

**Through Curious and Foreign Eyes: Grigorii Machtet Chronicles the Kansas Frontier, 1872-1873**

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**Abstract**

This project delves into the fascinating account of Grigorii Machtet, a Russian writer who chronicled his experiences during his year-long residence in Kansas from 1872 to 1873. Machtet's writings, which spanned a range of genres including autobiographical descriptions, novels, short stories, and morality lessons, offer a unique perspective on the American frontier. His eyewitness account of a Russian subject's death by gunshot near Seneca, Kansas, in November 1872, provides a captivating window into the tumultuous era of Kansas settlement. Machtet's observations of the people he met and the landscapes he encountered provide valuable insights into the cultural and social dynamics of the American West during this period. This project sheds light on Machtet's remarkable chronicles, which were later compiled into twelve volumes in Russian, and offers a fresh perspective on the Kansas frontier through the eyes of a curious and foreign observer.

# Through Curious and Foreign Eyes: Grigorii Machtet Chronicles the Kansas Frontier, 1872-1873

**Norman Saul**

One of the many newsworthy incidents during the settling of Kansas involved the death by a gunshot of a Russian subject near the town of Seneca in November 1872. The event, like so many similar ones, might have passed quietly into oblivion except that the details were recorded by a companion on the scene. This man, Grigorii Machtet, on the way to becoming a popular author in a great age of Russian literature, described what he saw during his year-long residence and travels in Kansas for an audience in Russia.

Machtet's writings covered a wide range of personal experiences abroad and at home, emphasizing his observations of people he met. Some were autobiographical and descriptive while others were novels, short stories, and morality lessons. After his death in 1901, they were noteworthy enough to be compiled in twelve volumes published in Russian in Kiev and, a few years later in a St. Petersburg edition.<sup>1</sup> Most of volume two of these collections cover his adventures in Kansas.

Machtet was born in 1852 in Lutsk, a major city in the province of Volynia, then part of the Russian empire and formerly within the Kingdom of Poland-Lithuania. Although he was the son of a schoolteacher of Ukrainian-Polish nobility, he wrote mainly in Russian and was properly included in the ranks of the Russian intelligentsia. Machtet then studied at the Nezhinski lyceum (high school) then at a provincial academy in Kamentz-Podolski in the 1860's during

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1. This article was originally published in the summer 1994 issue of *Kansas History*. It has been republished with permission. G. A. Machtet, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii G. A. Machteta* [Selections of the Works of G. A. Machtet], 12 vols. (Kiev: B. F. Fuks, 1902) and Machtet, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii*, 12 vols. (St. Petersburg: Prosveshchenie, 1911-12); the American stories were also published separately as *Po belyi svetu (ocherki amerikanskoi zhizhni)* [Around the Wide World: Sketches of American Life] (Moscow: Bonch-Bruевич, 1889), all available in the University of Illinois Library, Urbana-Champaign. The author is indebted to the opportunity to use the facilities of the Russian Research Laboratory and the resources of the university library during the summer of 1993.

For a translation of about half of Machtet's writings about Kansas, see Olga Peters Hasty and Suzanne Fusso, *America through Russian Eyes, 1874-1926* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988, 16-82. Alexander Nikoliukin, *A Russian Discovery of America* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1986), 320-36, contains Machtet's description of New York and the Russian community there.

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the height of liberal reforms in Russia, but was soon expelled for radical activities. He was nonetheless able to take a special examination in Kiev to become a schoolteacher in Mogilevsk.<sup>2</sup>

During this relatively free period in Russian history, the universities and schools around Kiev were hotbeds of student movements and radical activism. The socialist-populist ideas of Alexander Herzen, Vissarion Belinsky, Mikhael Bakunin, and Nicholas Chernyshevsky provided the inspiration for this revolutionary generation. These students tended to identify with groups and circles that often would have a distinct viewpoint.

At the high school in Ukraine, Machtet came under the influence of one of his teachers, Alexander Romanko-Romanovskii and his wife, Olga Razumovskaia, and he was introduced to the basic tenets of Russian populism that idealized the communal life of the Russian peasant village. He soon developed an attachment to the Kiev circle of the Debogorii-Mokrievich family (two brothers and a cousin), which was especially interested in opportunities abroad with a focus on the United States.<sup>3</sup>

Information about America was quite plentiful in Russia at that time because of the liberal reform era of the reign of Alexander II and the enduring popularity of American writers such as Washington Irving, James Fenimore Cooper, and Harriet Beecher Stowe, whose works were issued in several Russian-language editions. The United States also attracted Russian attention due to American friendship toward Russia during the Crimean War, the historical coincidence of slave and serf emancipations and the bitter struggle between North and South, with the sensational and much publicized Russian naval visits to New York and San Francisco in 1863 that demonstrated Russian support for the Union cause.

