

## THE GERMANIC-APOSTOLICS OF GRIDLEY

by

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Situated in the bluestem grazing region on the eastern fringe of the Flint Hills of Kansas is the village of Gridley. At its northern edge, there is a woodframe church that sits on a slight incline, with shade trees and prairie surrounding it, making an idyllic setting for worship. This building is the Gridley Apostolic Christian Church which was built in 1910 by Germanic-immigrant farmers. They came to America in the 1870s and 1880s because of poor economic conditions, unfavorable tax laws, rigid class structure, conscription, and religious persecution in Europe. The settlers--from Germany, Russia, and Switzerland--moved to Gridley, in Liberty Township of Coffey County, Kansas, because of the availability of land for settlement and also because of religious ties to brethren of the Apostolic Christian Church.<sup>1</sup>

The Apostolic Christian Church began in Switzerland in 1831-32 with the spiritual awakening and baptism of Samuel Froehlich. After Froehlich had preached in the Evangelical Baptist churches of some European countries for several years, his movement spread to America. In 1847, Froehlich was summoned by Joseph Virkler to settle a dispute among some Mennonite people in Lewis County, New York, and Froehlich sent Benedict Weyeneth to help, resulting in the blending of the two religious traditions. As the Evangelical Baptist Church spread westward from New York--about the time the United States entered World War I--the name was officially changed to the Apostolic Christian Church.<sup>2</sup>

The probable travel route for Swiss and German immigrants began at Le Havre, France, where they embarked

on their trip to New York. Some Evangelical Baptists settled in New York, but others traveled on to Pittsburgh, and by flatboat on the Ohio River to Sardis, Ohio. From there, settlers drifted west to the cheaper lands in Kansas and elsewhere. The Homestead Act of 1862 enticed some Germanic-farmers to move west, and the development of canals, roads, and especially railroads (the government granted land to the railroads, who then sold it to raise money), encouraged others.<sup>3</sup>

A Santa Fe railroad agent for Kansas colonization, Carl Schmidt, visited Russia in 1875, and brought 400 Mennonite families by steamer from the Ukraine port of Berdyansk to America. One of the immigrant families was Peter and Sophia Kraft and their five children, one of whom died at sea. They left because the Tsar had withdrawn military exemptions for German farmers who lived in Russia, and Peter Kraft and his family had no desire to bear arms or kill anyone. Moreover, in 1874, Kansas had passed a law exempting religious dissenters from military duty if they declared their religion with the county clerk, and the Krafts wanted to take advantage of this law.<sup>4</sup>

The immigrant families traveled on the Santa Fe railroad west to Newton, Kansas, then some, including the Kraft family, moved from there to Rush County. Peter Kraft was 29 years old when he staked out his claim and built a sod house and barn there. He soon decided, however, to move to an area where there was an Apostolic Christian community, so he and his family packed all of their worldly possessions in a wagon, and walking behind it, traveled

to Coffey County. The Peter Kraft family settled one mile north of what would soon be the site of the Gridley Apostolic Christian country church, which Peter would one day serve as minister.<sup>5</sup>

Martin and Anna Beck and five children—four of his and one of hers from previous marriages—came from Bergfelden, Germany, in 1883. That same year they left New York and traveled by rail to Burlington, Kansas. Preacher Joe Huber helped them out; he brought the family by wagon from Burlington to the Gridley area, and "put them up" for a few days until Martin could purchase an eighty-acre farm of his own.<sup>6</sup>

Still another immigrant, Martin Beyer, eighteen years of age, who was born in Baden, Germany, came to America and settled in upstate New York in 1848. He was followed in 1852 by his parents, Michael and Marie, and two brothers, Phillip and Jacob. The Beyers settled in Lewis County, New York, the home of the original Apostolic Christian Church in the United States. Martin was living in New York City when he married Elizabeth Schiffer, then the two moved to Ohio, where two sons were born and died. They returned to New York, where nine more children were born. In 1874 Martin Beyer traded his farm in northern New York for a farm near Diamond, Missouri, but when he and his family arrived, they discovered they had been swindled—there was no farm. Either because he had no money or he was too discouraged to return to New York, he remained in Missouri and took up the blacksmith trade. After the death of his wife Elizabeth, Martin married Christina Frey, and later he, his wife, and their son Jacob, also found their way to Gridley, Kansas.<sup>7</sup>

Jacob Somerhalder (he dropped the

second "m" in his name because he thought it was too long) came to America from Switzerland in 1873. Family histories say he wore his older clothing on the voyage across the Atlantic, packing his better clothes and money in a trunk. On the way, however, the ship sprang a leak, his trunk was thrown overboard to lighten the load, and Somerhalder lost everything he owned. A family friend paid his railroad fare to Ohio, where he is said to have split rails all winter to pay the debt. Jacob eventually settled near Gridley, and his parents followed a short time later. His father Rudolph died in 1881, soon after moving to his son's homestead, but his mother remained with him for many years, until her death. In 1884, at age 31, Jacob married Anna Ott. Anna's parents, too, were immigrants with fascinating histories. Her father was born in the Black Forest region of Germany, and her mother was born in Alsace Lorraine. Because of conflicting nationalities, the government would not acknowledge their 1840s marriage, but it was legalized soon after they moved to America. They settled first in Ohio, then in the late 1860s moved near Tremont, Illinois. According to Lydia (Somerhalder) Bahr, "The stopover in Illinois was just a waiting period since a church colony was being made, and I suppose that all the plans had not been ironed out." The Ott family moved to Kansas in 1878, settling near Lamont, Kansas, while the Somerhalders settled near Gridley, Kansas.<sup>8</sup>

