

White

THE LIFE AND TIMES

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Part 1:



Karl Wacker, who immigrated from South Russia to the Dakota Territory, wrote a fascinating account of the trials, problems, fears, and excitement he encountered as he left the Old World for a newer and brighter future in a far-off land. His narrative was translated from the German by his

I was born in South Russia about twenty three miles west of Odessa on the 31st of December, 1855. Was baptized by Pastor Hibner. When I was a year and a half old my father died. My mother, sick and overwhelmed with sorrow, and with four small children to care for, counting me, could not do all the work. So my aunt took me to grandmother's place and I became Grandma and Grandpa's child. I lived there and when I was seven years old I went to school. I had good clothes to wear. Aunt Lizzie always saw to it that I had everything I needed. I can remember nearly everything since I was seven years

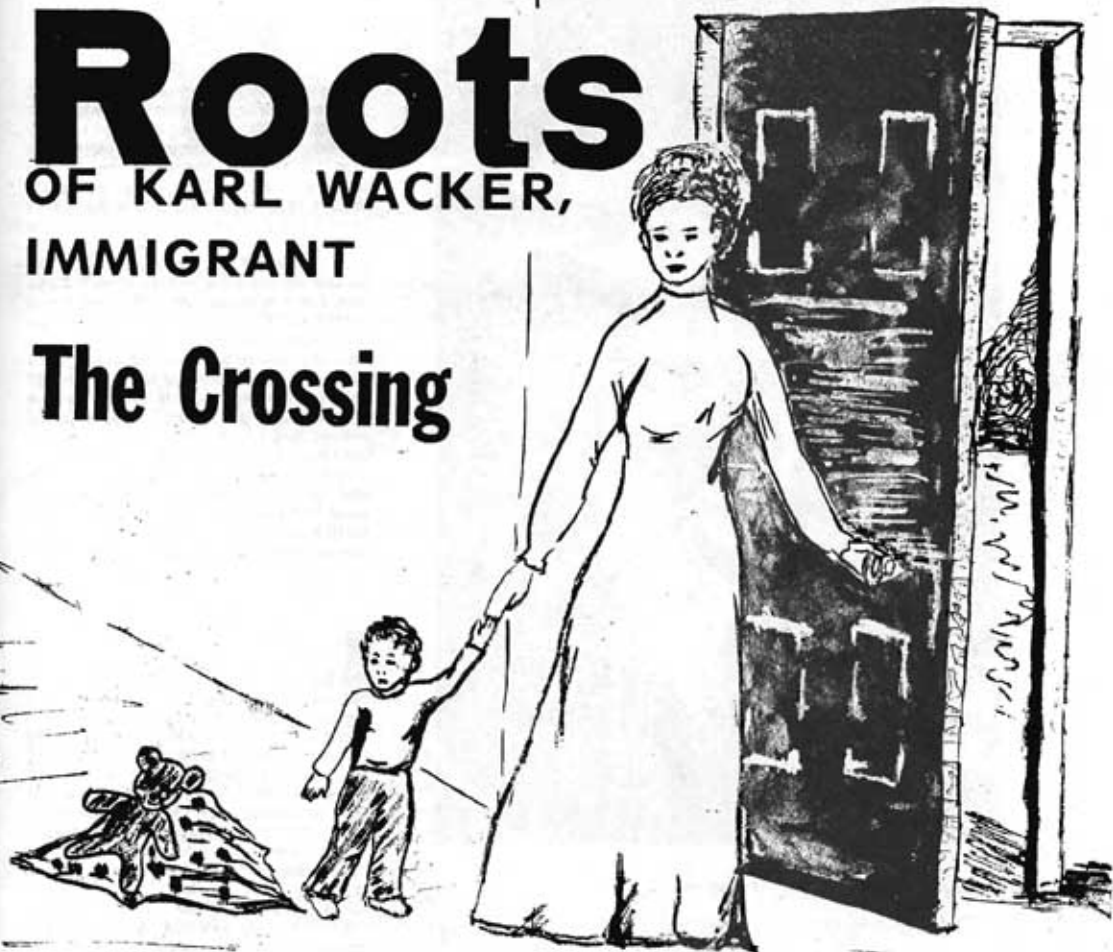
old. I remember that I loved to go to school and was quick at learning things too. Writing went slow and was poor at first. The teacher wanted me to write with a straight finger, but I could not do it. When I held my pencil tighter and had my finger bent, then I could write nicer. It was hard to write the other way, so I begged the teacher to let me write the way I wanted to but he would not hear of it. In all other things, he praised me and often he gave me candy or a penny to encourage me to write like he does, but all in vain. I wrote like I wanted to and could.