Several Russians, notably Aleksandr Lakier and Eduard Tsimmerman, had already written for the Russian public about their travels in America. Tsimmerman, a Moscow merchant, may have had the most influence upon Russian perceptions of the American frontier because he traveled into Nebraska in 1857 and again in 1869, and emphasized the growth and development that had taken place between his visits. Additionally, a popular account by a British observer, William Hepworth Dixon, also appeared in Russian and was extensively reviewed in Russian periodicals.<sup>4</sup> All of this spurred a curiosity about the United

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2. T. G. Machtet-Iurkevich (Machtet's daughter), introduction, *Izbrannoe G. A. Machteta* [Publications of G. A. Machtet]; "Machtet, Grigorii Aleksandrovich," *Istoricheskii Vestnik* [Historical Herald] 22 (October 1901) 383; Iaroslav Mandat, "Neistvestnaia avtobiografia G. A. Machtet" [An Unknown Autobiography of G. A. Machtet], *Ceskoslovenska Rusistka* 12 (1967) 34-36. The latter includes a letter of Machtet to the Czech literary historian and translator Augustin Vrzal.

3. V. K. Debogorii-Mokrievich, *Vospominania* [Memoirs] (Paris: J. Allemane, 1894) 16-17; Avrahm Yarmolinsky, *A Russian's American Dream: A Memoir on William Frey* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1965) 27-29.

4. Tsimmerman, *Puteshestvie po Amerike v 1869-70* [Travels around America in 1869-70] (Moscow: Grachev, 1871); Lakier, *Puteshestvie po severo-amerikanskim shtatam kanada i ostrov kuba* [Travels around North America, Canada, and Island of Cuba] 2 vols. (St. Petersburg: Vul'f, 1859); an edited version of the latter in English is by Arnold Schrier. *A Russian Looks at America: The Journal of Aleksandr Borisovich Lakier*

States drawing special attention to the outcome of the Civil War, the Homestead Act, land grants to railroads, an attempt to impeach a president, and the freedom and opportunity for immigration and settlement.

The members of the Debogorii-Mokrievich circle were also familiar with Chernyshevsky's and Herzen's sympathetic portraits of America and Bakunin account of his journey through the country in 1860 on his way from Siberian exile to Western Europe. And they were not alone in seeing the United States as a land of opportunity for an unrestricted political life and for social and economic experimentation. Machtet's group was so much infatuated with the New World that its members dubbed themselves "Amerikantsy," the Americans, and began to save money for a trip across the Atlantic.<sup>5</sup>

Another motivation for refuge in America at this time was the wide publicity in 1870 given to Sergei Nechaev's plot to murder a member of his terrorist Moscow student circle in order to bond them closer together, a famous episode of Russian revolutionary history immortalized by Fedor Dostoyevsky in *The Possessed* that had appeared in serial form in 1871. The "Amerikansky" wanted to escape the demoralization produced by the Russian environment that, in their eyes, contributed to this deed and to the repression that was growing in Russia. According to Vladimir Debogorii-Mokrievich, they also sought additional protection that American citizenship might give them upon returning to Russia.<sup>6</sup>

Three members of the circle in Kiev departed for America in the summer of 1872; the Debogorii-Mokrievich brothers also left: one had gone on earlier to join the Oneida Community in New York, one if the best-known utopian socialist settlements in America while the other only reached Zurich, a major center of Russian dissident exiles. Besides the twenty-year old Machtet, who took the name of George Mansted upon arrival, were the teacher Roman'ko-Romanovskii and Ivan Rechitskii, a former government clerk. They first spent several weeks in the rather turbulent Russian community in New York, which included socialists and Christians, Jews and gentiles, and Poles and Ukrainians, as well as Russians. Then they set off for west, apparently having received financial support, as they subsequently referred to themselves as the "Western Branch of the New York Russian Circle for Mutual Aid."<sup>7</sup>

Exactly why Machtet and his associates chose Kansas as their destination is not known, but from the beginning they were intent on finding the best place to establish an agricultural commune, and most likely were aware of the precedent set by Tsimmerman in investigating the Great Plains and by a fellow socialist of Baltic German origin, Vladimir Geins (Heinz), who, after departure from Russia, took the name of Wilhelm Frei (Free), soon anglicized to William Frey. In January 1871, after seeking advice from the Oneida Community and a short participation

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(Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1979). Other Russians writing about America before the Civil War include Adam Gurowski, Ivan Golovin, and Dmitri Zhurowskii. For more information, see Norman Saul, *Distant Friends: The United States and Russia, 1763-1867* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1991).

5. Debogorii-Mokrievich, 7-10.

6. Ibid., 10-11; Mandat, 35.

7. Yarmolinsky, 37-39.

in Alexander Longley's Reunion Community in Jasper County, Missouri, near the Kansas border, Frey and his wife and an American socialist, Stephen Briggs, bought former Osage Indian land in southern Kansas for a communal farm four miles east of Cedar Vale and called it the Progressive Communist Community. Under Frey's leadership it was known for vegetarianism and for having its own printing press that published a regular pamphlet, the *Progressive Communist*.<sup>8</sup>

Another factor in selecting Kansas may have been the publicity surrounding the journey in the West of Grand Duke Alexis in quest of buffalo hunting thrills in early 1872. After a long trip by train through Nebraska and Wyoming and a stop in Denver, the party returned through Kansas with stops in Topeka and Lawrence.<sup>9</sup> Or--Machtet and his companions may simply have headed west and ran out of money in St. Joseph, Missouri and found work at a nursery, across the Missouri River in Kansas.

