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Deutsch, Däätsch, Diiütsch, and Dietsch:
The Varieties of Kansas German Dialects
after 150 Years of German Group Settlement in Kansas

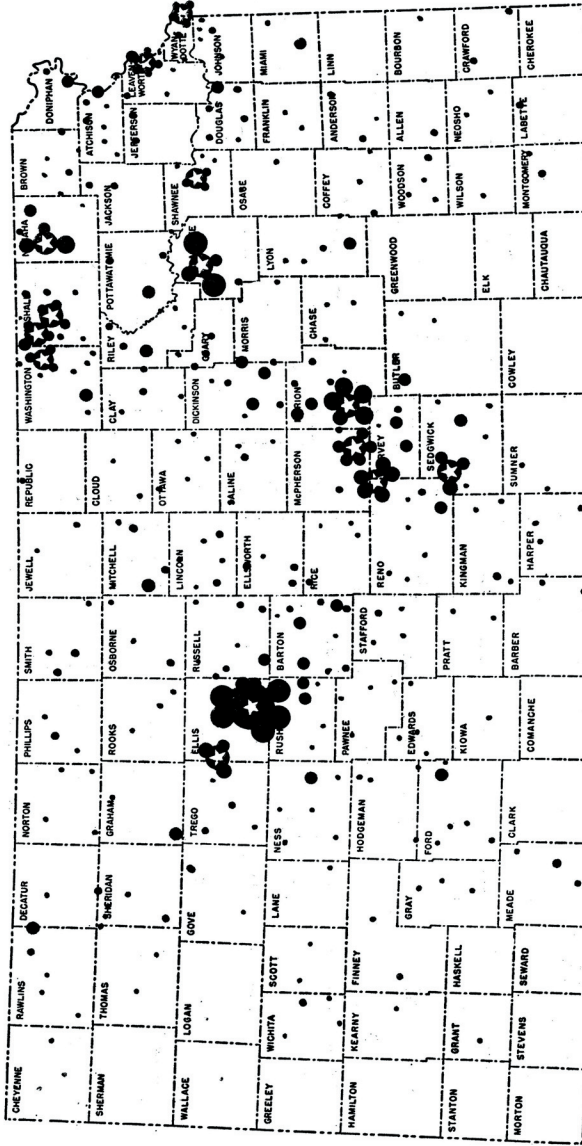
Introduction

As one travels throughout the state of Kansas, one cannot help noticing numerous place names which might lead one to believe that one is, indeed, not in Kansas anymore: Humboldt in Allen County, Bremen in Marshall County, Stuttgart in Phillips County, Marienthal in Wichita County, Windthorst in Ford County, Olmitz in Barton County, Olpe in Lyons County, Bern in Nemaha County, and many others. Whether named for famous German researchers (Alexander and Wilhelm von Humboldt), German political leaders of the nineteenth century (Ludwig Windthorst), cities and towns in Germany (Bremen, Stuttgart and Olpe), the capital of Switzerland (Bern), a city in Moravia in the former Austrian Empire (Olmütz), or a German colony near the Volga River in the Russian Empire (Marienthal), each of these Kansas communities is a living testament to the massive influx of German-speaking settlers who found new homes in Kansas during the period from the mid-1850s to the 1880s, and continue to immigrate to Kansas at the beginning of the twenty-first century (see Map 1).

These place names also reflect the diverse background of those German-speaking settlers: They came to Kansas from throughout the German-speaking area of Central Europe, including Switzerland, Austria, Luxembourg, Alsace, Lorraine, Bohemia, Moravia, Hungary, Galicia, and Bucovina as well as from the states and regions (Bavaria, Prussia, Württemberg, Westphalia, Hannover, Saxony, the Rhineland, etc.) normally associated with Germany itself. Significantly for Kansas, they also came from German colonies in the vast Russian Empire: from those established in the 1760s along the Volga River and from those established beginning in 1789 by Mennonites near the Black Sea.

But many settlers of German ancestry did not come to Kansas directly from their European homelands. They came to Kansas from German settlements and communities in the eastern United States. Some came as part of concerted attempts to establish German cultural enclaves in Kansas by German groups in Chicago (Eudora in Douglas County) or Cincinnati (Windthorst in Ford County). Some came as individuals and families seeking a better life from Missouri, Wisconsin, Iowa, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio and other states. A very large number came as part of the westward migration of the Pennsylvania Dutch or Pennsylvania Germans who traced their origins to German-speaking settlers in colonial Pennsylvania and who were among the very first white settlers in the Kansas Territory in 1854.

GERMAN SETTLEMENTS IN KANSAS



- Unimportant
- Quite important
- Of some importance
- Of major importance

Map 1. German-speaking settlements in Kansas prior to 1900 (Carman 1962).

More striking, perhaps, than these German place names are the monuments to the religious faith of the early German settlers in Kansas, which cannot help but catch the attention of the traveler through Kansas. In nearly every county one sees from afar the steeples of the churches built by a rich and diverse variety of German and Pennsylvania German religious bodies: St. Fidelis—"the Cathedral of the Plains"—in Victoria (Ellis County), St. Mark near Colwich (Sedgwick County), St. Mary in St. Benedict (Nemaha County), Immaculate Heart of Mary in Windthorst (Ford County), Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church in Goessel (Marion County), Zion Lutheran Church south of Offerle (Ford/Edwards County), Willow Springs Old German Baptist Brethren Church in southern Douglas County, the Benedictine Abbey in Atchison, and many, many others.

