European Settlement and Ethnicity Patterns on the Agricultural Frontiers of South Dakota

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The settlement of European immigrants on the agricultural frontiers of South Dakota largely took place in the years between the end of the Civil War and the turn of the century. According to the 1900 United States census, 401,570 people occupied South Dakota at the close of that settlement era. Of that number, the foreign-born and their children (foreign stock) accounted for 244,523, or over sixty percent of the total. This figure represented the highest proportion recorded in any census of the state, and by the standards of most states at that time, it was a very high proportion. Only a few states, mostly midwestern, could claim comparable foreign contributions to their populations. A major factor in the settlement of South Dakota was clearly the immigration of agricultural settlers of northwest European origins. In a large sense, the culture of the state owes much to their presence.

The aim of this study is to provide background information on the temporal and spatial patterns of ethnic settlement in South
Dakota and on the role played by ethnic groups in molding the state’s distinctive agrarian society. For organizational purposes, the body of the essay is divided into three sections. The first discusses the general processes that brought all of South Dakota into the settled ecumene of the Upper Midwest, for the settlement patterns of South Dakota, or any other state, cannot be treated in isolation. The external forces that brought various groups to different parts of the state must be seen in the context of developments on midwestern frontiers in general. The second section describes the ethnic pattern that developed over time, focusing on the formation of communities and regional consciousness within the boundaries of the state. The last section deals with ethnic culture and its relationship to the agrarian society that emerged in South Dakota by the early part of the twentieth century.

The Settlement Process

To be properly understood, the settlement of South Dakota must be seen in the context of the settlement of the larger region of which it is a part—the Upper Midwest. The states that make up this region (Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, and the Dakotas) stand together in that they shared a common settlement experience. All of them were opened to white settlement through a succession of related Indian treaties. Much of their land was made available to potential settlers through federal land policies that sought to foster a certain type of agricultural settlement. All of them actively pursued recruitment strategies designed to lure northwestern Europeans to their agricultural frontiers. And, all of them ultimately fell under the economic control of the financial interests (banking, milling, railroads) of the regional emporia at Chicago, Milwaukee, and the Twin Cities, a situation that did much to shape their politics. Most importantly, the agricultural communities of the region were often linked to one another through a complex pattern of migration.

The advance of settlement in the Upper Midwest was in no way steady or relentless. On the contrary, it varied considerably in its efficiency and direction over time. Temporally, it responded to the boom and bust cycle of American economic conditions and, especially on the plains, to the cyclical pattern of climatic conditions. The frontier was known to retreat as well as advance. Spatially, the advance of settlement was influenced by a myriad of
factors—environmental preference, Indian relations, the course of rivers and waterways, the colonization efforts of railroads and speculators, and so forth. A map of the settlement frontier at any point in time is a map of salients and backwaters, rarely a distinct line.

In spite of these complexities, one can generalize about the configuration of the frontier for the region as a whole, and to do so for 1860—the approximate time when the midwestern frontier first impinged on the present-day boundaries of South Dakota—produces the following. Starting in Nebraska, the frontier followed the course of the Missouri River with the exception of a westward penetrating salient along the Platte River Valley. Further north, the Missouri valley frontier took on a salient shape based on Sioux City, Iowa, and penetrated northwestward into Dakota Territory to a point just beyond Yankton. From the base of that salient, the frontier line swung sharply back into central Iowa, from where it swung gently northward to meet the Iowa-Minnesota border at roughly its midpoint. This rather abrupt retreat left all of northwestern Iowa and southwestern Minnesota well outside the settled ecumene. Farther north in Minnesota, the line formed another westward pointing salient, based this time on New Ulm and extending up the Minnesota valley toward Dakota Territory. A second Minnesota salient was located farther north. It followed the ecotone between the prairie and forest that extends in a broad arc from east-central Minnesota to the Red River Valley of the North. From the base of that salient, the frontier meandered in an easterly direction across Minnesota and Wisconsin to the shore of Green Bay on Lake Michigan.\(^1\)

The configuration of the 1860 frontier has several implications for the settlement of South Dakota. In the first place, it marks a temporary lull in the frontier process in the Upper Midwest. The frontier was destined to hold this position or, in some cases, even retreat over the next half-dozen years as the nation fought the Civil War and as grasshoppers and marauding Indians buffeted the frontier zone. This lull in migration meant that the initial settlements (1850s) in the Missouri valley and the lower Big Sioux valley of Dakota Territory were more or less stillborn. Like all

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midwestern frontiers during this period, they were cut off by events from the life-giving commitment of capital and new settlers. Secondly, the tremendous lag in settlement advancement in northwestern Iowa and southwestern Minnesota, which was a reflection of the slow acceptance of open-prairie settlement in the preceding decades, meant that the bulk of what was to become eastern South Dakota was about as far from the advancing frontier as it could be, a distance that would not be covered until the beginning of the 1880s. Therefore, the early phases of settlement in Dakota Territory favored the Missouri valley and its tributaries on the one hand and the Red River Valley of the North, to which one of the Minnesota salients pointed, on the other. Much of eastern South Dakota was not destined to experience the initial settlement of the renewed waves of European immigrants that descended on the Midwest in the decade following the Civil War. It would instead experience the later waves of immigrants that arrived in the 1880s and the 1890s or the children of the earlier waves, who at that time began to move westward from the maturing communities on the older frontiers of Iowa, Minnesota, and Wisconsin.

