



The North Bottoms

Submitted by John Stuertz

The North Bottoms neighborhood was settled by Germans from Russia beginning in the 1870s. These immigrants were descendants of German settlers attracted to Russia by Czarina Catherine the Great and her successors, who beginning in 1763 offered free land, exemption from military service, and local autonomy to anyone who would settle the sparsely populated steppes region. Many German farmers accepted the offer and formed villages along the Volga River and around the Black Sea.

These villages remained strongly German in language, religion, and culture well into the 1800s. Then in 1871 Czar Alexander II revoked the settlers' special status, removing their local autonomy and exposing them to military conscription. Germans from Russia soon began emigrating to Canada, South America, and the United States.

Most of these immigrants were farmers and they were drawn to the Midwest by the availability of cheap or even free land for homesteading. Establishing farms nevertheless required money, and many of the Germans from Russia were drawn to the jobs available in cities. Lincoln became a major settlement point, especially because of the large yards and shops of the Burlington and Missouri River Railroad, which actively recruited immigrants as passengers, as purchasers for its extensive lands, and as workers.

Within Lincoln, most of the Germans from Russia took up residence in the "bottom" lands along Salt Creek, both north and south of O Street, west of the downtown area. Although plagued by frequent flooding, the land was inexpensive

(or even neglected and available for squatting) and close to the rail yards and other employers of unskilled laborers. The North and South Bottoms were separated by the growing industrial and warehouse area (Haymarket Landmark District and its surroundings), and by the tendency of settlers to cluster according to their villages of origin. North or "Norcken" Bottoms was occupied primarily by immigrants from the Volga villages of Norka, Kukkus, and Huck, while settlers from Frank, Balzer, and Beideck clustered in South or "Franker" Bottoms. There were nearly 6,000 Germans from Russia in the two Bottoms settlements by 1914, when Hattie Plum Williams, a pioneering sociologist from the University of Nebraska, studied the neighborhoods.

Both areas developed into strong ethnic enclaves, with their own businesses, social organizations, churches, and schools. Small houses were built on long, narrow lots, and either imitated Old World models, or adapted American styles to fit familiar patterns. In the back yards, chicken coops, tiny barns, and summer kitchens recalled the agricultural outbuildings to which the settlers were accustomed.

Three separate German-language churches flourished in North Bottoms, while Hayward School provided public education. That former school building still stands on Ninth Street between Charleston and New Hampshire Streets. Built in three stages (1904, 1913, and 1925) as the population of the neighborhood grew, Hayward School is listed on the National Register of Historic Places for its special role in educating the Volga German "beet-

field children." The sugar beet industry of central and western Nebraska depended upon Germans from Russia as a major source of seasonal labor from the 1880s until well into the twentieth century. Burlington Railroad would run "Beet Field Specials" from Lincoln to the growing areas, transporting whole families to perform the various tasks of planting, thinning, transplanting, weeding, and harvesting. The "beet-field children" typically missed more than a month of school at both the beginning and end of the regular school year, so Lincoln Public Schools devoted special classrooms and teachers at Hayward to these children, condensing the year's work into the available time. Truancy laws ended the practice in the 1920s.

Although the descendants of the original immigrants from Russia have largely dispersed through the the community and the nation, the North and South Bottoms neighborhood recall the "urban villages" those people built to preserve their culture and to make homes in a new land. Today, both neighborhoods represent valuable resources of smaller houses, close to downtown, for homeowners and tenants. Some of these residents are also immigrants, continuing the neighborhood's historic function. ■

More on the North Bottoms in your next issue of the newsletter.

It just wouldn't seem like Christmas . . .

without joining friends to sing
carols. This year,
Sunday, December 14,
2:00 p.m., our Chapter will be
joining the congregation of
Friedens Lutheran Church,
6th and D Streets, Lincoln.
See you there.

Refreshments will be served.

Important!!

Circle these dates on your
calendar

Sunday, January 11, 1998
Lincoln Chapter AHSGR Meeting
★ Election of Officers ★
Please bring a favorite dish to share.
St. John's, 26th and D

Tuesday, January 13, 1998
LLCGS (Lincoln Lancaster County
Genealogical Society)
7:00 p.m.

Saturday, January 17, 1998
PAF-LUG (Personal Ancestral File—
Lincoln User's Group)
7:00 p.m.

Monday, January 19, 1998
Board Meeting with old and new
Board Members
6:30 p.m.; 631 D Street

Lincoln Chapter, American Historical Society of Germans from Russia

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**Lincoln Chapter
American Historical Society
of Germans from Russia
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