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German Immigration to Nebraska: The Role of State Immigration Agencies and Agents

In January 1861 influential Germans of Nebraska City and vicinity gathered at the local courtroom for a meeting of some importance. The chairman of this meeting—Friedrich Renner, a medical doctor from Baden in Germany—tried to impress on the audience the necessity for a publishing company which could issue a newspaper in the German language in Nebraska. The foremost duty of this paper would be to make Nebraska known to Germans as a territory for immigration. In the resolution for this "Deutsche Zeitungsgesellschaft," which was adopted that night, it was emphasized that the paper should be neutral in political and religious matters but it should be published and distributed in order "to enlighten those wishing to come amongst us, as to the fertile soil, the rich products, the ready market, the healthy climate of Nebraska."¹

On 4 April 1861 the first number of the *Nebraska Deutsche Zeitung* was issued, Dr. Friedrich Renner being the editor. One hundred and fifty copies were sent regularly to the German-speaking areas in Europe, "the postage being two cents a copy."² With undiminished enthusiasm Renner collected information and printed articles in his paper promoting Nebraska and the German settlements in Nebraska.³ As the National Homestead Law went into effect in January 1863, the *Deutsche Zeitung* received another impulse to encourage Germans to come to Nebraska. This law provided Renner with a strong promotional weapon: free land, 160 acres as a gift from the government, a farm within the reach of the poorest man. As Renner later wrote in his reminiscences:

It goes without saying that the *Zeitung* did its level best to spread as quickly as possible the glorious news to the farmer boys of the eastern states as well as in Europe, that millions of fertile acres of the public domain in Nebraska were lying open for selection.⁴

The federal law of 1864—"An Act to Encourage Immigration"—signaled the beginning of governmentally assisted immigration promotion, not only for the nation as a whole but also for the different states and territories as well. Under this law—in addition to providing funds for a National Bureau of Immigration—the United States government was willing to promote a program by which it would loan money for one year for the Atlantic passage of the immigrant workers. This program was inaugurated in order to alleviate the chronic labor shortage aggravated by the Civil War and to attract farm laborers to build up the agricultural component of the western frontier. Little coordination between the National Bureau of Immigration and the various states and the lack of money moved Congress to repeal this federal law after only four years of existence.⁵

Again it was through the initiative of Renner and the German businessmen of Nebraska City that the promotion of Nebraska was continued. On 22 July 1865—four years after the founding of Renner's German newspaper—the *Nebraska City News* carried an invitation for a "German Mass Meeting" appealing to all "German fellow citizens, as well as others, that may take an interest in the matter, . . . for the purpose of organizing an Immigration Association." This invitation was signed by Renner and others. The *Nebraska City News* endorsed the movement with the following commentary:

It is time that the citizens of Nebraska, without regard to nationality, were doing something to encourage immigration to our borders. Since the restoration of peace, and the return of the people to the arts of industry, the exodus of wanderers from Europe has received a vast impetus; and the accession to the tide of emigration is already observable in the arrivals at New York, Boston, Philadelphia, etc. The States of Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa and Missouri, have State paid agents constantly on the look out for new comers, and every westbound railway train is laden with families destined to an already determined home. Nebraska has none. Her fertile prairies, offered by the government free to the actual settler, are obliged to be idle because there is no one to direct the home-hunter hitherward.⁶

It should be mentioned that the Germans of Nebraska City must have thought this undertaking to be of great importance since they were willing to invest both their efforts and their money. Unlike the other ethnic groups, the Germans had approximately twice as many people working in the two occupation fields of commerce and industry than would be predicted by their paltry 8.6 percent of the total Nebraska City population.⁷ This fact makes it plausible that the Germans might profit more than other ethnic groups from a continuing flow of immigrants to Nebraska.

