

An Old Home in a New Place Hochfeld, Marion County, Kansas: 1874-2012



Figure 1. Photograph of the sign that currently marks the location of Hochfeld, Kansas settlement three miles north of Goessel, Kansas. A high persistence rate has caused a continual strong sense of community among those who currently live in Hochfeld. Photo taken by Bette Jo Lehrman.

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The village of Hochfeld, located in the Menno Township of Marion County, Kansas, was settled in 1874 by German Mennonites on land purchased from the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad Company. Attracted by military exemption laws and new opportunities in Kansas, the larger Alexanderwohl Community brought traditions such as land partibility to a new home in the Cottonwood Valley. This study includes an interview, analysis of early maps of the county, census research, and etchings of Hochfeld in Marion County, Kansas.

Imagine having the opportunity to leave an oppressive government to travel across seas to settle in the heart of another country while still preserving your own cultural heritage almost perfectly. Many people in the United States tried to take their culture to the empty and wide open lands of the new frontier in Kansas and failed miserably. Communities planning to capitalize on business opportunities on the new land surrounding the expanding railroads often collapsed due to false expectations and poor preparation. However, a fleeing German Mennonite community, made up of primarily middle to upper class immigrants, managed to organize a network of nine villages united by a central church in Marion County, Kansas named the Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church.¹ One of these nine villages that grew in the Cottonwood Valley was named Hochfeld, meaning “up field;” it was made up of six families. By studying a single village and its history through maps, census data, and written history we are able to identify overarching factors that contributed to high persistence rates within some Mennonite communities in Kansas. An oral account by Judy Regehr, a direct descendant of a Hochfeld school teacher, reveals intimate details about the community’s values and traditions that help paint a more vivid picture of the village.

An early description from the *Marion County Record* of the Cottonwood Valley says, “water is abundant in all parts of the county... the Cottonwood River runs diagonally through the county... making the county a perfect work of streams and valleys.”² Surrounded by the bluestem prairie grass in a relatively flat terrain, the people of Hochfeld were able to adapt their agricultural lifestyle to their new land in Kansas with minor changes.³ Timber for building fences was limited to the trees lining the Cottonwood Creek. Instead, properties were likely lined with Hawthorne hedgerows that kept livestock out of their neighbors’ property; these can still be seen

¹ Regehr, Judy. Interview. November 25, 2012. Manhattan, KS.

² Hiebert, Clarence. “Marion County Record (Kansas) – December 31, 1875.”

³ Socolofsky. *Historical Atlas of Kansas* (2nd Edition), 1988: 3-4.

in use across the region today.⁴ The German trademark crop, winter wheat, coated the majority of the fields in the village and was "...almost a sure crop, and most profitable one. There have been instances where farmers have paid for a good-sized farm with a single crop in wheat."⁵ The village of families huddled their sod houses onto one section of land without much separation, as they always had in Prussia. Their religious beliefs caused them to live simply, without luxury, as good stewards of their land and homes.⁶

Hochfeld is a unique community in Kansas due to the cultural traditions that were transplanted from the inhabitants' motherland to the bluestem prairies of central Kansas. In a period of time where towns would be settled and quickly abandoned, the village of Hochfeld persisted. It benefited from an existing network of Mennonite Communities in Kansas and the rest of the Midwestern United States. The small rural village of Hochfeld has a remarkably high persistence rate, estimated at nearly forty percent. This is the result of the strong sense of community built on the traditions of German Mennonites in West Prussia and intensified through their journey to the new and unfamiliar homeland of central Kansas. A short overview of the history of the Alexanderwohl peoples' migration through Europe and Russia to America is critical in giving context to the many factors that contributed to their success in Kansas. The following will provide that context and proceed to more specific factors of persistence in the Hochfeld village.

Their Journey

The Alexanderwohl Village originated in the Molotschna settlement in southern Russia, and was founded in 1821 by people from the Prussian border and Holland who still clung to their

⁴ Hiebert. "Marion County Record (Kansas) – December 31, 1875"

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Hiebert. "Kansas Monthly III, September, 1880: Two Days Among the Mennonites," 1880: 384. Located at the Mennonite Library and Archives. Newton, KS.

