

## A Community Built on Faith:

### German Catholics in Ost, Reno County, Kansas, 1882-1911

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**Figure 1.** A photograph of the second St. Joseph Church, front building, and the first St. Joseph Church, in the back, which had been turned into the first St. Joseph Catholic School circa. 1892. SOURCE: Roberta Lampe, *100 Years 1880-1980: St. Joseph Parish, Ost, Kansas* p. 56.

This is a brief history over the German Catholic community of Ost in Sumner Township, Reno County, Kansas. Ost was a settlement built on the faith and persistence of the settlers that founded the town. This study uses plat maps, photographs of past and present Ost, on-site cemetery research, newspaper articles, and the St. Joseph's Church Centennial book.

Imagine a horse-drawn wagon creeping along the prairie, with the father sitting in the front manning the reins while the mother sits beside him conversing softly. Riding in the back are the children, bobbing up and down slightly as the wagon bumps along the path deeply rutted from other wagons. Scanning the vast prairie, there are big bluestems dotting the landscape as far as the eye can see. Suddenly, a spire rises in the distance with a cross fixed at the tip, and, pulling closer, houses begin to appear, and a general store, busy with customers and locals talking and laughing, comes into focus. This is the community of Ost.

Located east of what used to be the North Ninnescah River, but is presently the Cheney Reservoir, Ost was in Sumner Township, Reno County, of Southcentral Kansas as seen in Figure 2 below. At the time that Ost was incorporated as a community on March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1882,



**Figure 2.** A plat map of Ost in the 1902 Plat Book of Reno County, Kansas with the church, school, and names of business owners included. SOURCE: Kansas Memory available at <http://www.kansasmemory.org/item/209395/page/55>

there were thirteen families, a Catholic church, and general store. When it came time to decide on the name of the community “they selected the name ‘Ast’ after the shortest [last] name among them.”<sup>1</sup> The question that may be asked is, why is the name of the community Ost if the settlers had decided on the name Ast? The reason for this change in name is due to poor penmanship by Frederick Ast. Upon writing the name, he drew “his capital A much like a capital O, with the loop and flowing line near the top instead of to the side.”<sup>2</sup> Henceforth, the community was known as Ost, but “[un]officially the townspeople began calling the town St. Joe, after the name of the church.”<sup>3</sup> This was a community of mainly German Catholics, with few of a different nationality. The community of Ost held deep respect for their Catholic religion, as can be seen in their German culture, Catholic church, and parochial school.

### **German Culture**

During the years of 1870 to 1873, Germans immigrated in large numbers to the United States of America due to religious constraints in Europe. The Germans mainly “came from Prussia and Wurttemberg, Hanover and Bavaria.”<sup>4</sup> Many of them were German Catholic and traveled towards the west to the states of Indiana or Illinois, while some decided to try their luck in New Jersey or New York.<sup>5</sup>

However, with the Civil War over, some German families decided to venture further west to the state of Kansas. During this time, Kansas land was still ripe for the picking and the land was inexpensive. That was how the original thirteen families of Ost ended up in the same area of

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<sup>1</sup> Roberta Lampe, *100 Years 1880-1980: St. Joseph Parish, Ost, Kansas* (Topeka, KS: Josten’s American Yearbook Co., 1980), 47.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid*, 47.

<sup>3</sup> Bert Newton, *Early Ghost Towns, Post Offices and Hamlets in Reno County, Kansas*, ed. Tim Stucky (Hutchinson, KS: C & B Publishing Co., 2004), 82.

<sup>4</sup> James R. Shortridge, *Peopling The Plains: Who Settled Where in Frontier Kansas* (Lawrence, KS: University Press of Kansas, 1995), 95.

<sup>5</sup> Lampe, 30.