The resolutions and bylaws adopted at this "German Mass Meeting" called

loudly upon every citizen of Nebraska, to assist with his influence and means, in organizing such an Immigration Society to encourage emigrants to locate in our territory, as well extend its influence not only to all parts of our own land, but also to England, Ireland, and Continental Europe.⁸

Members of the immigration association collected funds to provide for an agent who could be sent to Europe. John Siemers, a lawyer who had come from Hamburg to Nebraska a decade earlier, was chosen to represent Nebraska in Germany, and on 30 August 1865 he received the commission from the territorial governor to act as Nebraska's agent. Before his departure he wrote an interesting article which appeared in the *Nebraska City News*: "The Means and Ways to Obtain Emigration."⁹ After describing the benefits that increased immigration would bring to Nebraska, he continued with suggestion how to attract those who were willing to leave their homes. He did not recommend the governmental one-year-loan program for the expenses of a passage across the Atlantic, since in his mind this loan would burden the immigrant too much and would eventually lead to misery and poverty. Free passage for the needy would be the only solution to prevent this privation, but such a program would be too costly. A suggestion—far less expensive—was to distribute information about Nebraska directly to the prospective German emigrants. Emigration associations "formed . . . by well educated men" already existed in Hamburg, Bremen, Berlin, Frankfurt and other cities. At these offices the emigrant could find reading rooms with maps, handbooks and guides. These associations also published newsletters with advice and instructions on how to arrange a voyage across the Atlantic and how to survive in the New World. Siemers thought that information placed at these offices in Germany would draw the attention of emigrants to Nebraska. He concluded his articles with the words:

The expenses of such a mission will soon be refunded. Our merchants will see European faces and European hard coin at their counters; our farmers will have more hands in harvest time and not so much waste, and the cry of the fair sex for help in the house will cease.¹⁰

The Nebraska territorial government did not have the money to support a promotional program. In January 1866, territorial Governor Alvin Saunders in his opening message to the legislature drew attention to the following:

While all the Western States, and nearly all the organized Territories have adopted active and efficient measures to impart information in regard to their respective advantages as homes for people, not only for our country, but for the old world, the people of Nebraska should not, in my opinion, be idle. Nebraska, as a profitable grain and stock-raising country, has probably no superior in the western country, and yet but little of these advantages is known even among the people of the older States of our own country, much less to the people of Europe, thousands of whom, now that the war is over, are desirous of emigrating to America.¹¹

He then recommended the forming of a society, this time with money provided by the government, "having for its object the promotion of immigration, . . . under the charter derived from your honourable body." It was suggested that this society would appoint an agent to be sent to New York, furnished with information and "maps, to show where first class free homesteads could be taken," in order to draw immigrants to Nebraska. The legislature appropriated funds of \$2,000, a sum proved that too small for the task which lay ahead. The first report of this immigration bureau¹² a year later said that a pamphlet entitled "Nebraska," printed in the English and German language had been published. Ten thousand copies had been issued, "many of these have been distributed through the States, in Canada, and in Europe." The greater part of the funds had been spent to cover the cost of the publication, and there was not enough for expenses and salary for an agent who could travel to the eastern states, much less to Europe in order to aid immigration to Nebraska. Although the immigration board had secured the services of a man from New York—being fluent in English and German—who could act as an agent for the Nebraska Territory, this measure was not sufficient. An appeal had been made to each county in Nebraska to solicit donations for the project but there had been no response. The report concluded that in order to gain its share of immigrants larger amounts of money would be needed to build up a more efficient system of promotion and to maintain agents at home and abroad. Acting Governor Algernon Paddock in his opening address January 1867¹³ urged the legislators to continue appropriating funds for this project but on a much larger scale so that provisions could be made to appoint at least four agents who could travel to the eastern states and Europe. The governor concluded: "All that is necessary is to make known to those seeking homes in the West the rare inducements presented by Nebraska." The governor's enthusiastic recommendation was ignored: the legislature did not increase funds for the immigration board. In fact, it cut the program completely.