The Russian visitors did not go directly to the Frey's south Kansas commune—or to better-known Kansas towns—but came to the northeast corner of the state. There, in early summer, they found employment at the Doniphan County Nursery at Brenner Station south of Troy on the Atchison and Nebraska Railroad, the main factor in determining their location being the presence there of Russian-speaking "John Moshiskey" [likely in Russian Ivan Moshinsky] who had emigrated from Russia in 1868 and after working in a nursery in Illinois had established a partnership in the nursery in Kansas though Machtet does not cite the name in any of his writings.<sup>10</sup>

While working at the nursery, Machtet—or Mansted—began taking notes for a series of impressionistic "travel pictures" describing the frontier scene, informing his Russian readers that the American plains did not at all resemble the Ukrainian steppe:

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8. Ibid., 21-23; Frey to Alexander Longley, April 19, 1871, William Frey papers, box 1, folder3, Manuscript division, New York Public Library; "Our Past," *Progressive Communist* 2 (February 1875). Frey had also reports on America for the Russian public. See V. K. Geins, "Prezidentskaia kampaniia v Amerike: poiavlenie tret'ei partii" [The Presidential Election in America: The Appearance of a Third Party], *Otechestvennaia Zapiskaia* [Fatherland Notes] 230 (February) 415-53. This, perhaps the most popular of the several "fat" journals was the leader in exposing Russians to American life and society.

9. For an interesting tongue-in-cheek account of the grand duke's reception in Topeka by D. R. Anthony, a well-known newspaper publisher, *Leavenworth Daily Times*, January 24, 1872. For a full account of this episode, see Lee A. Farrow, *Alexis in America: a Russian Grand Duke's Tour 1871-72*, (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2014).

10. "John Moshiskey" as cited in *Portrait and Biographical Album of Marshall County, Kansas* (Chicago: Chapman Bros. 1889) 179, apparently having relocated on west to Marysville by the 1880s. He is described as "a Russian gentleman of superior education, who has been very successful in his present enterprise," the Marysville Nursery with more than a hundred thousand trees on 360 acres. In an earlier advertisement for the Doniphan County Nursery, Stapleton, Moshiskey & Co. the location is described as at Rock Creek schoolhouse near Brenner Station, Doniphan County Republican (Troy), August 10, 1872. Regarding the Russian name there are several variants: Mushinskii, Moshinskii, Moshenskii, Mashinskii, and Moshchenskii. See Morton Benson, comp. *Dictionary of Russian Personal Names* Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969), 86.

It has nothing in common with our silent, monotonous, flat, smooth, treeless steppe. It is all hills and valleys, crisscrossed by a multitude of streams and ravines that are often parched in summer but noisy and full of water in the spring, when their banks are covered with oaks, white and black walnuts, sycamores, and prickly shrubs . . . At sunset the streams and ravines are enveloped in thick fog that dissolves in the morning into clouds across the vast blue sky. That is why the Indians--the sons of the Great Spirit of the wilderness, who roamed these places long before the coming the paleface--called this land Kansas, that is, "smoking stream."<sup>11</sup>

He also described the violent history of Kansas, emphasizing the role of John Brown (and even translated one of the verses of the popular song into Russian), but stressed that all was tranquil and productive in Kansas now. Machtet was especially impressed with the transformation of the prairie from its Indian culture to immigrant settlement and described in detail the breaking of the soil for the first time. Curiously, he and his colleagues played a direct role in that transformation since their job at the nursery was planting hedgerows of Osage orange (Machtet complained about losing blood from the thorns).<sup>12</sup>

Keen to speak American English as well as to learn about Kansas society, Machtet attended town and rural meetings and conversed with farmers around Troy. Interestingly, within Machtet's Russian text, particular terms or idioms that struck him as unique were left in the original, phonetically spelled English, thus providing clues to 1870s Kansas speech patterns. He was also adept at sketching people. A leading character in his first stories was "Uncle Jack," a bachelor farmer who regularly attended these meetings, some of which were probably held at the Rock Creek schoolhouse, near the Doniphan County Nursery. "Uncle Jack's" persistence in speaking out in a booming voice and having a definite viewpoint on every issue, perhaps an early and persisting Kansas trait, impressed Machtet who faithfully recorded the debates he heard over "herd Iowa (law)" over "fence Iowa" and over school bond issues. He also emphasized Jack's unselfish hospitality to friend and foe alike. As Machtet described:

When I lived in northern Kansas, I had an acquaintance there, or rather a sincere friend--a farmer, an excellent worker, whose real name I, like all his neighbors, never knew. Like everyone else, I called him "Uncle Jack," and when I spoke of him in

11. Machtet, "preriia i pionery", [Prairie and Pioneers], *Polnoe sobranie* (Kiev ed.) 2: 5-11; This translation is from Hasty and Fusso, *America through Russian Eyes*, 20 (quoted by permission of Yale University Press, which retains the copyright).