Just as the German settlers in Kansas came from throughout the German-speaking world, they also represented just about every known religious denomination found in the United States in the nineteenth century, including Yiddish-speaking Jewish farming settlements in southwestern Kansas. German Catholics settled throughout Kansas, but established strongholds particularly in the northeastern counties from Atchison and Leavenworth to Seneca, in western Sedgwick County, in Ford and Edwards counties, and in numerous Volga German, Bucovina German and Moravian German parishes in Ellis, Rush and Barton counties. German Lutherans established congregations in many counties, but are especially numerous in the Horseshoe Creek communities of Washington and Marshall counties, in Phillips and Smith counties, and in Lincoln, Mitchell and Russell counties.

Numerous other Protestant denominations—Evangelical and Reformed, Evangelical United Brethren, Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists, Presbyterians—established German congregations in Kansas. Of special interest in Kansas is the large number of congregations reflecting an origin in the Anabaptist movement during the Reformation. German-speaking Mennonites from Russia together with Pennsylvania German and Swiss Mennonites have established a concentrated settlement area extending from Marion County to Reno County. Old Order Amish districts can be found in Reno and Anderson counties. At least five separate branches of the Church of the Brethren (Dunkers) have congregations in Kansas, especially concentrated along the Douglas and Franklin County border. River Brethren colonized Dickinson County in 1879; among these Pennsylvania Germans was the family of future United States President Dwight Eisenhower. The diverse religious heritage of Kansas owes much to these German settlers.

For the student of the German language, however, these German settlements in Kansas offer a window on the full spectrum of German dialects from the Low German dialects spoken from the Dutch border in northern Germany to the Vistula Delta of West Prussia—now Poland—to the Upper German dialects of Switzerland and Bavaria as well as varieties of German which emerged in colonial settlements, whether in Russia or in Pennsylvania. Many of these dialects have ceased to exist; after one generation in Kansas, many descendants of the first settlers had already assimilated to the dominant English-speaking culture. The anti-German sentiment of two world wars, especially the nearly hysterical efforts against the German language and speakers of that language during the First World War, accelerated the process of assimilation. Most importantly, the break up of our rural communities and the

increased mobility of our population since the Second World War have served to nearly eradicate the immigrant languages from the landscape of Kansas.

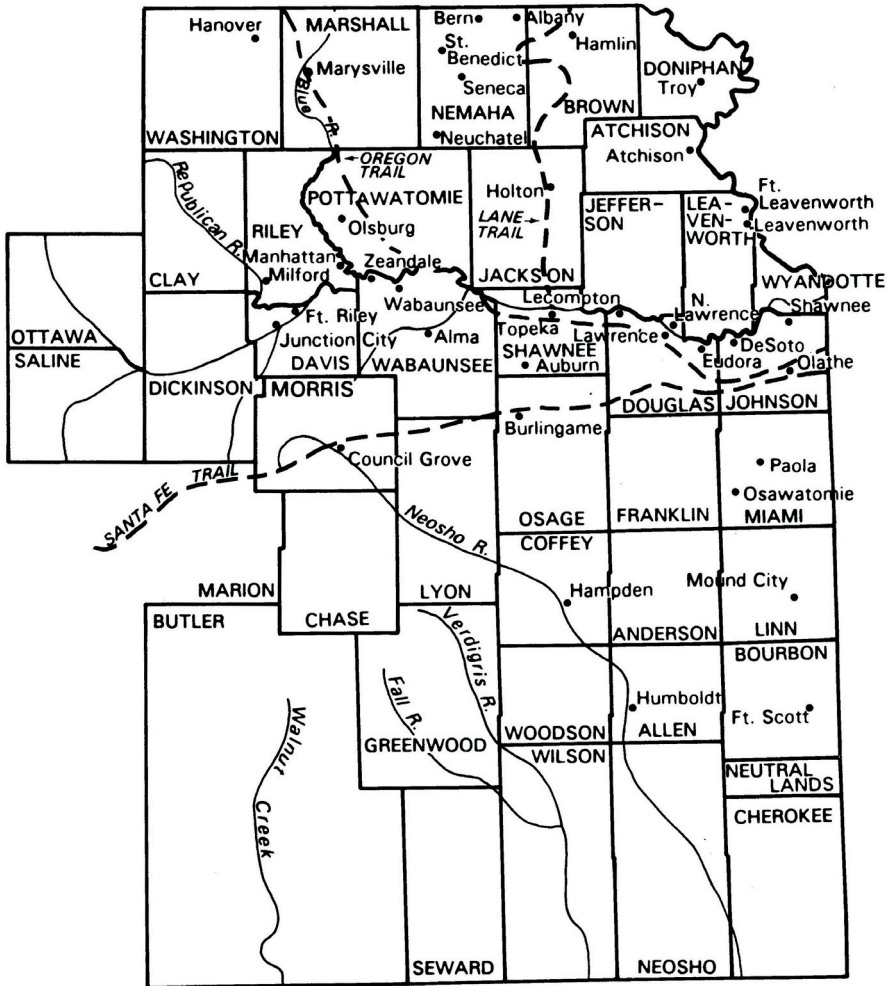
Today we are faced with the gradual dying out of the last remnants of the German settlement dialects in Kansas. In many areas where German settlement was particularly concentrated and unified, the older generations are still quite fluent in their various dialects: Volga German dialects (*Deitsch*) in Ellis and Russell counties; Low German (*Plattdüütsch*) in Missouri Synod Lutheran settlements in Marshall and Washington counties, Mennonite Low German (*Plautdietsch*) in Marion, McPherson and Reno counties; Schweitzer dialect (*Schweitzerdeitsch*) in Moundridge (McPherson County); Swiss German (*Bäärntüütsch*) in Bern (Nemaha County); and Bavarian dialect (*Deitsch-Behmisch*) in Ellis County.