In the 1890s, the broad pattern of settlement advance in the Upper Midwest would again directly affect the South Dakota experience. This time period witnessed another substantial slowing of the settlement process. The frontier, in fact, stalled roughly along the line of the Missouri River in the Dakotas and on the eastern margins of the Sand Hills in Nebraska. The only substantial settlement west of that line in 1890 was in Nebraska’s Platte River Valley and in the Black Hills enclave of extreme western South Dakota. The halt was the result of a combination of factors, including the onset of drier, less hospitable environmental conditions on the western plains, the existence of large Indian reservations directly in the path of further settlement advance, and a marked slowdown in the rate of agricultural immigration to the United States, which was linked to a period of contraction in American agriculture.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, the situation changed and the advance of settlement resumed, taking the frontier across the western Dakotas and well into central Montana. The sources of agricultural pioneers had changed radically in the intervening years, however. Many of the settlers who settled the west-river counties were of Old-American stock. A considerable proportion entered from the south and were part of an American migration stream that had moved westward from the middle-
Atlantic states through the upper South and the Ohio valley to Missouri, Nebraska, Kansas, and Texas. The influx of this element into the western Dakotas is evidenced today by a marked northward bend to the linguistic boundary between middle-Atlantic and New England speech types that occurs along the Missouri valley in the Dakotas.\(^2\) The halt of settlement along the Missouri and the shift in migration patterns that occurred once settlement resumed resulted in a fairly distinct western boundary of ethnic settlement in South Dakota. While many exceptions to the rule may be found, it is generally true that European settlement dominates the state east of the river, while a particular brand of Old-American culture prevails west of the river. This difference is an important factor in the tendency for South Dakotans to speak of "East River" and "West River" as separate regions or places.\(^3\)

The progress of the settlement frontier in South Dakota is mapped in Figure 1, using data from the United States decennial censuses. The standard two-persons-per-square-mile census definition of settlement is used. The decennial isolines on the map reflect much of what has been suggested by the regional patterns discussed above. By 1870, the counties of Yankton, Clay, Union, and part of Lincoln were the only ones that could be called settled using the census definition. Much of the population had arrived during the years 1868-1873, a relatively prosperous period in American history that saw the reestablishment of the old Sioux-City-based frontier salient along the Missouri and its northward offshoot along the lower reaches of the Big Sioux River Valley.\(^4\) The advance had been abruptly terminated in 1873 when the country plunged into a major economic depression. The depression was overtly precipitated by the financial collapse of the Northern Pacific railroad in 1873. Even before that time, however, a general uncertainty had manifested itself in congressional dissatisfaction with railroad finances and land management in frontier areas. This situation had a retarding effect on settlement


\(^3\) The east-river/west-river regionalism is based on more than ethnic differences. Significant differences in environment and economy also exist between the two halves of the state.

\(^4\) The early settlement of the salient, which had begun in 1858 following the treaty with the Yankton Sioux, had been almost entirely abandoned by 1862 in the face of repeated Indian attacks, grasshopper plagues, and drought. The area was in fact restored to the Indians for a short time after the Civil War.
in South Dakota in that it helped to kill a bid to secure a land-grant railroad from Yankton to the north via the James River Valley. This failure not only deprived South Dakota of a land-grant railroad, it also eliminated the prospect of a rapid northward extension of settlement in the 1870s based on Yankton and forestalled railroad construction in general until the late 1870s. Also retarding the advance of settlement in the mid-1870s was a period of intense drought and grasshopper infestation.

The bulk of the east-river country underwent settlement during the period 1879-1886, a period of national prosperity that coincided with the approach of railroad construction along the eastern boundary of South Dakota and settlement in northwestern Iowa and southwestern Minnesota. Known as the “Great Dakota Boom,” the period is characterized by a very rapid east to west extension of the frontier, often spearheaded by the railroads, several of which were competitively laying a series of more or less parallel lines over the eastern half of the state. By 1887, the east-river rail network was complete. The towns of Eureka, Bowdle, Gettysburg, Pierre, and Chamberlain marked the western termini of the railways and the temporary halt of the frontier along the Missouri River. The only major areas east of the Missouri that were not settled by 1890 were reservations set aside for the Indians.

On the other side of the Missouri, most of the west-river country still belonged to the Indians at the end of the 1880s. All but a narrow strip along the western boundary of the present state was part of the Great Sioux Reservation. This narrow western strip included the Black Hills and the territory served by a number of north-south running railways and trails that had been established in conjunction with the range-cattle industry. The opening of the west-river country to white settlement began in 1889 with the extinguishment of Indian title to nine million acres of land on the Great Sioux Reservation. Relatively little agricultural settlement occurred before 1900, however, mainly due to the lack of railway connections in the west and the continued availability of good agricultural lands farther east. Instead, the initial opportunity went to the cattleman, and the west-river country remained largely his domain until around 1902, when homesteading began in earnest.

Between roughly 1902 and 1915, a second Dakota boom saw the systematic settlement of much of the so-called surplus lands of the western reservations. The map of settlement advance (Figure 1) accordingly shows a substantial movement of the frontier westward from the Missouri and eastward from the Black Hills during the period 1900-1910. By 1910, the range-cattle industry had largely disappeared from the most important zone of new settlement that stretched between Pierre and the Black Hills. It receded before the advance of dry-land agriculture and the new upsurge in railroad construction that linked the Black Hills with the old rail termini at Pierre and Chamberlain.

