

RUSSIAN-GERMAN ARCHITECTURE  
IN SOUTHEASTERN SOUTH DAKOTA

By

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Germans were among the first white settlers to the Dakotas after the area was opened to white settlement in the summer of 1859 upon the formal withdrawal of the various Sioux tribes. Settlement was slow during the 1860s because of continual friction with the Indians, the lack of transportation facilities, and the existence of good government land to the east. Prospective settlers were discouraged by the lack of timber and by reports that the climate and soil were unfit for agriculture. In 1866 George Catlin wrote that the Dakotas were part of a region which would always be "useless and unfit for civilized man to cultivate."<sup>1</sup> But conditions for settlement became favorable in 1868 when several favorable treaties had been made with the Indians, the railroad was completed to Sioux City, Iowa--close to the eastern border of South Dakota--and the best land had been taken in Iowa and Minnesota.

In January of 1871 the legislature of Dakota Territory established a bureau of immigration whose duty it was to attract prospective settlers to the area. Among its activities was the distribution of pamphlets in the German language. These pamphlets described the area in the most glowing terms. One of these read as follows: "Süd-Dakota--die reichste Kornkammer der Welt. Ein Land voll Sonnenschein, gesundes Klima, glückliche Menschen. Seine fruchtbaren Felder, blühenden Städte, und wachsenden Industrien laden Euch ein und bieten Euch goldene Gelegenheiten zur Existenz."<sup>2</sup> Various railroads were also anxious to draw people to their lands, and German-language posters, pamphlets, and guides were published describing southern Minnesota and eastern Dakota as a region without equal for agriculture.

In the same year, the government of Russia decreed the abolition of special privileges granted to the Germans who had established colonies in southern Russia from 1763 to 1859. These privileges, including the exemption from military conscription, and the right to have German language schools, churches, and to have independent local administrations, had enabled them to preserve their German identity in Russia. Following the decree which would have meant their Russianization, thousands decided to emigrate to the United States. Since the Dakota area was just then being opened to settlement, it received the largest number of Russian-German settlers.

In the spring of 1873 Russian-Germans living in the Black Sea region and in Volhynia sent twelve emissaries to investigate prospective areas for settlement in the United States and Canada. Among them was Andreas Schrag, who on May 23, 1874, returned with eleven Mennonite families who settled near present-day Freeman in the southeastern part of Dakota Territory.<sup>3</sup> He lies buried in the Salem-Zion cemetery in Freeman,

South Dakota. The inscription on the grave stone is entirely in German. The Dakota Southern Railroad had recently been completed to Yankton and Russian-German immigrants settled in Bon Homme, Hutchinson, and Turner counties. Here they once and for all dispelled the myth about the unsuitability of that region for agriculture. The Germans from southern Russia were especially well equipped for farming in the Great Plains since they were familiar with the climate and soil conditions of semiarid lands. All of the settlers except the Russian-Germans came from humid regions and were shocked by the vast, flat, treeless prairie. The Russian-Germans, however, coming from the flat Russian steppes felt right at home. A visitor to a North Dakota community relates that he was thrilled to find a river valley and a few hills instead of the monotonous prairie. But when he made a remark to this effect, the Russian-German responded sadly that he didn't like those hills at all at first, but that he had finally gotten used to them.<sup>4</sup>

On the treeless prairie away from rivers, the settlers spent the first winter in dugouts or in sod houses. In 1874 Russian-Germans in the Freeman area began to build the houses that they had learned to build in Russia. They are built in a distinctive and unique form. They made large, sun-dried bricks and built thick-walled earthen houses of four or six rooms. These were warm in the winter and cool in the summer and remarkably durable. Some have lasted over a hundred years. The houses which are discussed here were all built between 1874 and 1879, the year in which the railroad came through Freeman, making the purchase of lumber possible.



Figure One

Figure one shows a typical house and barn combination. The left side housed the family, the right side the animals. House and barn are joined, and often, as here, a broken roof-line is the tell-tale sign of these structures. Wooden siding was added later, making the Russian-German earthen house unnoticeable to the uninitiated. In the Black Sea region the house and barn were also under one roof. The occupants of the house could walk from the living room into the adjoining stable.

