

Chronicle Unserer Leute

Oregon Chapter of the American Historical
Society of Germans from Russia

**Volume 43, Issue 1
January-March 2019**



Catherine II, the Great

Empress of Russia

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From the Editor

Welcome to this edition of *Chronicle Unserer Leute*.

This is the first edition of 2019 and the first without a regular newsletter editor. Special thanks to member Michael Amen who provided the featured article for this edition.

If you'd like to help the Oregon Chapter AHSGR resume providing a more thorough and expansive newsletter as we have in the past, we'd love to bring you on board. Just send us an email at oregonahsgr@gmail.com.



Documenting the History of the Volga Germans in Oregon and SW Washington

When I began my family research in the late 1990's I first visited the Oregon Historical Society and the Multnomah County Library to learn about the Volga Germans. To my dismay, there was almost no information about this ethnic group which began settling in Portland and nearby communities in 1881.

I decided it was important to document and share our history. It seemed that the best way to accomplish this was to create a website which makes the information and images accessible to nearly everyone. As a result, the Volga Germans in Portland website was launched.

Oregon Chapter members Marie Krieger and Bill Burbach were very helpful in sharing their personal collection of stories and photos with me. Joanne Krieger's work to document the history of the local churches has been invaluable. Many individuals contributed their family stories, histories and photos. Over the past 20 years, the site has expanded from a handful of pages to 537 pages containing over 1,800 images. We've come a long way, but our work is not finished.

I hope that you've all explored the website. If not, take some time to browse through the page here:

www.volgagermansportland.info

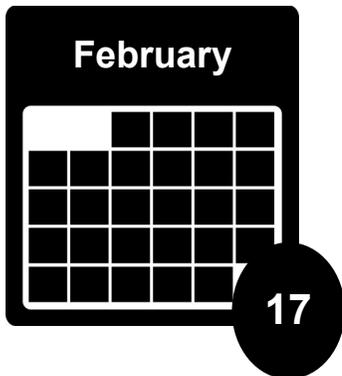
Please consider sharing your family stories and photos. You don't need to be a professional writer, simply jot down what you know or remember.

I'm very interested in photos from the early days in Portland (1880's to 1910), church confirmation photos, photos of Volga German owned businesses, scenes from the neighborhood, and images of people at work. If needed, I will help scan your photos.

The opportunity to collect and organize these materials is now. With each passing generation, more of our history will be lost. Who else will do this work if we don't?

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Upcoming Events

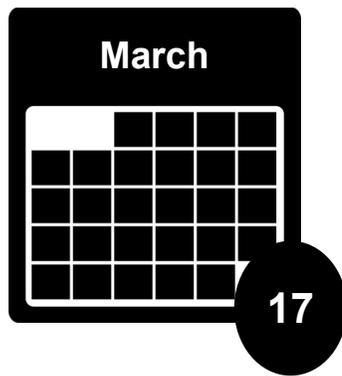


Steve Amen: 40 Years Behind the Scenes of “Real” News

Sunday, February 17th, 2019, 2 pm to 4 pm

Concordia University Library, Room 301 — 2800 NE Liberty St, Portland

For 25 years Steve was the host of Oregon Field Guide, the very popular local television show on OPB. Steve will share stories, both funny and terrifying, of his many years covering the news and working on Oregon Field Guide. Steve traces his roots to the villages of Frank and Norka.

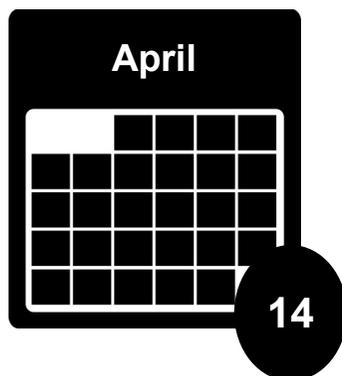


Lela Miller: How to Write Your Obituary

Sunday, March 17th, 2019, 2 pm to 4 pm

Concordia University Library, Room 301 — 2800 NE Liberty St, Portland

This class by our very own Lela Miller will assist you in writing your own obituary. Why do you need to write it, plus write it now? It needs to be accurate! You may be the only one who knows the true spelling of your name and/or family names. Let's do it now! Lela has a great outline to help you write it correctly. Your family will thank you!



