

THE INHERITANCE

The Epic Journeys of the German-Russian Pioneers

Part I of the Meidinger saga told of how German settlers migrated to Russia in the 1700s and 1800s, their dreams, their struggles, and how their dreams came to an end. The first episode closed just as one of the Meidingers, Gottlieb, had decided that a new promise—and a new hope—lay somewhere on the American frontier. It was a painful decision, because it meant the forsaking of all he knew and loved, of a familiar land, of even perhaps life itself.



Part II

By Alma Baumann

The first of Adam Meidinger Sr.'s children to go to the U.S. was Gottlieb. He had a rough time during his first years in this country.

To begin with, he worked on boats plying the Mississippi River

down to New Orleans, and then on the Missouri River up to remote Mandan in the wilderness of the Dakota Territory.

It was on the Mandan trip that calamity struck.

After a long and difficult river journey, their boat finally reached the frontier settlement of Mandan, was docked and the cargo unloaded. While the crew and passengers were conversing with the inhabitants of the dusty outpost, someone from on board sold alcohol

to the Indians there.

Liquor was forbidden in the fort area, but the lure of quick profits evidently proved too tempting to one of the crew members.

At any rate, the guilty person(s) cleverly shifted the blame to the two non-English-speaking men on the boat, Gottlieb and a fellow German immigrant. The two hapless newcomers were consequently accused, and since they could not speak English well enough to defend themselves, they were kicked

off the boat's crew and were not permitted to accompany them on the return voyage.

The two stranded young Germans did not think they had much of a future in the lonely village of Mandan, especially since their reputations had been sullied.

They struck out southward on foot, and walked all the way back to Menno in southeastern Dakota Territory, a distance of about 350 miles (as the crow flies). The long trek took them through unsettled and dangerous prairie. They were very happy when they finally glimpsed the village of Menno on the horizon because they knew that there were German-speaking settlers there. They would be safe at Menno.

Records show that in 1884 Gottlieb homesteaded in Hutchinson County (where Menno was located).

Despite his Mandan misadventure, Gottlieb enthusiastically believed that Dakota Territory was a land of opportunity. He wrote to his parents, still in Russia, and strongly encouraged them and his brothers and sisters to join him in America. He was sure that in the Dakotas they could all be a free and prosperous people.

In the fall of 1884, Gottlieb's brothers, Adam Jr. and Jacob, together with their sister, Christina, and her husband, Christian Rott, and their families arrived at Menno. Gottlieb was overjoyed. They all farmed there for one year.

Since land was getting scarce in the Menno area, some of the people were moving to the northern part of Dakota Territory, an untapped virgin land of promise.

Each of the Meidinger relatives had several sons, and so they knew they would need more land.

There was no other choice. They joined the exodus.

Before leaving Menno, they bought wagons, horses, oxen, chickens, and a few household supplies. When it was time to depart, everything was loaded onto the railroad's freight cars. Then they headed north by slow train.

It was an exciting time for both adults and children as their train puffed and steamed its way across

Dangerous trek through a trackless prairie did not daunt Gottlieb's courage—or his enthusiasm for America



The sons of Adam Meidinger Sr.:
Top row: Jacob, Gottlieb, John;
Bottom row: Adam Jr., Christoph

The Inheritance (continued)

a vast and empty prairiescape.

The windswept waves of undulating golden grass reminded them of the ocean, except that now they were riding over an ocean of grass.

It was early spring.

The warm sunshine invigorated everyone.

The train went as far as Ipswich, which was then the end of the railroad's line. At Ipswich, the exuberant immigrants loaded their belongings into covered wagons, and set out for Hoskins, a distance of about 60 miles.

That last stretch proved to be the hardest part of their whole journey. There were no roads, and so they traveled across trackless, open prairie, moving very slowly. They finally arrived at Hoskins on May 6, 1886.

The small, quaint village of Hoskins was located on the southern shores of the lake by the same name. It was a lovely site for a new town. Ducks and geese glided quietly on its waters. Glorious sunsets spread tranquil ruby trails



The first home of Adam Meidinger Jr. in Antelope Valley. It was constructed of stone and sod, measuring 12 ft. by 24 ft. The house was built in 1885. This picture was taken in 1946, at which time it was being torn down.