12. The prickly Osage orange, introduced from Texas and Arkansas, was very popular for hedgerows and producing durable fence posts. "The Osage Orange as a Timber Tree," *Kansas Daily Commonwealth* (Topeka), November 16, 1872. The article, however, recommended cedar because it added beauty, thus promoting another characteristic feature to the Kansas landscape.

the third person, I, as others, always added the epithet "fat." Uncle Jack was not married and it seemed he did not understand why people got married. He was already graying but was fresh and sprightly, and he loved to joke and laugh; I never saw him sad. He adored his pony, Jenny, and he loved his setter, Palmerston, but more than anything, even more than anything, even more than his "green prairie," for which he "would lay down his soul," Uncle Jack loved all kind of meetings, debates, speeches, and so forth. Although an excellent husbandman, he was always short of cash, and no one ever knew for sure what Fat Uncle Jack did with all those sums that so often fell to him from the sale of this or that. They knew only that Uncle Jack was somehow inordinately interested in schools, that not a single schoolboy or school-miss passed by his farm without nibbling on something; that out of nowhere boots and new trousers would appear on some John or Charlie and pretty new ribbons on some pretty Betsy, Rosie, or Kate. They also knew that when lightning burned a neighboring farmer's house and killed his ox, Uncle Jack talked to him about something for a long time, after which, the farmer, a poor man with a large family, began to build a new house and bought another ox.

Not one meeting, not one gathering seldom passed without him and his Palmerston, who always snored during heated debates and who sometimes awakened from his dreams when people began to argue too hotly, and would set up a furious barking, throwing Uncle Jack into considerable embarrassment and indignation. If a single meeting would take place without him, someone would go to his farm to find out what was wrong with him.<sup>13</sup>

One debate that Machtet describes concerned whether travel or the study of science were the best means of education. After much animated discussion a conclusion was reached that both were equally important, but the study of science should ideally precede travel. Russian readers must have been impressed by the interest in and promotion of education among ordinary Kansas citizens.

Uncle Jack took Machtet with him to another meeting in Troy that made a special impression on him. The Methodist and Presbyterian churches had been quarreling about religion, so they held an all-day meeting at the school auditorium. Two respective preachers were invited to lead the debate. Machtet observed:

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13. Machtet, Kiev ed. 2:29-37; English translation from Hasty and Fusso, 35-36. Though Machtet does not identify Uncle Jack, he is probably John McDaniel identified by the Kansas census of 1870 as a single, 81-year old farmer living near Rock Creek school with a higher than average property value (\$8,000). 1870 census, Kansas, Doniphan County, Wayne Township.



The preachers came in with their books, notes, pencils, and so forth, and the debates began. But what debates! I was expecting something serious, authoritative. And suddenly a whole slew of mutual gibes of the most venomous and caustic sort. What things they said! The words “my dear brother” were always on their lips; but then there flowed such comparisons, such inferences, such analogies, that finally it got hot for both of them, and sweat streamed from them. They argued for a long time; then even argued for a second day. Finally they became hoarse, and both decided that each of them was right in their descriptions of the other. They did not try to refute the other’s positions, but each sought to represent the other to the public in the most ludicrous, stupid, and unattractive light. And the public had a field day—they simply “split their sides laughing.” The public listened and they laughed, and in the end each preacher remained convinced that he was the one who was right. There were no new converts after the debate.<sup>14</sup>

Uncle Jack, who was at first miffed that the crowd had not allowed that Palmerston into the meeting laughed until he cried—until, as he told Machtet, his sides split.

In another story, “Spirits and Souls,” which does not have a specific locale in Kansas but was probably either Doniphan or Marshall County, Machtet describes mystical life on the prairie in wonderfully piquant Russian. He meets a Farmer Wilson, “a stout, kind-hearted soul,” in a beer saloon, and the two proceed to argue about whether there are spirits, a conversation inspired by the arrival in town of an attractive blonde medium. Machtet is then invited to join a wagon load of young people for a gay ride across the prairie to Farmer Davis’ home. The farmhouse, guests and the surprising effects of the “happening” are reported in dramatic detail, but the atheistic Russian was still not convinced of the existence of mystical beings.<sup>15</sup>

Another colorful picture that Machtet provided was of fighting a fall prairie grass fire. His Russian readers would have appreciated the community spirit and organization featured in the event. Also of interest is his lengthy narrative, in somewhat gory detail, of the murder of a farm family of German origin. He described the alarm of local citizens, the spread of rumors, the mobilization of a posse, and the capture of an alleged villain who, until the crowd finally became convinced of his innocence, was threatened with hanging. They then atoned for their mistake by taking him home, lighting his fire, and cooking his supper. Machtet seemed overly convinced of the effectiveness of this form of frontier

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14. Hasty and Fusso, 37.