Thus, the agricultural settlement of South Dakota took place during three distinct boom periods—1868-1873, 1879-1886, and 1902-1915. Because of the differential timing of these periods, the pool of potential settlers was quite different in each of the boom periods. Each of the three corresponding settlement areas in South Dakota received a peculiar mix of immigrants determined by the location of potential source areas and the direction of existing migration streams at the time.

The southeastern corner of the state, which was settled during the earliest period, received a heavy proportion of Old-American

Promotional efforts of the early twentieth century included post cards and flattering verses.
As much as one-half of the population in the southeastern counties during the early 1870s was reportedly “Yankee.” Many were veterans of the Union Army who had drifted to the frontier in the aftermath of the war. They were a naturally restless lot, and many did not remain in the area long. A smaller, but potentially more permanent, element of the population was immigrant and largely Scandinavian. The late 1860s and the early 1870s was a time of heavy emigration from the poorer agricultural districts of the Scandinavian countries. Much of it was motivated by depressingly poor harvests and, in some cases, terrible famine. As a consequence, this emigration predominantly consisted of family groups—a common characteristic of migration streams motivated by stressful circumstances. These immigrants came to the Midwest with the intention of locating areas where they could take land and settle permanently. In the southeastern counties of South Dakota, they rather quickly formed large and rather stable contiguous settlements, often displacing many of the earlier Yankee settlers.

Detailed study of the large Swedish settlement in Clay County, known as Dalesburg, found that most of its settlers were more or less direct immigrants from Europe. These people were anything but haphazard in the manner in which they made their way to the Dakota frontier. They knew something of their destination before they left Sweden and, depending on their resources, mapped out a fairly direct route to their ultimate destination. In fact, strong routes of migration were established early. Emigrants who left provinces that had a long emigration history proceeded to Clay County via settlements in Wisconsin, Minnesota, or Iowa where they knew people who had emigrated in earlier years. Following some of these routes involved temporary stays with friends and relatives along the way. Some who proceeded in this fashion took several years to reach their ultimate destination. Others, who had no friends or relatives in America, accomplished the journey in a number of months. The important point is that most of the Scandinavian settlers of this area were recent.

immigrants who had relatively little experience with American culture and economy. They made their way to the Dakota frontier quite directly or by way of acquaintances that shared their culture, and they settled down among people who had emigrated from the same agricultural regions of the homeland. The potential for cultural maintenance in these settlements was accordingly quite considerable.

In contrast to the counties settled during the 1868-1873 period, the east-river counties that were settled during the Great Dakota Boom of the 1880s drew their populations from more diverse sources. As in the southeastern counties, initial settlers were primarily Old-Americans, most of them from the old midwestern states of Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Wisconsin, and Iowa, but also some from New York and parts of New England. Indeed, John C. Hudson found in his detailed study of Sanborn County that Iowa, Michigan, and New York State picnics were commonplace events during the county's frontier heyday. The evidence suggests, however, that the initial preponderance of Old-Americans soon gave way to the foreign-born, who seemed to be more disposed to permanent settlement. In fact, Douglas Chittick claims that the severe drought of 1886-1887 effected a substantial exodus of Old-American stock from the east-river counties that was replaced by the continued arrival of European immigrants—thereby changing the composition of population in eastern South Dakota in the course of just a few years.

Compared to the southeastern counties, the composition of the foreign-born in the Great Dakota Boom region was not only more diverse, but, in general, this foreign-born population had come to the Dakota frontier by less direct means. The earlier Scandinavians were soon joined by Germans, Bohemians, Dutch, Swiss, Finns, and German-Russians, as well as many other groups. A significant proportion of these new immigrants had resided for some time in the United States prior to their arrival on the Dakota frontier. Many who settled during this period were children who had accompanied parents to frontier settlements in Minnesota, Iowa, and Wisconsin twenty to thirty years earlier. As these older settlements matured in the 1880s, the pioneers' offspring often found insufficient opportunity. As this cohort of children reached maturity, married, and looked for a means of livelihood,
they perceived that their best chances lay farther west on the Dakota frontier. Although they were foreign-born and were still inclined to marry and settle among their own kind, this generation also had more experience with American ways and the American agricultural economy than their parents. As a result, the potential for cultural maintenance in the new settlements was less. This is not to say that the foreign-born population of this region of South Dakota was entirely a product of midwestern “stepwise” migration. Many still came directly off the boat, especially among certain groups such as the German-Russians. On the whole, however, the proportion of long-term American residents was relatively high among the foreign-born who settled during the Great Dakota Boom.

