Steel Crosses
in
German Catholic Cemeteries
in
# Ellis, Rush, and Russell Counties

by S.J. Sackett

From Severin on the north to Liebenthal on the south, from Ellis on the west to Gorham on the east, steel crosses are found in all the Catholic cemeteries in the communities where the Volga Germans have settled. Cast-iron crosses were presumably ordered from commercial foundries; many, perhaps most, of the wrought-iron crosses were made by local blacksmiths.

When the Volga Germans first came to this country, they did not bring with them the custom of setting up steel crosses in their cemeteries; it was developed in the United States. The reason for desiring a steel cross instead of a wooden one is obvious: steel crosses are far more durable.

The earliest cross which I have been able to identify is in the Catherine cemetery; it was made by Jacob J. Schmidt and his brother John in about 1902, when Mr. Schmidt was 18 or 19. It memorializes the Schmidt brothers' mother, who died in 1885. Mr. Schmidt told me that he got the idea from having seen a metal cross in the cemetery in Salina; there was an iron works in Salina which produced cast-iron crosses. But Mr. Schmidt did not put the idea into practice until he saw a picture somewhere which was suffciently detailed that he and his brother could design the cross using it as a model.

The Schmidts had a blacksmith shop on their father's farm. They made the cross in three days. The coils were made from a soft rod clamped in a vise and turned to fit a paper pattern; the Schmidt brothers saved the pattern and used it later for other crosses. The uprights and crossbars were galvanized pipe. The decorative inserts between the uprights were a rod twisted at the forge. The hearts were cut from tin and welded on. The decorative supports were bent from a rod and bolted on; Mr. Schmidt can still grimace at remembering how head it

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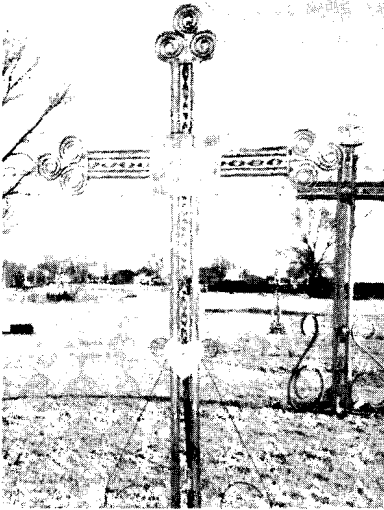
Cross by Jacob J. and John Schmidt, Catherine cemetery, 1902.

Cross in Victoria cemetery with unusual decoration at top and armtips. Note ceramic nameplate and heart. Cross in background at left has more conventional triple coil design and is decorated with a circle.

was to drill all the holes by hand in those days before electricity. The nameplate is also made from sheet metal and welded on. The letters and numbers are hammered in with a set of metal stamps.

When the Schmidts' father died in 1906, the brothers made a matching cross for him. It was made in only one day; by that time the Schmidts had grown so proficient at their work that it did not take them so much time.

Whether the Schmidts' cross for their mother was in fact the first cross in the entire settlement area can no longer be determined beyond doubt, but no earlier one has come to light. In any event, the use of steel crosses as grave markers eventually spread to all the other communities, though there are not many at Schoenchen.

Some cross-makers did not charge, partially at least because they made most of their crosses for relatives. Alex Graf of Victoria told me that, although he spent about a week apiece on his crosses, he would make them for his customers if they supplied the materials. John Beilman of Hays told me that his father and brother, Peter and Joseph Beilman, who made crosses at Hays and Catherine, were not paid for many of their crosses; they worked along on them during slack times, putting as many as possible off until winter, and using material from a scrap pile they kept. Jacob J. Schmidt of Catherine also told me that he and his brother made crosses during winters.

On the other hand, John P. Braun of Walker told me that Micheal B. Kuhn usually charged $25 for a cross; but he also made less expensive ones for clients who could not afford that much. Herman Tholen of Hays showed me a receipt indicating that John Knoll of Victoria on one occasion charged $9; but this cross was small and plain, and probably Mr. Knoll charged more for larger, more elaborate crosses.