15. Machtet, “Spirity i dukhi” *Nedelia* (The Week) 8 (January 6, 1875) 15-22. Although both Wilson and Davis are common names, both appear on the plat map of Doniphan County in 1882 as farmers near Troy. Machtet also recounted in detail his disdain for an encounter with a spiritualist in New York. Nikoliukin, *A Russian Discovery*, 333-34.



justice.<sup>16</sup>

As the wintry winds began to blow across the Plains by November 1872, hedgerow planting was necessarily suspended. Moshishkey and his partner took pity on their itinerant Russian workers, who had been joined by this time by Ivan Linev, a trained agronomist, and gave them a winter job clearing and improving land about 120 miles west, near Marysville, for another nursery.<sup>17</sup> Preceded by Moshishkey and provided a wagon, a team of horses, and tools, the four Russians set off in mid-November. Machtet reflected on the people they met on the road: "Farmers of the West are good-souled but yet brave and decisive."<sup>18</sup> He then recorded the sad event that occurred on their journey.

After passing through Seneca, the group stopped along Wild Cat Creek for lunch. While there Rechitskii pulled out an old revolver that he had recently purchased and attempted to shoot a bird across the stream, but the weapon failed to discharge. He then with obvious carelessness tried to unload it, but it went off, the bullet striking his companion, Roman'ko-Romanovskii, or "Room", as he was called in Kansas, in the rib section. Machtet, Linev, and the distraught Rechetskii tried to care for their companion, who they first thought was not seriously wounded. Once the severity of his condition became clear, Machtet had to restrain Rechitskii from also shooting himself. With the help nearby woodcutters, who had heard their cries of distress, they bundled the now unconscious "Room" onto the wagon and race off to Seneca. He was dead by the time they reached town.<sup>19</sup>

For Machtet, this was only the beginning of another quite moving story on the road in Kansas. He and his companions were temporarily arrested and they began to ponder an indefinite Siberia-like exile in the American West. But justice moved fast and, in this case, honorably. A coroner's inquest was held that day before a hastily assembled jury who, mainly from the testimony of Machtet, exonerated Rechitskii of any crime. The townspeople then extended their sympathy and friendship to the visitors, took up a collection for a handsome coffin for the deceased, attended the funeral in mass the next day and insisted on serving them meals. As the *Seneca Weekly Courier* boasted, Room "received the attention due from a civilized community."<sup>20</sup>

Whether these displaced socialists eventually would have turned the Marysville nursery into a Russian commune will never be known. Perhaps with the state of the land with its primitive dugout shelter was too discouraging.

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16. Hasty and Fusso, 39-44.

17. Moshishkey's Blue Valley Nursery is advertised as located on Frank Schmidt's farm on the edge of Marysville. *Marshall County News*, October 26, 1872.

18. Machtet, "Pred amerikanskim sudom," *Nedelia* (June 1, 1875), 721-23.

19. Ibid. 724-29; "Sad accident," *Seneca Weekly Courier*, November 15, 1872. The account in the *Kansas Daily Commonwealth* (Topeka) for the same date, Room [sic] was trying to take the revolver away Rechitskii, a version that was remembered several years later in the *Illustrated Doniphan County* (Troy: Weekly Kansas Chief, 1916) 380 (chronicle of events).

20. November 15, 1872. This is the only mention of the event in the local paper and a search of town records (which are minimal for this period) failed to turn up any record of burial place or court proceedings.

Rechitskii saddened by the way it turned out and feeling duty bound to return his friend's effects to his widow in Ukraine left for home soon after his arrival in Marysville. There, ironically, he immediately was arrested in a crackdown on populists and, perhaps still affected by his Kansas experience, committed suicide in transit to a labor camp in Siberia. Linev wandered on to another part of the United States, then he also returned to Russia to face arrest and a long term of exile.

Machtet, however, remained for the winter months with Moshishkey in a boarding house in Marysville, where he seemed to have forsaken his original work assignment but continued his stories about life there and the variety of people he met, such as David Wolff, a "Russian" shopkeeper who was really Jewish (and born in Poland); Harry Sullivan, the Irish owner of the boarding house; Bluepoint, the postmaster and editor of a newspaper; and Frank Schmidt, a noted local politician; and schoolteachers Mr. and Mrs. Williams.<sup>21</sup> Machtet, "Gorozhane prerii" [Townpeople of the Prairie], (Kiev ed.) 2: 69-87. Most of the names can be collaborated by the *Marshall County News*. For example, "Professor Williams, principal of our schools, informs us that he has a large number of pupils and that he is succeeding admirably." October 5, 1872.<sup>21</sup>

In his articles about life in Marysville Machtet emphasized the high educational and cultural levels of frontier society, stressing to his Russian readers the ample sophistication he found on the American Great Plains. With Bluepoint, who was educated at an eastern university, he carried on discussions in Latin, debating about the correct pronunciation of words.<sup>22</sup> With others he debated issues relating to Goethe, Hugo, Bentham, and Spencer. Machtet claimed to be well-acquainted with the whole town, especially owing to friendships with Williams and his wife who had recently arrived from New York, and joined them for a three-day church revival meeting in Blue Valley, a neighboring village.

