

Colorado's Germans from Russia:

THEY CAME OVER

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WHEN I was growing up in the sugar beet region of northeastern Colorado, there was one farm chore I seldom tried to avoid. In fact, I spent more than my share of time in the classroom eagerly anticipating this daily routine. As soon as I returned home from school I changed into old clothes and ran barefoot to the pasture bordering our farm along the South Platte River. It was my responsibility to bring the cows home, and despite warnings of diamondback rattlesnakes and temperamental bulls, I cheerfully accepted the task.

As I drove the cattle homeward, counting the slow-moving animals to make certain that no calves had strayed from the herd, I often stopped near a small pond in the pasture. On a nice afternoon I would lie in the grass at the water's edge and stare at the vastness above me. A hungry chicken hawk circling above the pond sometimes caught my attention, but my real concern was in the clouds. I was not interested in distinguishing silvery thunderheads from cirrus wisps or finding that peculiar streak of green many beet farmers claim is visible in an approaching hail cloud. There, on the soft floor of the prairie, I was searching for long-lost relatives.

While still very young, I had been told by my mother: "Your grandparents said they came from over the clouds." Her unusual reply was an utterly serious response to my endless questions about where "our people" came from before settling in Colorado. She did not intentionally deceive me, for there were a number of times that I saw her staring into the sky — with one hand shading her eyes from the sun — as if looking for someone. I always hoped to surprise her one day by running home from the pasture with news of more people, possibly aunts and uncles she had never seen — coming over the clouds.

Much of my childhood confusion stemmed from the seemingly contradictory stories I heard about our people. German was the language my parents used when conversing at the dinner table and on Sunday afternoons when relatives filled our farmhouse. Yet, there was much talk of Russia and some neighbors re-

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Russian Germans working in a sugar beet field, top, performing "blocking" with hoes and thinning by hand while kneeling. Below, the steeple of Russian German Lutheran Church, Sugar City, Colo.

ferred to us as "Rooshuns." Rarely was there any mention of Germany and few of our people deliberately spoke of themselves as Germans. But one didn't dare say "Russian" or "Rooshun" in their presence. The older emigrants simply referred to themselves as *unser Leit*, dialect German for "our people." And many of their stories about the Old Country were prefaced by a German phrase that sounded very much like "when we came from over the clouds."

Although my curiosity never waned, eventually I stopped gazing into an empty sky for answers. By the time I was a teen-ager I had learned, from bits of second-hand knowledge, that our people were indeed of German descent, although all of the emigrants once lived in

Russia. But the full story of how this had come about was unknown. And the allusion to a journey from over the clouds remained a puzzling mystery. High school teachers were unable to aid this frustrating search for answers; unfortunately, a few contributed to the erroneous notion that our people were actually "Russians."

Following high school, I majored in anthropology at the University of Colorado in Boulder. No doubt my boyhood curiosities about "who we were" sparked an interest in a more general survey of human origins and culture. However, I focused my anthropological interests on Plains Indians, whose ways I had known since childhood. I greatly admired self-assured tribesmen like the Blue Cloud Arapaho, who also called

themselves "our people" in their native language. Their roots did not stretch to a strange land thousands of miles across the sea, but were linked to each stream and lonely hilltop that I knew as a boy growing up in their old homeland on the Platte.

Shortly before I graduated from CU, I met a professor of Russian history who encouraged me to enroll in an independent study course and research the little-known history of the Germans from Russia. There were many questions I wanted to ask during our first meeting and in a few minutes he gave me a capsule history of the German settlements in eastern Europe. That encounter marked the beginning of my scholarly interests in the Germans from Russia. Aside from assigned read-