In 1879, Pastor G. August Bischoff came from Iowa to Dakota Territory, where he served over twenty congregations of the Iowa Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran church. The Iowa Synod had been founded in 1854 to serve German-speaking immigrants in Iowa. Pastors, teachers, and money were at first supplied from Germany to Iowa and then from Iowa to the surrounding states. In 1889, the Dakota District of the synod was established, and G. August Bischoff eventually became its president. ¹

Pastor Bischoff was one of the first ministers to have contact with the early Russian-German immigrants of southern Dakota. The first Russian-Germans to settle in the territory came from the Black Sea area of southern Russia. The following story of their ar-

rival and of the later growth of their communities is a translation of an article Bischoff wrote in 1909 for the Dakota Freie Presse,\(^2\) one of the many German-language newspapers in the Dakotas.\(^3\)

In the fall of 1872 the first immigrants — if I am not mistaken, 21 families from the Khersonian colonies Worms, Johannestal, and Rohrbach — set out on the journey to America and landed in New York before the winter. Dakota was not their goal at first (what did they know about Dakota!), rather, they turned toward Ohio, and they made their winter quarters in Sandusky, O.,\(^4\) because some colonists had gone to America earlier, and those had found a home in or near Sandusky, Ohio. These were looked up, and their advice was sought.

**How they got to Dakota**

Naturally they wanted to engage in agriculture here too and, in so far as possible, in the same manner as they were used to it in Russia; and furthermore the immigrants wanted to stay together, and for that they needed elbow room, that is to say, a lot of empty land. These people knew that they might be the first arrivals, but they wouldn’t remain the only ones. After them would come thousands. These first ones saw themselves as quartermasters of the whole army of immigrants from South Russia. For such an immigration Ohio did not, of course, offer enough room, even though many people would have liked to keep them there and did everything to get them to stay. And so a different, larger area for settlement had to be found. The winter was to be used for this task. The winter of 1872-73 was, incidentally, a very severe one in the East — terribly cold and snowy. In order to find a suitable area for settlement, individuals took distant journeys to different states of the Union during that winter. On these journeys they came to

Russian-German Settlements

Michigan, Illinois, Iowa, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Nebraska, and Kansas, maybe even farther southwest. But they did not find what they were looking for. January went by, February came; they wanted to begin field work in the spring on their own land. Many began to doubt that they had been wise to emigrate to America. Then the people heard as if by chance of Dakota, with its broad, empty prairies, and five of them decided to visit Dakota. These five, Georg Jassmann, Christian Jassmann, Georg Jassmann, Jr., Heinrich Sieler, and Dominik Stoller, were the first Germans from South Russia who stepped on Dakota ground. In Ohio their friends counseled against the whole plan; they shouldn't even think of Dakota because Dakota was in ill repute in the whole East because of its cold winters, its blizzards, its hot winds in the summer, and its Indian unrest. Nevertheless these five went to visit Dakota. They arrived in Yankton about mid-February. The railroad did not go farther. And although they had prepared themselves for bitter cold and a lot of snow because of the predictions in Ohio, they were most pleasantly disappointed because they met the most wonderful spring weather in this disreputable Dakota. While everything in Ohio was still frozen in ice and snow, the farmers in Dakota were busy in the fields. They inquired about conditions for settlement in the land office in Yankton; they rented a horse-drawn carriage, took along a surveyor, and drove out onto the wide prairie. Yes, here was an area as they had wished for, exactly like in Russia, so they thought. The wide, wide prairie reminded them of the steppes on the Black Sea. They drove around on the prairie for several days, came as far as Milltown and had a tough choice to make. About twenty miles northwest of Yankton—they were already on the way back to Yankton—they had the surveyor measure land for them. Here I would like to add how it came about that some of the first settlers were able to obtain so much land, 8 to 20 quarter sections, even though according to law three quarter sections was the most that a single settler could claim. They explained to the land officials that three quarter sections weren't enough for them because they had much more in Russia. They said they were the first ones of a large flock of immigrants; after them hundreds more would come, and wherever they went the whole stream would

follow. Dakota had, as was said before, a bad reputation; here now the government had the prospect of many desirable immigrants to Dakota. So it was probably felt that one had to help along a bit and to close one eye when land was claimed in the name of someone else. So they acquired land in the name of people who probably didn’t even exist, paid for it in six months, and bought it from the unknown owners. I leave open whether things really were like this, but I was told by a trustworthy source that this advice was given to the people in the land office itself, but that this way of claiming land was tolerated for only a short time. When the stream of immigration really came to Dakota, this practice was stopped.