Reno County. However, not everybody in the family came at once to the new land they had bought. Germans in the late 1800s would typically “emigrate as individuals or in small family groups”<sup>6</sup> Usually, it was the husband that travelled to the new land to survey it and build a little shack with whatever resources he could find. The wives and children would stay behind, awaiting the day the husband/father would return to pack up their belongings and bring them to their new home. Some of the original thirteen families that made-up Ost may not have known each other, but there is a possibility that they could have since “European immigrants came to the Great Plains in family units, with relatives and neighbors following later.”<sup>7</sup> The original thirteen family members and where they immigrated from are as follows:

Alsace	Bavaria	Germany	Illinois	Ireland	Poland	Prussia
Peter Bohr Family (wife from Belgium)	Frederick Ast Family	George Thimmesch Family	Sebastian Bugner (pictured in Figure 3 on next page)	James Elward Family	John Ciskowsky Family	George Erker Family <sup>8</sup>
Mathew Bohr (unmarried)	John Ast (brother of Frederick)  Carl Schwaiger Family	Martin Libel Family (wife from Lorraine)  Peter Marx Family	Nicholas May Family			

<sup>6</sup>Shortridge, 95.

<sup>7</sup> Frederick C. Luebke, “Ethnic Group Settlement on the Great Plains,” *Western Historical Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (1877): 407.

<sup>8</sup> All the names and lands where they were born or lived before moving to Ost are in Lampe, 45.



**Figure 3.** Sebastian and Barbara Bugner Family. Sebastian, located in the front row first from the right, is believed to be the first to live in the Ost area. Circa. 1911. SOURCE: Roberta Lampe, *100 Years 1880-1980: St. Joseph Parish, Ost, Kansas* p. 42.

While not all the families came from a German ancestry, they were still welcomed into this community.

There were two aspects that set Ost as a German community, the first being the settlers use of the German language. One instance of the German language in use at Ost can be inferred from an article in *The Catholic Advance*. There was an article over the dedication of the St. Marks church in Colwich, Sedgewick County, Kansas. In this article, it is mentioned that “Rev. Father Grueter, of Ost, delivered a beautiful sermon in German.”<sup>9</sup> It can be guessed that at this time, the church in Ost was possibly using the German language. There is also one other instance

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<sup>9</sup> “Dedication at St. Marks,” *The Catholic Advance*, March 3, 1906.



that involves the third pastor, Father Loevenich, of St. Joseph Church. Father Loevenich wanted to attract more families from the eastern states to the community of Ost, one way he tried to do this was by making a poster in 1893 that was written completely in German.<sup>10</sup> Father Loevenich's target audience were German Catholics, but he was open to anybody joining the community. Another interesting factor of the German language in use at Ost takes place in the cemetery. Upon further inspection of the headstones, some of them are written differently than the others. While some headstones have the usual name, born, and death written on them, there



**Figure 4.** Photograph of a headstone in the cemetery of St. Joe. Notice how instead of saying Born and Died, it instead says Geb and Gest.  
SOURCE: taken by author on November 25, 2016.

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<sup>10</sup> Lampe, 57.

are some that use different words as seen in Figure 4 on the previous page. Instead of saying born and died, the headstones read geb, which is the shortened word of geboren in German and translates to “born” in English, and gest, which is the shortened word of gestorben in German and translates to “dead” in English.

The second aspect that set Ost as a German Community was the opening of a parochial school. German Catholics typically had a Catholic church and a school that branched off that parish. Staying true to this tradition, the community of Ost “relinquished themselves to this national, distinctive trait within their beings.”<sup>11</sup> However, before the parochial school can be discussed, the more important building of the community must be talked about first.

### **St. Joseph Church**

Previously mentioned at the beginning, when Ost was officially incorporated as a community there was already a church built. During this time, St. Joseph Church, Ost did not have a resident pastor, instead the priest from Saint Mark, Sedgwick County, Kansas, would ride out to Ost to conduct mass. In September of 1886, though, the community of Ost received their first pastor, Reverend Joseph Hartman.<sup>12</sup> From then on, until the community of Ost was unincorporated in 1911, the parish had a total of five pastors, including the first. The names of each are as follows: Reverend Joseph Hartman, Reverend Bernard Vonderlage, Reverend John Loevenich, Reverend A. J. Abel, and Reverend J. J. Greuter. The two pastors that made big impacts on the Ost communities were Father Loevenich, the third pastor, and Father Greuter, the fifth pastor.

