In 2004, I traveled to Aberdeen, South Dakota to meet my grandmother’s cousin Fred Johnle. When he greeted me our conversation went something like this:

“Where you from?” Fred asked.

“California...” I responded.

“Where in California?”

“Modesto, that’s just south of Stockton, and about 70 miles east of San Francisco.”

“Oh... how close it that to West Dakota?”

“West Dakota?”

“Well you probably call it Lodi, but ask anyone around here and its West Dakota.”

Such was my introduction to the importance of the German-Russians to a small town where I have never lived, but to which I have always had a connection, as my German-Russian grandmother’s aunt lived there, and we would often visit when I was a child.

We are all familiar with the two earlier migrations of Germans, first to Russia at the behest of Catherine the Great, and later to the United States in order to escape the tyranny of Russia’s rulers. The Third Migration enabled those who settled in the Dakotas the opportunity to again find farmland suitable for their wants and needs in a more temperate climate. Thus we come to the story of Wilhelm Adam Hieb.

Wilhelm Adam Hieb was born on January 11, 1852, in Neudorf, Odessa, South Russia. He was the first of six children to be brought into this world by Margaretha Hofer, age 22 at Wilhelm’s birth, and her husband, Adam Hieb, who was 20.

Wilhelm grew up in Neudorf farming side-by-side with his father and other siblings.

While still in Neudorf, Wilhelm married Katharina Frey in 1873, both were 21 years old.

On May 13, 1874, Wilhelm and his very pregnant young wife, along with his parents and five brothers and sisters, arrived in Baltimore, MD on the S.S. Hermann after leaving through Bremen, Germany nearly three weeks before. From Baltimore, they made their way to Dakota Territory, and settled in Hutchinson County, near what is now Menno. Here their first daughter, Magdalena was born in August, only three months after their arrival in the United States.

Wilhelm established a small farm on his new land with his parents as his closest neighbors. Here his family grew. His first son, Jacob, born in 1878, was followed by son John in 1880, and daughter Katharina in 1882. Sadly, Katharina, his wife of 10 years, passed on March 6, 1883 at the age of 31. The children were 9, 5, 3 and barely 1.
Needing someone to care for his children, Wilhelm remarried on December 10, 1883, to Charlotta Wahl in Bon Homme County, South Dakota. Charlotta (or Charlotte as is sometimes recorded) added to the family with daughter Alida (Lydia) in 1885, daughter Albina in 1886, son William W. in 1888, and daughter Paulina in 1892.

After two decades on the prairie, Wilhelm missed the more temperate climate of South Russia, so he decided to find a place more comparable to where he grew up. In 1895, he was accompanied by his cousin, Gottlieb Hieb, and two friends, Ludwig Derheim and Jacob Mettler, as they headed for California and toured the state by train.

Wilhelm liked Los Angeles and its orange groves, but he wanted to grow grapes. So, they headed north. In Stockton they met Otto Grunsky, a real-estate agent who spoke German. Otto Grunsky took the three men a few miles north to what was determined to be the perfect place: Lodi. After a short tour of the area, I imagine that like any other good farmer, Wilhelm got off the buggy he was traveling in, bent over and scooped up a good handful of soil, feeling its texture as he rubbed his hands together, letting the soil return to the earth from which it came. This soil was the perfect blend of sand and loam, just right for growing grapes.

Wilhelm went back to South Dakota, sold his land, and became the first German Russian to move to Lodi. Wilhelm’s travelling companions came back to Lodi at a later date. Except for Ludwig Derheim, who died after returning to South Dakota, but his widow and children moved to Lodi the following year.

HISTORY OF THE LODI AREA

Agricultural methods and crops vary by location within the state. Some irreverent observer has remarked that after the Lord made the rest of the world He took the remnants that were left over and made California. This is true to the extent that there is no agricultural product in the world that can’t be profitably grown in this state.

Early explorers discovered a region teeming with wildlife and lush vegetation. The valley’s floor was covered with towering oaks, grasses, and wildflowers. The rivers were filled with salmon, the skies with migratory birds, and the lands rich with deer. Grizzly bears rumbled through the foothills, vast herds of antelope and elk roamed the valley floors, and Miwok Indians first inhabited the region, hunting and gathering along the rivers.

Grapes were always part of the local landscape, growing wild along the riverbanks. Early trappers called one stream “Wine Creek,” due to the bounty of wild vines. That river was later renamed the Calaveras River, and flows through the southern part of the Lodi region today.

