

**GERMAN IN COLORADO:
BACKGROUND FOR A LINGUISTIC SURVEY**

by

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Through the years there have been many calls for a comprehensive survey of the German spoken in the United States. The lack of any such study gives an indication of the difficulty of the undertaking. Gilbert's recent study suggests an unified approach in order to overcome present obstacles.¹ Eichhoff has noted that one of the major obstacles is the sheer number of speakers of German.² Other factors are their wide distribution in the United States and the practical administrative difficulties facing such a project. On the other hand, this situation does not preclude useful studies of smaller areas which have so far been relatively untouched by studies of American German.

Colorado is not a state that immediately comes to mind when American German is discussed, but yet it is one of the states which cannot be excluded when the total picture is drawn. While in terms of numbers the German-speaking population of the state has by no means been as striking as those of states like Pennsylvania or Wisconsin, it has been a significant element in the comparatively small population of Colorado. To the knowledge of this writer no description of German spoken in Colorado has been published. The well-known rapid decline in the speaking of German that has occurred throughout the United States also makes this an appropriate time, if not too late a date, to do some stock-taking and make an examination of Colorado German. As a first step, areas where Germans have settled can be ascertained from the existing literature, from the data compiled for the United States census reports and from local inquiries where necessary. Secondly, a survey in the field would establish whether, in fact, German is

still spoken at all and, if so, which varieties and to what extent. At the same time samples of the language could be recorded for later analysis and to determine areas justifying further study. The remainder of this article gives details of the extent and areas of German settlement in Colorado and discusses methods of approaching the study of the language.

The figures of the official reports tell part of the story of German settlement in Colorado. Table 1 shows the number of native Germans in relation to the population of Colorado and to the foreign-born population. At the turn of the century and in recent years Germany has been the major source of immigrants to Colorado. Their numbers reached a peak in 1910 while their percentage in the foreign-born population was highest in the early years of the state.

Table 1: Residents of Colorado 1860-1970 born in Germany

<u>Year</u>	<u>Population of Colorado</u>	<u>German-born</u>	<u>German-born in foreign-born population</u>	<u>Rank among foreign countries</u>
1860	34,277	567	21.3%	3rd
1870	39,864	1,456	22.1%	2nd
1880	194,327	7,012	17.6%	3rd
1890	413,249	15,151	18.0%	1st
1900	539,700	14,606	13.3%	1st
1910	799,024	16,908	13.3%	1st
1920	939,629	11,992	10.3%	3rd
1930	1,035,791	9,988	10.0%	4th
1940	1,123,296	7,017	9.9%	3rd
1950	1,325,089	5,821	9.9%	2nd
1960	1,753,947	8,522	14.2%	1st
1970	2,207,259	9,412	15.6%	1st

Speakers of German are to be found not only among persons born in Germany, but also among their descendants.³ Table 2 gives details of natives of the United States with one or both parents born in Germany for the period 1910-1970 and combines these figures with those of the German-born from Table 1 to form the category "German stock."

Table 2: Colorado residents 1910-1970 born in Germany or with parents born in Germany

<u>Year</u>	<u>Born in U.S. One or both parents born in Germany</u>	<u>Total German stock</u>
1910	38,974	55,882
1920	37,323	49,323
1930	40,367	50,355
1940	33,800	40,817
1950	30,620	36,441
1960	31,841	40,363
1970	33,760	43,172

Besides persons of German stock and some native Americans of German descent who are of the third generation one other significant source of speakers of German in Colorado is present in the Volga Germans, descendants of the many thousands of Germans who went to Russia as colonists in the second half of the eighteenth century at the invitation of Catherine the Great and settled along the Volga river. After their emigration from Russia, beginning around 1870, many eventually reached Colorado and are classed as natives of Russia in the census reports. Russia's rank among foreign countries as a source of immigrants to Colorado rose from thirteenth in 1890 to first position in 1920 (with 16,639 immigrants) and in 1940 (with 11,185). A very large proportion of the Russian immigrants at the beginning of the century were Volga Germans. Sallet estimated that in 1920 nearly 20,000 of the

approximately 120,000 Volga Germans of the first and second generations in the United States were in Colorado, as many as in any other state.⁴

