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RURAL GERMAN-SPEAKING WOMEN IN EARLY NEBRASKA AND KANSAS

ETHNICITY AS A FACTOR IN FRONTIER ADAPTATION

LINDA SCHELBITZKI PICKLE

Germans were the largest foreign-born ethnic group in nineteenth-century Kansas and Nebraska. Whether one includes all of the German speakers or only those who came from one of the many states eventually united into one German nation, these immigrants made up a sizeable proportion of the frontier population. Counting only the latter group, by 1900 eighteen percent of the residents of Nebraska and almost nine percent of the residents of Kansas were either first- or second-generation Germans.¹ Because of the size of the German population, their various times of emigration, and the diversity of their European origins and cultural heritages, it is difficult to come to all-encompassing conclusions about them. This difficulty is compounded when one tries to examine the lives of ordinary German women,

who left many fewer personal records of their lives than Anglo-American frontierswomen. (I use the term "Anglo-American" to designate English-speaking, American-born residents who are not persons of color.) In an attempt to diminish the complexity of the issues raised, this study focuses on first-generation German-speaking women who emigrated to the nineteenth-century rural Kansas and Nebraska frontier from Switzerland, Austria, or the German states, and excludes the Germans from Russia because of the significant cultural and historical differences in their backgrounds. It asks whether their ethnicity led German-speaking women to more painful frontier lives than those experienced by their Anglo-American counterparts.²

The following examination of the role of ethnicity in the lives of German women in early Kansas and Nebraska is based on diverse primary and secondary sources. With the exception of the letters of Louise Ritter, firsthand personal accounts extending over long periods are lacking.³ Most often one is forced to glean bits of information from the writings of German men, from public documents and other printed sources, and from accounts written by women's descendants. Nevertheless, the mosaic of many

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pieces of testimony and discrete information is complete enough to allow certain conclusions. This study begins with a discussion of the general as well as the concrete effects ethnicity had in the frontier lives of German-speaking women and concludes with an analysis of their reactions to the Great Plains environment.

HOMESICKNESS ON THE PLAINS

Homesickness for familiar surroundings was chronic for most early settlers. German-speaking women were very far from their place of origin and the possibility of return was usually remote, so their homesickness was often extreme. Mildred Schneider's grandfather met his future bride, new immigrant Augusta Muller, in the kitchen of an Omaha restaurant, where she sat peeling potatoes and "weeping tears of homesickness."⁴ Perhaps her homesickness led her to marry Ernst Schmidt in May 1870. He was twenty-two years older than she and had a farm with a one-room frame house to offer her. Whatever her motivation, she remained in Nebraska, bore ten children, and died a few months after her husband in 1913.

Like so much of the available information about German immigrant women, her granddaughter's account does not tell us enough about Augusta Muller's homesickness, or what adjustments she may have had to make in her new life, to give us a clear picture. Nor are there any clues as to the role her ethnic or cultural background played in her ultimate success as a frontier wife and mother. We learn only that she helped the family through many hard times with her good cooking and what she raised in her garden. Lacking specific data about Augusta Muller's feelings and mode of adaptation to her new environment, one can legitimately infer that Augusta Muller came to America to work and to better herself as a single woman. It is also likely that Augusta Muller Schmidt felt fortunate to have married into a farm and therefore wholeheartedly devoted herself to building and maintaining a good family life. Cooking and gardening required hard work that left her

little time or energy for romanticization or nostalgia.⁵

We know more about the loneliness and unhappiness other German women experienced. Louise Siegenthaler Ritter came to Nebraska in 1893, after the frontier era was over. She was thirty years old, the mother of three boys, and she would never see any of the members of her immediate family again. But in each of the many letters she sent them until her death in 1925, she wrote how much she missed and wished to be with them. Her references to Switzerland were sparse. She realized that she and her husband could never have attained the material security of their American life in the old country (30 July 1906). She also knew family members were unlikely to leave their secure and prosperous lives in Switzerland to come to the United States (25 Oct. 1896, Jan. 1902), but she wished repeatedly that she might see and talk to her correspondents. The presence of most of her husband's family could not substitute for her parents and siblings (30 Jan. 1913). Although she wrote in the early years that "there is nothing nicer than Switzerland," her "beautiful homeland" (8 Feb. 1894 and Christmas 1893), she did not express similar sentiments in later years. Indeed, when war threatened Europe, she urged her family even more strongly to join her where there was a safe and "good life under the flag of the stars" (5 Jan. 1913).

Like Louise Ritter, Anna Barbara Immendorf Ruppenthal, who came in 1877 to homestead in western Kansas with her husband and children, missed her family more than her homeland. She was, on the surface at least, a "reluctant pioneer" who regretted the move West for years. She did not miss her native Hesse, however, but longed for Philadelphia, where she had spent twenty-six years and where the rest of her family remained. Although she never openly opposed her husband, she confided to others that "had it not been for five small children, [she] might have steadfastly refused to go West, but . . . she did not know what to do with them if the father persisted in going to Kansas." Perhaps in part because of her Euro-

pean upbringing, she felt she owed her husband the obedience that her son describes: "None of his family ever questioned his views or his judgement openly, but bowed as to the inevitable."⁶ In any case, Anna Barbara Ruppenthal's unhappiness, like that of some Anglo-American women, stemmed from separation from family and the familiar surroundings of the American East, not from her ethnic identity or background, except that her acquiescence to her husband's decisions may have been culturally determined.

Some ethnic settlers, often including the women of the family, found the adjustment to the new land so difficult they returned to Europe. For most immigrants, who had invested everything they had in the venture to America, financial conditions prohibited a return. Carolyn Borgdorf Steinhaus, who came to the United States on her honeymoon in 1875 with her husband and parents-in-law, is one example. She and her family were so impoverished during the 1880s in Nebraska that she did not even have the money for postage to write her mother in Alsace-Lorraine.⁷ Women like Carolyn Steinhaus probably suffered more from separation from family than many Anglo-American women because poverty complicated long distance communications, but this was not a phenomenon restricted to Euro-ethnic women.