In the summer of 1867 Governor David Butler of the new State of Nebraska expressed his strong support for the organization of an immigration program. He declared:

That judicious but liberal appropriation, guided through proper channels, would bring to our people a ten-fold return in population and capital, must be apparent to any one giving the matter the least attention. Our neighboring states have not neglected their interest in this respect, and have sent their agents in every direction to divert a share of the westward tending stream of emigration from overpopulated countries to their own soil.¹⁴

He instigated a campaign, lasting almost three years, to change the legislators' convictions in order to obtain another program. Finally, in 1871 Nebraska passed an act providing \$15,000 for two years covering the expenses of a state immigration agency. The duties pertaining to this state board were:

1st. to encourage and promote immigration, advertising the resources and advantages of our State to the world at large, thereby inviting the hardy yeomanry, mechanic and capitalist of all nations to enhance the production of our soil, develop our commerce and increase our manufactories. 2nd. to advise and aid immigrants.¹⁵

Omaha was chosen as the office site, since for the greater number of immigrants this was the point of entry into Nebraska. It always had been Nebraska's agricultural potential which had enticed the immigrant to settle and the board's promotional campaigns were entirely based on this fact. "Landless men want lands! Manless lands want men!" read the heading of one of the board's pamphlets. "To unite Men and Lands in a sacred loyalty to each other's service, and the service of the State, is the worthy Mission of our great and successful Immigration movement."¹⁶ Part of their operation was to set up an exhibition of Nebraska's agricultural products at their office in Omaha. For that reason farmers in every county were asked to send in specimens of their commodities. All these articles were forwarded without charge by the different railroads.

Provisions had been made to hire four Nebraska citizens who would act as immigrant agents in the East and in Europe; one was sent to Castle Garden, one went to Scandinavia, and one was responsible for Germany's newly acquired Elsass-Lothringen from which the Nebraska state board expected now, at the end of the war, a number of immigrants. Friedrich Hedde, a forty-eight year old from Schleswig-Holstein, was chosen to be Nebraska's agent in Germany. Hedde—involved in a town building scheme—had arrived in Nebraska fourteen years earlier. In Kiel he had been a lawyer and had worked as editor and correspondent for several newspapers. Due to his liberal views he had to leave Germany. As a result of his political activity during the territorial period Hedde became well known in Nebraska. His interest in the growth and economic development of the town of Grand Island and the state led him to become energetically involved in the promotion of Nebraska.¹⁷ *The*

Omaha Republican thought Hedde as Nebraska's representative a superior choice. His first-rate education would make it possible "to be introduced into the circles of the well educated and influential classes of Germany."¹⁸ Without his reputation for scholarship and integrity, *The Omaha Republican* went on,

the authorities and the aristocracy of Germany, who in a great many places are opposed to emigration, would successfully work against him. There is hardly a country where the authorities have more influence on the people than in Germany, and that makes the position of the German agent different from that of all others. It probably will also be necessary to effect some alterations of German laws. If the agent understands to gain the confidence of the government, his work is half done. This depends really on the man selected, and only good education will entitle him to it. Brass, so effective in America and England, will do very little good in Germany.¹⁹

Hedde arrived in Germany at an interesting time. Since the close of the Franco-Prussian War emigration from Germany was increasing. Reasons for this increase, according to Hedde, were "heavy taxation, compulsion to serve three years in the standing army, and fear of new great wars soon to break out."²⁰ Hedde expected there a constant flow of emigration over the next years, "especially from the lately annexed provinces of Schleswig-Holstein and Elsass-Lothringen where more or less a strong feeling of dissatisfaction prevails."²¹ The upper classes, especially the landholding nobility, were disturbed, as increased emigration robbed them of their labor and forced them to pay higher wages. Consequently the government was asked to prevent this drain of workers. However, Hedde reported:

Notwithstanding the Imperial government has not done anything but to abolish the system of reduced fare for emigrants on German railroads, and to increase the passage from the German ports to the United States, to closely watch the German steamboat agents in order to punish them whenever they do something contrary to the laws. There is not the least probability that government will do anything that amounts to prohibition of emigration, because this would be against the law, and because Bismarck is smart enough to know that stopping emigration means favoring revolution.²²