The German settlers spread themselves widely throughout the state and were among the first residents in many counties, but their major area of concentration was in and around Denver.⁵ Many of the Volga Germans settled in northeastern Colorado. The first major stimulus for movement into the state by Germans and settlers of other nationalities alike was the discovery of gold. In the important mining camps of the second half of the nineteenth century like Pike's Peak, Leadville and Cripple Creek, the Germans were well represented. A consequence of the high percentage of Germans in the population of Colorado at this time was the publication of the constitution and laws of Colorado and many other public documents in German, as well as in English and Spanish, between 1877 and 1899. After the decline of mining many, the Germans among them, turned to agriculture. As in Wisconsin there was never much group settlement by Germans in Colorado. Most came as individuals or in families. One major attempt to establish a group settlement was an agricultural colony which had been organized in Chicago by the so-called German Colonization Company. Three hundred sixty-seven persons settled in 1870 in Wet Mountain Valley in the present Custer County. The experiment in cooperative living was an idealistic venture begun by Carl Wulsten for the benefit of Germans whom he saw forced to toil in poor conditions in Chicago, but failed shortly after its inception. Many of the settlers dispersed and only a few remained to work the land as individuals.⁶ Germans also engaged in the major forms of agriculture in the state, raising cattle and dry farming in eastern Colorado and fruit-growing on the Western Slope and in the San Luis Valley. The association of the Volga Germans with the sugar beet industry is discussed below.

The largest urban population of Germans was in Denver and they have remained a significant group. Germans served on the first Territorial Legislative Assembly and frequently in

other political offices in later years. Their *Turnvereine*, singing societies and the German theater became well-known in Denver. In the eighteen-seventies the first German newspapers were published. Oehlerts found that thirty-two different German newspapers had appeared in the state at one time or another, if only for a short period, before the end of 1963.⁷ The figure was more than for any other foreign language, although it is now likely that this number has been surpassed by newspapers in Spanish. An examination of this written German would complement the study of the spoken language. Many of the state's churches have held services in German. Although this practice has declined sharply, it has not disappeared.

The Volga Germans, the largest single group of speakers of German in Colorado, settled principally in the South Platte River Valley and live in the cities of Greeley, Loveland, Windsor, Berthoud, Longmont, Fort Morgan, Sterling and others, and also in Denver.⁸ Colorado became a major resettlement area of the Volga Germans (whose centers of population had been further east in Nebraska and Kansas) when the Great Western Sugar Company required more laborers than they were able to hire in Colorado. Hill found that since their arrival the Volga Germans had risen economically to become owners and tenants of farms, so that by 1940 they accounted for 75 percent of the beet growers or tenants of such farms in the South Platte River Valley (p. 65). Since their arrival in Colorado little more than half a century ago the culture of these people has suffered a rapid decline in contrast to its retention for some 160 years in the colonies in Russia. Hill rightly attributes the latter to the autonomous existence of the Germans on the Volga with their own schools and churches and a virtual absence of social contact with the Russians. On the other hand, the settlement in Colorado was in an already thriving agricultural area where children attended existing American public schools and there was much contact with speakers of English (p. xi). The conflict between the culture of the home and the culture of the outside world resulted in the loss of the former. The change in cultural alle-

giance took place within a short period of time in spite of the fact that the pietistic religion of the Volga Germans and their social life, which was closely associated with it, kept them out of the mainstream of American life. Such was the strength of the forces of assimilation.

The term, *Colorado German* applies to all the different varieties of German that were and are spoken in Colorado. It is therefore parallel to the term *Wisconsin German* which refers to a great variety of German dialects from High German to Low German, excluding *Pennsylvania German* which designates a single type of German (with regional variants) that is spoken over a wide area. It has also become evident that the most suitable candidate for linguistic study is the language of the Volga Germans. The individual nature of most of the rest of the German settlement and the openness of the Germans to American society were not conducive to the maintenance of an immigrant language. To what extent German is still known by descendants of these immigrants with their different dialects of German is a matter for further study. Such cases will serve for the study of individual bilingualism if not for that of a community. The use of German by Volga Germans is described briefly by Hill: "German is still used universally by first generation Volga Germans and virtually all those of the second generation are able to speak it because it was the only language spoken in their homes. Generally speaking, however, the second generation does not speak German except when conversing with the older people and they have not passed on the language to their offspring—the third generation" (p. 113). It is probably not over-optimistic to expect that there are still at least some who have a sufficient command of the language to provide information on the sounds and forms that were used when the speaking of German was general in their communities.

