

Museum Preserves Germans from Russia Cultural Heritage

In the heart of the South Salt Creek neighborhood across from Cooper Park sits the Germans from Russia Museum. The somewhat-overlooked Lincoln landmark hosts the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, an international organization dedicated to the discovery, collection, preservation and dissemination of information related to the history, cultural heritage and genealogy of Germanic settlers in the Russian Empire and their descendants.

About 2,000 people visit the museum each year to discover their family's heritage or to gain a new understanding of a culture with deep roots in Lincoln's development.

History of Germans from Russia

German peasants began immigrating to Russia after Catherine the Great, the German princess who married Tzar Peter III of Russia, issued two manifestos in 1763. She promised them paradise: free land and transportation, permission to speak their language and run their schools, freedom of religion, and an exemption from Russian military service.

Establishing dozens of colonies along the banks of Volga River and Black Sea, the Germans thrived in Russia for nearly 100 years. In 1871, however, Catherine's great-grandson Alexander II rescinded the manifestos. Forced to pay taxes, speak a foreign language, alter their schools to Russian protocol and serve in the military, many Germans relocated. Some settled in Canada, Argentina and Paraguay; others saw the promising opportunities in America and chose to relocate there.

Of those who moved to the United States, the majority planted roots in



Bob Wagner, AHSGR president, stands next to the museum's iconic statue of a German Russian immigrant family.

Kansas, Nebraska and the Dakotas because of the booming railroad industry, according to Bob Wagner, president of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia.

"They chose to move overseas instead of returning to Germany because in Germany they wouldn't have access to free land like they would here," he said.

By 1920, nearly 22,000 of these immigrants called Lincoln home. Most established communities in the South Bottoms, west of Ninth Street, and the North Bottoms, north of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

Preserving Their Legacy

As the original Germans-from-Russia immigrants died, the baby boomer generation became hungry to learn their heritage, so they formed the historical society to help one another find family records. The house on the corner of 6th and D streets became the society's headquarters and acted as a research center for members investigating their genealogy.

As membership grew and many offered to donate family artifacts to the

society, members decided to create a Germans from Russia museum next door. Its construction began in 1981 and concluded in 1984.

The museum's main building hosts most of the donated artifacts, which include furniture, books, toys, clothes, musical instruments and kitchenware. Other artifacts are displayed in the museum's summer kitchen, chapel, blacksmith shop, general store and barn. One of the most unique artifacts the museum boasts is an original copy of Catherine the Great's manifesto.

The museum continues to add artifacts, making it the largest collection of material on the former German colonies in Russia in the United States, Wagner said.

To continue its genealogical research efforts, the historical society created a research library in the basement of the main building that is open to society members and the general public. The library has helped connect many Germans from Russia with their family roots.



In the museum's basement, AHSGR Lincoln Quilters members work tirelessly on a quilt. This is one of the oldest volunteer groups that work for the benefit of AHSGR.

Come Learn More

The museum is open Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. Tours are available at 2 p.m. April 1 through Oct. 31. Admission is free.

Wagner encourages local older adults to visit the museum whether they have an ancestral connection to Germans from Russia or not.

"People who have a background in Germans from Russia will be amazed at the amount of information we have,"

Wagner said. "People who don't know much about Germans from Russia come here and are equally as amazed. Most visitors I've seen are shocked to learn what a big part they played in the Lincoln community."

American Historical Society of Germans from Russia membership is open to anyone interested in joining. Options include a basic membership for \$35 or a standard membership for \$50, which includes a quarterly journal



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and newsletter. Research library fees are waived for society members.

For more information on the museum or the historical society, call 402-474-3363.

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