German descent.⁷ The similarities in the setup of the original Alexanderwohl settlement in Russia and the eventual villages in Kansas are stark. For example, the Alexanderwohl Church near Goessel, Kansas currently has the remains of orchards behind it followed by a cemetery, a landscape almost identical to drawings of the original Alexanderwohl settlement in Russia. The surrounding thin strips of land separated into homesteads for each family forming a close community strongly resembles the organization of Hochfeld, Kansas.⁸

Important push and pull factors to consider in the movement of the Alexanderwohl community are conscription and exemption laws within each country. Due to their religious belief in pacifism, the Mennonites in Russia were fined for their exemption from conscription. This essentially led to a mass exodus of Mennonites from Russia to America between 1874 and 1879. Approximately one-third of the Mennonite population in Russia left with knowledge of military exemption laws being passed in the United States and Canada.⁹

Meanwhile, in the United States, railroads were marketing cheap land on the new frontier to immigrants from Eastern Europe. More specifically, according to the German General Land Agent, Carl Bernard Schmidt, the Atchison, Topeka, and Santa Fe Railroad received 3,200,000 acres of land for expansion of railroads and to promote settlement. In 1874, the people of Hochfeld settled on 1280 acres of that land in the Menno Township of Marion County, Kansas.¹⁰

Land Distribution

One of the most interesting features of Hochfeld is the land distribution system, called “partibility.” Partibility is the parceling out of land “into fragmented eighty-, forty-, and even

⁷ “Alexanderwohl Villages in Kansas, 1874,” *Mennonite Life*, 1949: 24. Located at the Mennonite Library and Archives. Newton, KS.

⁸ *Ibid*, 25.

⁹ Loewen, Royden. *Hidden Worlds: Revisiting the Mennonite Migrants of the 1870's*, 2011: 3.

¹⁰ *Atlas of Marion County, Kansas*. Davy Map & Atlas, 1949: 37.

twenty-acre parcels.”¹¹ This method of land distribution played a crucial role in the strong sense of community created in Hochfeld that still remain today, as seen in Figure 2. Instead of farming typical squares or rectangles of land, the standard 320 acre half section of the rectilinear survey, Mennonite farmers worked long, thin strips of land. As seen in Figure 3, these strips of property placed their homes close to each other, side-by-side, as opposed to a traditional separation of houses and farmsteads in rural areas. Marc Bloch, in his book *Land and Work in Mediaeval Europe*, describes a similar land distribution: “land in fragmented parcels, in long narrow fields without enclosures,” located in “England, Northern and Central France, almost the whole of Germany, and no doubt also a large part of Poland and Russia.”¹² The advantages of this old European method of land distribution can be seen in their social and agricultural lives.

The strips of land allowed the people of Hochfeld to emulate their former, close-knit neighborhoods. At first, the homesteads were contained to the west side of the current highway. When they began expanding, they moved two families across to the east side of the highway. It is debated whether they voted who moved to the other side or if the families volunteered.¹³ The traditionally democratic culture of the Mennonites would suggest that some form of voting is probable, but this is speculation.

¹¹ Loewen, Royden. *Hidden Worlds: Revisiting the Mennonite Migrants of the 1870's*, 2011: 34.

¹² Bloch, Marc. *Land and Work in Mediaeval Europe*, 1967: 69.

¹³ Regehr, Judy. Interview. November 25, 2012. Manhattan, KS.



Figure 2. A photograph depicting a field in the Hochfeld, Kansas, settlement located three miles north of Goessel, Kansas. Notice the hedges on both sides of the field that create a thin strip of land remnant of the original land distribution used in Hochfeld c. 1874. Photo taken by Bette Jo Lehrman, April 9, 2013.



Figure 3. An etching by C.B. Schmidt depicting a plan for land distribution in the Hochfeld, Kansas settlement located three miles north of Goessel, Kansas, c. 1870. Notice the thin strips of land that allow homesteads to be close together forming a small rural community. Copy of etching found on Mennonite Library Archives website.

The agricultural benefit of these land strips is equal water distribution from the Cottonwood Creek throughout the fields. Nearly every field had access to Cottonwood Creek for irrigation of crops, as seen in Figure 2. Farmers were unable to subsist just from the small land strips and were also required to have land on the outskirts of Hochfeld. Carl Bernard noticed while passing through Hochfeld that, “Not all settlers are dwelling in the village, however. Some of the more wealthy ones, who were able to buy a whole section, are living on their land and have divided it according to their own judgment.”¹⁴