The major groups that continue to teach a German dialect to the younger generation in Kansas are the communities of Old Order Amish. As long as their religion and life-style require the use of Biblical German in their worship services, they will probably continue to speak Pennsylvania German (*Däätsch*) in their families and communities. Of course, the incorporation of numerous words and even grammatical features of American English in Pennsylvania German remains an ongoing process. In the last decade migrant farm workers from Mennonite colonies in Mexico have entered the scene in the counties of southwestern Kansas. Here children speak a Mennonite version of Low German (*Plautdietsch*) as their first language. Only time will tell whether these newest of the German-speaking immigrants to Kansas will establish any cohesive settlements and maintain their German dialect.

German Group Settlements from the Territorial Period until the End of the Civil War, 1854-65

The Kansas-Nebraska Act (1854) opened the Kansas Territory for general settlement by European-Americans (see Map 2). Since 1830, Kansas Territory (acquired by the U.S. via the Louisiana Purchase [1803] and the Mexican War [1845-46]) had been designated for the resettlement of Eastern Indian tribes such as the Shawnee, Pottawatomie, Delaware, Chippewa, and Cherokee, and as the homeland for several other tribes such as the Kansas, Osage and Pawnee. The agreements with these tribes were, however, soon forgotten as white population growth in the East and immigration increased the demand for land on the frontier. The tribes in Kansas were coerced into signing new agreements which in essence led to their resettlement in the Indiana Territory to the south (now Oklahoma).

The large number of white settlers in Kansas Territory included many Germans from Eastern states. Most of the 80 non-English speaking settlements established in Kansas from 1854-61 were German-speaking. Among the very first settlers were many Pennsylvania Germans (Dunkers). But beginning in 1857, a variety of Germans began streaming into Kansas, attracted to some degree by the abolitionist newspaper published in German (*Kansas Zeitung*, Atchison, "Ein Organ für freies Wort, freien Boden und freie Männer"). Although many Germans found new homes in the early towns of Atchison, Leavenworth and Lawrence, most established relatively isolated German communities in the Territory. In what follows, we will survey the most important of these rural settlements, based largely on the published accounts of



Map 2. Counties organized in Eastern Kansas, 1854-65 (Shortridge 1995).

Carman (1954, 1961, 1962, 1974) and Shortridge (1991, 1995) as well as our own field work.

The Benedictine Abbey established by Bavarian monks in Doniphan in 1857 and moved to Atchison in 1859 became the focus of a significant German Catholic settlement band that by 1865 extended for several counties along the border with Nebraska. The most important of these were Wolf River in southwestern Doniphan County and St. Benedict (Wild Cat Creek) in northern Nemaha County. The overwhelming majority of settlers at St. Benedict came from Oldenburg.

Smaller German Catholic settlements were established with the help of the abbey

in Jefferson County (Mooney Creek), Brown County (Fidelity), Atchison County (Lancaster) and Leavenworth County (Easton). In 1858 Northern German Catholics also established a settlement in the southern part of the Territory with St. Boniface parish in Scipio (Anderson County). In the western fringe of settlement, German Catholics from South Hesse and the Rhine-Palatinate founded St. George parish in Flush (Floersch) in Pottawatomie County.

Among the numerous German Protestant communities were the Swiss Reformed in Doniphan County, who settled there in 1855. A little farther west in Nemaha County, on the border with Nebraska, Swiss Germans founded Bern in 1857. The religious affiliation of these Swiss was more complex. Congregations of Lutherans, Reformed as well as Apostolic Christians can be found here. Missouri-Synod Lutherans from Hannover, however, dominate the landscape centering on Bremen in Marshall County (Horseshoe Creek Settlement). The ranch of Gert Hollenberg, also from Hannover, had already been established here in the territorial period (1858; now the last surviving Pony Express station in Kansas). There were also a number of other minor Protestant settlements including Hiawatha in Brown County.

South of the Kansas River German Methodists at Stull and Evangelicals at Worden established themselves in Douglas County. A larger settlement, primarily Lutheran, developed along Mill Creek in Wabaunsee County with centers at Alma and Alta Vista. Secondary settlements from Mill Creek developed along Clark's Creek (Lutherans, 1858) in Davis and Morris counties as well as Lyon's Creek in Davis and Dickinson counties (Methodists and Lutherans, 1857). Another significant secondary settlement of North German Lutherans was Block in Miami County, established by settlers from Cole Camp, Missouri, in 1859.

Two town companies were also composed of Germans in the territorial period (1854-61). The Chicago-based *Deutscher Ansiedlungsverein* acquired Land for Eudora (named for a Shawnee chief) in Douglas County in 1857. Eudora was settled by a mixed German population. In a short time, German Evangelicals, German Methodists, German Catholics and Jews lived side by side. The town also had its own *Turnverein* and *Turnhalle*. German Congregationalists from Connecticut founded the second all-German town on the southern edge of the Territory on the Neosho River, also in 1857. This community was named Humboldt after the great explorer and had a distinctly abolitionist bent. The liberal perspective in Humboldt led to proposed street names reflecting patriots of the 1848 Revolution, including two executed by the Austrian and Prussian authorities, Robert Blum and Adolf von Trützschler.

The settlements of the Pennsylvania Germans in Kansas are not as easily identified because of the long history of settlement in Pennsylvania and the migration of Pennsylvania Germans westwards since the end of the eighteenth century. Based on their religious affiliation (Dunkers, Amish, River Brethren, etc.), it is possible to obtain some idea of the extent of Pennsylvania German involvement in the settlement of Kansas. Larger groups such as Lutherans or Reformed remain unnoticed.

Adherents of the Dunkers (Church of the Brethren) were quite conspicuous in the territorial period. A number of these Dunker settlements could be found south of the Kansas River in the counties of Douglas, Franklin and Osage and north of the river in the counties of Jefferson and Brown. Today many mistakenly believe the members of the most conservative of these Dunkers—the Old German Baptist Brethren—to be Amish based on their dress and general appearance.