The German steamboat companies had a well-organized system of agents all over the country. These agents would gladly distribute without charge pamphlets on Nebraska. Hedde, who had very limited funds for his operation in Hamburg, recognized this opportunity immediately. As Hedde reported to the state immigration board:

These men are the only ones who have regular intercourse with those classes who are apt to emigrate, and it is in the interests of these men to induce as many people to emigrate as they possibly can. On this interest of the said agents alone, I had to rely in order to make them distribute our pamphlets. A monetary inducement I could not offer them having not money enough to pay my own expenses.²³

Hedde urged the state immigration board to have a newspaper printed in Germany as other states had done, which would favor immigration to Nebraska and could be distributed gratis. Most newspapers in Germany had refused to print his articles. Only a few—particularly in Schleswig-Holstein where he still had connections—had been liberal enough to publish such articles. But these newspapers were generally read by the educated classes and did not reach the workers and farmers. Unlike his colleague C. D. Nelson, Nebraska's agent in Scandinavia, who claimed to have convinced personally 10,000 Scandinavian farmers to emigrate to Nebraska,²⁴ Hedde's report to the immigration board noted that

the whole effect of such correspondence [with the German newspapers] of course cannot be proven, not more than the effect of a speech or a publication in a political campaign, or the effect of an advertisement on the trade of a merchant, though nobody doubts their efficiency. Thousands may have been, or in the course of some years may be moved by them to come to Nebraska, without a particle of evidence to show what induced them to come.²⁵

An analysis of Hedde's address book for Hamburg and Schleswig-Holstein²⁶ gives us information about the people he contacted there. In Altona and Hamburg he got in touch with all the agencies and companies who were involved in the emigration business and also with bank directors, lawyers, public reading rooms and the different newspapers. In the countryside he approached the teacher and organist of a village, the mill owner, the pastor of the church, and the innkeeper.

On his return to the United States in 1872 Hedde appeared several times before the immigration board and gave detailed information concerning his work as an agent. In one of his publications titled "What Nebraska Ought to Do"²⁷ he suggested ways to improve the methods used to attract immigrants. One of the most serious defects in the promotional material was the inability to explain the homestead law to the German reader.

Though they give a great many particulars about the homestead law, none of them explains the main idea of the law, that it makes a free gift of 80 or 160 acres of land to the homesteader, with such

distinctness that those who have always lived in a country where lands are very high and never donated, can understand it. I have experienced the greatest difficulty in making people conceive this idea, and make them believe that my statements were true. Our own pamphlets were in this respect a great impediment to me.²⁸

Hedde later published a booklet in the German language titled "Nebraska."²⁹ The content of this book was especially directed toward the questions German emigrants would pose. Unfortunately this book was never distributed and used as promotional material for Nebraska.

In 1871 the Nebraska State Board of Immigration suggested the organization of county boards. The commissioner for immigration reported:

A matter of no small importance and assistance to successfully induce immigration, is the formation of local and county boards, who work harmoniously with the State Board, and give the immigrant aid and protection when the State Board, for obvious reasons, would fail. It gives us pleasure to note that several counties in our State have materially assisted our labors by well organized County boards.³⁰

Hall County, Nebraska, was the first to form such a local board and one could read in the *Platte Valley Independent* (Grand Island) on 25 March 1871: "Hall County, the first in the State to organize a board of Immigration—nothing like being always ahead." The Hall County board consisted of bankers, merchants, and the editor of the local newspaper, about an equal number of Germans and Americans. To assist foreign immigrants and to meet their needs secretaries who spoke German and Danish were appointed. "All letters of inquiry concerning this county, addressed to the Hall County Board of Immigration, Grand Island, Nebraska, will be promptly answered, whether written in the German, English or Danish language"³¹ a note in the newspaper read. Another one read: "Sleeping accommodations for 100 persons are now at the disposal of the Hall County Board of Immigration. All parties coming to Grand Island, for the purpose of locating in Hall or Howard Counties, are invited to address the Board who will tender them all the aid possible."³² The board provided information for land-hungry immigrants. In 1871 a map by the Hall County Board of Immigration was published in every weekly issue of the local paper for half a year, showing the government and railroad land still available to the new settlers. To collect and to communicate reliable information to the state board, information of the quality, quantity and price of land and town lots, of farms to be rented, work to be obtained and advice that might be important to the immigrant were the main services of the local organization.