After this school I went to a bigger

Roots

OF KARL WACKER,
IMMIGRANT

The Crossing



granddaughter, Hilda Feickert Sperle, who resides in Leola, S.D., when she was only 15 years old. PRAIRIES Magazine is proud to present the following as the first in a series of five different articles.

school. My teacher's name was Karl Fischer. My name is Karl too. My writing was still poor. When the teacher saw this, he said, "You will have to write plainer or I will put you back to the little ones again." I begged him to let me write with a bent finger and he said I should write half my things with a straight finger and the other half with a bent finger, which I did. On examining the papers he found out that what I had written with a bent finger was better and allowed me to write the way I wanted to. I did this and soon learned to write real plain. Even the teacher was amazed at my progress. I

won his heart and he won mine and everything went smoothly. I still liked to go to school. When I came to the higher grades we had to take dictation, and remember all the capital letters and punctuation. The teachers would say a few words, then give us enough time to write them plainly. Then he'd go on with a few more words. My oldest brother sometimes came to help me but the teacher said, "Johan, you had better stay in your place and watch out that Karl doesn't catch up with you, or get ahead of you." That stopped him. He didn't come again to help me.



Photograph of Karl Wacker as 19 year old.

The study hours over and we had to sit in line according to the grades of our writing. I was third from the head and my brother, Johan, was eighth. Later, by the time the confirmation day came, I was the first or the highest. I hope you don't think I brag too much, it was just so! I loved to study and liked the teacher. He had come to our village when a young man and started to teach and taught till he was an old man and everybody liked him. I was fourteen years old when I was confirmed. The teacher wanted me to go to school but there was no money. By this time my mother had married again and I spent some of my time at home. He would have liked to send me to school but he was poor also and so I went into a shop and worked for a man who made wagons, learning the trade while I was working.

In three years I had learned the trade and could make almost anything out of wood. I did some carving. Then I went to Majak, a little town beside Onister River, and worked there for ten rubles a month.

A big saw-mill was built there. A great big affair, three stories high! There was lots of carving to do. Every step had to be fancy and all this work went to me. The proprietor put the patterns on stiff paper and ordered several more drexlers to come and carve for a trial. Mine won his admiration and so I was hired. I did lots of work like this and earned good money. Later, when I came to America, I found that wagons weren't made by hand anymore here. So there was one job I could not get anymore.

As some of you might have heard before, about two hundred years ago, my forefathers immigrated from Germany into Russia. The Kaiserin Katherine promised them that for 100 years they could come into the country and they would not take them for soldiers. The Russians had lots of land and very few people to live on it. They were glad to have somebody come and live on it. When a boy was over 21 years old he had to go to military training and be a soldier for a certain number of years. This kept the Germans back, so the Kaiserin Katherine promised them they could immigrate for 100 years and they would not be ordered for soldiers. But before the hundred years were over the Kaiser, sorry for the promise that Katherine had made, wanted some more soldiers so he said the Germans could have 10 more years of freedom, then they would have to go like any Russian. We could go to America or any place, but what was left of young men after those 10 years would have to go to military school. We young men talked it over and most of us decided to go to America. We went to the colony to get our



German colonies in the Odessa district

Map of South Russia



A strong wind rocked the ship back and forth, and we got sea-sick!

pass. I walked about 20 miles to town three times before I finally got the papers. The day before I left home, I spent from early morning till late at night going from house to house of my friends saying good-bye. It was evening before I came to the preacher who had confirmed me. He gave me a copy of my birth certificate and other precious papers. I took them to my teacher (Fischer). It was hard to say good-bye to every friend forever! Sometimes I thought I couldn't go, but then I thought of the cruel Kaiser's words and the promised land of America. I braced up and went on bravely. The next morning we started early, two of my brothers, two friends, and I. My stepfather said before we left, "Are you sure you want to go?" I said, "Yes, I feel if I go to America I go to life, but if I stayed and went to the army, I feel I would go to an early grave." "Of course I can't hold you," he said, "and if you feel it is right to go, then I want you to go."

