

Volga settlers found their footing in Sheboygan

From 1764 to 1767, 23,000 Germans emigrated to a small area of Russia along the Volga River at the behest of Russia's German-born princess, Catherine the Great.

A total of 104 colonies were founded along the Volga River near Saratov. Immigrants to the Volga region came mainly from the German duchies of Hessen, and the Rhineland, and from the southwestern German states of Baden, Württemberg, Alsace and the Palatinate.

Though the stoic eighteenth-century pioneers settled into their new homes, within 100 years, many began leaving the settlements their ancestors had built.

Beginning with a few scouts to the United States, who located inexpensive and abundant land in 1874, German migration from Russia eventually reached massive proportions. By 1920, more than 200,000 German Russians resided in the United States.

The Volga Germans were different from earlier German immigrants. Their speech was laced with Russian words and German-Americans considered their German archaic. Along with their English-speaking neighbors, German-Americans referred to them as Russians and to their settlements as Russiantown.

Not everyone who came to Sheboygan intended to stay. Some men, responding to reports that good wages could be earned in a relatively short period of time, intended to work in the United States for a few years, save a sufficient amount of money, and then return to a life of ease in the old country.

But, World War I halted travel between Sheboygan and the Volga villages for a few years, and all thoughts of returning to the Russian homeland ended with reports of Bolshevik atrocities during the Revolution of 1917. After the early 1920s, German-Russian immigration ended.

German-Russian men found jobs in Sheboygan as carpenters, masons or painters. Often women supplemented family income by working as domestics. But most of the earliest immigrant men found work in Sheboygan's factories. New arrivals were actively recruited and quickly hired to produce enamelware at the Polarware and Vollrath companies, velocipedes and coaster wagons at Garton Toy Company, mittens and stockings at Hand Knit Hosiery Company, and furniture in a number of plants, including American Chair, Crocker Chair, Northern Furniture, Phoenix Chair and Dillingham Manufacturing Company.

In the nearby village of Kohler, a host of Sheboygan's German-Russian men made bathtubs and sinks at Kohler Company, which became the largest employer of the new immigrants and a major beneficiary of their strong work ethic. Many immigrants were awarded gold watches after twenty-five years of faithful service there, and many obituaries of Volga Germans or their sons' report, "He was a member of the Kohler Century Club."

When factory work was slack, as often happened in the spring and summer months, whole German-Russian families migrated from Sheboygan to Racine or Kenosha, or to the neighboring states of Michigan and Minnesota, to labor in the beet fields.

When Volga Germans arrived in Sheboygan, they often lived with friends or relatives until they could find rental housing. Sometimes a man would arrive alone, with plans to send for his family after he earned enough money to pay their passage. Such a man, or any single man who found work at the Kohler Company, could get a room and board across the street from the factory, at the American Club. That facility, which became a luxury hotel after extensive renovation, was built in 1918.

Kohler Company employees whose homes were in Sheboygan went to work via the electric interurban that ran between Sheboygan and Sheboygan Falls. Interestingly enough, school lunch hours were one and one-half hours long so that a child could eat at home and then carry father's lunch pail to the factory before the start of afternoon classes.

