the rich but miserly farmer, who sees in him nothing but free labor. In spite of growing up under harsh conditions, Johann falls in love with the farmer's daughter, Gretjen. Thrown out by the angry farmer and with nothing to hope for in Germany, Johann emigrates to America where, he believes, class differences can be overcome and he can forget the girl. He enlists and serves in the Civil War, "and when the war was over, I got 160 acres land as a reward," which over time he develops into a productive farm.⁸ Back in Germany the rich farmer has lost his wealth due to unwise financial speculation and decides to emigrate to America where he can receive 160 acres of land free. The end, as everybody can guess, is a happy one. "By chance" the wagon with the immigrants breaks down in front of Johann's farmhouse, Gretjen recognizes him immediately, and even the old people are by this time happy to see Johann and hear their mother tongue again. It is probably they who will never learn the English language, and it is they who will look back to the country they have left, and in their memories the "Old Country" will appear to be without fault. However, Johann and Gretjen see a challenge in the New World, where it is labor that is in demand and not land. Through work and adjustment they will gain the class status of a landowner, a task they could never have accomplished in Germany.

In the novel *Lisbeth von Bremen* Hein explains life in America in detail to his German readers.⁹ He defines and discusses such words as "timber claim," "homestead," "prairie fire," "dugout," "Conestoga wagon," and foremost

"prohibition." Several issues of the *Weltblatt* are missing, and consequently only part of the novel exists, but the main idea is recognizable. Dan, the young "Yankee" from Nebraska, and Lisbeth, the daughter of north German immigrants, want to marry, but their parents oppose it. Lisbeth's parents are extensively quoted here, because the father's reasoning expresses so well the complexity of the situation. The father considers himself a German liv-

ing in Nebraska. He is opposed to many American customs and rules, prefers to speak and read German, and treasures the "German way." On the other hand he believes that he, through immigration and settlement, has gained the same rights as any American. Lisbeth, who speaks English fluently and considers herself American, is caught between the heritage and culture of her parents and the culture of this "New World."

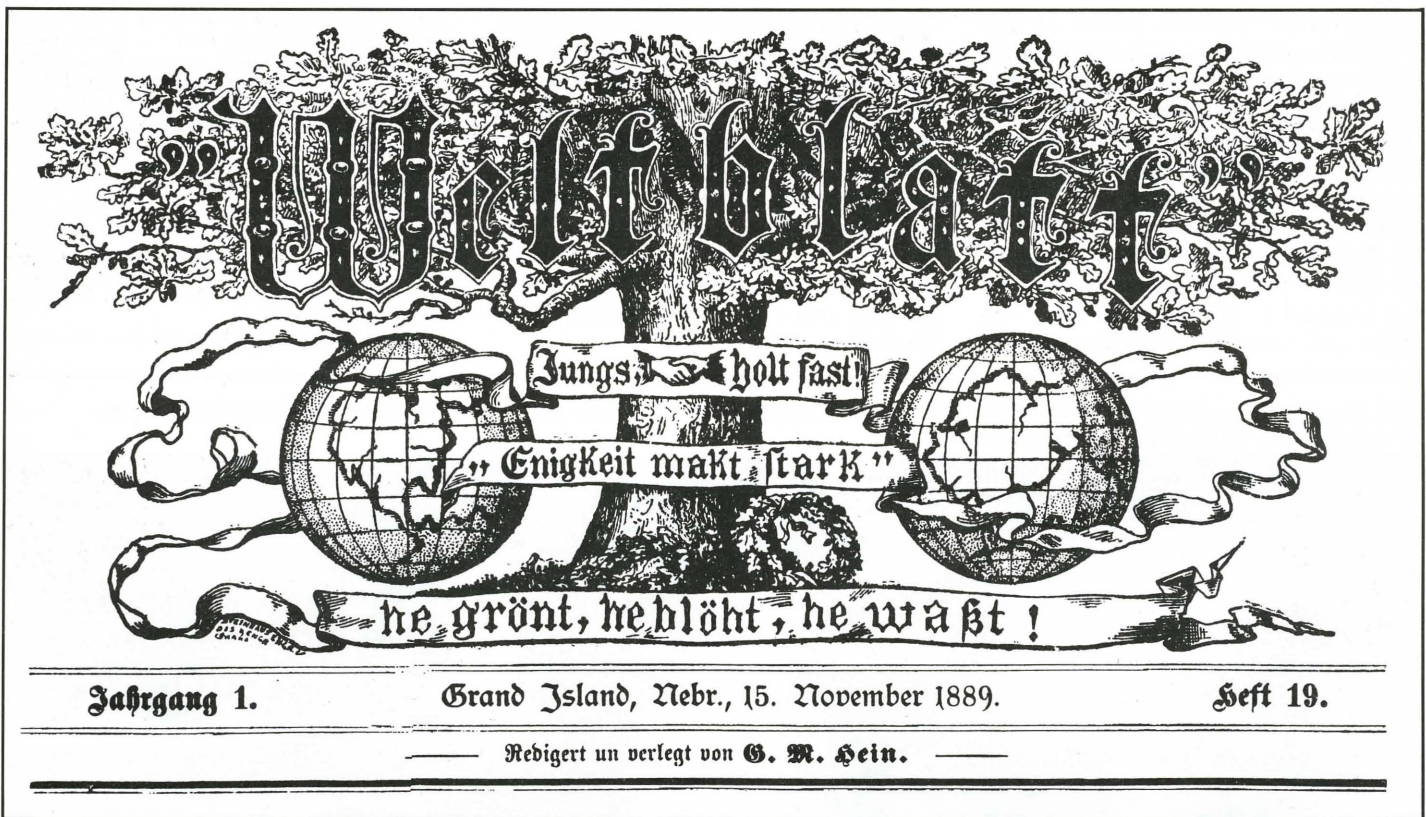
Father: My daughter is not going to get one of these Yankees, as long as I live They are only friendly to us when they need us. Even if they have not a cent in their pockets they regard themselves above us Germans. It is true, he wants to marry our Lisbeth. He knows the Yankee girls are not worth a thing. They cannot even cook a pot of soup. Perhaps he has heard that a German housewife can run a household very well, he knows our Lisbeth is a good looking girl, she is a gem. But such a guy should never have her, never.