Our scouts traveled back to Ohio after they had secured their land and told their countrymen, just like those Israelites did, about the good land that they had discovered and especially about the beautiful spring weather that they had encountered. People who wanted to keep these immigrants in Ohio tried to discredit these pioneers, calling them secret land agents, who were paid to entice poor people to the inhospitable Dakota. They declared their description of the spring weather in Dakota to be a lie, because it had to be much colder in Dakota than in Ohio since it was much further northwest. Besides that, the settlers in Dakota would never be secure from Indian attacks; all available military had been ordered to Dakota. As a matter of fact, Indian disturbances had broken out in Dakota. But obviously those scouts had not seen or heard anything of that. There the poor immigrants stood between Scilla and Charybdis: whom should they believe? They finally decided to follow their leaders to Dakota, even if with heavy hearts.

In Sandusky a railroad car was leased to Yankton, and now they all went to Dakota with everything they had. Meanwhile March had come. When they got to Sioux City, they didn’t notice much of the Dakota spring; on the contrary, there was a light snow and it was bitter cold. But the people didn’t mind because they weren’t in Dakota yet and in Dakota it would surely be different. Yes, it was different, all right, and how! The closer the train with our friends got to Yankton, the more it had to work through the snow, and Yankton was almost buried in snow. In addition, there was a Siberian cold. One can imagine what the poor scouts had to listen to from their countrymen. Now the people in Ohio were right after all in their description of Dakota, and their scouts were liars, swindlers, and cheaters. Some didn’t even want to leave the railroad car; they had had enough of Dakota; they wanted to return to Ohio with the next train. Merchants in Yankton heard of the new
arrivals, came to the station, and were witnesses to the bitter mood that had fallen on the people. They did what they could to calm the excited ones and told them that their delegates who had been here earlier did not deceive them. Winter had returned; no one was responsible for that. After much talk they were finally persuaded to come into town, where quarters were found for them. And even if many of these first ones could not become reconciled to the idea of remaining in Dakota forever, almost all stayed nevertheless.

The first settlements in Dakota

As was mentioned, the first quartermasters had claimed land approximately 20 miles northwest of Yankton, and all the families from the first train settled around these first homesteads. They named their settlement after the large harbor and merchant city on the Black Sea: Odessa. Odessa still lies in Yankton County. And as new trains of immigrants from Russia arrived, new settlements sprang up, like the settlement of Worms several miles to the west of Odessa, named after the Khersonian colony of Worms from which the settlers came. Then came Petersburg northwest of Worms, and north of Petersburg there was Friedenstal. Worms still lies in Yankton County, but Petersburg and Friedenstal already lie in Bon Homme County.

It got to be a large stream of immigrants that flowed from South Russia to Dakota. Not a month went by in the first years that did not bring newcomers from Russia. And so the settlements stretched further and further north. Already in the middle of the 70s the northern border of Yankton and Bon Homme counties were crossed, and the invasion of Hutchinson County began. Today’s Hutchinson County was divided in two parts in the 70s—the northern half was called Armstrong, the southern Hutchinson. In 1880 the two counties were joined into the present-day Hutchinson County. Already in 1879 we found several settlements of im-

6. Odessa settlement was three miles northwest of Lesterville. To the west was Worms, on the border of Yankton and Bon Homme counties. Petersburg, also called Saint Petersburg, was southeast and Friedenstal was southwest of Scotland in Bon Homme County.

7. Hutchinson County, with its present boundaries, was established by the territorial legislative assembly in January 1871. During the 1873-1874 session, a bill was passed dividing the county at a line running west and east. The northern half was called Armstrong County. The two counties were reunited in 1879, but Armstrong County officials defied this legislative act until 1881, when the courts compelled them to hand over their books to the Hutchinson County officials. Donald D. Parker, comp., History of Our County and State: [Hutchinson County] ([Brookings]: South Dakota State College, [1959]), pp. 2-3H.
migrants from Russia in Armstrong County, and in 1881 the first settlers moved into Douglas County. Although Yankton and Bon Homme County took in the first settlers, Hutchinson County became the real center for all those settlers coming from Russia, because in none of these counties did they gain as much influence—and have kept it until today—as in Hutchinson County. The stream of immigrants from Russia did not flow much further north, east, or west than Hutchinson County. When the land in these counties began to run out, the immigrants from Russia made a large leap and began to settle the counties McPherson, McIntosh, Edmunds, Walworth, Potter, and Campbell in the middle part of Dakota Territory because the part lying in between had in the meantime been claimed by settlers of other nationalities. The first settlers from Russia moved to those northern counties in the spring of 1885.8