LANGUAGE DIFFERENCES

Language differences caused some German-speaking women in early Kansas and Nebraska intense unhappiness. A Howard County, Nebraska, history relates the story of a Mrs. Koch who was left alone while her husband went to work on the railroad. According to Ellen Partsch, Mrs. Koch killed herself and her three children because she was "lonely in a strange land and unable to communicate with her neighbors in a strange tongue." Linguistic isolation did not always lead to suicide and infanticide, however. Frederica Hecker Fischer was a bride of twenty-eight when she came from Wurttemberg to her

fiance's log cabin in Kansas in 1869. She thought he must be joking at first when they drove up to it, but she stayed on, encouraged by "an occasional visit with her English neighbor with whom she could not converse except by signs, caring for her neighbor when another life came into the home or being cared for in like manner."⁸ Frederica Fischer may not have been happy in those early days, but she was not plunged into despair. She communicated, if only by signs, with her closest female neighbor, and shared with her events of the female life cycle that remain cross-cultural.

Louise Ritter's letters contain some variations on language difficulties. She never learned English well herself, although she could "get about fairly well in the shops and so" (28 Dec. 1921). Unfortunately, her own Swiss-German dialect was not the norm among her German-speaking neighbors in Nebraska. In an early letter she complained that her parents "would not be happy here," partly because "the language is different" (8 Feb. 1894). Swiss relatives and neighbors had intermarried with High-German speakers, and she did not feel comfortable with this. She and her husband made an effort to underpin their sons' oral knowledge of Swiss-German with instruction through the German-language church, but the latter could not really write High German (August 1912). Later she wrote that none of her grandchildren knew or ever would know German (9 Feb. 1922 and 13 Jan. 1925). She was sad at this but understood that because her sons' wives did not speak the Swiss dialect they could not use it in their homes. As a German speaker she also suffered persecution during World War I. After the war she wrote, "The nasty aftereffect of hatred one will feel for a long time" (28 Dec. 1921). A woman like Louise Ritter, who "had too little opportunity to learn English" and who interacted little with English speakers, had predictable difficulties in adaptation to America. The lack of uniformity in language within her immediate community and among her descendants was more painful, however.

GERMAN COMMUNITIES

The preceding examples indicate that a German-speaking woman's difficulties with English varied in relation to the strength of her contacts outside the German-speaking community, and, no doubt, her own personality. Because of their typically homebound existence, rural German women's sense of linguistic and cultural isolation would also have depended on the extent of their contacts with other Germans. Many came to the Great Plains with family members and settled in areas with significant German populations. Such women did not need to learn English well, if at all, and may not have felt the pressures of assimilation to any great degree. One of my own paternal great-grandmothers, Karolina Miller Krause, came to Fillmore County, Nebraska, from Austria in 1882 at the age of thirty-eight and never learned English.⁹

Individual circumstances led to widely varying degrees of interaction between German-speaking women and the American society around them. Elizabeth Ewy Hirschler is an example of a woman firmly imbedded in an ethnic family community including her mother and her brother's wife, yet she also seems to have interacted closely with non-Germans. In 1887, while homesteading in a settlement of Germans and Anglo-Americans, she, her sister-in-law, and neighbors Mrs. Voice and Mrs. John Rupp joined together in an "'amazonian' settlement" to care for their small children and cattle while their husbands were in eastern Kansas earning money. Anna Barbara Ruppenthal was probably atypical in her preference for associating with English speakers (because she thought Germans had exploited her labor when she first came to Philadelphia). Certainly other German women interacted with non-Germans, especially on the sparsely settled sod-house frontier.¹⁰

A German community did not always cushion a woman against frontier alienation. In 1866, in the diary he kept while homestead hunting near Manhattan, Kansas, Henry Ruegg noted the unhappiness of a Mrs. Metzger. Newly arrived from Switzerland, she called out to the

passing Ruegg that she didn't like it at all in Kansas. Ruegg blamed her husband, who had not prepared for her arrival. Mrs. Metzger was obviously alienated by her husband's behavior as much as by frontier conditions. Ruegg's and his countrymen's reaction indicates that such behavior was not approved in the Swiss-German frontier community. This says as much about ethnic attitudes toward work relationships within the family as it does about attitudes toward proper marital behavior, however. Like Americans, German speakers were well aware that homesteading was a family enterprise that required everyone's cooperation.¹¹

ASSIMILATION

Some German women, particularly if they had immigrated while young and did not have the support of an ethnic community, assimilated almost completely into American society. Elise Dubach Isely was twelve in 1855 when her family immigrated from Canton Bern to St. Joseph, Missouri. When her mother died two weeks after their arrival, her father took over a homestead in Doniphan County, Kansas, across the Missouri, and Elise began housekeeping. Her closest neighbors, friends, and teachers in American household arts were two families of Kentuckians. She and her family attended a German-language church and her father never learned fluent English, but they also associated with their American neighbors, who helped them raise their log cabin, and with whom Elise attended quilting and sewing bees. When her father remarried in 1870, she went to work for her hotelier uncle in St. Joseph. There she met her husband, another Swiss immigrant, who had consciously rejected the insularity of the Ohio German community in which his parents had settled. On their north Kansas farm they were totally immersed in the predominantly American community, and their ethnicity mattered only when neighbors directed foreign wayfarers to them because Elise spoke two foreign languages.¹²

Not surprisingly, young women, whether

German or Anglo-American, demonstrated a spirit of adventure toward the frontier. Elizabeth Oelder Krebs came on her wedding trip to homestead near Hiawatha, Kansas, in 1870. She later told an interviewer: "We were both homeless, full of energy, and love of adventure and when we heard of the wonders of Kansas we thought that was just the place to make us a home." The idea of Indians did not frighten her: "I was delighted with the idea of seeing Indians and the name Hiawatha put on the finishing touch of my dream for our home." Elizabeth Krebs's fifteen years in Ohio after arriving as a seven-year-old from Switzerland may, however, explain in part her enthusiasm about the West and her romanticizing of Indians.¹³ The realities of the frontier were different. After the "grasshopper year" of 1875 the Krebses traded their claim for two lots and a house in Hiawatha.