Yulia Tsybmal: AHSGR Translation Projects

Sunday, April 14th, 2019, 2 pm to 4 pm

Concordia University Library, Room 301 — 2800 NE Liberty St, Portland

Yulia is the former Archive Research Coordinator for AHSGR International. She last visited our chapter 5 years ago in April, 2014 to discuss the latest records from Russia being received and translated by AHSGR. She'll fill us in on the latest translation projects going on at AHSGR in Lincoln.

Missing Links

by Michael Amen

I am a latecomer to Volga German knowledge. I was completely unaware of my V.G. roots until I slowed down enough to listen to my uncle who keeps the ancestral flame alive to all who will listen. There was no discussion of ancestral history or accomplishments in my immediate family. The sole cultural link over the decades was a family meal called *Kraut Bierock*, a term garbled or gobbled to death by me and my family. Nobody at the table told the origins, acted or spoke German.

My uncle introduced me to one of the Bibles of the Volga German history: *Wir Wollen Deutsche Bleiben*. The book, despite its dry as bleached desert bones prose, told a story that seemed too bad to be true, but inspired me to research and learn more about my roots.

There is an abundance of public information available; simply type “Volga Germans” on Google; but there remains a shortage of public awareness. This apathy has not been helped by recent efforts to vilify the terms ‘immigrants’ and ‘caravans’.

My ancestors [Ament] who left Germany for Russia in 1763, at the invitation of Catherine the Great, were fleeing a caste system that judged people by their religion or professions. Catherine promised incentives that made it impossible to resist. The Ament(s), made the journey and settled in the villages of Frank and Walter.

The tales of their colonization are devoid of

written narratives, or ‘selfies’; but enough stories have been collected post facto to provide a glimpse. We know they faced monumental hardships from the day of their arrival. Many of the promises never materialized; but the important ones did. These incentives gave them an economic edge over their Russian neighbors but didn’t make things easy. The fact they persevered, built profitable industries, farmed under the most extreme conditions and held their family values and Lutheran religions central is admirable to this day.

Conditions changed drastically in 1871 when the third Czar, Alexander II, revoked the rights and privileges given by Catherine II and Alexander I. Their status changed from privileged colonists to peasants.

By the 1941 exodus, they were kicked out of their homes, subjected to death marches, and exiled to Siberia where they faced extreme living conditions. I was confused and angry! Why was a story similar to the Armenians and our own Native Americans unfamiliar to the general public, including anthropologists who pride themselves on studies of varied and obscure cultures?

The written stories divided our ancestors into two groups. [1] The Volga Germans who fled to other countries including the United States, *prior* to 1941 and [2] the Volga Germans who remained, trapped and poor with no place to go, eventually deported in 1941.

Missing Links, continued

We know a great deal about the plight of the Volga Germans deported in 1941, but we don't know much about the groups who fled to the United States and other countries during the period of 1872-1890.

One of the first missing links is associated with my family and the others that came to the United States in the 1870's. The stories lump the United States bound immigrants into one group filled with hope upon seeing the beckoning message on the Statue of Liberty and processing through Ellis Island, a chronological and physical impossibility.

Despite the stories and notes of daily life in the Volga villages, there is an absence of written stories from the fleeing villagers. They were fleeing: cholera, famines, raids and a knowledge that conditions were going to get worse under the Tsars. They left everything except what they could carry. The area between the Volga villages and the closest rail line at Saratov was remote and vulnerable to dangers.

My Amen(t) family left their Volga Russian villages [and the 't' in their last name], in late 1877 / early 1878, walking to the nearest rail line, in Saratov where they travelled by train across Germany to the port town of Hamburg, joining thousands of Europeans fleeing to the United States.

I assume the fleeing villagers would combine families and travel in 'caravans' for protection and support. These were hardworking people

who had a legitimate fear for their children's safety. They weren't seeking asylum; they wanted nothing more than an opportunity to start over and raise their families in a land of opportunity.

The documentation trail for my ancestors starts in Hamburg. They filled out ship manifests and booked steerage on the German vessel Wieland. They sailed 'steerage' (Zwischendeck). There were 14 Amens (3 generations) in that group including children ranging from 9 years to a one-month old baby.

The Amen family names and ages are on the hand-written ship boarding manifest from Hamburg, the hand-written arrival document from New York and on the digitized arrival data from the immigrant processing station in New York.