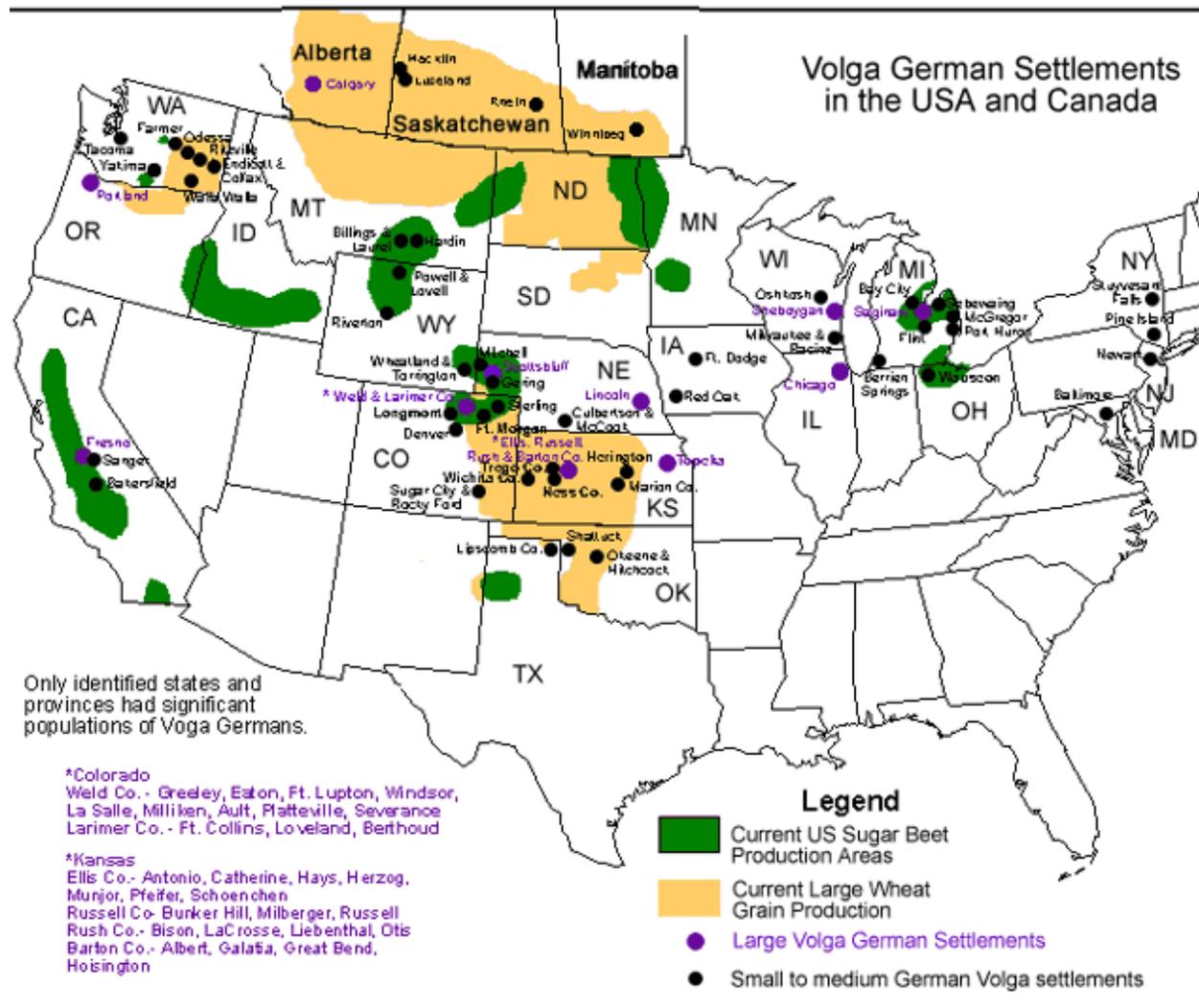
Due to their thrifty nature, it was not long before many German-Russian families owned their own homes. Neatly kept yards showed pride in ownership. A good number of Volga German homes were located on Erie Avenue, west of Eighth Street. In later years, children of these immigrants laughingly referred to the street as "Russian Boulevard."

They came from Lutheran villages in the old country, so most of the Volga Germans joined Lutheran churches in Sheboygan. Many became affiliated with Trinity Lutheran Church located at North Ninth Street and Wisconsin Avenue. In 1903, St. Stephan's congregation was organized with twenty-four charter members, all Volga German Lutherans. The church building, erected on the northwest corner of North Fourteenth Street and Erie Avenue, was built entirely by members of the congregation. When St. Stephan's disbanded in 1912, a number of families joined St. Andrew Lutheran Church, a sister congregation organized in 1902 on South Eleventh Street and Broadway Avenue. St. Paul Lutheran church at North Thirteenth Street and Lincoln Avenue was dedicated in 1904. Another church and school that Sheboygan's Germans from Russia attended was Ebenezer Lutheran, was dedicated in 1913 and located at North 15th Street and St. Clair Avenue.

Now, one hundred twenty-four years after that arrival, members of Volga German community will celebrate and pay homage to the hundreds of Volga Germans who followed that first small group of pioneers.

Dr. Brent Mai, past Director of the Center for Volga German Studies at Concordia University in Portland, Oregon will present Celebrating 250 Years of Volga German History on September 24 and September 25, 2016. The Sheboygan County Historical Museum is hosting the two-day event. This fascinating series of seminars will include a celebration of the 250th Anniversary of the establishment of the colonies of Reinwald, Schäfer, Schulz, Krasnoyar, Grimm, Bauer, Basel, Niedermanjou and so many others. Stay tuned for more information in the Sheboygan Press. Or go to schrc.org or sheboyganmuseum.org for more information. The seminar is open to the public. There is a small fee for attendance.

This article is the second of three parts on local Volga German history. Much of the information from all three columns comes from work and research done by Emma Hermann Thieme and Frederick Zitzer, champions of VG history.



Map of Volga German settlements in the United States



Left: The Lutheran church in the town of Basel, Russia, founded by Germans. The Freund family of Sheboygan came from Basel.



At right: The funeral of Albert Freund in Basel, Russia. The Freunds emigrated to Sheboygan. Photos like this were taken to be sent to those in America who could not attend the funeral.



St. Stephens Lutheran church, a community of German Russians, was once located on the northwest corner of 14th and Erie in Sheboygan.

