

# In Touch with Prairie Living

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By Michael M. Miller

Germans from Russia Heritage Collection  
North Dakota State University Libraries, Fargo



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“Wilhelm ‘Columbus’ Hieb and His Role in the Third Migration of German-Russians”, presented at the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia Heritage Fest in Lodi, CA, May 2018, by Pamela Atherstone, Modesto, CA, was kindly shared with me by the author. With Pam’s permission, I share this interesting story with you.

Pam writes, “In 2004, I traveled to Aberdeen, SD, 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 is that to West Dakota?”

“West Dakota?”

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

Wilhelm Adam Hieb was born on January 11, 1852, in Neudorf, Glückstal District, South Russia. Wilhelm grew up in Neudorf farming with his father and other siblings. While still in Neudorf, William married Katharina Frey in 1873; both were 21 years old. On May 13, 1874, William and his pregnant young wife, along with his parents and five sisters and brothers, arrived in Baltimore, MD, on the S.S. Hermann after leaving 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, SD. Katharina, his wife of 10 years, passed away in 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. Four additional children were born to Charlotte and Wilhelm.

William wanted to grow grapes. He

traveled to northern California in the Lodi area. Pam writes, “I imagine that like any other good farmer, Wilhelm got off the buggy, bent over and scooped up a good handful of soil, feeling the texture as he rubbed his hands together. 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. In 1897, Wilhelm and Charlotte, and their eight children arrived in their new town. Wilhelm bought 30 acres of sandy loam farmland a mile south of Lodi, and planted Zinfandel and Mission grapes. After his grapes started producing, William 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, SD.

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. By 1907, Lodi was shipping over \$10 million dollars in grapes for the table or for wine production.

Soon the Hieb’s were joined by other German-Russian families. In an article for Lodi-News Sentinel in 1975, youngest Hieb daughter, Paulina, 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.” Wilhelm 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.

Back in the Dakotas, it became sort a joke among German-Russians that to ensure their children’s survival they taught them three important words in English: Papa, Mama, and Lodi.

Some of the other migrating families coming from the Dakotas before 1905 were Handel, Preszler,

Widerrich, Niese, Bittner, Mayer, Frey, Schmiedt, Bechtold, Kirschenman and Bender. By 1933, 50% of Lodi’s population was of German-Russian heritage. In the early 1900s, there were at least ten German churches built in Lodi.

Wilhelm’s second wife, Charlotta, died in 1913 in Lodi at the age of 65. Wilhelm Adam “Columbus” Hieb died on 1929, in Lodi, when he was 77 years old. Pamela Atherstone shares, “It was determination, fortitude, and a pioneering spirit that earned Wilhelm the well-deserved nickname of “Columbus”. His legacy of grapes and wine keeps this town alive and prosperous.”

If you would like more information about the 24th Journey to the Homeland Tour to Germany and Ukraine (May 2022), or to donate a family history and photographs, contact Michael M. Miller, NDSU Libraries, Dept 2080, PO Box 6050, Fargo ND 58108-6050 (Tel: 701-231-8416); michael.miller@ndsu.edu, or go to [www.ndsu.edu/grhc](http://www.ndsu.edu/grhc).

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