In the early 1870s the Missouri, Kansas and Texas Railroad offered land for sale in Liberty Township in Coffey County, Kansas, and Germanic immigrants, hearing that it was good land, began moving there. Among them were the Bahrs, who in 1879 bought five sections of land for \$10.00 an acre

in the Errett School neighborhood in Coffey County. During the 1870s so many Germanic immigrant farmers came to southwestern Coffey and eastern Greenwood Counties in Kansas that an Apostolic Christian group began to meet at Errett School. (The school building, District No. 54, was 2 miles west, 3 miles south, and 1/2 mile west of the present site of Gridley. Today, all that remains of the school is a foundation, front steps, and basement walls.)<sup>9</sup>

Apostolic Christian families lived in a twenty-mile area from east to west. By the late 1870s, approximately 49 families met in the Errett School on Sundays, but because travel by wagon and carriage was difficult, the members decided to split into two congregations. One group, the members in the Verdigris Valley near Lamont in Greenwood County, built a church in 1881 about seven miles northwest of the Errett School, with the Bahrs, Becks, Blancks, Dreyers, Isches, Luthis, Otts, Sauders, Schwabs, Storrers, Youngs, and Winzlers playing prominent roles in the early congregation. The other--the Coffey County brethren--built a church in Liberty Township, about seven miles northeast of the school, with the Birks, Deitrichs, Hubers, Krafts, Knapps, Kaufmans, Kurths, Kurtzes, Leibigs, Metzgers, Roths, Schneiders, Selsmans, Somerhalders, Steffens, Waglers, Wahers, and Wietrichs among its active members.<sup>10</sup>

The Apostolic Christian Church brethren in Coffey County bought three acres of land, 2 miles north and 1 mile west of the present site of Gridley, Kansas, on December 22, 1880.<sup>11</sup> There they built the county's first Apostolic Christian Church. In addition to the church building, they also constructed a well and about 40 stables for horses. In 1895, the church was damaged by a

tornado, and in 1910 it was destroyed by a fire of suspicious origin.<sup>12</sup>

Many members of the congregation wanted to build a church in town by this time, so on November 17, 1910, three board members deeded a parcel of land at the northwest edge of Gridley to the Apostolic Christian Church. The new church was built that same year, and membership in the Gridley Apostolic Church rose steadily until it reached its peak in 1925, when the congregation included forty families--approximately one hundred members. Christian Wagler and Joseph Huber were the first ministers of the church.<sup>13</sup>

On February 10, 1883, George and Elizabeth Storrer donated land for the Apostolic Christian Church Cemetery. It was located one-half mile west of the country church site (2 miles north and 1 mile west of Gridley, Kansas). The cemetery contained three-fourths of an acre, including the roadway. Later, on January 29, 1946, Frank A. and Esther A. Povenmire (a granddaughter of Martin Beck) deeded enough land to give the cemetery a complete acre.<sup>13</sup> There are at least two rows of plots in the Gridley Apostolic Cemetery on the west side where early graves either have no markings or are marked only by rocks, some possibly with initials cut in the stone. In the earliest period, family members were not hurried together; instead, when a person died he or she was buried in the next available plot. While there are no records of the earliest burials, the earliest stone marker which gives the date of someone's death is 1881, so the cemetery existed even before the land was officially deeded. In the early 1900s, Chris Beck and Sam Kraft dug the graves by hand, 6 to 6-1/2 feet deep. Rock was so close to the surface that chiseling and blasting were often necessary.<sup>14</sup>

Many old world customs and traditions persist at the Apostolic Christian Church of Gridley. For several decades, until about World War I, the German language was used in church services. With anti-German feelings, however, the language in worship was changed to English. The pattern of worship services of the Gridley Apostolic Christian Church follows a 150-year-old tradition. Two ministers of the church are selected by the local congregation, and a three-man church board makes local decisions. Church attendance is expected, and members greet each other as they enter the church by shaking hands or kissing. Men sit on one side of the church, while women sit on the other.<sup>15</sup>

In a tradition borrowed from the Mennonites, the minister reads a few verses of a song before it is sung. Then, led by a man, sitting in a pew, who uses a pitch pipe for the beginning tone, the congregation joins in to create beautiful harmonies. The official hymnal is *The Zion's Harp*. Each Sunday, following the morning service which begins about 10:00 A.M., a lunch is served by one of the twenty families who are in attendance; afternoon worship service is patterned after the morning service, and ends about 2:00 P.M. From Thanksgiving to Easter, the Lamont and Gridley churches alternate their Sunday

evening "Singsings," and their Wednesday evening worship services.<sup>16</sup>

Germanic settlers were frugal, practical people and their descendants are much the same. Many family homes in the Gridley area were built in the early 1900s. They are two-story, frame homes that are spacious and sturdily-built. The immigrants' barns, chicken houses, and other outbuildings have also withstood the test of time--folklore has it that German barns were more solidly constructed than German homes. The truth is that lavish care was given to each, and Germans in Gridley, at least, carefully considered every detail when constructing buildings of every kind.