The notion that midwestern migration to the frontier proceeded in a stepwise fashion from settlement to settlement is an old one. Studies have consistently demonstrated that each frontier gave up its youth to a new western frontier roughly one generation after its own settlement had been completed. In South Dakota’s major east-river land boom, therefore, the major recruiting areas were found in southeastern Minnesota, western Wisconsin, and east-central Iowa—regions that were densely settled by German and Scandinavian immigrants in the decades before the Civil War. In fact, these areas were especially targeted for propaganda. Immigration officials, town agents, and railroad agents commonly gave speeches, distributed pamphlets printed in several languages, and set up exhibits at the agricultural fairs of these targeted regions throughout the late 1870s and the 1880s. Most territories competed in this way for settlers. The Dakotas were especially aggressive in this endeavor because they had to overcome a generally negative image of climatic extremes, grasshoppers, and Indians.11

In the case of the last Dakota boom (1902-1915), the migration fields were again quite different. This time, settlers were recruited from the southern plains states, to some extent from the older settlements in the east-river area, and, finally, from eastern

Much of this last surge was motivated by the propaganda of the so-called dry-farming movement, which promoted the idea that the semiarid western plains could be conquered agriculturally through the use of new dry-farming techniques such as deep plowing, cultivated fallow, and drought-resistant plant varieties. Many who came to the west-river area were disciples of the movement, but not experienced farmers. Recruitment was heavy among ranchers, tenants, and agricultural laborers on the southern plains and among urban dwellers in the East who were attracted to the possibility of possessing a farm on one of America's last frontiers. Many found dry-farming to be far more difficult and uncertain than they had anticipated and eventually left. The hardy ones that persisted became the core of the west-river agricultural population. This population contained some foreign-born elements, but it was essentially very different from the population east of the Missouri River.

When considering the migrations that brought settlers to South Dakota's agricultural frontiers, it is important to keep in mind that timing and information flow were the two crucial factors that determined events. Timing meant that certain source areas, both in America and overseas, were "ripe" for migration to new frontiers at certain times. The flow of information was important in that people seldom left their homes for a new life in an unsettled land without first acquiring what they considered to be reasonably reliable information about their prospective destination. Pioneers did not wander blindly into the unknown grasslands. They apparently followed well-used information networks specific to their ethnic group. These networks linked widely scattered settlements and enclaves in Europe and the Midwest and served as an effective means of spreading information about economic opportunity wherever it arose. Once a few members of any group went to and settled in a new place, their success was reported in the older American settlements or in Europe and uncertainty was reduced. The flow of emigrants to the new frontier then proceeded with relative confidence because the information

12. For a recent discussion of the participation of the east-river settlements in the last Dakota boom, see Herbert S. Schell, "Widening Horizons at the Turn of the Century: The Last Dakota Land Boom," *South Dakota History* 12 (Summer/Fall 1982): 93-117.

feedbacks were private (letters and word of mouth) or, at worst, semipublic (foreign language newspapers) and were therefore trustworthy. While “Dakota Fever” may have been widespread, the information and migration flows that led to the frontier were discrete—as were the population subgroups that followed them and eventually occupied different parts of South Dakota.¹⁴

The Ethnic Pattern

Accompanying this article is a series of maps (Figures 2-7) that depict the 1910 geographic distribution of the six most numerically significant ethnic groups in the state. The maps are based on data from the 1910 United States census, the timing of which is late enough to show both east- and west-river distributions. Each map imparts two pieces of information. The first is the number of people (circle size) residing in a county that belonged to a particular ethnic group or “stock.” Inclusion requires that the individual either was born in the particular mother country or was the American-born child of someone born in that country. The second piece of information is that group’s proportion of the total foreign stock residing in the county (shading). In other words, both the raw numbers and the relative importance of groups can be seen at the same time.¹⁵

A quick perusal of the maps will show that, even at the relatively gross scale of county data, a striking degree of localization or segregation of groups exists. To a large extent, ethnic groups tended to colonize particular areas of the state. This tendency is especially apparent in the eastern half of the state (one must bear in mind that the west-river patterns are difficult to interpret because the total foreign stock is usually a very small portion of the county population in the first place).¹⁶ Further, when ethnic groups are mapped at the scale of the individual farm, the segregation is even more pronounced. With the aid of platbooks, ethnic

¹⁴. For an excellent treatment of the kind of information flows that brought settlers to the various Dakota frontiers, see John C. Hudson, “Migration to an American Frontier,” Annals of the Association of American Geographers 66 (1976): 242-65. Swedish migration flows to Clay County are specifically treated in Ostergren, “Prairie Bound: Migration Patterns to a Swedish Settlement.”

¹⁵. Similar maps are published for the entire Upper Midwest in Ostergren, “Geographic Perspectives on the History of Settlement,” pp. 32-34.

¹⁶. In 1910, the foreign stock in South Dakota numbered 318,119 persons, or 54.4 percent of the total population of 583,888.
Figure 2. Swedish Stock, 1910 (19,638)

Percent of Total Foreign Stock

- 75 - 100
- 50 - 75
- 30 - 50
- 10 - 30
- 0 - 10

Legend:
- 5,000
- 3,000
- 1,000
- 200
land-ownership maps can be constructed with some labor (the names of land owners must be cross-checked with names in the manuscript census in order to determine ethnicity) for any east-river county, and the result will be a “patchwork-quilt” pattern of ethnic clustering.12 Thus, a basic geographic fact of ethnic settlement is the residential segregation that resulted from the natural desire to seek out one’s own kind and from the ever-present influence of the information networks.

One of the first foreign groups to settle South Dakota in large numbers was the Swedes. The bulk of the Swedish settlement was in the eastern counties of the east-river area, with the strongest concentrations in the extreme southeastern and northeastern corners of the state. During the 1860s, the first settlements were established in Union, Clay, and Minnehaha counties. A substantial portion of these settlers were direct immigrants from areas of agricultural distress in Sweden. Others came from earlier established settlements in central Iowa and northern Illinois. During the Great Dakota Boom, the heaviest Swedish concentrations developed in Grant, Roberts, Marshall, Day, and Brown counties. Many of these settlers were second-generation migrants out of the large Swedish settlements of east-central Minnesota and extreme western Wisconsin. The evidence also suggests some westward movement from east-river settlements to selected west-river counties after the turn of the century.