In his 1962 *Atlas and Statistics* Justice Neale Carman determined a so-called “critical year” for every non-English speaking group settlement in Kansas. The “critical year” was the approximate date by which time only about half of the families with children in a given community were still using the emigrant language or dialect in the home. Despite the limitations of Carman’s estimate, we have an approximate idea of the state of assimilation of a speech community to the dominant English society.

Based on Carman’s information, the Catholic German settlements in northeastern Kansas stopped using German fairly soon after arriving in Kansas. Most experienced the “critical year” prior to the First World War (Fidelity 1890, Flush 1900, Scipio 1905, Lancaster 1910, Easton 1913, Mooney Creek 1917). Even in larger settlements such as St. Benedict (“critical year” 1920) and Wolf River (1925) assimilation was already in progress prior to the war. The tenacity of the Low German dialect in St. Benedict, however, is evidenced by the presence of a handful of semi-speakers of the dialect today (2005).

Similar results obtain from the two German town companies of the territorial period. Carman calculated “critical years” for Humboldt of 1905 and for Eudora of 1910. Unfortunately, Carman, offers no insights into the situation of the many Pennsylvania German settlements of that period. Based on our own investigations, it appears that even among the most conservative Old German Baptist Brethren the use of German had largely dissipated by 1900.

In most of the mainstream Protestant settlements we find the same general pattern of assimilation prior to the First World War. A few communities continued with German into the mid-1920s before English became dominant: the Lutherans in Block (Miami County) and the denominationally mixed Germans in the vicinity of Marysville (Marshall County). 1930 was designated by Carman the “critical year” for the Evangelicals in Worden (Douglas County) and the Swiss in Bern (Nemaha County).

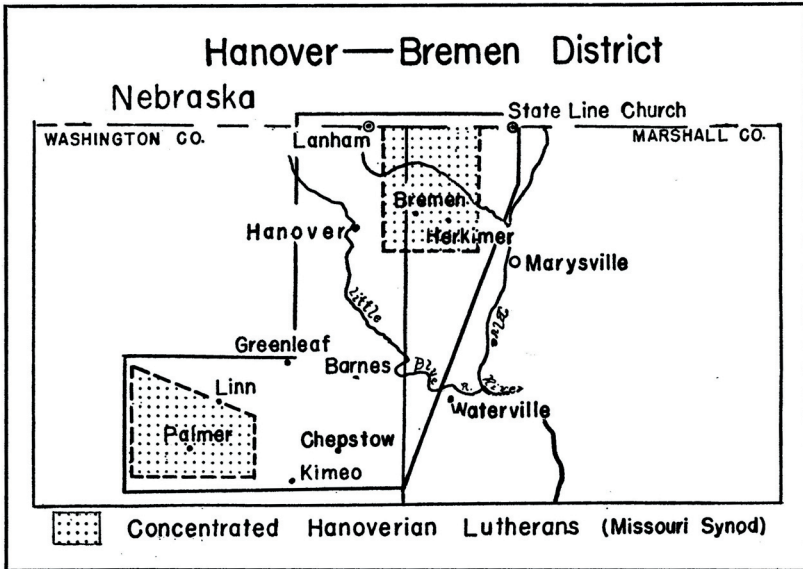
Particularly resistant to assimilation were the Hanoverian Lutherans along Horseshoe Creek near Bremen (Marshall County). Carman claimed that this group reached its “critical year” in 1942. It is thus not at all surprising that we still find a number of fluent speakers of “Hermansberg Low German” in this community in 2005 (see Map 3).

Post-Civil War: Homestead or Railroad Land, 1865-1885

Following the chaos of the Civil War in Kansas, the state experienced an uninterrupted flow of new settlers for the next two decades. German immigration to the U.S. numbered in the hundreds of thousands. Even more significant was the emigration of thousands of German colonists from the Russian Empire and the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Many found their way to the state of Kansas. The new settlers had the opportunity to acquire a farmstead either free under the provisions of the Homestead Act (1862) or relatively cheaply from one of the transcontinental railroad companies (Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad or the Kansas Pacific Railroad). The so-called railroad land stretched in a band from ten to twenty miles wide on both sides of the right-of-way and was offered for sale in alternating sections.

The western counties of Kansas presented a chessboard pattern of railroad and homestead lands for the potential settlers (see Map 4).

Some of these new settlers homesteaded in the counties of the territorial period and augmented the German population there. Others established new settlements in the older counties such as the Swiss Apostolic Christians who spread out along the borders of three counties in 1876 (Lyon, Greenwood and Coffey). These Swiss



Map 3. Low German Lutheran Enclave near Bremen and Hanover, Kansas (Carman 1962).

followed the pattern of assimilation to English by 1925 according to Carman. A mixed group of German Methodists, Lutherans and Swiss Reformed established themselves in the river valleys of Dickinson County. According to Carman, the Methodists assimilated prior to the First World War, the Swiss in New Basel by 1920 and the Lutherans along Lyon's Creek by 1930. In Washington County the Lutherans from Marshall County began to spread out to the west at the same time the town of Hanover (spelled with one "n" in Kansas) was established in 1869. Even though the town eventually became largely German Catholic, the surrounding farm area remained firmly in Low German Lutheran hands. Carman determined the "critical year" for the rural areas of the county in the mid- to late-1930s.

As we move westward along the border with Nebraska we encounter four significant settlements. In the southwestern area of Washington County we find the Low German Lutherans of Linn-Palmer. Established in 1871, these communities had close ties to the Low German enclaves of Cole Camp and Concordia in Missouri. The Linn-Palmer Low Germans, with a "critical year" around 1941, can be viewed as an extension of the larger Horseshoe Creek group near Bremen and Hanover (see Map 3). Here, too, we still find fluent speakers of Low German in 2005.