Those were hard times that the “Russlanders” (Russländer), as they called themselves, had to endure in those first years. It must have been a part of the providential wisdom of God that he showed Dakota to those pioneers in the best light in February 1873. If they had seen Dakota two weeks later, who knows if they would have found the courage to settle here. Dakota’s climate has gotten much milder since the population got denser. But in the 70s and 80s there were terribly cold winters and a great deal of snow. Whoever was in Dakota in the winter of ’80-’81 has seen snow as he never saw before or since. In February of that year the snow lay 3 ft. high in an even layer and stayed like that until the middle of April. On the 10th, 11th, and 13th of April there were cruel blizzards. Feed became so scarce that it was impossible to buy, and fuel was so scarce that sometimes two families moved together and burned whatever would burn because the railroad could not bring in any coal. And whoever experienced the terrible blizzard of January 12, 1888, will never forget it. It claimed not only many hundreds of head of cattle, but also caused the death of many people, mostly school children, in Hutchinson County. One family alone lost 5 children in the blizzard, another 4; in one school district 21 children lost their lives.

But neither the cold of the winters—provided that snowstorms didn’t claim animals or people, and provided that the fodder didn’t

8. For further discussion of Russian-German settlement patterns and a map of county settlement by nationality, see Richter, “‘Gebt ihr den Vorzug’: The German-Language Press of North and South Dakota,” pp. 190-92.
Then and now: above is an 1874 map of the southeastern Dakota counties settled by Russian-Germans. It shows the divided Hutchinson and Armstrong counties as well as the Odessa settlement in Yankton County. Below is a 1964 map of the same area.
The homes and Russian chimneys of the Russian-German pioneers were not only warm but were also sturdy. These modern photographs show a Russian-German house that still stands near Freeman in Hutchinson County.
give out too early in the spring—nor the heat of the summers troubled our settlers very much. They were protected against the cold by thick-walled houses made from clay or sod with the cozy, splendid Russian ovens in them. And what's good against cold is also good against heat. The houses were warm in the winter and cool in the summer. And they didn't really freeze outside either because of the beautiful warm Russian lamb coats and hats. With hat drawn over the ears, the fur coat tightly drawn around the neck and body, and the feet in felt boots, a person could lie in the snow the whole night.

What made the times so hard was the extremely low prices that they received for their agricultural products. For what little they had they received very little. They often had to sell wheat for less than 40¢; other grains stood in the same price relationship. Corn wasn't raised much at all. For eggs and butter they were usually offered not much more than 5¢ in the cities. Yes, those were hard times for the farmers. But by making do with little and with tenacious perseverance they endured those times.

The first Russian-Germans did not come to America with empty hands; they were well-to-do in Russia and some were downright wealthy, but how quickly did the Russian money disappear in Dakota! They wanted to pursue agriculture the same way as in Russia, i.e., with hired hands, but the people, whom they had been able to hire cheaply in Russia, had to be paid dearly here. They often began too extravagantly and expensively, and the Russian rubels disappeared; the people didn't know where the money went. If only they had brought the Russian rubels in silver or gold! For their paper money the local banks gave them only about two-thirds of true value and often not even that. With expensive farming practices and the bad times here, it was no wonder that many not only did not get ahead but went backwards and became impoverished. And those were usually the very ones who had been big men in Russia.

Since the Russian-Germans did not want to be Christians in name only, but were very serious about their Christianity, they soon united in Christian congregations. And even though they

9. Approximately two-thirds of the Russian-German immigrants to the United States were Lutherans, one-fourth were Catholics, and the rest were of several other faiths. In the Dakotas, the Russian-Germans were primarily Lutherans, Catholics, Mennonites, and Hutterites, with many other groups represented as well. Sallet, *Russian-German Settlements in the United States*, pp. 6, 13. Bischoff, while speaking generally of all groups here, is primarily concerned with the Lutherans of the Iowa Synod.
didn't have clergymen immediately, they nevertheless came together regularly on Sundays for services, usually more than once. They let a talented Christian—and they were blessed by God with many of these—read a sermon and deliver a free lecture to them in the afternoon. Sunday was observed scrupulously by everyone, and in their daily lives God's word was also very important. There were probably few homes in which the day's work was not begun with God's word and prayer.