Hochfeld School

Education was an important aspect of the Mennonite life in Marion County, Kansas. According to *Marion County Record* in 1875, there were, “seventy organized school districts in the county.”¹⁵ This is one year after the Alexanderwohl Mennonites arrived. Most of these small rural villages in the community of Alexanderwohl had churches that served as a community center. Hochfeld never established a church due to the proximity of the village to the Alexanderwohl Church. Therefore, their schoolhouse on the southern side of the section served as their community center. Judy Regehr, daughter of a former teacher in Hochfeld during the Great Depression, recalls a tradition that her father described that happened on the night of each Christmas Eve. Each of the younger children would recite a poem or reading in front of the community. Afterward, each child would receive a bag of candy and an orange. This was continued in her church even when the school closed down.¹⁶

¹⁴ Schmidt, Carl Bernard. *Ein Führer die Deutschen Ausiedlungen in sud west Kansas*, 1877: 8.

¹⁵ Hiebert. “Marion County Record (Kansas) – December 31, 1875,” 265.

¹⁶ Regehr, Judy. Interview. November 25, 2012. Manhattan, KS.

A Local, National, and Global Community

Members of Hochfeld attended the Alexanderwohl Church where the majority of surrounding villages gathered for church each Sunday.¹⁷ Their family and friends from the original settlement in Russia traveled across seas together, settled together, and went to church together. This local community of Mennonites supported each other from the beginning until the very end when many of the villages moved to larger towns. People currently living in Hochfeld still attend this church.

Not only was the Hochfeld village connected to the Alexanderwohl Church and community, but it also had ties to a much larger network of Mennonite Communities. *The Herald of Truth* is one of many Mennonite newspapers that connected villages in Kansas to the earlier settled communities in Elkhart, Indiana. This was a very active newspaper receiving stories from those who visited the communities in Kansas and their experiences there. Each month, the Alexanderwohl villages had new visitors from Elkhart there to scout the region and report back.¹⁸ Throughout many of the issues in the 1870-1880s, the newspapers released letters from fellow Mennonites who remained in Russia asking for their support.¹⁹ Members of the Alexanderwohl settlement in Kansas were very fortunate to still have this sort of contact with those who remained in Russia.

Assimilation of Hochfeld

The village of Hochfeld has a remarkably high persistence rate. Almost half of the families currently living on the original homesteads are still descendants of the immigrants from Russia.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Hiebert, Clarence. *Brothers in Deed to Brothers in Need*, 1974.

¹⁹ Ibid.

To the current landowners, this location has not ceased to be Hochfeld.²⁰ Memories of the original settlement are beginning to fade, though, as the family trees grow and new landowners enter the area. The Mennonite Heritage Museum in Goessel, Kansas has preserved some of the buildings that exemplify the early Mennonite settlers. However, there are several important factors that can explain the movement from the close-knit community of the original settlement of Hochfeld to the more current geographically defined community.

It is crucial to remember the anti-German sentiments in Kansas during World War I that led to the abandonment of some German settlements. This is a well-documented subject in Kansas as a whole, so I will refrain from speaking too much about it.²¹ Although it is difficult to establish or document for Marion County, these anti-German sentiments were said to have affected some in the area of Hochfeld. Oral history accounts carry these memories of harassment.²²

As with many communities, the arrival of the automobile in rural Kansas changed everything. The advancement of farm equipment inevitably led to the expansion of farmland and an emphasis on family, rather than the community.²³ Essentially, the rapid developments in technology throughout the 1920s led to an assimilation of Hochfeld into surrounding towns, namely a nearby Mennonite town, Goessel, Kansas, and the overall American culture of capitalism. Residents' access to larger towns expanded exponentially. This led to the consolidation of those schools that were so important to Mennonite community. Instead, places like Goessel, Kansas became the new community center. However, the tradition of the school being at the center of social gatherings has persisted in this area.

²⁰ Regehr, Judy. Interview. November 25, 2012. Manhattan, KS.

²¹ See, for instance, Craid Miner, *Kansas: The History of the Sunflower State, 1854-2000*. 238-243.

²² Regehr, Judy. Interview. November 25, 2012. Manhattan, KS.

²³ Loewen, Royden. *Hidden Worlds: Revisiting the Mennonite Migrants of the 1870's*, 2011: 41.

The German Mennonite culture still dominates the region's food, education, religion, and other ideals held by the original settlers. There are obvious indications, such as the traditional zwieback bread roll still served with holiday dinners today, that the Alexanderwohl settlement in Kansas stamped the region with a culture that originated in the original Molotschna village in Russia.

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