Married women with young children had more difficulty in adjusting to frontier conditions. Anna Barbara Ruppenthal and Elizabeth Hirschler suffered from the heavy labor of homesteading and the deprivations and dangers threatening their families. Louise Ritter's family remembered that she "was looking forward with great enthusiasm to the adventure, which it really was at that time and that no one could have stopped her from that plan."¹⁴ But then, during the first two hard drought years in Nebraska, she "often . . . wished [they] were still in [their] old homeland" (19 Nov. 1894). Later she wrote that she "resented" the short school term because of her children's missed opportunities for learning (15 April 1897). Her ten-year-old son Rudolf was run over and killed in a farm accident in the spring of 1903. He had been driving a team of horses, something he probably would not have done in Switzerland. When her husband became ill in the following winter, Louise Ritter expressed not only grief for him but fear that she and her boys might have to continue this dangerous venture alone (27 Dec. 1903).

If older German women viewed the prospect of moving to the American frontier positively,

it was usually because of the opportunities for a new start in life and not because of potential for adventure. Minnie Sanders Volker had come from a poor family near Hanover and worked as a farmhand until she married, at twenty-nine, a widower twenty years older than she. After eight years of marriage and three children, they came to the United States in 1867, had three more children, and tried unsuccessfully to establish themselves in Illinois and Missouri before homesteading in far western Kansas in 1878. A daughter-in-law wrote later that they had had very hard years at first and had lived on corn bread, sorghum molasses, and rye coffee. Minnie Volker spun wool, knitted socks, and earned egg and butter money. "By being thrifty and saving," the Volkers accumulated a fair amount of land and were able to help their children establish homes.¹⁵ Minnie's "German" qualities of frugality and hard work had a good deal to do with this success story.

WOMEN'S PRODUCTIVE CONTRIBUTIONS

Minnie Volker's reproductive and productive contributions were like those made by many women. Dairy and egg money "was the main reliance for household expenses" in many frontier families, and Germans were no exception. This money could also mean the difference between success and failure. A family might be able to make it through a season or two of failed crops if they had enough to eat from the woman's garden and if there was some extra income from woman's products. Elise Isely described how a woman's purchasing power worked. One fall when she wanted apples for her children, her husband had no money. She sent him to St. Joseph to trade three ten-pound jars of butter and fourteen of the seven-pound cheeses her parents had taught her to make. Isely came back with a wagonload of apples, a kraut cutter, a sausage cutter, and a raincoat.¹⁶

Louise Ritter also came from a family of cheese manufacturers and eventually she too made cheese for sale. Her second letter from Nebraska (22 Oct. 1893) related the laughter she and

Swiss acquaintances shared about a woman who claimed "she knew best how to make cheese." The joke seems to have been that men were usually cheese makers in Swiss-German society. Yet seven years later, when telling her family about her own money-making enterprises, Ritter wrote: "Imagine, dear Parents, I am now also making cheese. I have already sold forty pieces" (8 July 1900). She went on to ask her father to send powdered rennet and cheese-cloth. Louise Ritter's cheese making represented both an adaptation of European skills to American circumstances and a change in cultural attitudes.

It was appropriate, in European peasant society, for women to contribute heavy outside work at peak labor periods or at times when there were not enough males in the family to manage all the traditional men's work. German-speaking women in early Nebraska and Kansas were no exceptions. Henry Ruegg recorded that his Swiss wife raked and piled hay and tied shocks of oats. Karolina Miller Krause had worked as a farm laborer in Austria although her sickly husband was a weaver. In America her wages for field work helped to buy a farm. Albert Papp recalled for an interview in the late 1920s, that German wives often helped break the prairie by sitting "on the front of the plow and [driving] the oxen" for their husbands walking behind. This tradition, however, conflicted with nineteenth-century attitudes about women's roles held by most Americans and by upper-class Europeans. Louise Ritter, for instance, was proud of her husband's mechanized farming and reported that after the wheat harvest, she "did not have to set one foot in the fields" to rake or stack the straw (22 Oct. 1893). She continued doing other traditional women's field work, however, until her sons were old enough to take over.¹⁷

Germans themselves distinguished between German and Anglo-American women's attitudes toward "men's" work. Recently married Matthew Hermann wrote his parents in Wurttemberg in 1871: "There is a great difference here, for most women do not work. Under those

conditions, when a man and a woman do not cooperate, nothing is saved. This is not the case with us for my wife is even more anxious to save than I am." This is not an expression of the "companionate marriage" between roughly equal partners. Indeed, women performed heavy outside work on top of their usual housework and seasonal chores like cooking for harvest crews. I have not come across any examples of German men taking on "women's work," which might indicate such mutuality, although women whose husbands could afford hired help were sometimes relieved from traditional women's outdoor work such as milking.¹⁸

Although pioneer German women worked mostly within the domestic sphere, some also acted as midwives, ministered to the sick, and with their husbands contributed land for schools and churches. Other German women ran businesses with their husbands or relatives. Some were active in predominantly Anglo-American community organizations. Most "public" contributions of this sort, however, were not of a specifically ethnic character. There were, to my knowledge, no German "ladies' benevolent societies" in nineteenth-century Kansas or Nebraska that had an impact on the American society around them.¹⁹ Rather, most German women's desire for a larger sphere of influence seems to have been subsumed within the private family and ethnic spheres.