Mother: Father, Father, don't get so excited. There are some good men among them. And he is never drunk, he does not drink. That should be worth something.

Father: I think the Yankees got you. Yes, he is

G. M. Hein family, ca. late 1890s: daughters Hattie (back row, left) and Lillie; son Fritz (front row, left); Hein; wife Wilhelmina; daughter Minnie. Courtesy of the Stuhr Museum, Grand Island.





The ribbon on the nameplate connects symbolically the old continent and the new under the spreading oak tree, which represents German strength and liberty. The three slogans: "Unity Leads to Strength"; "Young Men, Remain United!"; "It Leafs Out, It Blossoms, It Grows [oak tree]." These slogans, used during the 1848 uprising of Schleswig-Holstein against Denmark, had special meaning for Low-German speakers from Schleswig-Holstein. Courtesy of the author.

never drunk because he had to promise it to his mother . . . Do you know that the majority of the Yankees are drunkards? When something is forbidden it becomes interesting. They don't drink they guzzle it down. They drink whisky out of beerglasses. These guys can not get a grip on themselves like the Indians; they are on the same level with those savages. One should send them all to the Indian reservation where everybody is severely punished if he distributes fire water. That would then be the end to the whole temperance swindle. We Germans and everybody else who has seen the world don't need such lectures. And you want to give your daughter to a guy like that? No, Mother, never!¹⁰

The condemnation of prohibition in Hein's novel is not surprising. During the 1880s prohibition had been strongly opposed by the German voters of the Grand Island area, because they saw this regulation as a restraint on their personal rights. In resistance to the passage of the Slocum Act by the

state legislature in 1881, an association was formed, according to Grand Island businessman Fred Hedde,

consisting of a number of our best known business men, irrespective of party lines, calling themselves "the Sons of Liberty" to "defend the liberty of the people against the encroachment of woman suffrage and temperance legislation."¹¹

Hein continued his novel with the elopement of the young couple to a timber claim in western Nebraska. Dan's mother is heartbroken over the sudden departure of her son. She imagines that under the "terrible influence of a German girl," he will be continuously drunk. Then the minister from the local Lutheran church visits her. "This pastor who was known to rich and poor, to Americans and to Germans as a man of honour, . . . who spoke English so well

that only barely one could hear an accent," tries to comfort the worried mother:

A German beer hall is quite different from an American saloon. We Germans go to a beerhall to have a good time; we talk and we play and we drink a glass of beer or wine. In an orderly beerhall hard liquors is [are] rarely served, and not in beerglasses, only in little glasses, just a sip! — If our American saloons are not what they should be, then let's together help to change that.¹²

Unfortunately some issues of the *Weltblatt* are missing at this point in the novel, and it is difficult to follow the further trials of Dan and Lisbeth before the inevitable happy ending.