In the western townships of Mitchell County and the eastern townships of Osborne County we find an extensive settlement of German Catholics, largely from the Rhineland, who established themselves around St. Boniface Church (Tipton) beginning in 1872. These German Catholics also reached their linguistic “critical year” in the 1930s according to Carman.

Further west Protestants from Württemberg established themselves in Phillips County in 1872. The early years brought little change until the construction of the Rock Island Railroad in 1887 and the founding of the town of Stuttgart. The Swabians of Stuttgart and Phillips County also had largely made the transition to English by the mid-1930s based on the information provided by Carman.

The isolated Beaver Creek valley in Decatur and Rawlins counties became the new home for Hungarian Germans from Sopron in 1876. Traveling first to Nebraska and being dissatisfied with the land there, the group continued by train to McCook, Nebraska, and then went across country to the homesteads in Kansas. This unique group of Hungarian Germans in Kansas, exhibiting both Catholic and Protestant subcommunities, maintained active use of German until the mid-1940s according to Carman.

The settlement corridor along the Kansas Pacific Railroad attracted German-Americans from the eastern states, especially Pennsylvania Germans from both Pennsylvania and Ohio. Their settlements lie scattered across the counties of Dickinson, Saline, Ellsworth, Russell and Ellis. Most significant were the “79ers”—the River Brethren—who migrated by the hundreds to Dickinson County from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, in 1879 and populated the rural areas around Abilene. Among them were the grandparents of President Dwight David Eisenhower.

Only a few of the German settlements along the Kansas Pacific had origins directly in Germany. Hanoverian Lutherans settled in Sylvan Grove in Lincoln County in 1873. Meanwhile Low German-speaking Catholics established themselves in Walker in Ellis County in 1871. The dominant language in Sylvan Grove was already English by the time of the First World War. In Walker on the other hand, Low German was still common until the late-1930s. The close contact with the numerous Volga German Catholics in Ellis County also played a role in retarding the process of assimilation in that county.

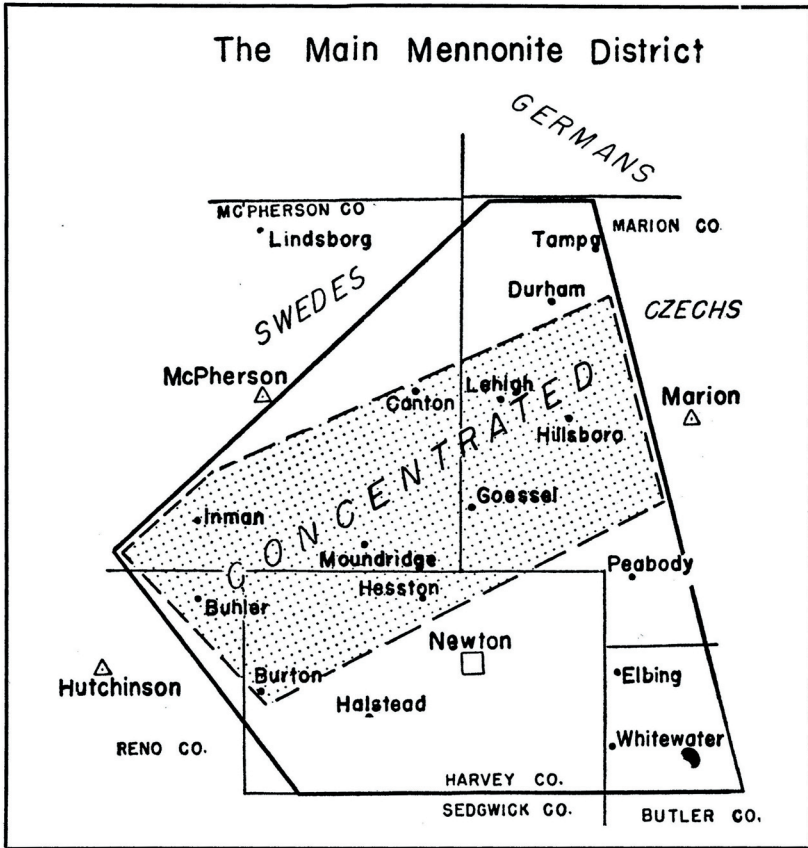
One other group of Germans along the Kansas Pacific deserves mention. In 1878 a colony of German Baptists was established near Lorraine in Ellsworth County. This was a transplanted settlement of East Frisians from an earlier settlement in Illinois. However, despite the relative isolation of the community, Carman determined their “critical year” shortly before the beginning of the First World War.

The efforts of the Santa Fe Railroad to position German-speaking communities on both sides of its right-of-way were significantly more successful. Carl Bernhard Schmidt, a recent immigrant from Saxony, became the Santa Fe’s agent for Europe. Schmidt traveled nearly forty times to Europe and brought some 60,000 German-speaking immigrants to the lands of the Santa Fe in Kansas. Turning first to Mennonites from Pennsylvania and Illinois, Schmidt sold them larger sections in the counties of Marion and Harvey. These became the basis for an extensive Mennonite colony (some twenty distinct groups) in south central Kansas, especially for German Mennonites from southern Russia (see Map 5).

Schmidt learned of the interest of the Russian-German Mennonites in 1873 and

invited their scouts to spend a week with him inspecting the lands along the Santa Fe in Kansas. Soon afterward he had sold land to these Mennonites in Marion County. By the end of 1874 there were already some 4,000 Russian-German Mennonites in Kansas. By the end of Schmidt's recruitment efforts in 1880 an estimated 15,000 Mennonites had resettled from south Russia to south Kansas.

The largest contingent of these Mennonites formed the General Conference



Map 5. Main Mennonite Enclave in Kansas (Carman 1962).

and included the Low German (*Plautdietsch*) congregations such as Alexanderwohl (Goessel in Marion County) and Hoffnungsau (near Inman in McPherson County and Buhler in Reno County) as well as the "Schweitzer" Mennonites from Volhynia near Moundridge (McPherson County) and Pretty Prairie (Reno County). Swiss Mennonites from Canton Bern also joined the General Conference in 1876 after settling near Whitewater (Butler County). Another group associating with the General Conference were the West Prussians who settled in Elbing (also Butler County).