It is important to understand a little about Lodi and its history before we go on with Wilhelm’s story. Lodi is located about 85 miles northeast of San Francisco and about 35 miles south of Sacramento. Lodi was founded in August of 1869 when the Central Pacific Railroad built a station along its new track. It was called Mokelumne, after the nearby river, but was officially named Lodi on March 21, 1874 by the California legislature at the behest of the U.S. Post Office Department. But aside from the obvious difficulty of pronouncing and spelling Mokelumne, locals understood another name needed to be chosen because the town was often confused with nearby communities with similar names – particularly Mokelumne Hill and Mokelumne City – which continuously hampered mail delivery and delayed shipments of goods and supplies. Mokelumne comes from the Plains Miwok (a local native tribe) and is
constructed from *moke*, meaning fishnet, and *-umne*, a suffix meaning "people of".

Several stories have been offered as to the origins of the town's new name. One refers to a locally stabled trotting horse that had set a four-mile (6 km) record, but as the horse reached the peak of its fame in 1869, it is unlikely that the notoriety would have still been evident in 1874. Alternatively, Lodi is a city in northern Italy where Napoleon defeated the Austrians in 1796 and won his first military victory. In Italian, Lodi means “beautiful.” More than likely, some of the earliest settler families were from Lodi, Illinois, and they chose to use the same name as their hometown.

Early on, Lodi’s agriculture centered around wheat and watermelons. By 1876 the Lodi Flour mill was producing a record 200 barrels of flour a day. When wheat and barley prices failed, local farmers turned to watermelons, and soon Lodi had a new title as the “watermelon capitol of the world.” In 1886 over 3000 railroad car loads of watermelons, grown without irrigation, were shipped out of Lodi. However, Wilhelm Hieb changed all that when he planted his first grapes.

**GERMAN-RUSSIANS ARRIVE IN LODI**

In 1897, Wilhelm and Charlotta, and their eight children arrived in their new town. Wilhelm bought 30 acres of sandy loam farm land a mile south of Lodi, on Kettleman Lane just west of the railroad, and planted some of it into Zinfandel and Mission grapes. The rest he put into pasture to raise cows to keep them afloat until the grapes were mature enough to produce.

After his grapes started producing, Wilhelm began turning them into wine, and became the first commercial winery in the Lodi Region. He shipped his wine in 50-gallon barrels to Hosmer, South Dakota, and soon other Dakota German-Russians took note of the quality and quantity of those shipments.

By 1899, Lodi was reported to have 2,346,061 grapevines. The projected wealth from this new crop beckoned relatives and acquaintances in the Dakotas, who hastened to this land of plenty. Quickly they realized the area was prime for growing the Flame Tokay grape. By 1905, Lodi was known worldwide as the “heartland of the delectable Flame Tokay grape,” and by 1907 Lodi was shipping out over $10 million (over $240 million by today's currency) in grapes for the table or for wine production.

Soon the Hieb’s were joined by other German-Russian families. In an article for the *Lodi News-Sentinel*, in 1975, youngest daughter Paulina (Polly) said “when other Dakotans began arriving, they’d always stay with us. The town did have a hotel and a restaurant, but this wasn’t for the thrifty Dakotans. People came and went from our house, and this went on for years. Sometimes families would stay with us for two or three weeks until they could find a place.”

It was about this time that Wilhelm became known as Columbus, as he enticed more and more of his former neighbors to migrate to Lodi. Soon his mail came addressed to Columbus Hieb, and the post office knew right where to deliver it. He would meet Dakotans at the train depot and drive the men around until they found what they needed. Land was inexpensive, about $25-35 an acre, and the sandy soil was ideal.

Some people farmed, others worked in wineries or canneries. Nearly everyone prospered, and the migration increased. Back in the Dakotas, it became sort of a joke among German-Russians that to ensure their children’s survival they taught them three words in English: Papa, Mama and Lodi.
Polly remembered a day in the early 1900s when an entire train car of Dakotans arrived. This time there were so many, their home wasn’t large enough to accommodate everybody. Her brother was sent on horseback to tell earlier migrants to come and get some of the new arrivals. Meanwhile, she helped her mother prepare food for everybody. “It didn’t matter how many came, we always had food. We learned how to manage on the spur of the moment.” Besides all of the cooking and making room for their guests, Polly remembered the boys sleeping in the barn on almond hulls.