In a letter to the Hall County board the State Superintendent of Immigration pointed out:

Neither Otoe County [Nebraska City] nor Douglas County [Omaha] [both situated in the eastern part of Nebraska] expect a very large percentage of the emigrants to locate within their border; for the reason that lands are too high for the masses of those coming West. Most persons coming to Nebraska are of limited means, and must of necessity hunt cheap lands, which can be found most anywhere from fifty to one hundred miles west of the Missouri River . . . if the counties lying west of us will only do something in the way Hall County has done, each one of them may expect a large increase of population the coming season. The State Board will do all in their power to bring emigrants to Nebraska, and the county authorities must look to their own interest and see that their county gets its share.³³

By 1873 Nebraska had over fifty county organizations, all looking for their fair share of immigrants.

As often happened with projects of this kind, the enthusiasm for state self-promotion was great in the beginning. State and local boards in reports did not hesitate to hail the success of their work.

The attention of emigrants has been attracted to Nebraska and she has received during this short season of nine months a larger share of the continual increasing tide of immigration than ever before. In consequence thereof our prairies are rapidly settling up, waving fields of grain can be seen, where but a short time ago the antelope and buffalo roamed; the value of our lands, as well as the productions are rapidly increasing and repay our State a hundredfold the small outlay made to bring about these results.³⁴

Although the increase of the number of immigrants to Nebraska during these years was quite substantial—the board taking eagerly all the credit for this increase—such claim by the board cannot be proven.

Lack of funds troubled the operation from the beginning. The two-year appropriation of \$15,000 had been spent in less than six months. State agents who worked in foreign countries received only a part of their salaries. Newspapers in the state started to question the policies of the state board. "An expensive failure," wrote the *Fall City Journal* in 1873. "The whole thing is a contemptible humbug, a swindle on the State, and a burlesque on the aptitude of business. It makes a few more petty offices for somebody to hold—that is all. The County Immigration Agency scheme also has proved

quite as abortive."³⁵ The *Platte Valley Independent* in Grand Island, which had been so optimistic and eager in the support of this venture wrote now:

In Hall County we have yet to meet the first individual who will acknowledge that he was brought here through any efforts made by the board, while we find that fully half of the new settlers readily admit that they were induced to come to this county through the instrumentality of the *Independent*, and the balance claim to have been drawn here through the influence of the Union Pacific Land Department, and friends already residing here. We believe this to be the case in most other counties. The first and greatest cause of attracting immigration is the local paper which is sent throughout the East by publishers and friends, along the line of the Union Pacific. Said company alone does more to advance the cause of immigration in one month, than has been done by the Board of Immigration in a whole year. The same may be said of the B.&M. and other roads.³⁶

Throughout the existence of the State Board of Immigration the railroads of Nebraska had provided assistance. Many thousands of dollars were saved to the immigrant by reduced transportation rates for the newcomers, their household goods and implements. The State Commissioner of Immigration reported, . . . "especially are we indebted to the officers of the popular Burlington and Missouri River Railroad for their prompt response to the call of the Board for an Emigrant House."³⁷ The Burlington Railroad had furnished a building in Lincoln, Nebraska, to accommodate the arriving settlers. Cooperation had benefited both the railroads and the state. As time went on the railroads expended the promotion activities. In 1877 the Nebraska legislature no longer saw the need for a state-funded immigration program and ceased to appropriate any money for such activities.