Louise Ritter's letters show some private ways in which immigrant women expressed and maintained their heritage cultures. Ritter did not continue to wear in America the Bernese costume she had on in her wedding picture, but she did ask that her mother send along with an emigrating sister-in-law "a nice black cap" and "a pretty shawl embroidered with roses and lined with black wool," items that she said she could not find in America (20 Dec. 1906). After her mother's death, she hoped an acquaintance who visited her sister in Switzerland would buy and bring her back a small brass pan (6 Dec. 1920). When he did not do so, she wrote sorrowfully that it would have been more than just something that she could not obtain in Amer-

ica: "it would have been a nice remembrance of our mother, who surely used a utensil like that very often" (27 June 1921). This may have been Louise Ritter's way of hinting that her sister send her some small household item as a keepsake of her mother. She loved music and often sang and accompanied herself on a zither, a native Swiss instrument her husband had given her.²⁰

HOLIDAY TRADITIONS AND ETHNICITY

Ethnicity shows itself most easily in holiday traditions and cooking. Louise Ritter had to learn to cook for the "Yankee" threshers, who "like a lot of sugar in baking and coffee." But she cooked differently for her family: "We ourselves don't like sugar too well. Sometimes something sweet is nice, but vegetables, meat and potatoes are better for us!" (11 Dec. 1898). She made traditional Swiss baked goods, especially for the holidays.²¹ She tried to celebrate the holidays, particularly Christmas and New Year's, as had been done in her homeland. She regretted the absence of proper Christmas trees in Nebraska for her children's sake, but noted in her letters their pleasure in the ones erected in the church, or the substitutes she made from Nebraska cedars at home (11 Dec. 1898; 27 Dec. 1903; 8 Jan. 1905; 20 Dec. 1906). That her married sons and their families continued to celebrate New Year's with her and her husband until her death attests to her influence in this regard (28 Dec. 1921 and 13 Jan. 1925).

ADAPTING TO THE GREAT PLAINS

Ethnicity also affected German-speaking women's adaptation to the particular frontier environment of the Great Plains. We might expect that such women, as North Europeans, reacted negatively to this geographic and climatic area. In their letters and memoirs they often noted the unattractive aspects of this environment—its monotonous flatness, extremes of climate, Indians, dangerous animals, grasshoppers, and prairie fires. Like those of Anglo-

American women, their responses were as varied as their individual differences and circumstances.²² Often, however, their reminiscences about their early frontier experiences were colored by nostalgia. Louise Ritter's letters give a clearer picture of the immediate impact of this environment on European immigrants. Her first letter reports the worst things her new environment contained: snakes ("which horrify us"), Indians who camped overnight on their farm ("No one can claim to have slept particularly well that night."), drought, almost unbearable heat, wind, and "a gruesome, beautiful electric storm" that damaged their house (27 Aug. 1893). Her first Christmas letter from America commented as well on the changeable and severe winter weather (a "grimly beautiful" ice storm) and on the "wolves" (perhaps coyotes) they heard calling at night: "It is quite gruesome since there are often so many together. They are supposed to not harm people" (Christmas 1893).

Louise Ritter emphasized the weather and agricultural problems in her early letters because the family was struggling to survive. Later, when they had established themselves successfully on the Plains, she could be more equanimous: "We have to be grateful for all that grew last summer. The heat was often so intense that one felt like passing out, and it started very early" (1 Jan. 1912). As time passed she could also see beauty in the more mundane things of her environment. For example, she described corn to her sister as "a beautiful plant" that stands "in rows close together like soldiers" (30 Dec. 1919). The wild plums, cherries, and grapes formed a beautiful roof over the creek bed (27 Aug. 1893), but she appreciated the fruits they yielded more than their aesthetic qualities (20 Dec. 1906, 11 Jan. 1908, 1 Jan. 1912). The Nebraska Plains, in the more settled state that Louise Ritter knew them, do not seem to have been or become a place of physical beauty to her. Earlier sources might tell if this aspect of her frontier experience was typical of German-speaking women and if it and her adjustment to the Great Plains climate were different than those of rural An-

glo-American women from the eastern United States.²³

The typical residences of the Great Plains frontier, the sod house and the dugout, did not draw particular blame from German women, those purported paragons of cleanliness. Louisa Bartsch, a neighbor of Henry and Rosie Ise in Osborne County, Kansas, first saw the sod dugout her husband had built for his family during a heavy rain, when part of the roof had washed in and a foot of water stood in the recessed floor, and she not surprisingly refused to enter it. Only after her husband had bailed out the water and settled the children did she agree "to enter, and take up the duties of a homesteader's wife." The Bartschs, like other German homesteaders, eventually constructed a frame home. Like their Anglo-American sisters, German-speaking frontierswomen usually accepted the sod house as necessary and temporary housing on the timberless Plains. Rosie Ise appreciated the practical side of dirt construction and regretted having asked her bridegroom to lay down a plank floor in his log cabin because the cottonwood warped badly as it dried. Nancy Ellen Wieck's mother-in-law requested in 1910 that they build her a house of sod rather than frame or cement block, for it would stay cool and not blow away in the Kansas wind.²⁴

Living on the Great Plains placed women in houses of different construction farther from each other than was the case in Europe. The natural environment could not support dense agricultural settlements, and the large, square tracts of land available under the various homestead acts discouraged village agriculture. Even where people tried to build close together, German women frequently lacked German neighbors. In an era of shared farm work, no telephones or radios, and long distances to town, rural people tended to see each other more than is now the case. They tried to visit and stay in touch with each other as much as time and weather allowed, especially in the early years of settlement. European immigrants joined relatives and friends in America, and older residents often made a special effort to welcome newcomers from

the homeland. It is likely that rural German-speaking women, like rural Anglo-American women, had many contacts with other people, even in this wide-open country.²⁵

