



Buffalo Tales



Volume 12, No. 6

Buffalo County Historical Society

June, 1989

ROOTS OF BUFFALO COUNTY — THE GERMANS AND AUSTRIANS Part I

by Margaret Stines Nielsen

Although most Germans didn't come to Buffalo County until the seventies and eighties, Augustus (August) Meyer, a native of Bavaria, was a leader in the first crisis to confront the early settlers. Meyer had come to America as a young man and enlisted in Company F of the U.S. Cavalry. He was discharged at Fort Kearny in 1861, worked for the Western Stage Company at the Boyd Ranch for about two years, then was put in charge of the station at Wood River Center, where a relay of horses was kept. In 1863, he had married Elizabeth Owen¹, of Manchester, England, at Dobytown.

In August of 1864, the Arapaho and Cheyenne Indians launched an attack on travelers, stage depots and ranches along the central and western Platte and on the Little Blue. On August eighth, word of the outbreak reached Fort Kearny and settlers in the area were urged to go to Wood River Center for protection. By daylight all settlers within miles had gathered at the Center. Augustus Meyer, chosen as their captain, organized pickets and sent out scouts to look for Indians. The women and children were gathered in an unfinished log stable which had no roof.

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August Meyer

1. Elizabeth, a Mormon, had stopped at Wood River with three sisters and a brother-in-law. When the others were ready to go on to Salt Lake, she was ill. With her sister, Sarah, she stayed behind at the home of Mrs. Sarah Oliver. Sarah Owen married Ed Oliver in December, 1862. The next year, their parents, Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Owen, came over from England.

BUFFALO TALES is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P. O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848. It is sent to all members of the Society.

Membership is open to anyone who has an interest in the history of Buffalo County and its people. Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

- Basic Membership \$10.00
 - Institutional Membership \$15.00
 - Supporting Membership \$25.00
- Life memberships are \$100.00 for an individual; \$150.00 for husband and wife, jointly.

Officers and Directors: President, Margaret Hohnholt; Vice-President, Merlin Burgland; Treasurer, Philip S. Holmgren, Directors: Frances Link, Barb Avery, Edna Hehner, Viola Livingston, Jim Cudaback, Michael Stauffer, Glen Wisch, Chad Anderson, Colleen Parker, Chandler Lynch III. Publications Chairman: Alice Howell.

Trails & Rails Museum 706 West 11th Street (308) 234-3041

WITH THE MUSEUM

Our Society is already putting in a busy summer. We have had many school tours and have had good attendance for the two weeks we have been open at the museum.

The Society has several projects going — the Dobytown production (our Wagons West for this year) and the Walking Tour of the Business District, both during the Annual Arts Festival, and the Society tour to Fort Robinson and the Black Hills which leaves June 20. There are 40 members making this trip.

As many of you know, the Salvation Army made a small church on their property available to us. Because of the speed with which decisions had to be made, we had to move rapidly to accept or turn down the offer. After much study and discussion by members of the Board of Directors, the decision was made to accept their offer if we could fit into their time frame. With the help of many groups, it all fell into place and the move was made on Monday, June 5. The mover, the city, the Nebraska Public Power Co. and others involved did an excellent job. It will probably be set on the foundation this week.

This church was originally built as a German-Baptist Mission Church in 1899 and dedicated in 1900. It has served several congregations since that time. It can be used for displays, meeting room, work room and many other uses.

We really appreciate all the volunteers who are helping at the Museum and on the other projects. Any one interested in helping in any way, feel free to contact us at 234-3041.

Margaret Hohnholt, President

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Mark your calendars for July 7 and 8 at 8:30 p.m. and come to the musical program *Dobytown* at the Harmon Park Sonatorium. Free admission but donations to help defray expenses will be welcome.

NEW MEMBERS

1989 Supporting Member

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1989 Annual Members

Carl Whitney Kearney Jane Bish Miller

During the day, James Oliver and Thomas Morgan, who had gone to the fort to sell vegetables, returned with news of more Indian atrocities. After spending another day and night at the Center, the settlers felt it best to leave the country. Returning to their homes, they hastily piled what they could carry into wagons and fled to Omaha and into Iowa. The William Nutter family returned to England. (*Tales of Buffalo County, II*)

Mr. Meyer, Ed Oliver, George Burke and John Britt elected to stay behind to protect their property. County historian S. C. Bassett wrote that Meyer's "sense of duty to his employers would not permit of his leaving the stage property, and further he had seen no Indians and did not greatly fear attack." Time proved him right; the other settlers returned the next year.