Naturally the first meeting places were private homes, but as soon as possible the building of churches was begun, and a number of smaller or larger churches rose in the settlements. The first church building deserves to be mentioned. Odessa, the first settlement, also built the first church, and for those days it was quite a large and expensive church. Its pretty, high tower rose far above the land. And when the church was finished, the congregation was as happy as a bird who has found his nest. But there were also worries because of the large debt, which would burden the congregation for many, many years. They had heard that it was not hard to pay off church debts in America through collections in other congregations, and so they also wanted to collect for the Odessa church. Two collectors were chosen and they went on a collection tour. I don't think that a longer collection trip was ever undertaken for any church. The two collectors not only crossed the whole state of Iowa from Sioux City to Dubuque, their trip took them all the way to Pittsburg, Pen. And the result of this collection trip? In Pennsylvania they got from the well-known Rugg Brothers, known as the Ruggists, so much help that they could begin their homeward trip to Dakota. They had set out with empty hands and they returned with empty hands, but they were richer in experience.

The mainstream of the German-Russian immigration at first flowed to Dakota, but it soon (in the mid-70s) divided into three branches, of which one went to Nebraska, and the other to Kansas.

In Platte and Clay counties in Nebraska, as well as in Russel County, Kansas, large settlements of Russian-Germans came into existence. These settlements were not founded from Dakota, but directly from Russia.

Concerning the religious condition of the first settlers

I have already reported that the first arrivals settled in Yankton County about 20 miles northwest of Yankton and founded Odessa.
Here the first congregation of Russian-Germans was founded and the first church built. This first congregation could not be called Lutheran; it consisted of Lutherans and Reformed. This congregation fell into the hands of a preacher called Heimle, who was supposed to have been a Catholic priest and who held Lutheran services for the Lutherans and reformed services for the Reformed. When this clergyman turned out to be a notorious drunkard, he had to pack up and leave, and the two congregations were divided; the Reformed withdrew and the church stayed with the Lutherans who were served for several years by Pastor Doescher, who at that time still belonged to the Missouri Synod. After Pastor Doescher had also given up his post—about 1877—Pastor F. W. Beckmann was called by the congregation. As already mentioned, several other settlements grew up around the first settlement of Odessa, namely, Worms, Petersburg, and Friedenstal, most of them in Bon Homme County. Pastor Beckmann lived in Yankton and served these four congregations from there.

In 1879 the C. M. & St. Paul Railroad was built from Marion Junction to the Missouri River, and along this railroad rose the towns of Freeman, Menno, Scotland, etc., which now became the center of social, political, religious, and business life. In Scotland a Lutheran congregation of Russian-Germans was formed immediately after the town was started. This congregation now assumed first rank after the parsonage had been transferred from Yankton to Scotland. When Pastor Beckmann had to give up his post due to old age, the parish called Pastor C. Wiederaenders in 1882. In 1883 the Lutheran church in Scotland was built and on 8 July, a Sunday, it was consecrated. This Sunday will be unforgettable for all who were at the dedication because there was one of the most terrible hail-storms in this part of Dakota. Pastor Wiederaenders only stayed in Scotland until 1884 and then answered a call to western Nebraska. The parish, after it had been without a preacher for a time, then called a pastor by the name of Mueller, of whom it was not known to which group he really belonged. He served the congregation for eight years. After he left, the congregation again turned to the Lutheran community of Iowa and called Pastor J. Roesch of Texas, who served the congregation from 1893 to 1897. Pastor Roesch was succeeded by Pastor W.

10. For more information about Reformed congregations of Russian-Germans, see Rath, Black Sea Germans in the Dakotas, pp. 147, 166-90.
Wilks, and he in turn was relieved by Pastor Wiederaenders, again for only two years, until in 1907 Pastor G. Zink was called, who is still with the congregation today.

With the increased immigration from Russia, the settlements went further and further north. Already in the end of the '70s, the southern townships of Hutchinson Co. had large settlements. On 1 April 1880, the Lutheran congregation of Hutchinson County was founded, and it included the following settlements: Kulm, Rosenfeld, Blumenfeld, Eigenfeld, Hoffnungstal, and Friedenstal, to which Parkston was soon added, so that, for a time, the parish included nine ministries, which were served by one pastor and which together formed the Lutheran Emmanuel Congregation. At that time there were no churches, but worship services were held in private homes. The English schools were also held in private homes. The first church of the congregation was built in the settlement of Rosenfeld in 1881. Then came the churches in Kulm and Eigenfeld in 1885. The former two churches are still standing; the Eigenfeld church was destroyed by a storm a few years ago and had to be rebuilt. In 1887 the church in Brig was built and in 1889 the one in Dennewitz. In the same year Parkston also built a little church.