My family and others left Hamburg in late May and arrived in New York, June 5th, 1878 after a two week crossing. They were processed through Castle Garden Station Battery Park Manhattan. Castle Garden was basic by Ellis Island standards; but it did maintain arrival dates which are available in digitized form from the Immigration Processing Station, New York.

The Statue of Liberty was not built until 1886 and Ellis Island was not built and opened for business until 1892 [two years after the United States formally took control of immigration]. Prior to 1890, the states controlled all immigration on their boundaries.

Missing Links, continued

Contrary to the romanticized images of the German immigrants staring in wonder at the welcoming arms of the statue of liberty and swept into organized lines at Ellis Island, the original or 'early' Volga German [1871-1892] colonists never saw nor were greeted or welcomed by The Statue. If they escaped the swarming pickpockets and opportunists on the New York docks, they were directed to Castle Gardens and hopefully an interpreter.

I don't have a list of famous names descended from the Volga villagers that processed through Castle Garden; but they did rub shoulders with the famous and infamous including: Houdini, Typhoid Mary, and the first Trumps. Castle Gardens closed in 1890. All that remains is a plaque in the area now called Battery Park.

Information provided by Carole Hayden [Oregon Chapter AHSGR board member] told by her family, who arrived in this era: "there was a German-speaking man waiting on the docks for the immigrants to come off the ship. He had sandwiches for them and helped them get through processing and the train station".

We have no written notes about what conditions my ancestors encountered in New York; but we know Burlington Railroad was actively recruiting newly arrived immigrants, who, spoke no English, had a reputation as hard workers and were willing to go anywhere that promised a job. Later generations of the Volga Germans had more deluxe accommodations, but my family and many others were herded into Burlington boxcars, and transported like cattle

to eastern Nebraska.

The Amen family initially disembarked at the end of the Burlington line in Sutton, Nebraska where they were housed in temporary shelters. They would eventually settle in the adjacent town of Hastings, Nebraska.

My grandfather, Walter, born in Hastings, handwrote his memories of stories told to him by his father, Peter [first American born] about early life in Hastings. Six hundred handwritten words through a young boy's eyes seem compressed; but they told a story of a dad and mom who never stopped working or started complaining.

Through my grandfather's notes, we know the original Volga German settlers did not boast about their ethnic pride. Initially they were called 'dirty ruskies' and later drew suspicion because of Germany's role in the war. They held onto their old habits of isolationism, kept to themselves, worked hard, and started from scratch.

I am humbled when I think what it took to build a successful economy through blood, sweat, and tears, lose it all and start over in a new country with a caste system of its own.

That first generation of Nebraska Amens spoke only 'Volga German' and they wanted to ensure their children spoke German. Their children attended German schools in Hastings; but found it confusing because "the Volga German spoken at home was not like the Berlin Deutsch taught in school". They soon adopted the

Missing Links, continued

English language and American customs.

Another 'missing link' in the ancestor chain became obvious in 2016 when Brent Mai sponsored two separate tours to the former Russian village areas in August 2016: Tour 1 (August 8-20) went to the Bergseite Villages, and Tour 2 (August 20-30) the Wiensenseite villages. After they returned from the tour, I attended a slideshow presentation and spoke with some of the visitors. Very little remains of the original 300 mother and 2700 daughter colonies, [a total of 3,000 ethnic settlements] in Russia.

What was once a profitable self-sustaining area dotted with factories and bountiful farms, international trade, and ethnic pride, with family and religion central, no longer exists. The years and the new occupants have erased most traces of our ancestors. Finding and identifying the old sites requires knowledgeable local guides [fluent in Russian and English] and durable vehicles. Visitors going on their own would have incredible difficulty getting to and finding sites of previous villages or recognizing what they were seeing. The highway from Saratov has no exit signs to 'former Volga German villages'. The village sites are accessed by narrow, overgrown, poorly maintained, rutted dirt roads. The roads provide basic access but are not useful for large delivery trucks. Many of the village sites were completely hidden from the roads by tall grass. There is no rail line. Existing villages had some cars but no evidence of alternative transportation like horses, wagons, etc. Despite

the availability of rivers, they were not used as transportation and none of the villages had wharves or were serviced by barges.