The Nebraska "Deutsche Zeitungsgesellschaft," the territorial and state immigration associations and the county societies existed only for a brief period. But these organizations and their agents—such as Renner, Siemers and Hedde—developed methods of immigration promotion which could be used in the later 1870s and 1880s by the immigration and colonization agencies of Nebraska railroads.

Grand Island, Nebraska

Notes

- ¹ *Nebraska City News*, 26 January 1861.
- ² Friedrich Renner, *Reminiscences of Territorial Days*, Proceedings and Collections of the Nebraska State Historical Society, 2d. series, vol.5 (1902), 60.
- ³ Not one issue of the *Nebraska Deutsche Zeitung* of that period has been found so far. A few articles here and there had been reprinted by the *Westliche Post* of St. Louis during that time. It is only natural that the *Westliche Post*—in order to fit its own needs—was biased in the choice of articles and therefore it is difficult to receive a true picture of the style and characteristics of Renner's newspaper.
- ⁴ Renner, *Reminiscences*, 60.
- ⁵ *Reports of the Immigration Commission*, Washington, 1911, cited in I. Schöberl, "Auswanderungspolitik in Deutschland und Einwanderungspolitik in den Vereinigten Staaten," *Zeitschrift für Kulturaustausch* 32 (1982): 324.
- ⁶ *Nebraska City News*, 22 July 1865.
- ⁷ C. G. Robbins, *A Tale of Two Cities* (Wherein a Physicist looks at the 1860 Census of Nebraska City and Omaha, Nebraska), vol.2 (Grand Island, NE: Prairie Pioneer Press, 1987).
- ⁸ *Nebraska City News*, 22 July 1865.
- ⁹ *Nebraska City News*, 29 July 1865.
- ¹⁰ *Nebraska City News*, 19 August 1865.
- ¹¹ *Messages and Proclamation of the Governors of Nebraska 1854-1941* (Lincoln, NE: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1941), 197.
- ¹² *Ibid.*, 207.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 239.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 271.
- ¹⁵ *Platte Valley Independent* (Grand Island, NE), 27 January 1872.
- ¹⁶ *Nebraska* (State Board of Immigration, 1873), pamphlet in the Archive of the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, NE.
- ¹⁷ Edith Robbins, "A Forty-Eighter on the Town-Building Frontier," in *The German Forty-Eighters in the United States*, ed. Charlotte L. Brancaforte (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 1989).
- ¹⁸ *Omaha Republican*, quoted in the *Platte Valley Independent* (Grand Island, NE), 4 March 1871.
- ¹⁹ *Ibid.*
- ²⁰ *Omaha Herald*, 4 December 1872.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² *Ibid.*
- ²³ *Omaha Republican*, 4 February 1873.
- ²⁴ *Dakota City Mail*, 1 September 1871, cited in D. M. Emmons, *Garden in the Grasslands* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1971), 105.
- ²⁵ *Omaha Republican*, 4 February 1873.
- ²⁶ Friedrich Hedde, *Address Book for Hamburg and Schleswig-Holstein*, Archive at Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, Grand Island, NE.
- ²⁷ *Omaha Herald*, 4 December 1872.
- ²⁸ *Ibid.*
- ²⁹ Friedrich Hedde, *Der amerikanische Westen: Der Staat Nebraska* (Kiel, 1874).
- ³⁰ *Report of the Commissioners of Immigration*, quoted in the *Platte Valley Independent* (Grand Island, NE), 27 January 1872.
- ³¹ *Platte Valley Independent* (Grand Island, NE), 25 March 1871.
- ³² *Ibid.*, 1 April 1871.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 8 April 1871.
- ³⁴ *Report of the Commissioners of Immigration*, quoted in *Platte Valley Independent* (Grand Island, NE), 27 January 1872.

³⁵ *Nebraska City News*, 25 October 1873.

³⁶ *Platte Valley Independent* (Grand Island, NE) 1 February 1873.

³⁷ *Report of the Commissioners of Immigration*, quoted in *Platte Valley Independent* (Grand Island, NE), 27 January 1872.