Both the German colonists who migrated to the Black Sea area and the Russian-Germans who came to Dakota Territory came upon lands devoid of timber. In both regions they met this challenge by building houses made from earth, either of sunbaked bricks, stones and clay, or as was more common in southeastern Dakota, of layers of clay. Clay made by mixing earth and water was poured into forms, and bricks were made by drying these in the sun for several weeks.<sup>5</sup> With such bricks the house in figure one was then constructed. In the Black Sea region every village had a clay pit. Karl Stumpp described the procedure that was followed there: "The clay was then mixed with chopped straw or horse manure and then in water until it was a viscous mass. This was then pressed into wooden molds, to form a rectangular building block. In the summer months these blocks dried very quickly and could soon be used."<sup>6</sup> Figure two shows the inside wall of a house in South Dakota built of clay bricks and plastered with a mixture of clay, sand, and limestone. Walls were plastered

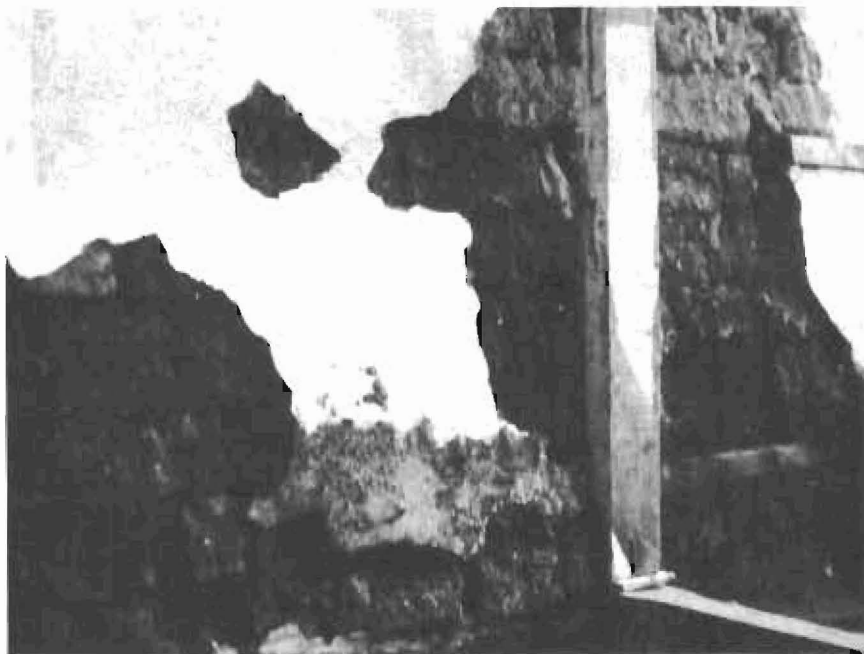


Figure Two

inside and out and whitewashed with lime. The walls of houses in the Black Sea region were also always stuccoed and whitewashed.<sup>7</sup>

German houses in the Black Sea region as well as those in South Dakota were one-story dwellings usually consisting of six rooms, three in front and three in back. In the middle of the house was the clay bakeoven which occupied a large part of the kitchen (figure three). Bread was baked behind the door on

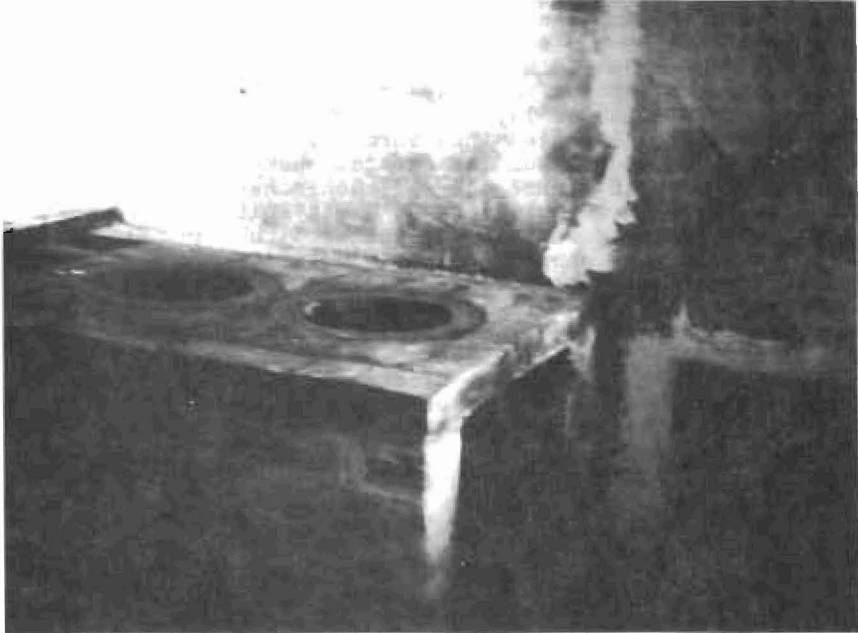


Figure Three

the right. This oven, of Russian origin, was capable of heating the entire building. The smoke was channeled back and forth in the thick brick wall on the other side of the kitchen so that heat was conducted to the whole house. Straw and old prairie grass, usually mixed with manure, were thrust into the oven, and this fuel burned so slowly that the fire needed to be stoked only two or three times in twenty-four hours, with the stoking taking about twenty minutes.<sup>8</sup> The chimney, also made from earthen bricks, rose through the attic in a pyramid form. Inside of it meat, sausages, and ham could be hung to be smoked. In the summer, a small building in the yard, the *Sommerküche*, was used for cooking and baking. The use of the summer kitchen avoided heating the main dwelling during the hot summer, and the meals were taken in the cool earthen house.