A more conservative group of Russian-German Mennonites founded the Gnadenu congregation near Hillsboro (Marion County). Hillsboro became the center for the second denominational group of the Mennonites in Kansas, the

Mennonite Brethren.

Still more conservative were a Low German-speaking group of Mennonites from Polish Russia and Volhynia—other Mennonites refer to the Low German of this group as “Polish.” This group came under the influence of the Pennsylvania German Mennonite preacher John Holdeman. These “Holdeman people” (Church of God in Christ--Holdeman) purchased railroad land in McPherson County. An offshoot of the “Holdeman people” moved further west along the Santa Fe tracks and founded the community of Bergthal in Barton County near Pawnee Rock. Later on they associated themselves with the General Conference.

This main Mennonite settlement area extends over five counties in south central Kansas: Harvey, Marion, McPherson, Reno and Butler. At least six varieties of German dialects can be distinguished. Among the Amish and some Old Order Mennonites Pennsylvania German (Dutch) is the language of everyday communication. The true Swiss Mennonites near Whitewater speak a variety of Swiss German. Those in Elbing speak a West Prussian colloquial German. The Schweitzer Mennonites speak a Palatine dialect sharing many characteristics with Pennsylvania German. The majority of these Mennonites speak a variety of Low German—either the Polish variety of the Holdeman people or the more widespread *Plautdietsch* common to the Mennonite Brethren and many in the General Conference. In 2005 we still have numerous fluent speakers of *Plautdietsch* in these communities. The Pennsylvania German (*Däätsch*) of the Old Order Amish districts in Reno County is still learned by children in the home. For all other groups in the Mennonite settlement area, Carman determined a “critical year” in the 1930s (see Map 5).

Schmidt varied the religious and linguistic landscape by settling Catholics from the Rhineland and the Mosel in western Sedgwick County, northwest of Wichita. In the area surrounding the parish of St. Mark's, hundreds of German Catholic families found new homes. By bringing in German Catholics from Westphalia and Alsace, however, Schmidt thwarted the development of a particular German dialect among these Catholics. As was so often the case, by the mid-1930s assimilation to the dominant English language was well underway.

Schmidt's next project focused on the town of Ellinwood (Barton County). Beginning in 1873, a pure German colony called “Germania” was to arise here—with a German administration, German culture and German institutions (see Map 6). Settlers from Germany and Germans from Moravia settled in a circle around a large wetland (Cheyenne Bottoms) in the middle of Barton County. In the northeast, German Moravian Catholics from Brno founded Odin and others from Olmütz founded Olmitz with St. Ann's church to the northwest of the marshes. Lutherans from East Friesland settled in Albert on the western edge of the wetlands. Baptists from Hannover and Prussia were settled to the south of Ellinwood in Stafford County in 1880.

Schmidt's last two major attempts at German colonization along the Santa Fe were Windthorst in Ford County, about sixteen miles east of Dodge City, and Offerle in Edwards County. Collaborating with the *Auroverein* of Cincinnati, Schmidt established a significant Catholic settlement on the High Plains in 1878. The community took its name from German Catholic leader Ludwig Windthorst, at that time one of Bismarck's political opponents. Offerle on the other hand emerged at the same time out of a Lutheran initiative from Germans in Illinois. However, even

in these isolated western German settlements in Kansas, most reached their “critical years” by around 1930—the German Moravians in Barton County, however, not until 1940.

Schmidt was less successful with a second group of immigrants from Russia. After showing the scouts of the Volga Germans sections of land near Larned in Pawnee County, the Volga Germans decided the price was more than they felt reasonable. The German-born agent for the Kansas Pacific, Adam Rödelheimer, however, was able to find land that met the wishes of these Russian Germans. Large numbers of Catholics from the German colonies on the Volga established six villages in 1876-77 in Ellis County (Herzog, Katharinenstadt, Obermonjour, Pfeiffer, Schoenchen) and in neighboring Rush County (Liebenthal). Lutherans from the Volga settled in the counties around the Catholics in southern Russell (Dorrance and Milberger), northern Barton and Rush (Otis and Bison) and to the west in Trego. Further west secondary settlements of these Volga Germans were established, e.g., St. Peter (Graham County) and Marienthal (Wichita County). Carman set the “critical year” for the main settlements in Ellis and Rush counties at 1950. Today (2005) fluent speakers of these Middle German village dialects of the Volga Germans in Kansas can still be found (see Map 7).

About fifteen miles west of Hays, the county seat of Ellis County, is the town of Ellis. Ellis became the focal point for immigration of Germans from the Austrian crown land of Bukovina around 1880. These Bukovina Germans came in two distinct groups: The Catholic German Bohemians and the Lutheran “Swabians.” The Catholics speak a northern/middle Bavarian dialect from the Bohemian Forest. The so-called “Swabians” speak a Palatine-type dialect. Carman estimated 1935 as the critical year for both groups.

By the end of the 1880s all counties of western Kansas had been organized and the period of major railroad construction across the state had also come to an end. Sporadic immigration of Germans to the established settlements continued, however, until the First World War. One of the later groups has in the meantime vanished from the Kansas scene. From 1882 to 1886 some seven Yiddish-speaking farm communities were established in southwestern Kansas by Jews from Russia. The first of these was Beersheba (Hodgeman County). By 1900 the attempt of these Jewish immigrants to establish a New Jerusalem on the prairie had failed. Today there is no trace of these Yiddish settlements in the vicinity of Dodge City (Harris 1984).