The names of several of the blacksmiths who made crosses have survived. In Catherine there were Joseph Giebler, Henry Pelzal, Frank Schmeidler, Jacob J. Schmidt, John Schmidt, and Raymond J. Schmidt. In Hays, Peter Beilman and his son Joseph. In Liebenthal, John Herrmann and his son, John, Jr. In Munjor, Alois Hauser, who later moved to Victoria; his son, Alois, Jr.; and Joe D. Unrein. In Pfeifer there was Adam Kisner, one remembered only as Old Man Lambrack, and John Schlitter and his son Jacob. In Victoria there were Alex Graf, John Knoll, Andrew Kuhn, two Joseph Kuhns, Martin Quint, Adam Riedel, and Ignatz Vonfeldt. In Waler there was Micheal B. Kuhn. Of these the three who seemed to have the greatest local fame were Alois Hauser of Munjor, John Knoll of Victoria, and Micheal B. Kuhn of Walker.

In the opinion of many local residents, Alois Hauser was the best blacksmith in the county, and his fame extended to several of the communities. He was of Austrian descent. At first he settled in Munjor, but then in 1913 he moved to Victoria, where he died in 1934. Some of his work appears in the Hays cemetery as well as those of Munjor and Victoria. His son, Alois, Jr., was also a blacksmith and worked in Munjor, where he made several crosses, before settling in Hays.

When Alois Hauser moved to Victoria, the leading blacksmith there was John Knoll, who had already produced a number of steel crosses. According to two of my informants, there was a rivalry between Mr. Knoll and Mr. Hauser, and each tried to outdo the other in the beauty of his work. Mr. Knoll left Victoria for some years to run a shoe shop in St. Peter, Kansas, where he also made crosses. Mr. Knoll died in 1939; so far as I can determine, in fact, the last steel cross in the Victoria cemetery was John Knoll's own cross, on which he was working at the time of his death. He left it incomplete, and Alex Graf, who had been working for him and bought his blacksmith shop after his death, finished it. Until recently it still stood, with nothing to mark the identity of its maker but a metal plate with the name "Knoll" written on it in pencil. It has now been replaced.

The cemetery at Walker, for which Micheal B. Kuhn provided most of the crosses, is the only one to show a consistency of style. Of the sixteen steel crosses at Walker, seven are nearly identical, being made of twin steel pipes painted black, decorated with a kind of white lattice-work between the pipes and three white coils at the top and two

Cross in Victoria cemetery, perhaps by John Knoll.
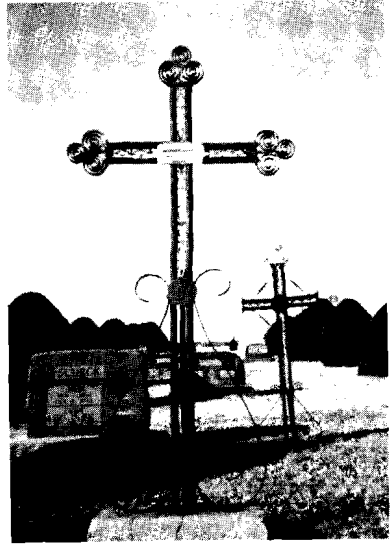
Cross by Michael B. Kuhn, Walker cemetery.
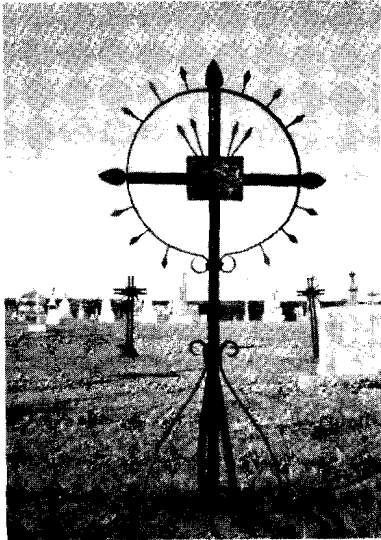
Cross in Munjor cemetery, perhaps by Alois Hauser.