The Norwegians, second only to the Germans, were one of the largest ethnic groups in South Dakota in 1910 (Figure B). The Norwegian concentrations formed a more or less continuous band in the “row counties”— the easternmost tiers of counties along the border with Minnesota.13 The general geographical configuration of Norwegian settlement in the Upper Midwest is that of a sweeping arc stretching from south-central Wisconsin through central Minnesota to the Red River Valley of the North. The clustering along South Dakota’s eastern border is the westernmost extension of the central segment of this Norwegian “arc of settlement.” The first Norwegian settlements were located in the south-


18. Chittick, “Recipe for Nationality Stew,” p. 135, uses the term “row counties” to describe the location of the heaviest Norwegian concentrations.
Figure 3. Norwegian Stock, 1910 (48,721)
eastern counties of Union, Clay, and Yankton. As with the Swedes, these settlements received direct infusions of settlers from Norway, but linkages with older settlements in Iowa and Wisconsin were also important. In the Great Dakota Boom, Norwegian settlement spread along the Big Sioux and James valleys. In the majority of the row counties, the Norwegian share of the foreign stock exceeded fifty percent. In Lincoln County, it exceeded seventy-five percent. Many who settled these eastern counties came by way of the old Norwegian settlements in southeastern Minnesota and western Wisconsin, where considerable recruitment efforts were undertaken by the Dakota Territory Bureau of Immigration.19

The other Scandinavian group—the Danes—came via migration paths similar to those of the Norwegians. Their South Dakota settlements were essentially daughter settlements of older midwestern communities. The largest Danish settlement was in the vicinity of Viborg in Turner County, where the Danish stock accounted for nearly half of the foreign stock in 1910 (Figure 4). Major settlements were also established in Yankton, Clay, and Kingsbury counties. When the Danish distribution is added to the Swedish and Norwegian, the extent of the Scandinavian dominance all along the extreme eastern part of the state is apparent.

The Germans were the largest ethnic group, accounting for roughly one-fifth of the total foreign stock (Figure 5). If other German-speaking groups are included, such as the German-Russians, the Swiss, and the Austrians, the German element in the state probably exceeded one hundred thousand in number or one-third of the total. More so than any other group, the Germans developed settlements nearly everywhere in the state, including the west-river counties. The Germans were also less inclined to come in groups, migrating often as single families or individuals instead. They arrived in the state in a more or less continuous stream that spanned all settlement booms. Both Wisconsin and Illinois were important staging areas. Because of the great length of time that Germans had been arriving in the United States, many Dakota settlers were third generation. Many also came from blue-collar, nonfarm backgrounds in or around the industrial centers of Buffalo, Cleveland, Detroit, Saint Louis, Milwaukee, and Chicago. One researcher has suggested that of all groups, the

Figure 6. Russian* Stock, 1910 (30,678)

*Listed as Russian born in 1910 census, but actually German-Russians

Percent of Total Foreign Stock
- 6,000
- 3,000
- 1,000
- 200
- 75 - 100
- 50 - 75
- 30 - 50
- 0 - 10
- 10 - 30
Germans, when taken as a whole, were the least likely to have had prior agricultural experience in America.\textsuperscript{20}

One of the major and most cohesive ethnic groups was the German-Russians. The German-Russians were Russian-born, German-speaking people who emigrated from the large German agricultural colonies established in the south of Russia by Catherine II and Alexander I during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. The German colonies in Russia were concentrated in two areas—the Volga region and the region north of the Black Sea. These colonies had been settled by industrious peasants from various parts of Germany, Switzerland, and the low countries. Throughout the nineteenth century these colonies remained exceptionally close-knit. They preserved their German culture as well as their religious predilections. Most colonies were wholly Catholic or Protestant. Many belonged to rather exclusive Protestant movements, such as the Hutterites and the Mennonites.

The German-Russians arrived in South Dakota in considerable numbers during the late 1870s and developed an especially strong immigrant flow in the late 1880s. The geographic distribution of German-Russian stock (Figure 6) is a strongly segregated one, with two major east-river concentrations—one in the southern counties of Yankton, Bon Homme, Turner and Hutchinson; the other in the northern counties of Campbell, McPherson, Walworth, and Edmunds. Both concentrations have later extensions located in the west-river counties immediately to their west. The German-Russians made their way to South Dakota via extremely effective and discrete migration routes. They were lured to the region in part by railroad agents and immigration officials who prized the German-Russians for their exceptional reputation as agriculturists. But they were also rather careful in the selection of settlement sites, commonly sending small groups ahead to locate and secure land before larger numbers arrived.\textsuperscript{21} Thus, the German-Russians moved almost exclusively within a network of colonies established by their own kind and virtually closed to outsiders.\textsuperscript{22} According to John C. Hudson, it was not uncommon in

\textsuperscript{20} Hudson, “Migration to an American Frontier,” p. 248.