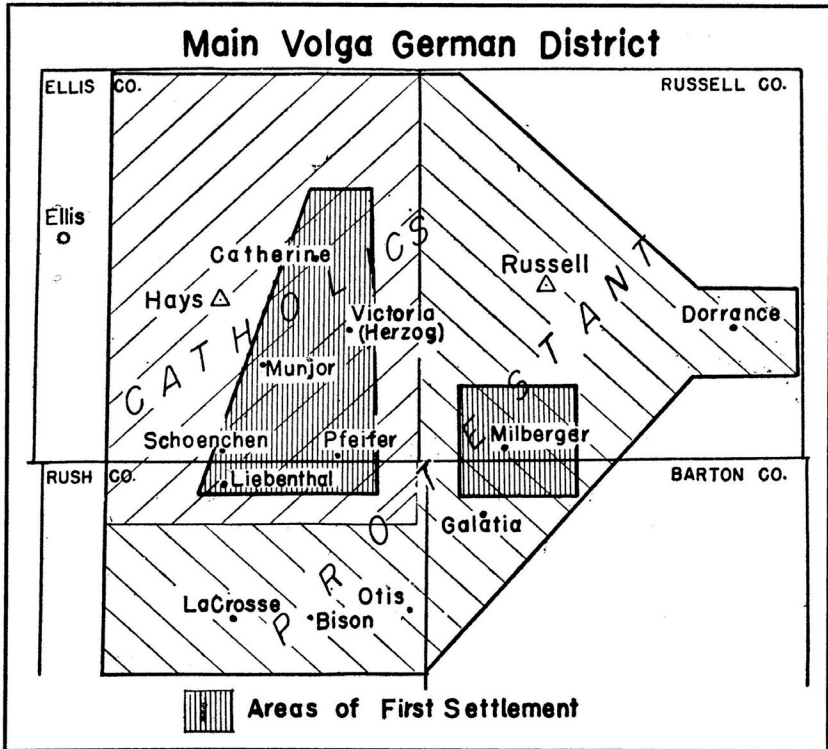
Kansas German Speech Enclaves during the Twentieth Century

With the exception of the Old Order Amish in Reno and Anderson counties, the Kansas German immigrant groups of the nineteenth century have nearly all completed their transition to English. In several of the larger groups, the older generation still continues to hold on to the linguistic heritage of the group. It becomes harder and harder, however, to find individuals who regularly use the immigrant dialect.

Klaus Mattheier observed that the German settlements in Kansas could largely be termed “residual speech islands” (1993). The best examples of these “residual speech islands” are the settlements of the Volga Germans and those of the Bukovina Germans in west central Kansas, those of the Russian-German Mennonites in south

central Kansas, and those of the Low German Lutherans in north central Kansas (see Maps 3, 5 and 7). All of these groups reached Carman's "critical year" in the period from 1935 to 1950. The following depiction of the assimilatory process among the Low German-speaking Mennonites based on the studies of Schmidt (1977) and Engelbrecht (1985) provides a general model applicable to all of the groups in Kansas.

Immediately following the first settlement in 1874, the main group of Russian



Map 7. The Volga German Enclave in Kansas (Carman 1962).

German Mennonites exhibited diglossia. The language of worship and religious practice was literary German; for everyday use varieties of *Plautdietsch* were spoken. The first schools established by these Mennonites used literary German as the medium of instruction, so that children could participate in worship and Bible readings. A form of literary German also was needed to communicate about church doctrine in the General Conference with other Mennonites who did not have *Plautdietsch* as their mother tongue. But only three years after arrival in Kansas (1877), the General Conference decided to teach English in their schools as a second language. The Mennonite schools were held in the spring after the end of the public (English) school year. As the public school year lengthened, the school time of the Mennonite

schools were shortened. The result was a gradual diminishing of German instruction and its ultimate end by the time of the First World War.

The shift to English in religious usage was gradual but steady. Some congregations had English sermons prior to 1900. In others, the first English sermon was not preached until 1940. The membership of the Kansas congregations in the General Conference was a major factor in this shift. In the 1890s the Mennonites in the eastern states desired to introduce English as the official language of the Conference. The Kansas congregations resisted at first. Ultimately, German was retained as the official language in the Western District (Kansas) of the General Conference into the 1930s (the last official report of the Western District in German was in 1941).

But the leadership of the church in Kansas quickly recognized that the youth could only be kept in the church by the use of English. Even prior to 1916, many Mennonite young people could not understand the German sermons. The language of the Christian Youth Associations, with chapters in nearly every Mennonite congregation, was more often than not English by the early 1900s. The war against the Kaiser only accelerated these trends. After all, religious education in English was already the rule. In 1924 an English songbook for children was approved.

The importance of the Sunday schools cannot be overlooked. Religious instruction for those children attending public schools during the week quickly switched to English. Evidence indicates that instruction for the youth in English was prevalent prior to 1910. Even adult Sunday school classes had shifted to English by 1930. Yet, even as late as 1970 a few German Sunday school classes were being taught for older members.

As mentioned above, the use of English for Sunday sermons began already prior to 1900 and was widespread by the 1930s. The career of Pastor Peter Richert provides an interesting example of this development. Richert was born in Taurida, Russia, in 1871 and came with his parents to Kansas in 1874. He grew up in the large Marion County congregation of Alexanderwohl. From 1908 to 1946 he served as pastor for the Tabor congregation. He began giving ten-minute summaries of his sermons in English in 1923. He held his first sermon entirely in English in 1927. From 1927 to 1935 he held 407 sermons in German and 48 in English. From 1936 to 1939 there were 201 German and 215 English sermons. In final six years (1940-46) English was dominant with 368 to 140 in German (Engelbrecht 1985, 96-98). Some of Richert's contemporaries, however, preached only in German.