Cross at Walker apparently an imitation of Michael B. Kuhn's work.

Cross at Walker, probably by Michael B. Kuhn.

Two crosses at Pfeifer, cast iron (left) and wrought iron (right).

arms of the cross. One of these is decorated with additional scroll work at the intersection of the vertical and horizontal pieces of the cross; it probably cost more than Kuhn's standard fee. One interesting cross at Walker is apparently an attempt to imitate Kuhn's style, using white rings instead of white coils; that it is not Kuhn's work can be seen by the braces, which are angular rather than the sweeping S curves which Kuhn characteristically used. Three crosses are black with white fleur-de-lis at the top and armtips; these may also be by Kuhn and may represent his less expensive model. Similar crosses at Gorham may well also be Kuhn's.

Some of the designs for wrought-iron crosses seem to have been borrowed or modified from those of cast-iron crosses. Indeed, in the Pfeifer cemetery stand side-by-side two crosses for a husband and wife; it takes close scrutiny to see that one is cast iron, while the other is a handmade initation. The cast-iron cross bears the name of John Schlitter, who made many of the wrought-iron crosses in that cemetery; the other memorializes his wife and was made by their son Jacob.

Many of the crosses are extremely simple; frequently, but not invariably, these mark the graves of children. But a large number of crosses show decorative motifs of various kinds, and many of these are tasteful and effective. Common motifs are a rayed circle, which may be either a sun or a halo, and hearts. Many bear cast-iron crucifixes.

The most common construction of the larger crosses is two pipes. In several the pipes are simply rounded off with U-shaped joints.
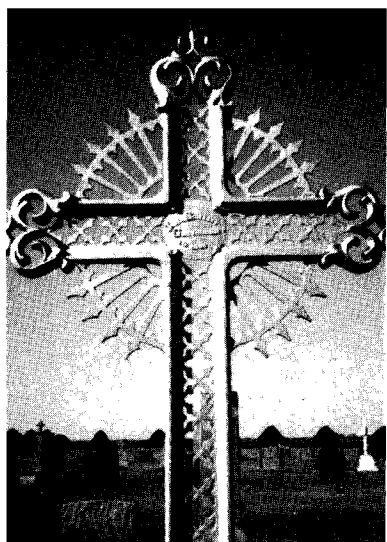
Cast-iron cross in Pfeifer cemetery.

Wrought-iron cross (cast-iron rays) in Pfeifer cemetery, made by Jacob Schlitter.

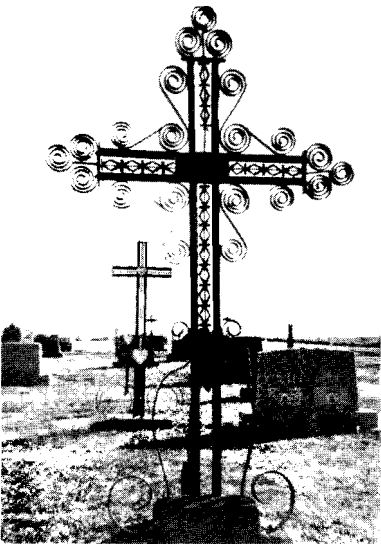Cross with rayed circle in Liebenthal cemetery, probably by John Herrmann.

Cross with hearts in Victoria cemetery, probably by John Knoll.

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Cast-iron crucifix within rayed circle affixed to cross in Walker cemetery, probably by Michael B. Kuhn.
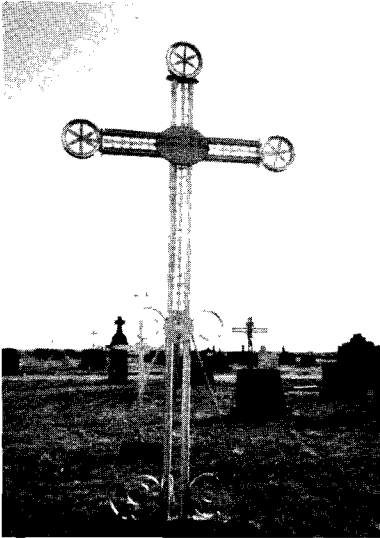

Cross made of two pipes rounded off with U-shaped joints, Victoria cemetery. Note rayed circle and heart.