The Homestead Act may have separated the new farmsteads, but it also offered women financial independence. Mary Sandoz contemplated taking a claim but decided that she, "a town woman, couldn't make a living . . . on a claim alone" without money to get started. Probably, as Elaine Lindgren has shown for North Dakota, some German-speaking women homesteaded in Kansas and Nebraska. Lindgren found that more ethnic immigrant women took homesteads toward the end of the century, but that they were usually fewer proportionately than female Anglo-American homesteaders. Lindgren's sample was too small and the case study material too limited, however, to justify firm conclusions about the role of ethnic differences in homesteading. Her explanation for the higher percentage of Anglo-American women homesteaders, that "women who were already attuned to the American scene would display a greater sense of confidence and freedom of choice," is reasonable.²⁶

By and large, the Great Plains changed rural women's work little. Because of the move from a European village-centered community to that of the isolated, self-sufficient American farm, German-speaking women had to take on some domestic work that had been done by local craftspeople in the Old World. Louise Ritter noted: "We have no baker here. Every woman here bakes her own bread as well as she can" (27 Aug. 1893). German-speaking women and their children helped the men of the family in the intensive farming style characteristic of their villages in Europe. Women's willingness to work and to bear large numbers of children were no doubt factors in the success of many rural immigrants. The crops raised by immigrants tended to be more diversified than those grown by Anglo-American farmers, especially after a few years on the frontier, but this would have had little impact on women's labor. We can assume that German-speaking women had to learn to deal

with new foodstuffs, corn in particular, which was not used for human consumption in nineteenth-century Europe, since European immigrants did not hesitate to grow corn.²⁷

Germans raised more sheep and swine on the Great Plains than did Americans. Pork was a traditional German food and women may have been influential in the decision to raise pigs even though the environment was not particularly favorable. Although there was no inherent need for family production of woolen clothing by the time Kansas and Nebraska were settled, some German communities and individuals continued to spin, weave, and knit. Perhaps the household practices of women, who in most European peasant families were in charge of livestock, had an influence on some farming decisions in America.²⁸ In other respects, however, rural German-speaking women, like Anglo-American women, had to make do with the crops and products that could survive an often hostile environment.

CONCLUSION

Indeed, the lives of rural German-speaking women in nineteenth-century Kansas and Nebraska were similar to those of Anglo-American women. They reacted to the Great Plains frontier in all the ways we know other women have reacted. They were as successful, brave, happy, and unhappy as other women. The main differences were in the area of their contributions to frontier society. These were almost solely of a private nature and often marked by ethnicity, even if as individuals they assimilated more or less completely into American society. Organized German women's associations do not seem to have existed outside of immigrant churches. One striking difference deserves particular notice. There were no German women's suffrage groups, and no Germanic names appear on the membership lists of a variety of organizations in Kansas and Nebraska that advocated women's suffrage in the late nineteenth century. The vehement opposition of Germans to the question of female suffrage has been noted in several

studies (especially since suffrage was so often linked to temperance).²⁹ Long-standing gender role expectations with foundations in religious and legal traditions united almost all German-speaking immigrants on this issue. Without primary documentation, we cannot know what German-speaking women thought about suffrage, but they had probably internalized their culture's views on the subject and did not support women's rights.

As already stated, it is difficult to arrive at firm conclusions about the lives of German-speaking women because of the paucity of primary documents. This deficiency in documentation may also indicate other differences between them and Anglo-American women: a higher degree of illiteracy, perhaps, particularly among women who immigrated from rural areas of Europe, and a less strongly developed literary tradition in general for women within their culture and society. More often than not the man of the family wrote home to the Old Country, even to his wife's family.³⁰ Whether this was part of the pattern of female subordination within marriage, a result of higher illiteracy rates among women, or a matter of men having more time to devote to such things is impossible to determine. Probably all of these factors were at work.

Even with these distressing gaps of knowledge one may draw certain conclusions about rural German-speaking women in early Kansas and Nebraska. Ethnicity was a factor in their lives, for better and for worse. It probably caused many of them to react quite negatively at first to the natural environment of the Great Plains. The pain of homesickness was intensified for some by distance and their isolation within an alien culture. But for many, their role as maintainers of a cultural heritage in language, religious faith, domestic practices, and folk celebrations was a source of strength and consolation as well, particularly if they were members of dense German-speaking settlements.³¹ Even where diverse German backgrounds inhibited the formation of strong ethnic self-identity and hastened the process of assimilation,

women's isolation in the home protected them from much of the pressure of immediate adaptation to America.

The lack of major cultural revisions among most German-speaking women, including the maintenance of traditions of frugality, hard work, and self-sacrifice, was, on the whole, the source of frontier advantages to them and their families. Without doubt the patriarchal tradition of the subordination of women in family life contributed to frontier success in terms of land ownership and upward mobility, for all residents of nineteenth-century rural America. Therefore it is difficult to say whether the strongly patriarchal traditions of German-speaking families also served an adaptive function by making their women even more self-sacrificing, frugal, and hard-working than their Anglo-American sisters. The story of Rosie Ise's mother's first years in Kansas is tantalizingly provocative in this regard. Married to an "impractical" man who read more than he worked, she walked five or six miles to town with a bucket of eggs and butter on her head and one or two more in her hands, carried water from a well a quarter of a mile away, took her infant with her when she washed for a family four miles distant, and slept out in the cornfield one summer to guard it from the neighbors' cows. She also sent her daughter Rosie out to work in other families from the age of eight. Such women's work kept the family going during the drought years of 1859-60 and beyond, until the two older boys could do field work.³² We cannot know the degree to which her initiative and exertions were greater than those of Anglo-American women around her. By limiting a woman's range of alternatives to hard work and self-sacrifice, the conditioning of German-speaking women may well have served an adaptive function that contributed to family success. We may ask, a century later, at what cost to the individual woman such success was gained. But most nineteenth-century immigrant women probably thought their deprivations and hard work worth the material advantages they won for their children.