\textsuperscript{22} See the mapped migration routes of German-Russians in Hudson, “Migration to an American Frontier,” p. 246. \textit{See also} the discussion and maps of settlement patterns in Anton H. Richter, “‘Gebt ihr den Vorzug’: The German-Language Press of North and South Dakota,” \textit{South Dakota History} 10 (Summer 1980): 189-92.
Wagonloads of sacked grain await shipment from Eureka, a German-Russian community in McPherson County and an important shipping point for wheat in the 1890s.

the early part of this century to find individuals in the German-Russian settlements who had lived at one time or another in all of the established Dakota settlements. Nearly everyone had relatives in each settlement area.  

In South Dakota, most German-Russians came from the Black Sea colonies. The Volga group was more commonly found in the plains states located farther west and along the Pacific coast. Only a few of the Volga group settled in the state, primarily in the west-river counties of Perkins and Harding. The first German-Russian settlements were located near Yankton. Separate colonies were founded northwest of Yankton by Protestant and Catholic groups that arrived in the mid-1870s. Subsequent settlements were founded later in that decade around Tyndall, Menno, and Freeman. These clusters served as a staging area for later expansions during the 1880s to places farther west and into the counties along both sides of the border with North Dakota. Included among the German-Russians were colonies of Mennonites and Hutterites—highly cohesive Anabaptist groups, the latter of which organized its settlements on a communal model.

More than any other group, the German-Russians successfully transplanted the culture, social organization, and agricultural practices they had known in the homeland. While the American land-survey system discouraged the compact agricultural villages that they were accustomed to in Europe, they still founded numerous small agricultural hamlets that effectively served as focal points in their settlements. As in Russia, these hamlets were closely identified with certain regional and religious backgrounds. The economic life of the German-Russian settlements, however, was not completely closed. They are credited with bringing new forms of wheat culture to the semiarid grasslands. Their settlements became important centers for the diffusion of this culture and important shipping points for the early bountiful harvests of the new wheat varieties.

The other sizeable non-English-speaking group to settle in South Dakota was the Bohemians. Although listed in the 1910 United States census as Austrians, the Bohemians were the major representative of the Austro-Hungarian Empire to settle in the state (Figure 7). Theirs was a highly organized settlement process. The earliest contingents were organized in Chicago and proceeded westward to Knox County, Nebraska, and Bon Homme County in South Dakota. These early settlements were established in the late 1860s and early 1870s and were fairly direct migrations from the old world to the new. A large and compact settlement eventually developed around Tabor in Bon Homme County. Subsequent migration in the 1880s resulted in additional settlements in Charles Mix, Gregory, and Brule counties, with many
Figure 7. Austrian Stock, 1910 (111,112)
of the settlers coming from older settlements in Wisconsin and Iowa. The Bohemians were somewhat of an exception to the largely Protestant mix in South Dakota in that they were predominantly Roman Catholic.

One other major ethnic group with more than ten thousand stock in 1910 was represented in South Dakota—the Irish (11,422). It is difficult, however, to say anything remarkable about the distribution of this distinctive, but easily assimilated, English-speaking group. They were not known as agriculturalists in the Upper Midwest, and they seldom established close-knit homogeneous enclaves as other groups did. Rather, their distribution was ubiquitous (they represent roughly one to two percent of the foreign stock in virtually every county, both east and west river) and frequently oriented to local requirements for day labor and nonagricultural work in the towns.

Other groups of some size include the Dutch (5,285), who largely arrived as second-generation migrants from Dutch settlements in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Iowa. The first Dutch settlement was in Bon Homme County in 1873. Sizeable Dutch settlements were later established in Douglas and Charles Mix counties. Douglas County eventually contained the major concentration with the Dutch accounting for 19.2 percent of the foreign stock in that county in 1910. Also of local significance were the Finns (1,381). Finnish settlements of some size in the east-river counties were located at Lake Norden in Hamlin County and in Savo Township of Brown County. Like most Finnish agricultural communities in the Midwest, they were populated by Finns who had spent time in the industrial mining communities of Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. A third group of Finns took up residence in the northern Black Hills. Other small ethnic groups of less than one thousand persons occasionally supported a compact settlement or two, such as the Poles who had a settlement in the northern part of Day County, which was a daughter settlement of earlier communities in Minnesota and Wisconsin.

The ethnic pattern in South Dakota was a pattern of enclaves—a patchwork quilt—produced by the patterns of information flow and migration that brought settlers to the state.24 The intriguing thing about the pattern is the realization that each of

24. For an idea of the pattern of ethnic enclaves, see the maps in Chittick, "Recipe for Nationality Stew," pp. 104-6, and in Richter, "‘Gebt ihr den Vorzug,’ " p. 190.
These Finnish immigrants settled in Savo Township in Brown County.

these enclaves was a cultural and social entity, held together by the ties of kinship, culture, church, and linkage with other places. The nature of the environment, American social institutions, and the American economic system determined that the character of these immigrant agricultural communities would change over time. The general trend of that change and the difference between places in effecting that change is the essence of the impact of South Dakota's ethnic groups on its culture and economy.

**Ethnicity and Rural Life**

The patchwork-quilt pattern of ethnic settlement in South Dakota was quickly institutionalized by the immigrant church. Indeed, one of the first undertakings in most immigrant settlements, beyond that of insuring survival, was the founding of a church. Organizational meetings commonly took place in a settler's home and were conducted by laymen because of the shortage of clergy in pioneer settlements. Usually, the new congregation's membership grew rapidly. A permanent building was soon erected and a call sent out for a permanent minister of the faith.
In a short time, most immigrant settlements supported at least one organized religious establishment. Doctrinal differences and schism often fostered the establishment of more than one (especially among the Norwegians who seem to have been greatly inclined toward schismatic activity).