Cross with armtips decorated with trio of coils in Victoria cemetery, probably by John Knoll. Note additional elaboration.
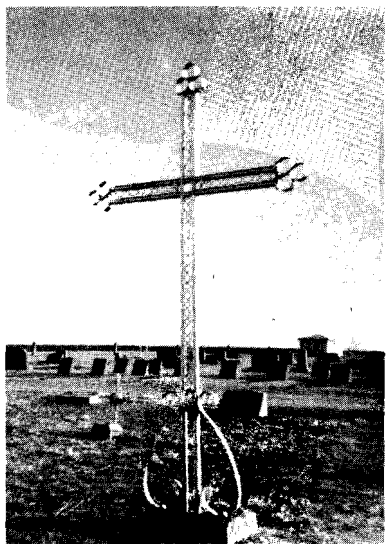
Cross with armtips decorated with circles in Victoria cemetery. Note smaller cross with coils to the left.

Cross with single circles containing six-pointed stars in Victoria cemetery.

Cross with triple circles containing eight-pointed stars in Victoria cemetery. Note crosses in background at left with U-sahped joints and single circles containing crosses.
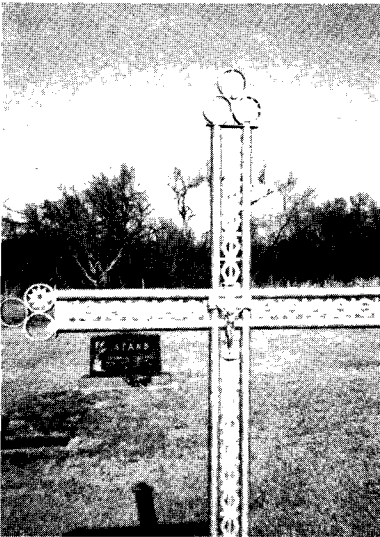
Cross with triple circles originally containing unusual ten-pointed stars, most of which are now missing, in Catherine cemetery. Note cast-iron crucifix.

Cross with crowns at the armtips in the Pfeifer cemetery. Note also cast-iron crucifix in rayed circle and, at bottom, skull. Cast-iron crosses may be seen in background at left and right.

Cross decorated with what may be a tulip design. Victoria cemetery.

Uniquely designed cross in Munjor cemetery, probably by Alois Hauser.

Where the upright and crossbar are not just rounded off, they may be completed with a curve, either open or closed. But the most usual single way of ornamenting the top and arms of the cross is with a trio of coils; this basic design can be elaborated with additional scrolls and coils.

Sometimes instead of coils there are circles. These may be empty, or they may contain crosses or six- or eight-pointed stars. Those that are empty may have been intended that way, or they may originally have held something which has been lost. The upright and arms may also terminate in some other design, such as hearts or crowns or a design that looks something like a stylized tulip. But it is difficult to do justice to the wide variety of designs which may be found in these cemeteries. Some occur with considerable frequency; others are unique.

Many of the crosses bear ceramic nameplates. My informants agree that these cannot have been produced locally, but I have not been able to determine whether this is true also of the crosses to which they were attached, which therefore must have been produced commercially and imported from somewhere else, or whether the nameplates were made somewhere else and then affixed to the crosses locally. More frequently the nameplate is the temporary grave marker, provided by the local mortuary, which was removed from the gravesite and welded to the cross. Several also bear nameplates with the lettering stamped in by hand.