Some of the other migrating families before 1905 were Handel, Preszler, Wiederrich, Niese, Bittner, Mayer, Frey, Schmiedt, Bechtold, Kirschenman, and Bender. By 1933 50% of Lodi’s population was of German-Russian extraction.

Wilhelm’s father, Adam, was widowed in 1880, so he also moved west in the path of his son, probably about 1900. Unfortunately, he passed away on March 31, 1907, in Lodi, at the age of 75.

DEVELOPMENT OF WINE

Just after the turn of the century, vineyard development thrived, shipping companies emerged, and wineries slowly began sprouting up in the Lodi area. The once struggling growers prospered, and in 1901 the local newspaper declared that wine production was “the coming industry for this part of the state.”

In order to better market their wines, the German-Russians formed co-operative wineries, where the growers actually owned the business and shared the profits. This was a first for California.

The enactment of Prohibition in 1919 posed a real threat to Wilhelm Hieb and the other Lodi winegrape growers. Although some wineries did close, and some growers prematurely tore out their vines, it turned out that Prohibition became a very prosperous time for Lodi growers. The difference: Business simply shifted from making wine to shipping fresh grapes. Since home winemaking was allowed under the Volstead Act, the demand for winegrapes actually increased during Prohibition. As a result, thousands of railcars left Lodi each harvest full of Zinfandel, Tokay, and Alicante winegrapes, among others.

The repeal of Prohibition in 1933 signaled the rebirth of the Lodi wine industry. Some new co-operatives were formed, many new wineries were built, and Lodi wines were once again finding their way across the country. Dessert-style wines like sherry, port, and sparkling wines were the preference of the general consumer at the time so a change in grapes and fermentation was made. Today there are more than 80 wineries in and around Lodi.

THE GRAPES

While Wilhelm originally planted Zinfandel and Mission grapes, it was the Tokay grape that really took off in popularity with the German-Russian vineyardists. While they made great wine, Zinfandel and Mission grapes were not suited well for transport and often rotted before reaching their destinations. Imported from the Carpathian Mountains of Eastern Hungary, a region that was often disputed territory between Russia and Hungary, these black skinned grapes typically produce a big, blustery, jammy style of robust red wine.
The Tokay, on the other hand, are hefty, plump berried, beautifully pinkish red grapes, and were originally cultivated as either ornamentals or for eating as table grapes, or “shipping grapes.” The Tokay was a delicious grape that held up well during the long railcar trip across the country to eastern markets. German-Russian winemakers developed it into a fine California wine grape, when they discovered it could not only be fermented into wine, but distilled into brandy, or fortified into port and sherry-styled wines as well.

Scientists of the vine are in agreement that the Tokay probably originated in Algeria. Once established in Northern San Joaquin Valley, it quickly became apparent that this Mediterranean variety is nearly perfectly suited to the combination of moderately warm summer days, cool summer nights, and rich, yet well drained, sandy loams of the region – particularly the area now officially recognized as Lodi’s Mokelumne River American Viticultural Area.

Plant Flame Tokay a little further north toward Galt or Sacramento, a little further east toward Amador County, or a little further south near Stockton or Modesto, and the skins of the grape simply do not ripen into its dazzling pink color, nor does its pulp retain its sweet, juicy, mouthwatering taste. Tokay, it almost seems, was destined to be grown closer to the banks of Lodi’s Mokelumne River, and in that part of the world only.

Subsequently, the grape evolved into Lodi’s most widely planted grape between the 1890s and 1980s – until the arrival of the hybridized Flame Seedless grape, which proved to be far more easily grown, for much lower cost, further south in warmer districts of California’s Central Valley. Soon after, Flame Tokay began to disappear in fresh markets; going the same way as old fashioned seeded watermelons.

Greg Burns of Jesse’s Grove’s Vineyards is a fifth generation wine grape grower in Lodi. He has preserved the ancient Tokay vines that his great-great grandfather Joseph Spenker planted. His passion is expressed in his own words on the Lodi Wine Commission website, “Tokay has a long, rich history in Lodi. There are so few of them left – the grape has pretty much fallen off the radar. But because Tokay is so perfectly balanced and well suited to the appellation, and because of the maturity of the vines, with their thick, complex trunks, we still get grapes of tremendous quality from these ancient vines. We keep them because you just can’t replant Tokay vines over 120 years old – once they’re gone, they’re gone forever.”