These churches and the spatial distribution of their membership, which normally coincided with the bounds of the ethnic settlement, defined a functional region with the church as the nodal point. At this time, no other institution on the frontier could serve this essential purpose of solidifying the ethnic settlement into a focused community. Townships, arbitrarily defined by the land survey, lacked the necessary social relevance. Towns in South Dakota were more often than not sited by the railroads and were intended to facilitate commerce, not social consciousness. Granges, cooperatives, and farmer’s associations came much too late to provide social cohesiveness. Thus, depending on the cultural homogeneity of the local population, the membership field

25. For a good description of this process as it applied to German-Russian communities in southeastern South Dakota, see Bischoff, “1909 Report on Russian-German Settlements,” pp. 193-98.

A large Swedish settlement supported the Bloomingdale Swedish Baptist Church near Centerville, South Dakota.
The German Reform church in Chancellor, South Dakota, is one of many similar structures that dotted the plains. Below, the interior of a Scandinavian church in the Black Hills featured an altar painting in an elaborately carved wooden frame.
of the rural church congregation often took on an exclusive character. Its well defined boundaries were a reflection of the ties of kinship, culture, and linkage with other places that identified the group that settled there.

In addition to this tendency to define "place" and "community," the church upheld values and preserved continuity with the cultural past. Services in rural immigrant churches were commonly held in ethnic languages well into the early part of the twentieth century. Church schools instructed the young in the old language, and congregations postponed for as long as possible the inevitable need to begin keeping official records in English. Immigrant churches observed the old holidays and preserved the traditional music and customs. Women's organizations provided the opportunity to carry on folk crafts. From the pulpit, the clergy remonstrated against the use of alcohol, loose morals, and casual association with outsiders. While the outside world could not be avoided forever, the church functioned as the first, and in some ways the only, defense against rapid change.  

As it performed these functions that were so basic to cultural maintenance, the church also became a symbolic place and structure on the landscape. In South Dakota's open plains, the church building was the dominant structure on the landscape, with the possible exception of the grain elevator. With its white clapboard siding and gleaming spire, it was visible for miles, as any traveler of the backroads of the state can attest. Although most country churches in South Dakota were quite similar in architectural style, because building styles in the United States had become more or less standardized by the latter half of the nineteenth century, there were considerable efforts on the part of immigrant settlers to add symbolic pieces of ornamentation to the outside. These usually took the form of special kinds of crosses or carvings on the tower (much of which disappeared in a rush of remodeling that took place after World War II, but can still be seen in old photographs or found discarded in church basements). More so than the exteriors, the interiors of country churches were decorated to resemble the cultural past. Carvings and decorative woodwork modeled after some parish church in Europe, altar paintings brought from the old country, and foreign-language inscriptions on ceilings and walls were commonplace features. In a

sense, one might even say that the contrast between the exteriors and the interiors of the immigrant churches symbolized what was happening to the immigrants themselves—they were becoming outwardly American and inwardly ethnic.  

In any case, the central role of the church as a conservative force that defended cultural continuity with the past cannot be overestimated. It was the key to cultural maintenance and local identity in all immigrant communities. Its relative strength was an important factor in determining the rate of cultural change. A measure of its local importance is the great number of country churches erected. By the turn of the century, many American church leaders lamented the fact that the American Midwest was simply “overchurched.”  

In recent decades, as people have left the countryside in increasing numbers and communities have been forced to merge, the abandonment of country churches is a stark reminder of the different social order that once existed.  

Without doubt, a strong ethnic, social, and cultural life, built around church and kinship, persisted well into this century in many parts of South Dakota. There was, of course, variation in the degree of persistence from group to group and from place to place, which is difficult to generalize about without an exhaustive study of the many communities. As suggested earlier, the variance was related to the background and migratory experience of each settlement in question. Cohesive groups that traveled exclusive paths to the Dakota frontier, such as the German-Russians, can be expected to have maintained their ethnic distinctiveness longer. At the other extreme, there were many German settlements, for example, in which the inhabitants had rather scattered origins and a lengthy experience with America. Another significant factor seems to be proximity to urban centers. The larger cities cast a shadow, so to speak, over the ability of a community to look inwardly on itself. On the other hand, this writer has no-

27. For a discussion of architectural style in rural church construction in the Upper Midwest, see ibid., pp. 229-30.  
28. Ibid., p. 225.  
29. South Dakota had 2,180 church organizations in 1916 with 199,017 members. Church membership in that year amounted to 28.5 percent of the total state population. It is generally thought that any “churched population” figure that approaches 30 percent is extremely high since most congregations report only adult communicant membership. For a complete statistical treatment of South Dakota religious bodies in 1890, 1906, 1916, and 1936, see Donald D. Parker, Denomination- al Histories of South Dakota ([Brookings]: South Dakota State University, [1964]), pp. 261-78.
ticed that although ethnic identity may fade in these old settle-
ments, attachment to place and community persists. If one asks
rural South Dakotans who they are, they will most likely give you
the name of a place, not a group, and will express some affinity to
that place. In many ways, the change that has occurred in this
century has been a transference of identity from ethnicity to place,
which is really only a change of labels. The rediscovery of ethnici-
ty today, which is so evident almost everywhere, is really quite
plastic—it is a fashionably nostalgic label for localism.