Methodology for the study of American German in Pennsylvania, Wisconsin and Texas has been established in the work of Reed, Seifert, Eichhoff and Gilbert, respectively. In examining German spoken in other parts of the United States it

is useful to follow this approach in order to obtain comparable materials. A preliminary linguistic survey would involve taking samples from as many different areas as possible. The investigator may choose to study the language either in relation to the dialects of the old homeland or with regard to the changes caused by its contact with English. If he chooses the latter, which is often the more rewarding approach, he will look for English influence at all levels of the language, but especially in the lexicon, and examine the phonological, morphological and semantic integration of loanwords. The questionnaire is one of the most important tools of the fieldworker, for with it he or she can obtain comparable material in an economical manner from each of the informants. A suitable basis for a workbook for the collection of data on English influence is Lester W. J. Seifert's Wisconsin German Questionnaire (Typescript, Madison 1946), an assemblage of some 700 English sentences grouped according to topic and intended for translation by an informant. It was used by Eichhoff in his survey of Wisconsin German and in revised form by Gilbert in Texas. It is easily adapted for use in Colorado or in other states and can provide a common element in different studies. For a comparison with native German dialects the investigator may choose to record the forty sentences used by Wenker for the *Deutscher Sprachatlas*. In those cases in which further study is desirable a questionnaire compiled specifically for the dialect under examination is needed since neither of the above aims at an exhaustive treatment of any one dialect.

NOTES

¹Glenn G. Gilbert, "A Unified Proposal for the Study of the German Language in America," in *The German Language in America: a Symposium*, ed. Glenn G. Gilbert (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1971), pp. 128-135.

²Jürgen Eichhoff, "German in Wisconsin" in Gilbert, p. 43.

³They will, of course, also be found among natives of Austria, Switzerland and other countries and their descendants, but their numbers are small and they are not included in the present survey.

⁴Richard Sallet, "Russlanddeutsche Siedlungen in den Vereinigten Staaten" in *Jahrbuch der Deutsch-Amerikanischen Gesellschaft von Illinois*, XXXI (1931), 108.

⁵Two books deal exclusively with the German element in Colorado: Mildred S. McArthur, *History of the German Element in the State of Colorado* (Chicago: German-American Historical Society of Illinois, 1917) and W. R. Hentschel, *The German Element in the Development of Colorado* (Denver: A. D. Meyer, 1932). From the many general histories of the state the following was most useful in making this survey: Colin B. Goodykoontz, "The People of Colorado," in *Colorado and its People: A Narrative and Topical History of the Centennial State*, ed. LeRoy R. Hafen (New York: Lewis Historical Publishing Co., 1948), II, pp. 77-120.

⁶Further details in James Field Willard, *Experiments in Colorado Colonization 1869-72*, University of Colorado Historical Collections, 3 (Boulder, Colorado, 1926).

⁷Donald E. Oehlerts, *Guide to Colorado Newspapers 1859-1963* (Denver: Bibliographic Center for Research, 1964), p. vii.

⁸Details of Russian-German settlement in the United States are available in Schwabenland (op. cit.) and in George J. Eisenach, *Pietism and the Russian Germans in the United States* (Berne, Indiana: The Berne Publishers, 1948). Alton David Hill, Jr. deals especially with Volga Germans in Colorado in his "Volga German Occupation in the Windsor area," M. A. thesis (Univ. of Colorado, 1959).

⁹See particularly Carroll E. Reed and Lester W. J. Seifert, "A Study of the Pennsylvania German Dialect Spoken in the Counties of Lehigh and Berks," *Modern Language Quarterly*, IX (1948), 448-466; Eichhoff (op. cit.); Glenn G. Gilbert, "The German Dialect of Kendall and Gillespie Counties, Texas," *Zeitschrift für Mundartforschung*, XXXI (1964), 138-172.

AUFRUF

Töchter und Söhne
deutscher Saat
und Erden,
Pfälzer Kindeskind
im blühend Mohawkland —
erhört die Winde linder
und hehrer werden,
erhört die frischen Töne,
der Ahnen stillen Rat:
Erneuert das deutsche Band!

HERMAN F. BRAUSE

Rochester, N. Y.