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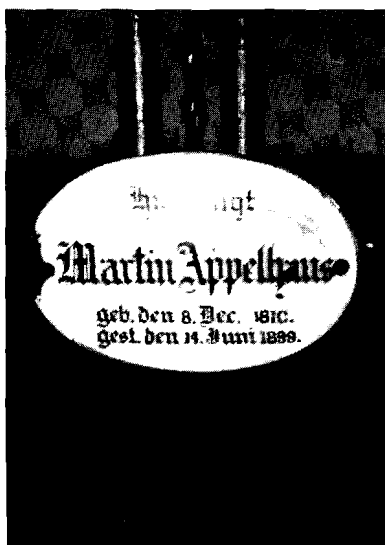
Ceramic nameplate affixed to cross in the Victoria cemetery.
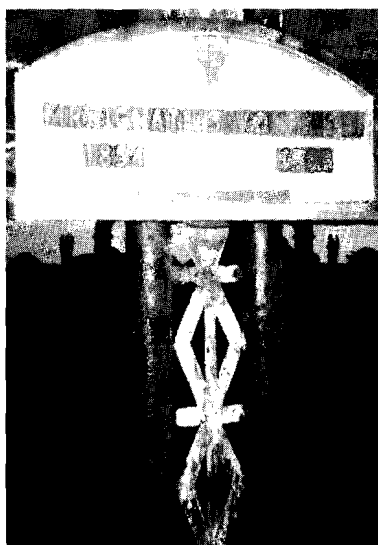
Temporary grave marker welded to cross in Walker cemetery, probably by Michael B. Kuhn.

Everyone I talked to agreed that the reason the steel crosses went out of fashion was that they were replaced in popularity by stone monuments. An enterprising tombstone salesman, Wendelin L. Brown of Hays, would make periodic tours of the cemeteries looking for fresh earth; when he saw any, he would make inquiries as to who had been interred and would talk to the survivors. In addition to selling tombstones for new graves. Mr. Brown would talk the family into replacing any steel crosses on their plot. Increasingly his sales pitches were successful. Indeed, John Schmidt of Catherine even replaced the cross he himself had made for his own wife by a marble monument. Mr. Brown told me that at one time he had seventy wrought-iron crosses stacked in his back yard; he took them to Topeka and sold them to people to train roses on for $2 each.

But while even during the Depression the use of steel crosses was beginning to decline, the custom has persisted until fairly recently. The most recent cross I found was in the Catholic cemetery at Ellis, dated 1969. It was not, however, made locally; and it has now been replaced by a stone.
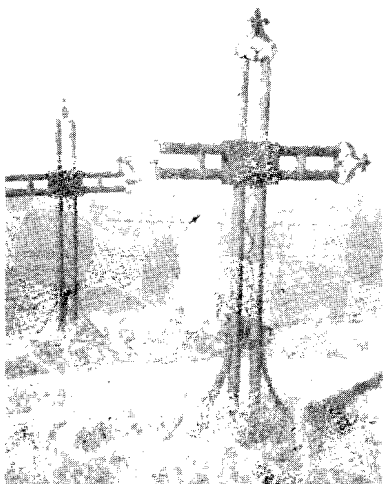
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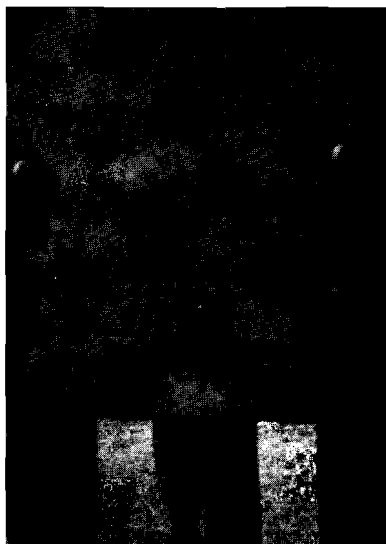
Nameplate made of metal with legend stamped in by hand, Gorham cemetery.
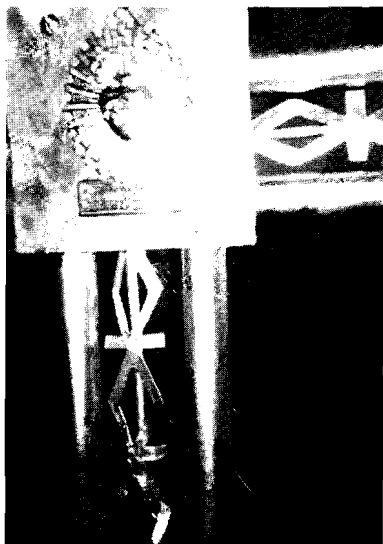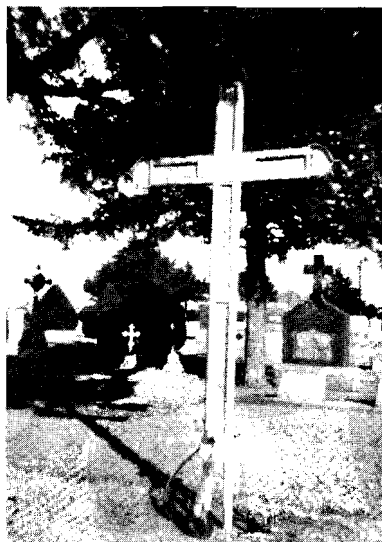