Now the valley teemed with people, wagons, and horses from all around. The white tops of the wagons made it look like so much like a military camp dotted with tents, that if your eyes were not dazzled by the plethora of multi-colored bows, ribbons, and plumes pinned on all the misses and missuses and if the squealing and laughter of the children weren't so resounding in the distance, you would hardly venture to enter here without first checking your constant companion—your revolver—without making sure that this was not an enemy camp!<sup>23</sup>

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21. Machtet, "Gorozhane prerii" [Townpeople of the Prairie], (Kiev ed.) 2: 69-87. Most of the names can be collaborated by the *Marshall County News*. For example, "Professor Williams, principal of our schools, informs us that he has a large number of pupils and that he is succeeding admirably." October 5, 1872.

22. Machtet, (Kiev ed.) 2, 80-81.

23. Hasty and Fusso, 48-49.

To improve his English and to meet more new people, he attended an evening class taught by Williams and stressed the role of public education in American life. “‘Schools, schools, schools’ is the motto of America.”<sup>24</sup> Machtet also painted in detail the struggle between cattlemen and farmers, the displacement of Indians and their culture, the high esteem and value of land (“land is the best savings bank”), the rivalry between towns for business and to be the county seat, the routine live of both town and country.

After spending about three months in and around Marysville, Machtet set off in February 1873 to visit Frey’s commune to the south. Although the route cannot be determined precisely, it certainly took him through part of the scenic Flint Hills of Kansas:

The farther south we went the more deserted the area became and the fewer farms and hamlets we encountered along the road; the waves of the hilly prairie spread like an endless yellow-green carpet [it was early February] merging far in the distance with the clear-blue sky on which there was not a single blemish, not a single little cloud, only the bright but as yet weakly warming sun. A light haze of fog, betraying the presence of gurgling prairie streams billowed around the base of hills. . . . Wild herds wandered about the virgin meadows and valleys; at the approach the train the animals lifted their tails and scattered in all directions, bellowing loudly; the prairie rabbit sprang like a rubber ball thrown by strong arm and flocks of prairie fowl flew hither and thither, flapping their heavy wings. Evening stole up quietly, imperceptibly, tinging the railroad cars and the prairie and sky with a bright-pink light; the sun so bright and blinding earlier but now safe for the eyes, hung on the horizon like an enormous red-hot disc, slowly receding and yielding its place to the pale moon and the diamond-like stars.<sup>25</sup>

On the long trip across the state Machtet was impressed by the scenery, comfort of the ride, absence of classes and compartments in the cars, and that the train would slow down to pick up passengers along the tracts. At one point the train stopped, and the conductor announced the bridge ahead was weakened by rains and advised passengers to get off and walk across—but none did. The food in the dining car was good and cheap, which Machtet thought was fortunate since none was available at the small-town depots:

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24. “V Amerikanskoi shkole” (In an American School), *Nedelia* 8 (December 8, 1875): 1796-1797.

25. Hasty and Fusso translation, 61-62. Most of this north-south journey would have taken place aboard the Kansas & Texas (KATY) or the Leavenworth, Lawrence, and Galveston railroads (LL&G). Since we know that Machtet left the train at Independence, just off the main line of the LL&G, this is most likely the route taken by him.

Stations do not even exist here, unless you would give the name to the small telegraph booths, plastered with advertisements and signs of all possible colors and contents as the following: “Wives! Unless you wish to see your husbands emaciated, you should buy them the ‘Famous Anti-Leanness Elicir’ from my inventor husband, a druggist from Chicago! A precious gift for wives!” Or the following: “Grant’s socks! All Republicans truly loyal to the Union will surely want to acquire the very same socks that President Grant wears. Inexpensive and comfortable!”<sup>26</sup>

This “handbill America” conjures up a different picture than the neat and tidy scenes usually depicted in Hollywood westerns.

By early February Machtet reached Independence, thirty miles from his destination near Cedar Vale, where he stayed for a few days at the Caldwell House. There he had an opportunity to witness the local agitation over the “Pomeroy Scandal.” Samuel C. Pomeroy, the senior senator from Kansas, seemed to be on his way to re-election by the Kansas legislature when the state senator from Wilson County (Independence), Colonel A. M. York exposed Pomeroy’s attempt to buy his vote in the state legislature for \$7,000.<sup>27</sup> Independence was especially shaken by the uproar that ensued around both men, and both men, and Machtet thus found himself in the middle of one of Kansas’ most celebrated political events.<sup>28</sup> He caught the excitement in another story.

Newspapers were greedily devoured by readers. A whole horde of people massed at the railroad station, awaiting the train that was to bring letters and newspapers from Tupika (Topeka). Little groups of people were everywhere . . . gestures, shouts, among which the most distinctly and frequently uttered words were Goddamn; seven thousand; Mr. York; Mr. Pomeroy; bribe; and hang him. The news was so astounding and spread so rapidly that in a few hours a great number of farmers’ wagons were already crowding the streets of the town. The farmers, strapping and silent, with their inevitable pipes and energetic “goddamns” darted around listening and asking questions in the stores and hotels.<sup>29</sup>

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26. *Obshchina Freia* [Frey’s Commune] (Kiev ed.) 2: 150-52; and in *Nedelia* 8 (August 4, 1875); translation from Hasty and Fusso, 63.