Descendants of many of the immigrants still reside in or near Gridley, and many still live on family farms. Because of the decline of farming, many of the younger generation of Apostolic Christian farmers have been forced to take up other occupations. Although smaller in membership than in the early 1900s, the Apostolic Christian Church still promotes valuable virtues of peacefulness, hard work and thrift, and--most of all-- a sense of brotherhood and community that continues to make Gridley a desirable place, one of which immigrants would be proud.

#### End Notes

<sup>1</sup>Perry A. Klopfenstein, *Marching to Zion: A History of the Apostolic Christian Church of America, 1847-1982* (Fl. Scott, KS: Sekan Printing Co., 1984), 64, 241-242.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 6-25.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid., 26-27, 66-67.

- <sup>4</sup>Craig Miner, *West of Wichita: Settling the High Plains of Kansas, 1865-1890* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1986): 80-83; Genealogy Sheet on American Historical Society of Germans from Russia: Family Group Chart, Peter and Sophia (Hegwald) Kraft; Interview with Sam Kraft by author, Gridley, Kansas, June, 1989.
- <sup>5</sup>Miner, 80-83; Genealogy Sheet: Peter and Sophia Kraft; Interview, S. Kraft, June, 1989; Interview with Mr. and Mrs. Glenn Kraft by author, Gridley, Kansas, June, 1989; Klopfenstein, 241.
- <sup>6</sup>Barbara (Beck) Storrer, "Personal Recollections" recorded by Esther A. (Beck) Povenmire, in possession of author, Gridley, Kansas, n.d.; Register of Deeds Office, Coffey County, Kansas, Deed Record, v. 34, 69; (*An Illustrated Historical Atlas of Coffey County, Kansas* (Philadelphia: Edwards Brothers, 1878): 55.
- <sup>7</sup>Joc and Naomi Beyer, comps., *Genealogy of Martin Beyer, Son of Michael and Marie Beyer* (1966): 1: Interview with Nelda Beyer by author, Gridley, Kansas, July, 1989; Klopfenstein, 223-226.
- <sup>8</sup>Lydia Bahr and Dorothy Brown, comps., *Family Tree: Anna Ott Somerhalder 1852-1972* (Pt. Scott: Sekan Printing, 1972): 10; Interview with Edna Somerhalder by author, Gridley, Kansas, July, 1989.
- <sup>9</sup>*An Illustrated Historical Atlas*, 5, 55; Interview with Sam Kraft by author, Gridley, Kansas, July, 1989; Klopfenstein, 77, 238-239; Anna M. Swihart, *Bahr Genealogy* (Milford, IL: Kosko Printers, 1983): 41.
- <sup>10</sup>Klopfenstein, 77, 238-243; *An Illustrated Historical Atlas*, 5, 55; Reprint by Kansas Council of Genealogical Societies, 1982, *The Official State Atlas of Kansas*, Compiled from Government Surveys, County Records, and Personal Investigations (Philadelphia: L. H. Everts, 1887): 136-137.
- <sup>11</sup>Register of Deeds Office, Coffey County, Kansas, Deed Record, v. 28, 172; Interview, S. Kraft, June, 1989.
- <sup>12</sup>Interview, S. Kraft, July, 1989; Klopfenstein, 241; *Plat Book of Coffey County, Kansas*, Compiled from County Records and Actual Surveys (Minneapolis: Northwest Pub., 1901): 35.
- <sup>13</sup>Register of Deeds Office, Coffey County, Kansas, Deed Record, v. 76, 295-296; Interview, S. Kraft, June and July, 1989; Klopfenstein, 241-242; *Standard Atlas of Coffey County, Kansas, Including a Plat Book* (Chicago: Ogle and Co., 1919): 36.
- <sup>14</sup>Register of Deeds Office, Coffey County, Kansas, Deed Record, v. 45, 145 and v. 34, 69 and v. 112, 131-132; Interview, S. Kraft, June, 1989; Interview with Ivan Beyer by author, Gridley, Kansas, July, 1989.

<sup>15</sup>Klopfenstein, 360, 453, 462-464; Interview, S. Kraft, July, 1989.

<sup>16</sup>Klopfenstein, 360, 453, 462-464, 466; Interview with Sarah and Hannah Grimm by author, Gridley, Kansas, July, 1989; Interview with Sarah Somerhalder by author, Gridley, Kansas, July, 1989.