Cast-iron misericordia attached to a cross in the Victoria cemetery.
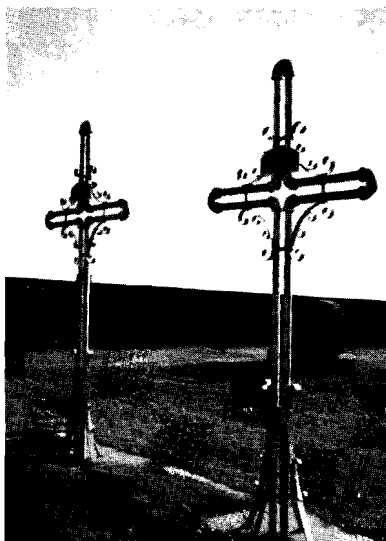

Crosses for husband and wife in Catherine cemetery. Note construction of two sets of pipes, finished with U joints, and use of temporary grave markers as nameplates.

Crosses in Munjor cemetery, probably by Alois Hauser. Note design, perhaps a stylized tulip, at top and armtips.
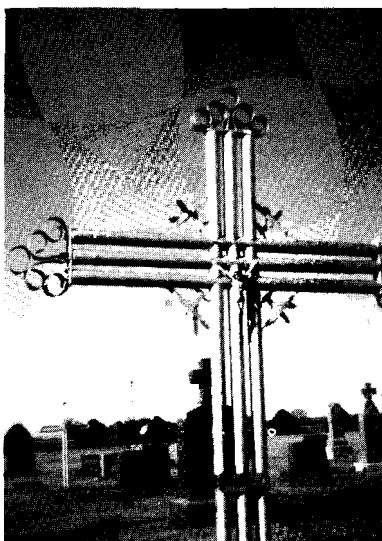
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Cross in Hays cemetery, probably by Peter or Joseph Beilman. Cast-iron crosses are visible in background to left.
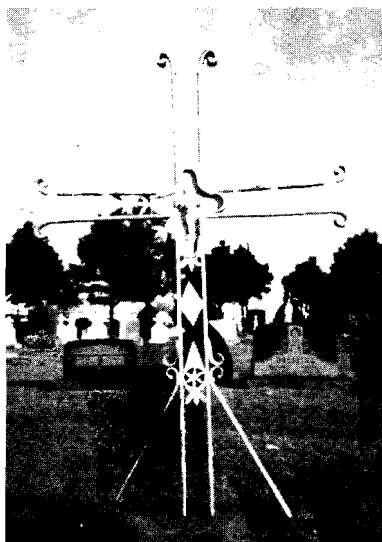
Unique cross in Hays cemetery. Note cast-iron crucifix.

Unique cross in Pfeifer cemetery made of metal to resemble stone monuments such as those in background. Note use of rayed circle and also cast-iron crucifix (problably in hand-made mold).

Cross in Pfeifer cemetery with unusual triple-pipe design; decorations at top and armtips, and also where arms join upright, are also unusual. Note cast-iron crucifix and hand-stamped nameplate.

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