NOTES

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1. U.S. Bureau of the Census, *Census Reports*, vol. 1, *Twelfth Census of the United States, 1900*, pt. 1 (Washington, D.C.: GPO, 1902), pp. cxcvi-cxcvii. These statistics are cited by Frederick C. Luebke, "Introduction," *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*, ed. Frederick C. Luebke (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), p. xxi.

2. See Glenda Riley, *Frontierswomen: The Iowa Experience* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1981), p. xv, and Sandra Myres, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1981), p. xvi.

3. Darlene M. Ritter, *The Letters of Louise Ritter from 1893-1925: A Swiss-German Immigrant Woman to Antelope County, Nebraska* (Fremont, Neb.: Siegenthaler-Ritter, 1980). Further citations by date in text.

4. Mildred Schneider, "The Story of Ernst Friedrich Schmidt," typescript, Donald Floyd Danker, Personal Papers, box 4, f. 19, Nebraska State Historical Society (NSHS), Lincoln. Mrs. Schmidt's maiden name was probably Müller/Mueller.

5. Glenda Riley's study "Women in the West" *Journal of American Culture* 3 (Summer 1980): 311-29, warns against the dangers of distorting the reality of the lives of frontierswomen by emphasizing either the positive or negative aspects of their experiences. It is a particularly apropos warning in respect to immigrant frontierswomen who left so few primary documents.

6. J.C. Ruppenthal, "Anna Barbara Immendorf, A Pioneer of Lincoln and Russell Counties, Kansas, A Sketch of her Life," *Kansas Woman's Journal* (1925): 10, 5. Also found as typescript in Lilla Day Monroe Collection of Pioneer Stories, microfilm 7, Kansas State Historical Society (KSHS), Topeka.

7. See Linda S. Pickle, "Stereotypes and Reality: Nineteenth Century German Women in Missouri," *Missouri Historical Review* 79, no. 3 (April 1985): 302-05; Lucy Steinhaus, *I Remember When* (Sacramento: J-Rad Publications, 1980), p. 74.

8. Ellen Kiechel Partsch, *Howard County, the First 100 Years* (n.p., n.d.), 25-26; Nannie L. Gander, "Frederica Hecker Fischer," typescript, Lilla Day Monroe Collection of Pioneer Stories, microfilm 3, KSHS.

9. Dorothy W. Creigh asserted that this was especially true of the German and German-Russian women, "for there were always people from the Old Country to talk to" (*Adams County: A Story of the Great Plains* [Hastings, Neb.: Adams County-Hastings Centennial Commission, 1972], p. 333); author's interview with Karolina Miller Krause's grandson, James Schelbitzki, Columbia, Missouri, 30 December 1986; Estelle Schelbitzki Freeman, "Anton and Karolina Krause," typescript, 1986, in author's possession.

10. Edward E. Hirschler, "The Story of a Pioneer Family," (Master's thesis, Fort Hays Kansas State College, 1937) p. 26; Ruppenthal, "Anna Barbara Immendorf": 3. On the other hand, Henry Ruegg noted some ethnic hostility between Americans and Germans in the predominantly Swiss-German settlement along Fancy Creek, near Manhattan, Kansas: "these [two] Americans do not like it near the Germans and their wives like it still less." Henry Ruegg, diary entry, 4 Oct. 1866, "Diaries and Papers, 1848-1877," trans. Othmar Stutz, typescript, KSHS.

11. Ruegg, diary entries of 3 and 6 Oct. 1866. Another indication that German-speaking men were considerate of the women in their families is the concern expressed by Howard Ruede, who had come to Kansas in 1877 to prepare a homestead for his parents, brother, and sister. In his letters home, he painted a realistic picture of the hardships of living in a dugout and seemed especially concerned that his mother and sister be prepared for this. See Howard Ruede, *Sod-House Days: Letters from a Kansas Homesteader, 1877-78*, ed. John Ise (New York: Columbia University Press, 1937), p. 192 and passim. Ruede was born in Pennsylvania into a German-American community that was relatively little affected by acculturation.

12. Bliss Isely, *Sunbonnet Days by Elise Dubach Isely* (Caldwell, Idaho: Caxton, 1935), see especially pp. 60-64, 75-93, 159, 181-87, 213-15.

13. Maude Griffis, "Mrs. John Krebs: The Flower Woman of Hiawatha," typescript, Lilla Day Monroe Collection of Pioneer Stories, microfilm 4, KSHS. Recent arrivals and European residents were more concerned about the possible depredations of the "Red Man." Louise Ritter arrived directly from Switzerland in Nebraska in 1893, long after any danger to white settlers from Native Americans was past. But she was terrified when a group of Poncas or Pawnees traveling west to visit relatives camped overnight on their farm (27 Aug. 1893). In her next letter, and again in 1913, she reassured her Swiss relatives that Indians were really no longer a threat (22 Oct. 1893 and 17 Dec. 1913).

14. Ruppenthal, "Anna Barbara Immendorf": 5-7, 10; Hirschler, "Pioneer Family," pp. 29-30; Dar-

lene Ritter, *Letters of Louise Ritter*, p. 22.

15. Mrs. Henry Volker, Jr., "Minnie Sanders Volker," typescript, Lilla Day Monroe Collection of Pioneer Stories, microfilm 9, KSHS. See also Wolfgang Helbich, "Einführung," "Amerika ist ein freies Land . . .": *Auswanderer schreiben nach Deutschland*, ed. and intro. Wolfgang Helbich (Darmstadt and Neuwied: Luchterhand, 1985), p. 16.