27. For many years the senators in a state were elected to office by the state legislature, thus ensuring the party dominating the legislature also elected the senators, leading to a number of abuses. This was changed to the current popular election in 1913.

28. Pomeroy was an ardent abolitionist from Massachusetts, who had come to Kansas to advocate statehood (free state) for Kansas, and after his subsequent defeat, would return there.

29. Hasty and Fusso, 64; verified by the *South Kansas Tribune* (Independence) February 5 and 12, 1872. Machtet may have been making a play on Russian words at

After observing the commotion in Independence Machtet walked the remaining thirty miles to Cedar Vale, leaving behind his luggage at the hotel to be picked up later. He painted a vivid “prayerth” picture of the rolling hills and valleys, the buffalo tracks he crossed, and the people he met. At a farmhouse set off the road the Russian was invited in for lunch and plied for the latest political news from Independence and his views on railroad monopolies, farmers’ clubs, and the prices of farmland up north. Lunch consisted of pork, dried buffalo meat, beans, potatoes, fried eggs, and tea. Machtet offered fifty cents, but the farmer objected to payment; they finally settled on thirty cents.

Frey’s Cedar Vale commune, which formally was named “the Progressive Community” by its first constitution but was also known as “the Progressive Communist Community” (and in late 1875 Frey formed a separate “Investigating Community”), had been in existence for two years when Machtet arrived. Although small and isolated, it managed to secure some public success and attention, thanks to money from the Geins family in Russia and to Frey’s active correspondence.<sup>30</sup> Frey had actually shared the founding role with an American, Dr. Stephen S. Briggs, who Machtet describes as tall, impressive, handsome man, a dilettante who advocated vegetarianism as well as communalism.<sup>31</sup> By 1873 Frey also had become a health food addict and the community was becoming known as much for its dietary code as for its social and political ideals. Adding to the peculiarity of this little society was J. G. Truman, a lapsed seminarian from Wisconsin who, according to Machtet, described himself as “a crank, a spiritualist, and a nudist.” The latter, although probably not practiced in the Kansas winter, would have made him an even greater problem for the community, since Machtet describes him as portly, ugly, pockmarked, and cantankerous.<sup>32</sup>

Strange personalities, extremist views, and the mixture of Russian and American backgrounds led to constant squabbling within the commune, even a verbal battle and estrangement between Frey and his wife (later reconciled). Frey’s papers, however, indicate that the cause of the argument was most likely was his wife’s love interest in Machtet. This may explain why Machtet, highly critical of this particular social experiment, stayed only eight months before setting off on his return journey to Russia. His romantic involvement may also have affected his descriptions. Mary Frey is “a woman of quite exceptional intellect . . . oppressed by this sort of community [and] . . . endured it against her will, behaving unusual tact,” while her husband is depicted as stubborn, obstinate and having a mind lacking in “creativity and power of analysis.”<sup>33</sup>

Retrospectively, Machtet’s criticism of the little Kansas-Russian community

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Kansas’ expense, since tupik in Russian means “dead end.”

30. Yarmolinsky, 21; Allen, 48-57. While drawing on Machtet’s description in his works published in 1901, Yarmolinsky questions its accuracy due to its publication many years later, but in fact it was first published first in *Nedelia* in 1875, soon after Machtet’s return to Russia.

31. Machtet, (Kiev ed.) 2, 158-61.

32. Ibid. Truman to Frey, August 28, 1872, NYPL, Frey Papers, box 1, file 5.

33. Hasty and Fusso translation, 69-70.

grew. After Frey's death in 1889, Machtet observed that many such groups in America were made up of "benign egoists for whom people, society, homeland are nothing and personal, peace, their own tastes, habits, and views are everything."<sup>34</sup>

Frey's Kansas commune lasted several more years, into 1879, reaching its zenith in 1875 with the acquisition of a printing press and the publication of a journal, the *Progressive Communist*, a monthly newsletter that recorded its activities and inventory of its possessions. The commune then consisted of only a few people: Mary Frey as president, Truman as secretary, William Frey, treasurer, Briggs, manager of orchards and gardens, William Frey, agriculture, and Mary Frey also housekeeper. They owned collectively 320 acres, but only 40 were fenced and only 24 plowed; the property included a one acre vineyard, a three-acre orchard, a one-story box house, with a one story and a half addition, a yoke of oxen, two cows, three calves, one wagon, and a printing press with type.<sup>35</sup> Not mentioned was a substantial library that included the works of Hume, Macauley, Gibbons, Josephus, Abbott, Mill, and Spencer that Frey later donated to the Cedar Vale public library.<sup>36</sup> It is not known if any local people read them; they appear not to have survived.<sup>37</sup>

Despite Machtet's negative views of the Frey's enterprise, it continued to attract a number of visitors, most notably Nikolai Chaikovsky (1850-1926), later a well-known socialist and a leader of the Socialist Revolutionary Party during the 1917 revolution and the civil war that followed; Alexander Malikov, a "God-man" (Christian pacifist) who became a disciple of Leo Tolstoy; and Fedor Kamensky, a noted sculptor, a few of whose works are exhibited at the Russian Museum in St. Petersburg and eleven others from 1875 to 1878.<sup>38</sup> In general, these Russians left no imprint in the state, and only vague memories at Cedar Vale, while the large numbers of settlers from Russia-Ukrainian-Dutch and Swiss Mennonites and Catholic and Lutheran Volga-Germans—who left a lasting impact upon the state.