Zinfandel, on the other hand, did not wither and die. These grapes had an affinity for growing in the same region as the Tokay. In an interview for the Lodi Wine Commission, Jonathan Wetmore of Round Valley Ranches stated, “The interesting thing about Zinfandel and Tokay, which grew side by side in the old part of Lodi, … is that both grapes absolutely thrived in the region’s deep, rich, fine sandy loams (officially classified as Tokay Fine Sandy Loam). The old timers always knew that wherever you could get the Tokay to turn its bright pink color, you could also grow the highest quality Zinfandel. Lodi was the king of Tokay because you couldn’t grow it anywhere else in California. You needed the moderating, cooling breezes from off the Delta to grow good Tokay; and even then, not in every part.

“In a lot of ways, growing Tokay for the table market also taught us how to grow wine grapes like Zinfandel. We pulled leaves to knock out leaf hoppers and concentrate color and flavor’ and it made sense to take care of our Zinfandel the same way.”

In any case, demand for Lodi grown Tokay as a fresh market table grape vanished during the mid-1980s. Lodi’s thousands of acres
of Tokay were unceremoniously pulled out in favor of wine grapes such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Chardonnay, suddenly in great demand by the rapidly growing wine production industry. Today, precious few plantings of old fashioned, seeded Tokay plants exist; mostly as front-yard heirlooms or ornamentals, if not left to grow wild among patches of weeds.

Lodi’s thousands of acres of old vine, wild rooted, Zinfandel might have suffered the same fate by the end of the eighties if not for the sudden popularity of White Zinfandel. Tokay may now be a symbol of the past; but thanks to the wiles and resilience of growers like Mr. Wetmore, Lodi’s meticulously grown, quality driven red Zinfandels are now in rapidly growing demand not just in the U.S., but also in markets as far flung as China and Scandinavia.

**COMMENTARY**

Many places in California that were settled by German-Russians are no longer distinctly German-Russian, though one can find the names of many living there. In most of California, the German-Russian has been thoroughly assimilated into the American culture, although traces of them can be found in place names. Micke Grove, a popular park in Lodi, is named for a German-Russian couple who donated part of their farm land for a family gathering place. The town of Victor just east of Lodi, and the long closed Victor Fine Foods Company along Hwy 99, are also German-Russian in origin. Victor Fine Foods specialized in German sausages.

Lodi currently is comprised of 20 percent German-Russian descendants. However, German food is difficult to find in restaurants, though there are a few German bakeries around, but they are predominately German, not German-Russian.

**BACK TO WILHELM ‘COLUMBUS’**

In the early 1900’s there were at least ten German churches built in Lodi. In the early days, church services were held at the Hieb home. Once there were enough members to establish a full congregation, a building was erected at the corner of Lodi Avenue and Pleasant Street. The church is now Zion Reformed Church, established in 1943 when Salem Reformed merged with Hope Reformed. The current site is located on Ham Lane, considered “on the edge of town” when it was built in 1951, and services were held in German until well into the 1980’s.

In 1923, George Henry Tinkham, a well-known historian of the upper San Joaquin Valley, wrote about Wilhelm Hieb in his book, "History of San Joaquin County, California." He states that Wilhelm, “after living (on the farm) a number of years and bringing the place to a high state of development, disposed of it and now makes his home in Lodi, retired from active business. He was the founder of the Salem Reformed Church and has always been active in its affairs."

Wilhelm’s second wife, Charlotta, passed away on September 1, 1913, in Lodi, at the age of 65. They had been married 29 years.

Wilhelm Adam "Columbus" Hieb died on August 1, 1929, in Lodi, California, when he was 77 years old.

It was determination, fortitude, and a pioneering spirit that earned Wilhelm Adam Hieb the well-deserved nickname of Columbus. Those who followed in his path knew him only by that name. He went by the name of Columbus until he passed away in Lodi, a town that embodies the spirit of those who, like Columbus, came for a better life.

But he left a legacy that continues to this day, a legacy of adventure, determination and faith. His legacy of grapes and wine keeps this town alive and prosperous.
The Lodi Wine Grape Commission makes this statement: “In Lodi, wine comes first. And we wouldn’t have it any other way. Come meet the passionate people behind our handcrafted wines and gnarly old vines.”

Showing off their bountiful harvest. Wilhelm Hieb second from right, date unknown.
I would like to offer my thanks and gratitude to Richard Hieb for his assistance in procuring some of the information used in this presentation.

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Lodi Wine Commission

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