By 1890 Grand Island had grown into a sizable town, and the unlimited opportunities of the frontier had vanished. Hein — his enthusiasm not-

withstanding — did not prosper financially. That the whole endeavor was a monetary fiasco did not come to light until the last issue of March 27, 1890. Hein sadly and with some bitterness wrote in his article "Farewell":

We had high hopes when we launched the *Weltblatt* into the world. The best writers and the best poets had been secured as contributors so that we could always present original material. The most prominent Low-German speakers and societies in the entire nation promised us their support and the paper was greeted everywhere with true enthusiasm. There was not a single German newspaper in the whole United States which did not show respect and esteem for this high-quality magazine. Finally, we received such favorable criticism from Germany that nobody was able to harbor doubts concerning its success. But [it seems that] the Low-Germans do not wish to support such a journal, they seem quite happy with a newspaper full of advertizing, copied articles, and other products written by dilettantes. America is full of Low-German speakers but most of them can not read their mother tongue.¹³

Hein presented here his explanation for the failure, emphasizing that different levels of education among the Low-German immigrants had been the principal reason. He divided the Low Germans into four classes and with this laid out a wide spectrum of problems the immigrants were facing in the assimilation process, from total acceptance of the "American way of life" to the retention of their ethnic heritage.

1. There are the ones who barely can read and write a little High-German. The printed text in the *Weltblatt* is "Greek to them." One can not expect of these types that they will sacrifice \$2 annually for their mother tongue.

2. We meet these kinds who probably have learned a little bit more, but in this country they

rarely "lower themselves" to speak German or Low-German. They only speak English, but after the first three words of English one can recognize immediately from which area in [north] Germany they come from, because it is only Low-German that they can speak well.

3. Then there are those "educated" Germans who have the inbred antipathy against the Low-German language They can speak Low-German quite well, but speak only High-German, "that is more refined."

4. Now we come upon the intelligent Low-Germans. They not only recognize the value of their mother tongue, but at any time they are ready to make sacrifices: These are our subscribers and our co-workers. Reluctantly we bid farewell to these worthy people.¹⁴

At the end Hein was convinced that close to seventy-five percent of the Low-German speaking population in America belonged to the first category. Since the *Weltblatt* was entirely dependent on subscriptions for income, the outcome of his venture was not surprising. Hein noted:

If somebody wants to learn from our experience he should know that \$10,000 are necessary for a successful outcome. . . . We have tried to save our mother tongue but with the downfall of the *Weltblatt* the first cut with the spade toward its grave is done.¹⁵

Despite his disappointment over the failure of the *Weltblatt*, the remainder of Hein's life appears to have been spent in writing and publishing endeavors. After another journalistic failure in Omaha, he went to Salt Lake City, where he published articles on theosophy in English and German.¹⁶

Had Hein's Grand Island *Weltblatt* been successful in preserving the language, one result would have been the preservation of cultural coherence

among the Low-German speakers in the United States. Unfortunately the magazine did not last long enough to have this effect. The consequences of its failure were not only local, however, for with the death of the *Weltblatt*, the nation lost its only literary magazine in the Low-German language with an international reputation. If, as is often thought, it is language and literature that carried culture, the national loss must have been great.

NOTES

¹A. F. Buechler, R. J. Barr, eds., *History of Hall County, Nebraska* (Lincoln, NE: Western Publishing and Engraving Company, 1920), 402.

²*Weltblatt*, Vol. 1, No. 1 and 4-26, including January 1, 1889-March 27, 1890.

³*Ibid.*, December 1, 1889, 311.

⁴*Ibid.*, January 1, 1889, 5.

⁵*Ibid.*, 2.

⁶*Ibid.*, 5.

⁷*Ibid.*, December 1, 1889, 316.

⁸An amendment to the Homestead Act of 1862 allowed honorably discharged Union soldiers of the Civil War to deduct their term of service from the five-year residence requirement. Wounded or disabled veterans could deduct the entire period of their enlistment, not to exceed four years.

⁹*Weltblatt*, January 1, 1889, 6.

¹⁰*Ibid.*, 7.

¹¹*The (St. Paul) Phonograph*, March 24, 1881, 1.

¹²*Weltblatt*, March 15, 1889, 50-51.

¹³*Ibid.*, March 27, 1890.

¹⁴*Ibid.*

¹⁵*Ibid.*

¹⁶In February of 1899 the Grand Island *Nebraska Courier* printed Hein's "History of the Mormons in Utah," in which he claimed that the Book of Mormon was originally written in Low German.