In 1871, Meyer took a homestead near Shelton where he spent the rest of his life. The Meyers had five daughters. He was made an honorary member of the Gibbon Free Homestead Colony.

A number of Germans were drawn to the county by the existence of a large German colony in Hall County. Mr. and Mrs. George Stearley, of Bavaria, came to Wood River in 1868. They later took a homestead five miles southwest of Shelton. The couple had seven sons and one daughter.

Henry Fieldgrove, of Hanover came to this country in 1854. After working in Pennsylvania as a farmer and miner, he served in the infantry for two years. In 1871 he took a homestead near Shelton and soon added more property. During his first year he was appointed road supervisor and also deputy sheriff. He served in the legislature in 1888.

In 1877, Fieldgrove's daughter, Racheal, married George Meisner of Vitzburg, Germany, who had also settled in the Shelton area in 1871. (*Buffalo Tales, May 1987*) The Meisners lived in a granary until their elaborate mansion could be built. "The Elms" has been restored by the present owners, Kathie and Doug Turner, and is on the National Register of Historic Places.

As land around Shelton was taken, German immigrants moved north and west. In 1879 the town of Sodtown (Luce) was established in Cherry Creek township (*Tales of Buffalo County, II*) and became an important social center to Germans living in the surrounding area. Mr. and Mrs. Johann Gottlieb, from Naundorf, homesteaded in the area with their ten children. Five of the children married and most of them remained in the area.

Jacob Link left his native Wuertenberg at the age of seventeen to travel to Michigan, in 1882. He worked on a farm where he saved enough money in four months to send two \$20 gold pieces to his family. His sister Marie was the first of the family to come over. About a year later the parents and their five other children came to this country. Jacob, impressed by Union Pacific pamphlets, persuaded his family to come to Nebraska in 1884.

The family bought an eighty-acre farm in the Sodtown area. The trip proved too much for his father who died shortly after their arrival. When school land came up for sale, Jacob persuaded his mother to mortgage the farm and buy another 160 acres nearby. They built a two-room structure, one for the family, and the other for grain. When they were troubled by grain thieves, Jacob installed a bell, which was tied to the door handle. The thefts stopped.

In 1890 Katherine Rapp left Germany to become Jacob's bride. He was active in church and school affairs and was one of the organizers of the Sodtown Telephone Company which was farmer-owned. The Links retired to Ravenna in 1933.

Marie Link, who had followed her brother to Michigan, married Fred Spahr, also of Wuertenberg in 1883. The couple came with the Links to Nebraska in 1884 and located in the same area. The Spahrs, who had six children, moved to Shelton on their retirement in 1913.

The first Zion Lutheran Church, north Shelton, was built in Gardner township in 1890. Some of the founders were Claus Hadenfelt, Claus Holm, Claus Stotman, W. and E. Reese, W. Schmidt, Frederick Ohlman, C. and W. Puchert, Heinrich Rohwetter, Max Specht, W. Kuster. In 1897 the church was taken down and rebuilt 3½ miles southwest, nearer the center of the German population. It was used as church and school until 1912 when the present building was completed.

The Saxon Colony

A group of people in the Kingdom of Saxony had long dreamed of coming to America where land was available for little or no money. As they didn't have money



Zion Lutheran Church at North Shelton

for passage they organized into classes according to their ability to pay. Some paid a dollar a month, others fifty cents, into a common fund. When enough money had accumulated, a raffle was held to see who would be the first to come over.

The first group traveled to northern Michigan in April of 1873, intending to establish a colony there. There they were joined by "Dr. Schneider", a native of Saxony who had heard of the colony while traveling in Egypt. Realizing the possibilities of such an undertaking he attached himself to the venture. Possibly it was his enthusiasm that prompted the colonists to choose him president. However, county historian S. C. Bassett wrote he was "without means . . . and it does not appear that either as an individual or an officer he was of help"

After a July frost the colonists began to look elsewhere for a location. About October 1, 1873 they arrived "on the south bank of the Loup River, opposite the mouth of Beaver Creek." Because the group was allowed only eighty acres for a homestead, many of them took pre-emption claims of 160 acres for \$2.50 an acre, to be paid for over a period of 2½ years.