When in the year 1886 the C. M. & St. Paul Railroad laid track from Yankton through Scotland to Mitchell, the new towns of Tripp and Parkston rose along side. In these towns Lutheran congregations of Russian-Germans came into being. Because the settlement of Friedenstal lay in the vicinity of Tripp, this congregation moved its center to Tripp and built a church there in 1887. Hoffnungstal and Neu-Posttal decided to build a church much later.

A major difficulty for some time was the German school. To be sure, the pastor did what he could for the children but what could he accomplish in the far-flung parish? If the young people were not to become uncivilized and estranged from the church, something had to be done. And something was done.

In the year 1890 a school club was founded in the Emmanuel Congregation. This club built a large, two-story school house next to the parsonage in the congregation of Dennewitz. Here the...
children were to get not only schooling, but also room and board. It contained a classroom, church, diningroom, and bedrooms for 70 to 80 children. Later it was enlarged through an addition, which contained the teacher’s residence. Now the school could be furnished, and a teacher and a housekeeper hired. And without a doubt this school has been a blessing for many children. In this school the pastors Hausen, Krumstock, and the teachers Fischer and Hoeb taught, one after the other. The school house is no longer standing today. It was reduced to ashes by lightning in 1902. But it has fulfilled its purpose, because the different settlements had grown strong enough to erect German schools in their own midst.

An early view of Parkston’s main street indicates the farming interests of the German immigrants who settled the area. Note the German names on the various businesses.

When in 1882 a number of families, mostly from the Eigenfeld settlement, moved to Douglas County, a congregation was formed there as well. It had ties to the congregation that had immigrated from Silesia and had settled near Plainview, Douglas County, about ten miles to the north. This Russian-German congregation built its church in 1888. It dissolved the ties with the Silesian community in the beginning of the following year and joined the Emmanuel Church. But after about two years it again joined the
Silesian congregation until it became independent in 1897 and got its own pastor.

In 1891 the congregation in Parkston separated from the Emmanuel Church, became independent, and named Pastor F. Walther its pastor. Under his successor, Pastor W. Schuhmacher, this congregation joined the congregation in the Rosenfeld settlement, and in 1905 Eigenfeld also joined them. With that, a new parish was formed to the north of the Emmanuel Church, and it was served by the following persons: F. Walther, W. Schuhmacher, O. Pett, A. Ottersberg, and J. Lambertus, who still heads the parish. With that, the Emmanuel Church had gotten smaller by three or four congregations, and its pastor had a lighter workload.

The first pastor of the Emmanuel Congregation was the author of this report, G. A. Bischoff, who came to Dakota in 1879, in order to help the old pastor Beckmann. When the Emmanuel Congregation was founded in Hutchinson County in 1880 it named him its pastor. When he laid down his post after 16 years in 1896, the office remained vacant for a long time. The congregation in Tripp had meanwhile gotten so strong that it could consider becoming independent. It carried out its long-held wish and peaceably dissolved the connection with the Emmanuel Church during the time when the Emmanuel Church did not have a preacher. It called Pastor H. Koepp, who only stayed a year. After a long vacancy Pastor A. Hein was called, who is still at his post in Tripp.

After my departure, the Emmanuel Church called Pastor A. Hahn, whose successor was J. Knotz, who in turn was succeeded by J. A. Grueber. Now the congregation is served by Pastor H. Gocken and currently consists of the four settlements of Dennewitz, Kulm, Hoffnungstal, and New Posttal.

When the congregation in Douglas County became independent at the end of the 90s, it called Pastor H. Gocken, and when Pastor Gocken followed the call of the Emmanuel Church, it called Pastor D. Weger who is still there.

And so, over the years, the old Emmanuel Congregation has branched out into four independent parishes where previously one pastor had to do the work and was able to do it. Now four persons have their work: Gocken at the old Emmanuel Congregation, Hein in Tripp, Lambertus in Parkston, and D. Weger in Delmont. In 1884 the first church was built. In the 25 years since then, twelve churches and five schools have been built.
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