



Sunday morning services at the north Bottom's Immanuel church: Ushers with collection plates walk around Anna Giebelhaus, 99, and her wheelchair.

Lincoln's German-Russians

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What Russia offered was sweet. Religious freedom. No taxation for 30 years. Self government. And all of this was along an area of incredible natural resources, the fertile Volga River valley.

Thousands of Germans settled in self-sufficient colonies like Beideck, Doenhof and Norka. The settlers kept to themselves, rarely associating with the Russian natives.

Towards the end of the 1800s, however, things began to change for the worse. Russia instituted compulsory military duties for all males over age 21.

Once again the Germans moved, this time crossing an ocean. Stirred by thoughts of America's freedom and prosperity, they worked their way out of Russia to find a new life.

Jacob Giesick, 93, is one of those who found a new beginning. In 1912, he left Russia to escape the compulsory draft.

They found the American Dream

"Good people came over here and they prospered, and prospered fast," Giesick said. "And now I'm the luckiest man. I've got prosperity all my life. I was in want for nothing."

It was true that he and many other German-Russian people prospered — but for this they paid a high price. They were strangers here at first, working for less than average wages, facing an unfamiliar language and culture. They settled where land was affordable, in part of the Salt Creek valley known as the "Russian Bottoms."

"It was a damn unhealthy place to live," said Jack Lofink, 87, a 55-year resident of the area. "During the winter you saw numerous quarantine signs up and down the streets for diphtheria, smallpox... In the spring we had many floods down there, and raw sewage was dumped into Salt Creek back then."

It wasn't too long, however, before there were more good times than bad for many of these people.

"I liked everything about this country," said 90-year-old Jacob Walters. "Sure we had some bad times, but we had a lot of good times, too."

By working together, the German-Russians overcame their difficulties and built churches and porched-in homes.

"They weren't afraid to work and they took great pride in their own home, however modest it might be," said Ruth Amen, the daughter of immigrants who settled here in the late 1800s. Miss Amen is now the director of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, an organization built by and for these people to preserve their heritage. She remembered her parents.

"They wanted for their kids what

they couldn't have themselves," Miss Amen said. "They were a very saving people, maybe too saving at times."

Over the years, the German-Russians became known for two things: a strong work ethic and extreme pride in property ownership. Values like these made weekly porch and sidewalk scrubbing mandatory for 30 years. The same values drive many 80 and 90-year-olds today as they insist on having their homes in immaculate condition at all times.

"I try to get him to take it easy," said Alex Walters, Jacob's 67-year-old son. "I told him, 'You don't have to clean the house every week.' He said OK, he'll wait till next week. He has to do it."

"They know the pain," said Bharat Surender, a minister in the Bottoms

area. "Every immigrant has to start from scratch. They have to learn to do things the American way. But they are very proud of freedom. They are very proud of this land, and the personal input they've had in this nation."

They worked hard, kept their homes, families and lives in order. And in their own way, have found what they were looking for: the American Dream of freedom and prosperity.

Still, Pauline Strauch is waiting for the Lord to take her home. She smiles when she says it though, for she knows it will have to wait awhile. After all, it's almost time for the family Christmas dinner, and she has to make sure her cleaning lady does a good job this time.

"These young people, you can't get them to work anymore. Not like we did anyway," she said.

Story and Photos
by Joel Sartore