16. Sometimes married women even financed the family's trip to America. The granddaughter of Christiana Winegar Kunz and John Michael Kunz wrote: "Altho [sic] John was titled it was Christiana who financed the trip to America." Mary Miller, "Cass County Settlers Who Were Ancestors of Marvin, Carol Ann and Debra Kay Miller," typescript, Donald F. Danker, Personal Papers, box 5, f. 8, NSHS; Isely, *Sunbonnet Days*, pp. 71, 166.

17. Ruegg, diary entries of 12 June 1873 and July 1875; Freeman, "Anton and Karolina Krause"; Louis Henry Siekmann, "The German Element and Its Part in the Early Development of Otoe County, Nebraska," (Master's thesis, University of Nebraska, 1930), p. 21. There is no record that the women discussed here experienced the distress attributed to the wives of the German "Forty-Eighters" or that of Anglo-American women who had inculcated the "Cult of True Womanhood" of the period. For a discussion of the dichotomy between upper- and lower-class German attitudes toward appropriate female behavior, see Pickle, "Stereotypes and Reality": 294-97.

18. Walter W. Hermann, "Germany to USA. Migration of the Matthew Hermann Family," typescript, Nebraska United Methodist History Center, Nebraska Wesleyan University, Lincoln; Katherine Harris, "Sex Roles and Work Patterns Among Homesteading Families in Northeastern Colorado, 1873-1920," *Frontiers* 7, no. 3 (1984): 48. The extent to which German-speaking women were influenced by some equivalent of the Cult of True Womanhood, to which Harris and others attribute the concepts of woman as a helpmate and equality in marriage, has yet to be determined. The best recent study of images of femininity in German culture, Silvia Bovenschen's *Die imaginierte Weiblichkeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979), deals only with such images among the intelligentsia and in "higher" cultural expressions, particularly in literature. Among the German-speaking immigrants on the Great Plains, it is unlikely that similar ideals played a strong role in developing attitudes of cooperation between husbands and wives. It is more likely that this stemmed from the traditional cooperation necessary for survival in German artisan and peasant families. Howard Ruede, who came to Kansas to homestead in 1877 and worked for German settlers as a hired hand, noted the kind

of domestic labor that supported the wheat harvest that summer. He was awakened one morning at 4:20 by the wife of his employer when she came downstairs to fire the stove for breakfast. Everyone else rose at 6:00 (Diaries, pp. 38, 113). He also noted that he had learned to milk but that it hurt his hands (Diaries, pp. 78-79). Louise Ritter's younger boys, in the absence of daughters, did help her with doing dishes and cleaning floors (1 Jan. 1913). But she was also doing the baking and washing for her two grown sons. No wonder she said: "If they had a housekeeper or if one would marry a pious virgin, I would be happy." Her often-repeated hope that one of her Swiss nieces would immigrate was, by the time this letter was written, motivated as much by the desire for help in the house as it was by loneliness. (See also letters of 17 Dec. 1913; 2 April 1915; 30 Dec. 1919.)

19. Isely, *Sunbonnet Days*, pp. 182-84, 213; Miller, "Cass County Settlers"; Mrs. A. E. Topping, "Mary Cresence Berhalter Maichel," typescript, Lilla Day Monroe Collection of Pioneer Stories, microfilm 5, KSHS. Theresa Lammers Bollmann worked in private homes in Illinois for nine years (1848-57), while her husband regained his health. Then they began a grocery business in Chicago and continued this in Kansas in 1877. Justine Schieve Ott (b. 1838) was operating a bakery and grocery in Olathe with her husband when Quantrelle raided that town. Adelheit Viets had a general store in Helper, Kansas, with her husband, his brother, and the latter's wife. Adelheit Viets and her sister-in-law also boarded railroad section hands (Fred Bollman, "Theresa Lammers Bollman," typescript, Lilla Day Monroe Collection of Pioneer Stories, microfilm 1, KSHS; Mrs. Walter Mason, "Justine Schieve Ott," typescript, Lilla Day Monroe Collection of Pioneer Stories, microfilm 6, KSHS; Adelheit Viets, "Autobiography," typescript, Lilla Day Monroe Collection of Pioneer Stories, microfilm 9, KSHS). Adelheit Krebs organized the Civic Club No. 1 of Hiawatha and later organized a Civic Club No. 2, for the blacks of that community (Griffis, "Mrs. John Krebs"); but Anne Firor Scott mentions no immigrant women's groups in her essay on women's work in voluntary associations: "On Seeing and Not Seeing: A Case of Historical Invisibility," *Journal of American History* 71 (June 1984): 7-21.

20. Ritter, *Letters of Louise Ritter*, pp. 28, 58, 163.

21. Ritter, *Letters of Louise Ritter*, p. 126. As Kathleen Neils Conzen states, neutral aspects of Old World culture, "like food preferences," could be retained without compromising the adaptation to the new environment, "Historical Approaches to the Study of Rural Ethnic Communities," in *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*, ed. Frederick C. Luebke (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), p. 9.

22. Mary Sandoz missed the Swiss landscape. Mari

Sandoz, *Old Jules* (1935; rpt. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1962), pp. 185-86. Anna Ruppenthal prided herself on having helped fight two prairie fires (Ruppenthal, "Anna Barbara Immendorf": 10). Young Elizabeth Krebs looked forward to seeing Indians in Kansas, while Elize Speck feared that begging Indians would steal her blond, blue-eyed children from her dugout in Saunders County, Nebraska (Griffis, "Mrs. John Krebs"; Catherine B. Marcy, "A Story of the Ballow Family and the Heldt Family in Saunders County, Nebraska," typescript, Donald F. Danker, Personal Papers, box 4, f. 15, NSHS). Katherine Bonard Ringeisen's laconic autobiography contains brief references to an Indian scare and to prairie fires as well as to the scarcity of fence posts and the use of a washboard, "run with plenty of elbow greece [sic]" (Katherine B. Ringeisen, typescript, Lilla Day Monroe Collection of Pioneer Stories, microfilm 7, KSHS).