Another marker of the transition to English in this group is the Mennonite weekly *Der Herold* (1909-41). Until 1916 the paper was entirely in German except for some advertisements in English. During 1916 a total of twelve news articles appeared in English. In 1917 the number of English articles climbed to 30 and in 1918 reached 203. Beginning in May 1919, an entire page was printed in English and in 1922 a complete edition in English was published: *Mennonite Weekly Review*. As the German readership aged and gradually decreased by 1940, it was determined that the German edition was no longer needed (Engelbrecht 1985, 115-22).

The loss of the mother tongue, *Plautdietsch*, paralleled the loss of literary German but lagged roughly one generation behind that transition. Based on information gleaned from questionnaires, Schmidt (1977) provides the following sketch of that transition in the Mennonite congregation of Hoffnungsau in McPherson County.

Those born prior to 1917 grew up in a Low German environment. English was

first encountered in the public school. These children also experienced instruction in literary German in summer school and continued to hear German preached on Sunday until the 1950s. After 1950, however, English dominated with this group. As senior citizens they still enjoyed speaking *Plautdietsch* with family and friends in the 1970s.

Those born from 1918 to 1927 also grew up with *Plautdietsch* in the home, but some English was also spoken. Most of them also experience German summer school albeit for very short periods. They also heard German in church during their school years. But by the time they were in their twenties, English was dominant in church. As parents they tended to teach their children English as a first language. They can still speak *Plautdietsch*.

Those born from 1928 to 1947 still grew up hearing some *Plautdietsch* at home. *Hochdeutsch* in church became rare after their primary school years and there were no more German summer schools to attend. Some may have taken German in high school or college, but very few have any ability in standard German. They did, however, have a passive understanding of *Plautdietsch* and on occasion they used Low German phrases and expressions in the 1970s.

Those born from 1948 to 1957 had little contact with Low German in the home and only a few of this group can understand let alone speak *Plautdietsch*. They had no contact with standard German in the context of church or Sunday school. Again, German as a foreign language in high school or college would be the only situations in which they might have encountered the standard language. It was exceptional to find individuals in this group with any ability in *Plautdietsch* in the 1970s.

Those born from 1958 to 1967 had hardly any contact with *Plautdietsch* in the family nor did they experience standard German in church. The centennial celebration of the Hoffnungsau congregation in 1974, however, awakened a keen interest in the linguistic heritage of the Mennonites in this group.

The final stage for many such speech communities in Kansas is the emergence of “heritage associations.” For a number of years, the Fall Festival at the General Conference Bethel College in North Newton (Harvey County) has featured two language programs: the Low German (*Plautdietsch*) theater production and the Swiss Mennonite (*Schweitzer*) skits. The Volga Germans of Ellis County now have groups who perform the traditional wedding ceremony and another group that sings the folk songs of the Volga Germans. The Lutheran Low Germans near Hanover and Bremen in northern Kansas have recently started the Hermansberg Low German Heritage Club to promote their immigrant language and heritage and have also had Low German worship services in conjunction with a “Germanfest” in Marysville. Such sparks of enthusiasm for the immigrant languages in Kansas cannot in the long run halt the gradual demise of the German dialects as the older speakers pass from the scene.

The Twenty-First Century: The Influx of Mennonites from Mexico

It might seem that we are left with only the Old Order Amish and Pennsylvania German as a living reminder of the once widespread use of German dialects in Kansas. However, as noted earlier, there is a new group of German-speaking immigrants in

Kansas. For over a decade, farm laborers and their families from Mennonite colonies in Chihuahua province in northern Mexico have been migrating into the market of southwestern Kansas. These people are Low German-speaking Old Colony Mennonites who immigrated to Canada from southern Russian in the late nineteenth century. After the First World War, they moved to new colonies in Mexico to avoid restrictions being placed on them by the Canadian authorities. Now as the economic conditions in Chihuahua deteriorate they are seeking better opportunities for their families. The out-migration from Mexico takes them not only to Kansas but also to states such as Texas and also to Canada and South America.

The high demand in southwestern Kansas for agricultural labor is drawing them to Kansas. With the transfer of the meat packing industry from the major cities such as Chicago, Omaha and Kansas City to the High Plains of western Kansas, major slaughter houses have been built near places such as Garden City and Liberal in Kansas. The need for cheap labor in the feed lots is overwhelming and with the Spanish-speaking Mexicans that flock to this labor market come *Plautdietsch*-speaking Mennonites as well.

Today (2005) we estimate that some 5,000 Mennonites from Mexico are living in the southwestern counties of Kansas. These are young families with children. At home the language of everyday use is *Plautdietsch*. The church congregations established by these new immigrants vary in their language use. In November 2003, we experienced a two-hour worship service at the Gospel Mennonite Church in Copeland, Kansas. All preaching was in Low German; hymn singing and Bible passages in literary German; one closing hymn was sung in English. In other congregations, the use of English for preaching has been reported. Schools operated by these Mennonites are conducted in English. All schools, whether Mennonite or public, must deal with large numbers of children requiring ESL classes as they enter the school system. It can be overwhelming for a teacher in first grade to be confronted with half of the class consisting of Low German-speaking children. The Kansas Department of Health and Environment also reports that fully one-third of its low income health contacts are with these Low German-speaking Mennonites in southwestern Kansas.

What will the linguistic situation be in southwestern Kansas in ten or twenty years? Will these newest German immigrants in Kansas rapidly assimilate to the dominant English society or will they be able to isolate themselves as did the immigrants of the nineteenth century? The more plausible outcome is rapid assimilation given the social integration in the schools and in the economy. And, if the churches adopt English in the worship services that would most probably mean the end of Low German over time. But we cannot answer these questions now and must wait to see how this group adapts to the Kansas environment. This recent development at least teaches us that the story of German dialects in Kansas is far from over.

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