Father Loevenich, pictured on the next page in Figure 5 & 6, who arrived in Feb. 1890, made two important decisions that impacted Ost in a positive way. The first was the decision to

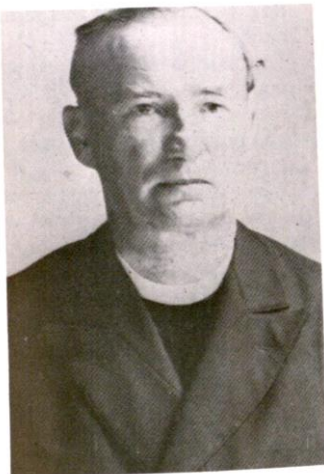
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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, 50.

build a new church for the growing community, and the second was to create the first parochial school. Around the late 1880s, Ost's community had begun to grow larger, and Father Loevenich took notice of this. After getting permission from the excited parishoners, a draft had been born, in which the new church "would be almost three times larger than the first one, and have the capacity and sufficient pew space for some sixty families."<sup>13</sup> After much success with the new church, the next step was taken to finally build a parochial school. However, instead of building a new school, the Ost community decided to have the "old church building...moved...and converted into a parochial school."<sup>14</sup>

When the final pastor, Father Grueter, pictured below in Figure 5 & 6, arrived in Dec. 1899, twelve years before Ost became unincorporated, he was able to make his mark on the community. Starting right away, he was able to get the consent of the Ost community to build a new rectory for future priest to reside in once he moved on to a new rectory. He was also able to build on to the school so that more kids would be able to attend St. Joseph Catholic School.



**Figure 5 & 6.** On the left is Reverend John Loevenich, who had the idea to build the second church and the first school. On the right is Reverend J. J. Grueter, who had the idea to build the new rectory and add on more room space to the school. Circa. 1890 and 1898. SOURCE: Roberta Lampe, *100 Years 1880-1980: St. Joseph Parish, Ost, Kansas* p. 54 & 82.




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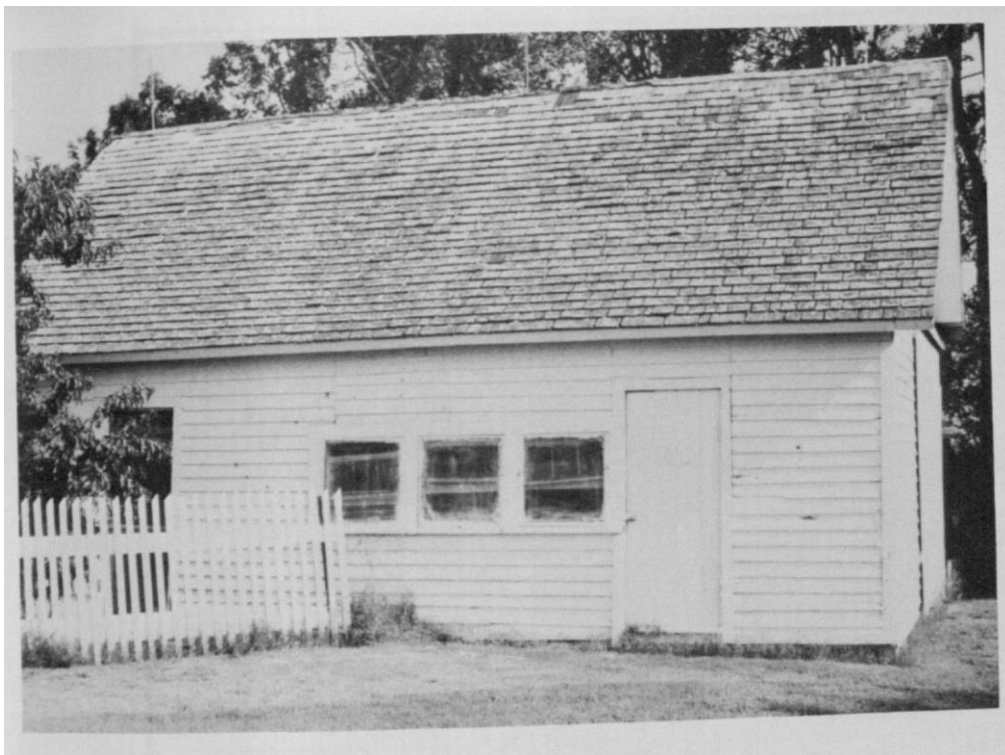
<sup>13</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>14</sup> Newton, 82.