23. Annette Kolodny has argued in *The Land Before Her: Fantasy and Experience of the American Frontiers, 1630-1860* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1984) that male settlers saw the land as something to exploit, whereas women viewed it as a "garden" to be cultivated, preserved, and appreciated. She is writing, however, primarily of fairly well-educated Anglo-American settlers. The extant evidence I have located indicates that German-speaking women, like their men, saw the landscape mainly in terms of the material advantages it offered.

24. John Ise, *Sod and Stubble: The Story of a Kansas Homestead* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), pp. 23, 17-18; *Memoirs of Pioneers of Cheyenne County, Kansas: Ole Robert Cram, Georg Isernhagen, Nancy Moore Wieck*, ed. Lee F. Pendergrass (Hays, Kansas: Fort Hays State University, 1980), p. 115.

25. An example is the Ise family, whose best friends, the Bartschs, lived two miles away. Rosie Ise's brother and family were one mile distant. Their nearest neighbors were the Altheys, an American family from Missouri. Nonetheless, the Ises saw a great deal of their friends and relatives. (Ise, *Sod and Stubble*). The Ritters joined several brothers and sisters of Fritz's in Nebraska. In an early letter, Louise mentioned visits by Swiss in the neighborhood and from as far away as Columbus (22 Oct. 1893). Her son Ernst said that Louise Ritter "never got away from home much. She did have some close friends" (Ritter, *Letters of Louise Ritter*, p. 114). Her isolation was partly a matter of choice. Glenda Riley has found friendships typical of early frontier life in South Dakota, and this was probably true farther south as well: "Farm Women's Roles in the Agricultural Development of South Dakota," *South Dakota History* 13 (Spring/Summer 1982): 103.

26. Sandoz, 185; H. Elaine Lindgren, "Ethnic

Women Homesteading on the Plains of North Dakota," *Great Plains Quarterly* 9 (Summer 1989): 157-73.

27. Glenda Riley claims that farm women's work remained relatively constant "from the early years of the nineteenth century well into the twentieth," "Farm Women's Roles": 83. Cornelia Butler Flora and Jan L. Flora identify work and children as the main contributions German-Russian women made toward their farms' success: "The Structure of Agriculture and Women's Culture in the Great Plains," *Great Plains Quarterly* 8 (Fall 1988): 195-205. Bradley H. Baltensperger's study of European- and American-born farmers in three Nebraska counties between 1880 and 1900 indicates their willingness to accommodate agricultural practices to the new environment: "Agricultural Change among Nebraska Immigrants 1880-1900," in *Ethnicity on the Great Plains*, ed. Frederick C. Luebke, pp. 173-74. German and other European immigrants employed the entire family in production; larger families farmed more intensively and with greater crop and livestock diversity and were somewhat more successful in persistence as farmers than Americans; see Flora and Flora; Baltensperger; Edmund DeS. Brunner, *Immigrant Farmers and Their Children* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday, Doran and Co., 1929); Seddie Cogswell, Jr., *Tenure, Nativity, and Age as Factors in Iowa Agriculture, 1850-1880* (Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1975); Theodore Saloutos, "The Immigrant Contribution to American Agriculture," *Agricultural History* 50, no. 1 (Jan. 1976): 45-67; Douglas E. Bowers, "American Agriculture: The Contributions of German-Americans," *Journal of NAL Associates* 9, 1-4 (1984): 1-12.

28. Baltensperger, "Agricultural Change," pp. 181-82; Minnie Sanders Volker continued to spin wool and knit socks during the first hard years in Kansas. Joan Jensen indicates that "the self-sufficiency and independence of the old farm system," including the manufacture of cloth, was temporarily revived in re-

mote frontier areas: *With These Hands: Women Working on the Land* (Old Westbury, New York: The Feminist Press, 1981), pp. 34-35. During the Civil War Elise Isely found her mother-in-law's German community in Ohio more backward than the Kansas settlements because her hostess still spun and wove the cloth for the family (Isely, *Sunbonnet Days*, 136-37). Louise Ritter's disapproval of American carelessness toward livestock stemmed from her culture (Christmas 1893; 20 Jan. 1894; 19 Aug. 1906). The Ritters always protected their livestock and built an imposing barn on their second farm (28 Jan. 1894, and 10 May 1912).

29. The most important of these studies is that by Frederick C. Luebke: *Immigrants and Politics: The Germans of Nebraska, 1880-1900* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1969).

30. This is my personal experience, but it is borne out by the letters cited in Wolfgang Helbich and Ursula Boesing, "Amerika ist ein freies Land . . .": *Auswanderer schreiben nach Deutschland* (Darmstadt & Neuwid: Luchterhand, 1985).

31. Reinhard Doerries, "Church and Faith on the Great Plains Frontier: Acculturation Problems of German-Americans," *Amerikastudien/American Studies* 24 (1979): 275-87, speculates that rural insularity afforded immigrants "a kind of human dignity" they might have had to sacrifice in more direct confrontation with American society (p. 280).

32. John Ise, "Mother's Recollections of Her Early Life," typescript, n.d., Kansas Collection, University of Kansas, Lawrence. Flora and Flora, "Structure of Agriculture and Women's Culture," credit the greater degree of land ownership among the Germans from Russia in central Kansas to similar women's contributions to family resources. John Mack Faragher's study of midwestern farm families, *Women and Men on the Overland Trail* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), establishes the cultural and legal subordination of women in mid-nineteenth-century America, see especially p. 61-63 and 160-63.