Early in October of 1874 we were on our way, through Germany, out to the sea. There, in Bremen, we had to stay two days till the ship was ready to leave. While waiting thus we met a Slovak who was going our way so we went along together, prepared everything and then looked around until it was time to leave. Everything was new and interesting and at last we stepped on ship and set sail. We sailed to a sea port in France where we stopped two hours. Within 24 hours, we were past England and out on the high sea. The first two days went fine but the third day a wind came up and, as the ship rocked back and forth, we got sea sick. For 11 days we saw nothing but sky and water.

There were Dutch people on the ship

and every evening when the wind wasn't too strong they would dance and sing, wearing wooden shoes. They made a lot of noise but we enjoyed it.

Some of the Germans on board and other Easterners who were sick prayed, others cursed. But those who went to the deck and exercised during the day were the best off. Potatoes and black bread was what our food consisted of mostly, a little coffee sometimes.

Oh, what a relief it was when we sighted Newfoundland, and at last America, the promised land! The ship was kept off shore until everyone had been examined. Then we landed in New York, showed our passports and signed our names. That took a long time. It was evening before we came to a hotel. That was on Long Island. The next day we boarded a smaller ship and came upon the mainland, where we boarded a train headed for Chicago, Illinois. The Slovak, who I mentioned before, had been separated from us on Long Island, but before we boarded the train we met him again. Oh, he was glad to see us and continue the journey with us! He stepped off before we got to Chicago. He was a fine fellow and we hated to see the last of him. In Chicago we changed trains, in Missouri again, then again in Sioux City, and in Yankton, S.D. we stopped. That was as far as the railroad went in those days.

My teacher, Fischer, had given me a letter for Philip Jasman, one of his relatives, to take us in and see what he could do to help us. Philip Jasman and his brother George both happened to be in Yankton the day we came in so it was our luck. I went with George Jasman and my four pals went with Philip. These brothers were from Russia too. It was supper time

when we got to his home. After supper, I had to tell him about his old friend Karl Fischer. We talked far into the night.

The next morning I slept until it was late. The sun was high in the sky and shone through the window in my face. Hurridly I washed and dressed and went down the steps to the dining room. Everyone had eaten and was at work. I was ashamed of myself but they wouldn't hear of it. The said, "Never mind, come and have breakfast. We know that such a long journey makes a person tired and worn out." They had kept breakfast warm for me. There was lots of it and it tasted good! Food was so much better here than it had been in Russia. There were foods here that we had never heard of over there. It was lighter. I was a great eater. I could eat more the first year in America than I could ever before.

Breakfast over, I went out to see if I could help these good people. Mr. Jasman, his three sons and I went to splitting trees for fence posts. Every tree would have made at least four fence posts, if split right. But often they could get only one or two out of each, and how they scolded about the American trees! Said they just didn't split as they should. After watching them for a while, I said, "I think if you'd start your axe on the thin end and split downward then it would go better." The boys laughed but their father asked, "Why do you think it would go better that way?" "Because," I answered, "my grandfather always said if you'd split straight at the top, it would always split straight." He asked, "Was your grandfather a wood man?" "Yes, and a wagon maker too," I said. "And that's what I am too." Ah, that was a surprise! "Here," he said, "Take this axe and let me see what you can do. He may have been right!" So I took the axe and split the tree. Put the top end up and the axe directly in the middle of the heart of it and split it. It went straight and made two even pieces. I did the same with each half and got four posts out of a tree! Then the old man came up to me, and said, "Your grandfather was a smart man. Don't ever forget what he said, and we don't want to forget it either. You keep the axe in your hand and my boys should use the hammer and build a sheep barn. If split the way you do it, the wood will be enough for the barn and the fence we want to build." The boys too were amazed and pleased at what I had taught them. I was 19 years old then. I took off my coat and fell to work, and in two hours, dinner time, I had all the rest of the trees split. Mr. Jasman wanted to pay me for that, but I wouldn't take it. I worked for him till the next fall. He wanted to keep me longer but I found out that I could earn more if I did carpenter work and that was easier for me too.



Food was so much better in the Dakotas than it was in Russia!