

THE PRACTICE OF FOLK MEDICINE
AMONG THE VOLGA GERMANS IN KANSAS

by

Helmut J. Schmeller
Fort Hays State University

In the course of the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the demographic makeup of a number of counties in central and western Kansas was substantially altered by the influx of several thousand ethnic Germans from Russia. Among them was a group of some 1,200 Volga German Roman Catholics, as well as smaller groups of Lutherans and Baptists, who by the end of 1876 were well on their way towards developing a major area of settlements in Ellis; Rush, and Russell counties.¹ In many respects -- language, appearance, customs, and manners -- these newcomers appeared to be radically different from other, earlier German immigrants. Commenting on the "queer" appearance of these "strong looking animals" whose presence was accompanied by a "smell so pungent as to make a strong man weak," the local press nevertheless extended a welcome of sorts: "The latest report is that one thousand more Russians are on the road to Ellis County. All right; the more the better; but let us lay in a supply of carbolic acid."²

Although the local newspapers gradually abandoned their condescending attitude towards the immigrants from Russia, the fact remains that these "Rooshians" (as they are still occasionally labelled) continued to meet with frequent ridicule and rejection which may have hampered their integration into the new social and cultural fabric of the West. There seems little doubt, however, that it was above all the Russian experience of these settlers -- nearly a century on the Russian steppes in an often hostile environment -- which predisposed them to establish in Kansas the kinds of communities conducive to the preservation of those religious, cultural, and social values which had in the past provided them with the principal ingredients of their group identity.

Among the many items in the extensive cultural baggage, which the Germans from Russia brought to western Kansas, was the practice of their folk medicine, in particular the institution of the "folk doctor." Each community appears to have enjoyed the services of one or more of these practitioners who relied on a common repertoire of remedies and practices which had been handed down over generations as an oral tradition. Although the number of these part-time practitioners as well as their significance within the communities has declined somewhat over the years, several of them are still offering free advice and treatment for a variety of ailments.³

As most of the Volga Germans were engaged in some form of agricultural work, it stands to reason that injuries to the skin such as cuts, abrasions, and infections were among the most common instances requiring attention. Cuts in the skin were often treated by applying axle grease which apparently acted as a sealant. To prevent blood poisoning, it was recommended to apply a paste consisting of flour, butter, and egg to the affected area of the skin. A similar type of poultice was also used in the treatment of boils; in both instances the mixture appears to have had a drawing effect on the infected area. One practitioner claimed to

have had considerable success with a slightly different mixture in the treatment of hemorrhoids. Here, a combination of alum and egg white was applied to the affected area just before the patient retired for the evening. If the hemorrhoids were internal, the same mixture was given as an enema. This treatment, which had to be repeated for three successive evenings to assure a complete cure, allegedly produced the desired results even in severe cases where surgery had been recommended as the only solution.

To cure a common skin rash, somewhat vaguely defined as *der Fleck* (i.e. the spot), the recommended manner of treatment showed considerable variations: some of the practitioners applied a mixture of pork lard and turpentine, others suggested a mixture of sugar and turpentine, a poultice of hot milk and bread, or a cud of used chewing tobacco. Without knowing the exact nature of the mysterious *Fleck* it is difficult to say anything definite about the therapy although it seems likely that the turpentine or the saliva in the chewing tobacco may have been the effective ingredient.

While some of the folk doctors' remedies may well be based on some scientific rationale, albeit unknown to the practitioners, others are more difficult to explain and should probably be relegated to the category of the "Old Wives' Tales." There seems to be no discernible reason, for example, why the application of meat from a freshly killed chicken should aid in the treatment of an open wound or why a slice of salted pork (in other cases, unsalted pork) should relieve the discomforts of a boil. The same holds true for a curious treatment of ringworm: some practitioners suggested that this infection could be cured by rubbing the smooth sole of a worn baby shoe over the infected area of the skin.

The numerous methods of removing warts -- by one count some two hundred different versions were known in Kansas -- offer still another *curiosum*. One particular method required that an individual tie as many knots in a string as he had warts. The string was then to be buried in a location where it would quickly decompose, at which time the warts would also disappear. Another method called for the application of raw potato peelings to the wart accompanied by the burying of the potato; once again, the warts would vanish as the potato decomposed. Tempting as it may be to dismiss such methods out of hand as sheer superstition, there is some evidence that certain skin conditions, including warts, respond to changes in an individual's emotional state, i.e. warts may indeed disappear if the patient is convinced of the efficacy of the treatment.⁵

A number of practices of the Volga German folk doctors also show a strong admixture of religious elements which appear to be closely related to similar practices in certain rural regions of Germany. One of the folk doctors interviewed made use of a prayer in which the help of the Trinity was invoked to control severe bleeding. The prayer had to be repeated three times and, for some unknown reason, could only be taught to one person at a time. An identical prayer is also recommended by Johann Georg Hohman in his work *Der Lang Verborgene Freund* which, according to its author, offers "miraculous and well-tested remedies and

arts for man and animal."⁶ Aside from the presence of religious elements in several healing practices, the role of the so-called *Bruchher* in some Volga German communities is of some interest. The *Bruchher*, a type of faith healer, was usually called upon as a last resort to say prayers for the seriously ill. In that respect his function is identical to that of the *Geandbeter* (i.e. a person who effects a cure through prayer), whose services were much in demand in rural areas of Germany. It is of interest to note that similar faith healing practices have also survived among the Volga German settlers in Argentina where the *curandero*, a combination of folk doctor and faith healer, is apparently still in some demand.⁷