It is estimated the old villages are 10% occupied. The original settlement areas are dotted with homes but devoid of memorials. There was no evidence of where current occupants worked in the village areas. Local guides said many jobs disappeared during the Gorbachev era and the men live and work in large cities and send money home to wife and children. Some original German houses remain and were easy to spot by general design and colors, with high roof lines, storage space and basements. The Russian homes are spartan with low roofs and no basements, heated with propane through above ground lines; electric power, satellite dishes and [unheated] outdoor toilets. The tour groups saw few people wandering around outside; they apparently stay inside watching satellite television.

Major cities, motels, restaurants, and stores were few and far between. There was no effort on the part of Russia to memorialize or vilify the Volga Germans. Tour attendees said Russian people they talked to were polite and helpful with no evidence of bad [or good] feelings about Volga Germans. There were no remaining German cemeteries; they were all destroyed. In some cases, coffins or bones extended from river banks uncovered by previous floods. Life continued as if our ancestors were never there. *Ghost towns with no ghosts.*

I made a visit to Hastings in August, 2016 with

Missing Links, continued

my uncle. We looked at the old family houses, previous public German market areas, wandered through the cemetery, and visited the Volga German museum. It was a visit devoid of any tangible memories. When I left Hastings, heading to Scottsbluff, I stopped in the last remnant of our social history, the Runza drive-thru. It was enjoyable but when I tried to reminisce with the waitress about the origins of this dish, she said: 'huh, whatever'.

There has been a lack of informative TV shows about our ancestor's journeys or qualities; but I recently stumbled onto an old television program being rebroadcast, titled 'Postcards From Nebraska', on the RFD channel. The show, produced in 2006 for CBS Sunday Morning, highlighted author/humorist Roger Welsch waxing poetic about daily life in his adopted town of Dannebrog, Nebraska. This seems to be a town inhabited primarily of descendants of Volga Germans. It showcases what Mr. Welsch describes as the 'get it done' work ethic. Ironically, I watched it during its initial run [2006-2008] a date which coincided with my ignorance of Volga Germans. When I watched the reruns last month, it was an epiphany moment hearing Mr. Welsch's reference to his Russian ancestors and this town. Dannebrog is newly added to my bucket list.

Summary

It was and is a story of determination. The Volga Germans who settled in the United States were understandably proud of their ability to persevere but reluctant to draw

attention to themselves.

The Volga German people were known as industrious and hard workers. Children were not allowed to be idle. That gene or work ethic was never written down but was drilled into countless generations' heads.

A wonderful summary from John Hoelzer, "The Earliest Volga Germans in Sutton Nebraska and Portion of their History", Work Paper #16 of The American Historical Society of Germans from Russia (December 1974) captures these qualities. Note: ignore the patriarchal references: these qualities describe men, women and children:

"So we find the Volga Germans involved everywhere and associated with anything of worth. He is an honest, dependable and industrious worker who is noted everywhere for his outstanding accomplishments. Early, he established a home and is devoted and loving to his family. As a rule, he is known as someone who willingly pays his debts. He is also devoted to the Christian religion, which he received from his fathers and he attends church and participates in the mission effort. He is also a law-abiding person who gladly adheres to the state's precepts. The Volga German belongs to a healthy, strong, honorable, and God-loving people of whom we need never be ashamed. Instead, we have every reason to be justly proud."

The first Amens [and many other VGs] who arrived in the United States started over with

Missing Links, continued

nothing. It would take them decades to obtain a quality of life we consider substandard. During those decades, their children moved out and up.

My concern, as the title implies, is the tragedy of the missing links, the loss of all traces of family history. Within two generations of their arrival, our Amen history and ancestral pride evaporated. Some of us naively assumed our individual can-do attitudes were self-generated. The Volga German villages are gone, and all that remains of Castle Garden is a plaque. My Nebraska ancestors didn't build factories, pyramids or towering skyscrapers. They brought manufacture and laying skills with them and after a large fire swept through the wooden homes in Hastings, bricklaying was in high demand. Virtually everything they built is still standing. The real story is the undeniable fact they passed along something stronger than bricks: a work ethic that remains today.

I started my research looking for the origin of what I dubbed '*March of The Penguin*' DNA [resolve to forge through the strongest challenges] and reasons for the lack of historical knowledge. I found the answer to the first question but am disheartened by the second.

My concern is not for my past but for the future of all immigrants. I don't embrace open borders; but I embrace the reality the United States is still the land of opportunity.