### St. Joseph Catholic School

In 1892, the same year the second church was built, the first parochial school, St. Joseph Catholic School, was opened. As mentioned earlier, the school used to be the first church, but was converted into a school. The people of Ost also “had a horse barn nearby for the students’ horses,” as most had to travel from their farm homes to get to school.<sup>15</sup> The community decided to hire “two Sisters of the Sorrowful Mother, headquartered at the St. Francis Hospital, Wichita,”<sup>16</sup> and rented one of the buildings in the community for the Sisters to reside in. The first parochial school lasted for five years, until the fourth pastor of Ost, Father Abel, decided to build a new school building. Thus, the first parochial school building was dismantled and the second



**Figure 7.** This is a photograph of School District 78, the one room school directly east of Ost. Notice how the building seems to be worn due to disuse. Circa. 1918. SOURCE: Roberta Lampe, *100 Years 1880-1980: St. Joseph Parish, Ost, Kansas*, p. 37.

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, 82.

<sup>16</sup> Lampe, 55.

parochial school was built. Then, sometime around 1903, the fifth pastor of Ost, Father Greuter, as mentioned earlier in the text, added more space to the second parochial school building.

During the years when the first parochial school and the second parochial school were around, there was also another school directly east of Ost, as can be seen on the plat map on page two, that went by the name of School District 78, which was a one room school as can be seen on the previous page in Figure 7. This was a competition of enrollment between the schools, that School District 78 slowly began to lose. Since St. Joseph Catholic School was opened, that meant all the children in the St. Joseph parish attended the parochial school in their community. For School District 78, that meant a slow descent of attendance, which gained some recognition since in 1910 *The Hutchinson News* ran an article about how “no pupils at all showed up for enrollment.”<sup>17</sup> Thus, the school closed, which was a financial gain for the community of Ost. Since Ost was in the district of District School 78 and it had its own parochial school in the same district, the town had “to pay a double school tax.”<sup>18</sup> With School District 78 closed though, the people of Ost only had to pay taxes for the one school.

## **Conclusion**

Sadly, the community of Ost steadily declined in population after reaching a peak of 150.<sup>19</sup> A possible factor that could have led to Ost’s decline could be the environment and location of the community. Ost was in the Red Jaw Valley, which is likely named for its red clay soil, and was not the ideal place for farming. Some farmers struggled to grow crops, and many probably had to move away due to financial loss. Another factor that probably played a key role in Ost’s decline in population was competition of other communities. Located eight miles southwest of Andale, Sedgwick County, Kansas, and eleven miles from Cheney, Reno County,

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<sup>17</sup> “No Pupils to Teach,” *The Hutchinson News*, November 29, 1910.

<sup>18</sup> “No Pupils to Teach,” *The Hutchinson News*, November 29, 1910.

<sup>19</sup> Lampe, 52.

Kansas, the people of Ost would go to Andale for shipping, while they would go to Cheney for banking purposes.<sup>20</sup> While Ost was declining, these two communities were thriving and growing, which probably appealed to some of the citizens of Ost who decided to move due to better opportunities.

Due to this decline, the community of Ost was unincorporated on February 28, 1911. Although Ost became unincorporated, it still persists to this day with a third brick church built in 1914, and a third brick parochial school built in 1922. Also, Ost is now mainly referred to as



**Figure 8.** This is a photograph of present day Ost, known as St. Joe mainly. Taken from the northwest, it shows the third church and third parochial school built after Ost became unincorporated. SOURCE: Photo taken by author on November 25, 2016.

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<sup>20</sup> R.L. Polk & Co., *Polk's Kansas State Gazetteer and Business Directory* (Detroit: R. L. Polk & Co., 1900), 823.

St. Joe, only rarely being called Ost. There are even some citizens of Andale who send their children to St. Joseph Catholic School, Ost, instead of the local grade school in their town. The St. Joseph Church also brings Catholics in the surrounding area every Sunday at 9 AM. Thanks to the early settlers of Ost “[t]hrough their zealous endeavors, the religious environment of this area developed into the foundations of faith among later Catholics here [in Ost].”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Lampe, 47.

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