A second type of building was the stone house (figure four). Walls were built of rocks, and clay was used as



Figure Four

mortar. This is a four-room house. The walls are about two feet thick and plastered with clay. Clay was also used in the basement ceiling and was held in place by means of a lattice-work of sticks. The floors were still solid many decades after their construction. Instead of a stone wall surrounding the yard, as customary in South Russia, a stone corral near the house graphically illustrated the lack of trees in those days. There was no timber for making fences, but plenty of rocks with which to make an enclosure for the animals.

A third type of architecture--the most common in this area--was the rammed earth style (figure five). Grass, straw, and small stones were added to earth mixed with water, and the resulting mortar was mixed into such a consistency that it could be handled with a pitch fork.<sup>9</sup> The clay mixture would then be forked into long wooden forms, or if there was no lumber for forms, the walls were shaped with short boards and tamped into place. A course, or layer, could only be about a foot high or the walls would have spread under their own weight. The lines of the courses can be seen on this picture (figure five). Upon completion the walls were stuccoed with lime from local limestone.

The house in figure six was built in 1878. It was inhabited until 1951 and was still in excellent condition in 1980. This house has six rooms, an attached barn, and a Vorhäusl, or ante-chamber, which was common in Russia. This



Figure Five



Figure Six

entryway kept out the cold drafts in the winter and afforded protection against flies and dust in the summer. Deep recessed windows let in the sun in the winter but kept it out in the summer. The thick-walled house of the Russian-Germans was well adapted to life on the northern Great Plains. Other settlers erected claim shanties, which meant buying and transporting expensive lumber. Nothing but a thin piece of wood separated the inside from outside temperatures of 100 degrees in the summer and 30 below zero in the winter. But the Russian-German clay house was unsurpassed in coping with the environment.

The environment which these immigrants met in southeastern South Dakota was similar to that which they had left in southern Russia. And the houses which they erected here were remarkably similar in style to those which they had learned to build in the Black Sea area. They were house-barn combinations built with native materials--earth and stone. The one-story dwellings contained either four or six rooms with thick earthen walls, stuccoed and whitewashed inside and outside. Most had a vestibule; all had a large brick oven. The prevalent rammed earth, or clay wall, construction was a distinctive and unique architectural style and a monument to the Germans who came to Dakota Territory from Russia.

#### NOTES

1. Harold E. Briggs, "The Settlement and Economic Development of the Territory of Dakota," South Dakota Historical Review, Vol. 1, No. 3 (1936): 152.
2. "South Dakota--the richest granary of the world. A land full of sunshine, healthy climate, happy people. Its fertile fields, blooming cities, and growing industries invite you and offer you golden opportunities for existence." State Bureau of Immigration, John D. Deets, Commissioner, Pierre, South Dakota.
3. A.P. Waltner, "Important Events in the History of the Salem-Zion Church," The Seventy-Fifth Anniversary of the Salem-Zion Mennonite Church of Freeman, South Dakota, 1955, 39.
4. Richard Saller, Russian-German Settlements in the United States, trans. by LaVern Rippley and Armand Bauer (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1974), 87.
5. William C. Sherman, "Prairie Architecture of the Russian-German Settlers," Russian-German Settlements in the United States, 185-195.
6. Karl Stumpff, The German-Russians: Two Centuries of Pioneering, trans. Joseph S. Height (Bonn, Brussels, New York: Edition Atlantic-Forum, 1967), 38.
7. *Ibid.*, 21.
8. J.D. Butler, Mennonite Life, Bethel College (North Newton, Kansas: Bethel College, 1949), 17.

9. According to Reuben Goertz, a grandson of Russian-German immigrants who built these dwellings. Mr. Goertz made it possible for me to visit the houses described here, and I wish to express my gratitude to him.

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*To A Deserted House*

*Think twice  
before you enter my gate  
step into my privacy  
to find decay  
and termite wood  
that half of the world  
you choose to forget.*

*The tree rocks me gently  
in its shadows  
and that is comfort enough.*

*Louise Monfredo*