I feel our Volga German ancestors provide

lessons we can use today:

1. University Doctorate Programs can use the Volga German story as a model for the benefits and challenges of immigration.
2. Sociologists can analyse the mistakes made by Catherine the Great: insulting the host Russians and praising the talents of German guests, resulting in divisive communities.
3. Economists can study the potential benefits of applying Catherine's economic incentives to all qualified classes of documented citizens: "could Russian history have been altered if Russians were given the same incentives as the Germans?"
4. Revisit the qualities described by John Hoelzer and remind the public this nation was built by immigrants who gave more than they got.
5. Never forget, we are their memorials.

November Program: Book Review

NOVEMBER BOOK REVIEWS

Our November Chapter meeting, led by board member Carole Hayden, was a series of reviews of books concerning our German from Russia history, heritage, and culture.

There are many books written about our people. Here is a list of the titles we discussed:

- *Children of the Volga* by George Bruntz
- *Thunder on the Steppe* by Timothy and Rosalinda Kloberdanz
- *Wir Wollen Deutsche Bleiben* by George J. Walters
- *Hardship to Homeland: Pacific Northwest Volga Germans* by Richard D. Scheuerman & Clifford E. Trafzer
- *From Privileged to Dispossessed* by James W. Long
- *The Czar's Germans* by Hattie Plum Williams
- *In the Track of the Russian Famine* by E. A. Brayley Hodgetts
- *The Worst Hard Time* by Timothy Egan
- *Miracles of Grace and Judgment* by Gerhard Schroeder



Christmas Potluck

The Christmas potluck was a lot of fun. Norm and Mary Metzler kindly provided entertainment with Norm on the accordion and Mary providing color commentary. They led us in several rounds of singing Christmas carols - both in English and German. We had a great time meeting with our friends and cousins and enjoying the delicious food and desserts that everyone brought.

Special thanks to board member Carole Hayden for taking the lead in organizing the program. **These events don't happen on their own** - it takes the active work of our board members. We have a few slots open on the board and would love to have additional people help us keep the chapter going.



50th International Convention
of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia

Our Golden Jubilee



An Enduring Legacy

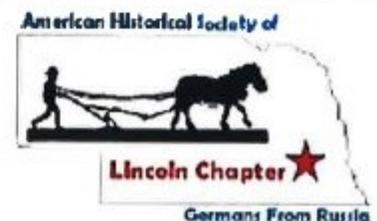
*Come join us as we celebrate the 50th annual convention
of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia*

July 22-27, 2019

Embassy Suites Hotel
Lincoln, Nebraska



**American Historical Society
of Germans from Russia**



AHSGR Oregon Chapter Membership Renewal Form

Membership fees are for a calendar year that renews each January 1st. Annual dues for the AHSGR Oregon Chapter membership are \$25.

Membership Year 20____

Name(s) _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip Code _____

Telephone _____ E-mail _____

I want my Oregon Chapter newsletter delivered electronically. Yes _____ No _____

I want to receive my Oregon Chapter newsletter in the mail (paper copy). Yes _____ No _____

In order for us to serve our membership more effectively, please list all of your German-Russian family surnames and all of the villages that you believe your ancestors are from:

Villages

Surnames

Annual Dues:	\$25.00
Annual Donation:	\$
Total Enclosed:	\$

Please make all checks payable to **AHSGR OREGON CHAPTER** and send your membership dues and form to:

AHSGR OREGON CHAPTER

P.O. Box 55218

Portland, Oregon 97238-5218

You can also send dues and donations electronically via PayPal to our chapter email address:

oregonahsgr@gmail.com

The Oregon Chapter of AHSGR is a tax-exempt non-profit organization organized under the Internal Revenue Code 501 (c)(3). As such, your dues are tax deductible to the extent allowed by law. (Federal Tax ID # 93-1313164)

PLEASE NOTE: Additional dues are required for membership in the AHSGR International Organization. (See www.ahsgr.org for current International membership levels and dues.) Please remit International dues directly to AHSGR Headquarters.

AHSGR OREGON CHAPTER

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The American Historical Society of Germans from Russia is an international organization dedicated to the discovery, collection, preservation, and the dissemination of information related to the history, cultural heritage and genealogy of Germanic settlers in the Russian Empire and their descendants.

The Chronicle Unserer Leute (Chronicle of Our People) is published periodically by the Oregon Chapter of AHSGR. Keep up to date with the latest news and events from the Oregon Chapter of AHSGR on our website: www.oregonahsgr.org

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