Polemics aside, it is quite reasonable to describe most of South
Dakota’s early twentieth century rural immigrant society as so-
cially and culturally ethnic, but economically American. At that
time, most rural neighborhoods were still quite parochial and
inward-looking socially. Interaction with other groups was gener-
ally difficult, mainly because of cultural values and prejudices.
Most studies of ethnic intermarriage, for instance, find that it
generally did not occur in rural areas until school consolidation in
the twentieth century brought larger numbers of young people
from different ethnic groups into contact with one another. An-
other inhibiting factor was that the church controlled the mar-
riage process, and most immigrant churches had rather exclusive
ideas about the whole subject of marriage outside the commu-
nity. In his study of intermarriage among ethnic groups in North
Dakota, John C. Hudson found that endogamy was the rule for all
groups. In comparing groups, he found that the German-Russians
were the most endogamous, followed by the Norwegians. The
Old-Americans were the least endogamous.\(^{30}\) While social contact
across community and ethnic boundaries may not have been a
widespread practice, social contact among the migration linkages
between communities in various parts of the Midwest was com-
mon. Thus, marriages between young men who homesteaded in
the Dakotas and young girls in older settlements in Minnesota,
Wisconsin, or Iowa was an established pattern, as was the prac-
tice of taking a spouse in the old parish back in Europe. The major
area of social contact between ethnic groups in South Dakota was
the market town, which was basically a Yankee place and there-
fore neutral ground. This situation did not change until mass re-
irement among the settler generation caused large numbers of
country folk to take up residence in town.

While a certain cultural identity and social aloofness was read-
ily maintained, most immigrant farmers became Americanized

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rapidly when it came to economic life. In part, it was the encounter with an alien environment that caused them to abandon the agricultural techniques and tools they had always known. With the exception of the German-Russians, few Dakota settlers had much experience with the open prairie or the semiarid plains. Nearly all dealt with the task of drawing a living from the new environment by engaging in experimentation and by borrowing ideas from others, especially the Americans. The prairie simply could not be conquered by equipment and agricultural practices known to people who had essentially farmed a woodland environment. A case in point, cited by Hudson, is the bill of lading for an “emigrant car” (box car) hired by a Norwegian farmer named Elkens when he moved his family to the Dakota frontier near Fargo in 1888. Elkens took two cows, two calves, a barrel of salt pork, a cook stove, 250 fence posts, a mower, a corn planter, a cultivator, a breaking plow, and miscellaneous items. He obviously intended to experiment, as did most settlers. In fact, the first crops recorded all across the Dakotas exhibit no significant variation from national trends or between ethnic groups. Most studies have found that complete adaptation was the rule. The only evidence for ethnic preference comes in the form of what Terry G. Jordan calls “cultural rebound.” The idea here is that once economic stability was assured by successfully mastering the standard American crops and techniques, the immigrant was sometimes disposed to dabble in older practices and crops as a secondary endeavor, but never as his main effort to keep his family alive.

Economic adaptation was also encouraged by the fact that the immigrant farmer ultimately had to deal with the Americans in economic matters. The seed dealer, the implement dealer, the general merchant, the banker, the elevator operator, and, at least in the early days, even the elected officials in the trade town were all Americans. Business was conducted in town on American terms. Thus, we must take care not to go too far in our impressions of ethnic pluralism. The landscape may have been a patchwork quilt of tiny communities whose inhabitants spoke only to one another, but they all belonged to a larger economic community, which was the trade area of the local town. In this larger community, other considerations took precedence.

31. Ibid., p. 251.
One could say that the immigrant farmer lived simultaneously in two worlds—a social-cultural world based on kinship, religion, and continuity with the past and an economic world that was modern and alien, but absolutely essential. It was along the interface between these two worlds that change took place. Any activity that occupied the boundary zone between these worlds could be stressful to the first. A good example is land inheritance because land could be looked upon in two ways. It could be viewed entrepreneurially as a source of speculation or quick profit. In this sense, material advantage might outweigh communal and noneconomic goals. In another sense, land could be viewed as the giver of life—a symbol of familial accomplishment and identity in the community. Here, the ultimate goal would be its orderly inheritance in the interest of maintaining family and commu-

The street signs in Tabor, South Dakota, illustrate a modern blend of cultures in an area heavily settled by Bohemians (Czechs).
nity continuity. Issues such as this were crucial to what happened in ethnic communities across the state, and studies have shown that the response could be highly varied.\textsuperscript{33}

\section*{Conclusion}

European immigrants played a significant role in the agricultural settlement of South Dakota and in the shaping of its rural culture. A major aim of this article, however, has been to point out that the role they played was as highly varied as their origins, the timing of their arrival, and the homogeneity of their settlements. To generalize too much about the propensity of any national group to maintain its culture in this new environment is an uncertain endeavor because every settlement was the product of discrete migration and information flows that linked it to other places in the Midwest and in Europe. Accordingly, its population had a particular past association with American culture and environments, with European culture and environments, and with the experience of migration under the conditions existing at a certain time. It is the great variety of these factors in South Dakota settlement history that makes its rural communities so distinctive and fascinating.

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