First essentials were a well and shelter. The colonists all worked together to build a sod house on the Fred Winkler claim. Thirteen people spent the winter in this 16 by 24 foot structure. They were: Mr. and Mrs. Winkler, Mr. and Mrs. Gust Schieme, C. W. Grosser, Richard Goehring, William Freyberg, Charles Muerbe, F. Reinhold, Julius Weigel, Carl Kaeupler, Dr. Schneider and Felix Zehr.

Early in the spring the colonists began work on the other soddies, carrying heavy timbers for the roofs across the icy waters of the South Loup to the various claims. Later some members bought ox teams, those who could not afford them exchanged work for use of the teams in breaking the tough sod.

By late July the corn had begun to tassel and gardens were thriving when a horde of grasshoppers descended, stripping everything in two days. The hoppers returned in 1875, but the damage wasn't quite so severe. In 1876 a three day storm in May destroyed the newly hatched pests.

In spite of the fact that the township had been named for him, Dr. Schneider left the colonists in 1874. The others, who had spent all they had in getting established, had no choice but to remain. They survived by helping each other and on what they could get of food and clothing shipments sent from the east.

One day Mrs. Ernest Goehring, set out on foot for relief headquarters in Kearney, twenty-eight miles distant. Loading what supplies she could handle in a basket which fit over her head and shoulders she started for home. The next day at sundown she arrived at the Bassett home north of Gibbon, so exhausted she couldn't lift the basket from her shoulders. The women of the family cared for her blistered feet and put her to bed. The next morning they hitched up the wagon to take her home, but she refused their help because she had no money to pay them and didn't understand that they meant it only as a kindness. Hoisting the basket on her shoulders she started across the bluffs to her home twelve miles away.

The only thing of value the Goehring could part with was a gun which they sold to George Meisner for \$8.00. With this, two of the Goehring sons bought shirts, overalls and shoes and started east, looking for work.

Richard found a job with Fred Hedde, leader of the German colonists of Grand Island. He sent his wages home and was also able to prove up a homestead of his own.

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He later went into the lumber business in Grand Island, served in several county offices and was city councilman for six years.

In 1874, a town to be called Berg was surveyed; Friedrich Friedrich became first postmaster. Although no town developed there were three churches in the area: Lutheran, Presbyterian and Catholic. The Zion Lutheran Church flourished for a number of years but was removed to Ravenna in 1910.

Two men who camped on the site of the Saxon Colony during the first winter were August Kappler and Otto Gumprecht. The Kappler family took up a claim eight miles south of Ravenna and lived in a dugout with a blanket for a door. After the grasshoppers had devastated the area, the Kapplers gathered enough grass from the river for hay for their oxen. In the fall a prairie fire swept down on the dugout. Esther Kappler, a daughter, beat the blanket down from the doorway and the three children in the dugout escaped just before the roof fell in. The family spent the winter in a log house in Gibbon.

Otto Gumprecht homesteaded on a place six miles north of Gibbon. He was born in Dresden, his wife, Julia, in Saxony. The couple, who had seven children, retired in Shelton.

F. Louis Weidner, was influenced to come to Schneider township from Michigan by letters from a friend, Louis Veit, who had come with the Saxon Colony. Louis took a preemption in the township on September 21, 1874, after the grasshoppers had struck. He later said the \$50.00 he had when he arrived "vanished like snow on a spring day." The Weidners, who had five children, retired to a small acreage outside of Ravenna in 1910.

Others of the Saxon colony not previously mentioned are Mr. and Mrs. William Weber, Mr. and Mrs. William Fisher, Mr. and Mrs. Carl Rost, Frank Guenther, J. C. Grosser, August Schmidt and Emil Veit. After much hardship they achieved the prosperity which had brought them to this country, which could be both harsh and generous.

Author's Note

It is impossible to do justice to all the German immigrants who came to the county. I have tried to choose representative families in those areas where the greatest number of Germans were located.

(Part II will follow in the July-August issue.)