The repertoire of the Volga German folk doctors also contains a variety of cures and remedies to meet the symptoms of the common cold and of influenza. Aside from the use of alcohol which appears to serve as a kind of general tonic, the use of mustard plasters or of a particular mixture of goose and skunk fat used to relieve chest congestion were common. Equally widespread is a more exotic practice, known regionally as *Kaiszapfen ziehen* (lit. "pulling of the uvula). An individual complaining of difficulties in swallowing due to an enlarged and partially descended uvula is subjected to the following treatment: a pinch of pepper is placed on the patient's outstretched tongue as the practitioner grabs the patient's hair near the top of the skull and "gives it a good jerk." This will allegedly call the uvula to retract and relieve the discomfort. Should the subject be bald, the practitioners recommended a skull massage to relax the subject before the skin at the top of the head is appropriately pulled upward. Whatever the rationale for this procedure, there is no shortage of satisfied patients willing to testify to the effectiveness of this treatment.

To most rural peoples the ability to have large families is considered both a blessing as well as an economic necessity. Not surprisingly, several practices of the folk doctors focus on the correction of so-called female disorders and on providing advice and care during and after pregnancy. One specific treatment, designed to increase the probability of pregnancy, consists of abdominal massages which, according to the practitioner, "will put things in their right place." These massages, lasting usually half an hour, are administered beginning with the third day after the termination of the last menstrual cycle and are continued approximately one week apart. Judging from the reputation of the practitioner, the treatments were quite successful although the folk doctor could not offer any specifics explaining their effectiveness other than the observation that "faith" in the treatment was perhaps the decisive factor. Some practitioners also provided massages to relieve menstrual cramps while others specialized in correcting abnormal positions of the fetus through manipulation shortly before the anticipated time of delivery. After childbirth women were given special diets, in particular prune soup or onion soup, both of which were deemed effective in keeping the bowels open. Women were furthermore encouraged to stay in bed for at least nine days after delivery with the ninth day being the most crucial. On that day, so the belief ran, the Virgin Mary arranged for the various organs to return to their proper place.

The general attitude towards childhood diseases among the Volga Germans appears to have been to let the disease run its course and to let nature take care of it. One particular ailment, however, seems to have occupied much of the attention of the folk doctors, namely the so-called "dislocated navel." The symptoms of this curious affliction appear most often in children after strenuous physical activity: headaches, abdominal pains, pains in the side, in some cases even vomiting. There are two methods by which the dislocated navel -- which is of course not dislocated at all -- may be corrected. The first of these calls for the subject to lie on a flat surface, face down. The practitioner, standing above the subject, then manipulates the skin in a rolling and pulling fashion in and around the region of the lower back just opposite the navel. This procedure is continued until two or three "cracks" are heard at which time it is assumed that the navel is back in its proper place.

The second method involves the use of a burning candle and of a drinking glass or a glass jar. The subject in this case is asked to lie flat on his back. A burning candle, affixed to a piece of cardboard or to a coin, is placed on the navel while a glass is placed over the candle, shutting off the air supply. After the flame has died, glass and candle are removed and the patient is pronounced cured.

Whatever the nature of this ailment, only one thing seems certain: hundreds of people of all age groups claim to have experienced its symptoms in childhood and to have undergone successful treatment for what, in reality, appears to be some type of abdominal muscle spasm. Incidentally, the Germans from Russia who migrated to Argentina use an identical skin manipulation procedure to cure -- not a dislocated navel -- but an *empacho*, an upset stomach.⁸

The candle-and-glass procedure noted above is, incidentally, also used to relieve the discomforts of a headache. In this instance, the subject lies down on a flat surface with the burning candle and the glass placed in the middle of his forehead. After the flame has died, both candle and glass are removed and the headache will disappear. While this procedure is obviously open to question, as indeed are many of the other forms of treatment noted above, it seems possible that, in this instance, the effect of the suction on the permeability of the blood vessels in the vicinity of the frontalis nerve may be sufficient to relieve the patient of his discomforts.

The present examination of the practices of the Volga German folk doctors represents, needless to say, no more than a random sampling. Whatever the validity or the rationale of the various treatments and cures may be, the survival of such practices in a time and in an area in which competent, professional medical help is readily available suggests some tentative answers. The persistence of these practices attests to the strength of traditional perceptions in a closely knit group of peoples who have in the past -- in Russia, in the United States, and elsewhere -- turned to their own kind and to their own institutions and wisdoms. Undoubtedly, decades of hostility and rejection by outsiders played a significant part in this

phenomenon. It seems equally apparent that confidence and trust in the person of the practitioner outweighs in many instances confidence in the potential of modern medicine; this factor, more than anything else, may serve to explain the relative longevity and efficacy of the cures and remedies of the Volga German folk doctors.

NOTES

¹Norman E. Saul, "The Migration of the Russian-Germans to Kansas," The Kansas Historical Quarterly, XL (Spring 1974), 51-52.

²Hays City Sentinel, March 1, 1876; August 16, 1876.

³Information relating to the various remedies and types of treatment has been obtained through a series of tape-recorded interviews with practitioners and their patients during the fall of 1980.

⁴Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs, Petticoat Pioneers of the Midwest (Phillipsburg, Kansas: Kansas Federation of Women's Clubs) p. 32.

⁵Carol Ann Rinzler, A Dictionary of Medical Folklore (New York: Ballantine Books, 1979), p. 231.

⁶Johann Georg Hohman, *Der Lang Verborgene Freund* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, 1843), pp. 10-11.

⁷Barbara Iris Graefe, *Zur Volkskunde der Russlanddeutschen in Argentinien* (Wien: A. Schöndl, 1971), p. 126.

⁸Ibid.