Mr. and Mrs. Adam Meidinger Sr.



John Wishek Tells the Meidingers about Antelope Valley

on a still summer's night.

The Meidingers had been told to contact John H. Wishek, the land agent there. The German people trusted Wishek. He and those working with him put 10,000 settlers on public land in the five counties in and around present-day McIntosh County.

Wishek told the Meidingers about some new land approximately 20 miles northeast of Hoskins, a place called Antelope Valley. It had rich, fertile land, Wishek said.

That was where the Meidinger men decided to locate. They placed their files for the land on May 14, 1886. Then they set their horses and wagons moving again, but this time their destination was to be their claims, their very own land!

It was a joyous time. They had few possessions, but they had a dream.

When they reached their claims, they turned the wagon boxes up-

side down and anchored them to the ground. That was the home for each family for several months.

It being late in the spring, they had to get their gardens planted and flax seeded before they could build houses of sod.

Each family had wagons, two oxen, two cows, two horses, two pigs, some basic utensils, clothing, and bedding.

They had to go to Ellendale, a thriving settlement about 40 miles east, in order to buy windows, doors, and lumber.

Of course, they had no furniture, and so that too had to be made. To cook their food, they made a hole in the ground. The children gathered weeds and hay for fuel.

In the autumn of 1886, Mr. and Mrs. Adam Meidinger Sr. sailed to America. They were joined by their youngest son, Johann, and his wife, Magdeline Schnible, and

their children.

The reason the senior Meidingers had not gone to America earlier with their other children was because they had wanted to wait until their son, Johann, returned from serving in the Russian army. When their soldier son returned, they all crossed the Atlantic with many other Germans from Russia.

Then the Meidingers journeyed by train to Tripp, in present-day South Dakota, where they stayed for the winter.

As soon as spring arrived and it was safe to travel, they eagerly loaded their belongings and went by rail to Ipswich, and from there by covered wagon to Antelope Valley.

It was a long and arduous journey, but the happy reunion at Antelope Valley was sweeter than 10 Christmases! The women cried and laughed at the same time. The men slapped each other on the



"They're here! They're here!"

A thrilling, unforgettable moment when the horse-drawn wagon carrying Mr. and Mrs. Adam Meidinger, newly arrived from Russia, at last pulls into the farm at Antelope Valley.

back. Children skipped about with glee.

And thankful prayers were offered.

Not too much time went by until the men helped build a sod

house for the parents north of Adam Jr.'s place. Adam Sr. "retired," but he kept busy taking care of his garden, chickens, and cow.

At the age of 75, Adam Sr. went blind. But he continued to be

cheerful because of his faith in God. During his life, he had studied his Bible so well that he could recite many lengthy passages.

The mother died in the spring of 1897 and he in the fall. They were

A Flood of Immigrants Flows Out of Russia for the Dakotas



The frame house above was built by Adam Jr. (who was later called Adam Sr.) in 1893. It was one of the first frame buildings in the Antelope Valley area. At the same time this photo was taken, the Jacob Buyer family and his parents lived on the place. Mrs. Buyer was the daughter of Adam Jr., who had moved to Ashley at the time of this picture.

buried in the Berlin Baptist Cemetery, located not far from their sons' productive farms.

Johann settled on his own claim not far from his Meidinger relatives. He also was a farmer. He and his family lived in a sod house which neighbors and relatives helped set up.

In 1888, Christoph and his wife, Christina Meyer, and their children embarked for America. He was born on October 10, 1844.

They too went to Antelope Valley to be near the family. The area where these Meidingers lived was often called the "Meidinger Settlement" for many years.

There was a daughter, Eva, who did not emigrate to America. She

and her husband, Adam Kurtz, remained in Russia.

But, as a total, there were more than 300,000 Germans who came to America from Russia. Many settled in the Dakotas. □

IN THE NEXT issue
Part III of the Meidinger saga concludes with accounts of how the family adapted to life in Antelope Valley, some of their hardships and some of their joys.