After the formal closure of the Kansas commune in 1879, Frey pursued

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34. Ibid., 71. First published as "Russkaia sem'ia v Kanzase" [a Russian Family in Kansas] in *Nedelia* 8 (August 4, 1875), then more critically in 1889; the latter was included in the collected works of 1902, which is the one cited by Hasty and Fusso, 59.

35. *Progressive Communist* 1 (January 1875), 8.

36. *Chatauqua County Times* (Sedan), January 10, 1879. The author has benefitted from the vast newspaper holdings of the Kansas History Research Center in Topeka but regrets the decision to destroy the originals as a space saving measure in favor of the use of poor microfilm copies. See also William E. Connelley, comp., *History of Kansas Newspapers* (Topeka: Kansas State Historical Society, 1916).

37. Author's visit to Cedar Vale, 1992. A historical marker is on the site of the commune but no buildings survive. Shortly before his death in 1904, Malikov recalled his experiences in the commune. A. Faresov, "Odin iz semidesiatniki" [One of the 70's People], *Vestnik Evropy* [Herald of Europe] 39 (September, 1904) 225-60. Chaikovsky, interviewed in 1919, recalled that an oil well was later drilled in the commune's front yard. "Hit Oil in Kansas," *Topeka State Journal*, May 17, 1919. The miserable end of the Russian community in Kansas is also recounted in interviews with former members by reporter for the *New York Sun*, subsequently quoted in "Russians in the United States," *Missouri Republican* (St Louis), October 9, 1879.

38. These may have been motivated by reading Machtet's articles published in Russia in *Nedelia* in 1875.

his communal beliefs at the mainly Jewish New Odessa colony in Oregon and elsewhere.<sup>39</sup> Increasingly he came under the influence of August Comte's positivism and carried on a widely publicized correspondence with Leo Tolstoy earning the famous author's respect. Vladimir Geins, alias William Frey died in London in 1889, ten years after his departure from Kansas, while his wife and partner in the commune lived on for several more years in New York.<sup>40</sup>

The comparatively young Machtet, still not cured of his "Americanism," returned to Russia and settled in St. Petersburg. There he was able to publish his articles about America in the progressive periodical *Nedelia* and in major newspapers during the still generally open and free political atmosphere of the 1870s. His colorful and descriptive stories about his travels are reminiscent of Mark Twain's brief notes about his visit to Russia in 1867 (*The Innocents Abroad*), and they are lighter and more colloquial and interesting than most publications of that period. But Machtet, perhaps because of these writings, was soon arrested in the repression that followed the 1874 "to the people movement" to stir the peasants to revolt. After a year of hardship in the Peter and Paul Fortress in St. Petersburg, he was first confined to exile in the Arkhangelsk region in the north of Russia and then for a time in Siberia. There he married Elena Medvedeva, who bore his child, but soon died of tuberculosis.<sup>41</sup>

During his years of exile, he continued to write—two popular novels, more autobiographical stories, and a sharp criticism of Russian and Ukrainian anti-semitism. George Kennan of *Siberia and the Exile System* fame, met Machtet during his survey of political prisoners in 1885-86 and considered him "one of rising novelists of Russia."<sup>42</sup> In 1889, Machtet was allowed to return to Moscow and then to Ukraine where he worked as a government clerk. He was finally able to go to St. Petersburg in 1900, but a year later, at age 49, he died while convalescing at Yalta. Anton Chekhov was among the illustrious fellow writers attending his funeral.<sup>43</sup>

As a young man, Machtet tended to romanticize his portraits of Kansas but was hardly superficial. He was, nevertheless, critical of some aspects of this frontier society, especially its superficial and fluidity, violence, weird spirituality and internal contradictions. Unlike most other observers of America, but typical of other Russians of this period, he studied rural life was amazed at the development of small communities, and marveled at the ease by which he lived and worked alongside the local people. He was impressed especially by the

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39. Yarmolinsky, 87-90, but has the commune collapsing in the spring of 1879. Contemporary newspapers are more exact. "Progressive Community is about dissolved. They have sold out and are in a squabble among themselves, and there is no telling how it will end." *Chautauqua Journal* (Sedan), September 18, 1879.

40. Ibid, 125-35; Allen, 55-58.

41. Faresov, 243.

42. Kennan to William Dudley Foulke, February 15, 1888, Foulke Papers, box 3, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.

43. A. V. Goltsev, "Obituary," in *Russkoe Vedomosti* [Russian News], October 10, 1901, preserved in George Kennan Papers, box 111, Manuscript Division, Library of Congress.



friendliness, curiosity, openness, optimism, and quest for education. Machtet thus responded to and nourished Russian favorable opinion about the United States that prevailed in the nineteenth century and that persisted through periods hostility and confrontation to the present. And he did this with considerable sacrifice and cost to himself.

**About the Author**

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