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Review of "Wisconsin German: Land and Life," edited by H. Bungert, C. Kluge, and R. Ostergren

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Review of *Wisconsin German: Land and Life*, edited by H. Bungert, C. Kluge, and R. Ostergren (Madison: Max Kade Institute for German American Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, 2006), *H-Net German Discussion Log*, (July 2007). © 2007 H-Net (Humanities and Social Sciences Online). Used with permission.

URL: <http://h-net.msu.edu/cgi-bin/logbrowse.pl?trx=vx&list=H-German&month=0707&week=c&msg=EJGc%2bw4iDurHhmlz4VXF6w&user=&pw>

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In Search of Wisconsin Germans

Like the bucolic winter landscape at the center of its earth-tone cover, the essays in Wisconsin German Land and Life are richly detailed and well researched. In this collection, the authors examine German migrants' relationships to the land in the nineteenth century. The contributors explore their living conditions in specific farming communities along the Rhine and conclude with a discussion about their settlement in Wisconsin. This volume developed out of a project between the Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and the Institute of Anglo-American History at the University of Cologne that involved faculty members, graduate students, researchers, historians, community scholars and genealogists in the United States and Germany. The State Historical Society of Wisconsin and the Cartography Lab at UW-Madison are also recognized for their contributions to the study.

The introductory pages include a table of contents, list of contributors, preface, acknowledgements, and introduction by two of the three editors, Robert Ostergren and Heike Bungert, who note that German migration to Wisconsin occurred over several decades. Most immigration was a reaction to socioeconomic circumstances, though immigrants were also motivated by religion, politics, and the desire for land, adventure, freedom and independence. The focus of the research in this volume, however, falls on the experiences of immigrants from the Rhineland who came from predominantly agricultural areas and settled in southeastern Wisconsin in the 1840s and 1850s. Open for settlement in 1834, Wisconsin encouraged and benefited from their capital, expertise, and labor.

Drawing on official records on both sides of the Atlantic, the contributors utilized qualitative and quantitative data. These sources include personal correspondence and testimonies, obituary clippings, genealogical data from federal and state censuses, family records, land records/registers, land surveys, church archives and parish registers, tax rolls, city and state archives, discharge papers, ship passenger lists, agricultural census schedules, and platbooks. The authors also reference secondary sources in English and German, German-language immigrant literature, local historical pamphlets, historical volumes published by the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, and Wisconsin state laws and newspapers.

The volume is divided into three thematic sections of roughly equal length: the immigrants' premigration situations, the complicated and often perilous process of migration itself, and experiences with the land in Wisconsin. A concluding word is added by the third editor, Cora Lee Kluge, and Joseph Salmons, one of the contributors who also wrote the preface. The editors and most of the authors offer suggestions for further research.

In the first essay about premigration, Anke Ortlepp examines the histories of emigrants from the rural area of Westerwald who settled in Dodge County communities.[1] Originally from a hilly region northeast of Koblenz, they left primarily for economic reasons and saw Wisconsin as an attractive alternative to the harsh realities of their former lives, which were hampered by slow-moving agricultural reforms, constant population growth, and scarce material resources.

In the second essay, Ulrich Sanger compares the emigrants from the Cologne Bay area with those from the Westerwald and concludes that the former were most likely better off. He examines farmers who came from the region west of Cologne and settled in Cross Plains, Wisconsin. As with the Westerwald emigrants, the most common reason to migrate was economic hardship. These settlers experienced many of the same challenges in their homeland, such as crop failures in the 1840s, overpopulation, and division of landholdings due to partible inheritance. Small landholders found it difficult to eke out a living and began to hope for a better life in America.

Ute Langer's essay anchors the premigration section. She explains how to use archival resources in Germany to understand better the lives of individual emigrants and premigration patterns. She maintains that researchers must rely on both American and German primary sources to reconstruct a more detailed representation of the

emigrant experience. American census lists and passenger lists enumerate who migrated and when, but do not explain the relationship between German-Americans and their land.

The second section of the book addresses the migration process. Timothy Bawden's chapter provides a geographic perspective on Wisconsin's German immigrant population, whose influence is still felt today throughout the state. Like most migration researchers, he emphasizes the centrality of "pull" and "push" factors in understanding immigration. Wisconsin offered the promise of jobs, a climate and landscape that reminded many Germans of home, and inexpensive land on which they could grow familiar crops such as barley and wheat. Once they arrived and wrote to family and friends about their new life, others joined them in a process of chain migration. Wisconsin steered them towards the state as well by establishing an Office of the Commissioner of Emigration in 1852 and placing a commissioner in New York to greet them with promotional materials in English and German.

Johannes Strohschänk and William Thiel expand upon Bawden's essay and discuss the Wisconsin Office of the Commissioner of Emigration in greater detail.[2] In the 1850s "emigration" was the term most commonly used for both emigration and immigration. The authors refer to the migrant in transit as an "emigrant" and the foreign settler who succeeded in the new homeland as an "immigrant" (p. 95). Wisconsin was the second state in the Union to focus on immigration policy, following Michigan, which posted an agent in New York to promote the state to new arrivals in the late 1840s. Though the Wisconsin Office of Commissioner of Emigration operated for only three years, Strohschänk and Thiel assert that the commissioners' targeted efforts to attract emigrants of German ethnic background to Wisconsin did make a difference in the competition for settlers. Today, half of Wisconsin's population claims some German heritage (p. 119). Based on the records left by the commissioners, the emigrants appeared to have benefited from their guidance, services, and assistance as well.

Once on their way to Wisconsin, German emigrants had to decide on the location and type of land to purchase for their farms. In his essay about German settlement in Wisconsin, Scott Moranda begins by explaining forest management in German-speaking Europe. Forests played an important role in German collective identity, national memory, and socioeconomic stability. While forestlands were important to German emigrants, Moranda believes that their settlement patterns in Wisconsin most likely were based on economic and practical concerns rather than on a sentimental affinity to the forest.

The last essay in this section explores other factors that influenced the migration process. Helmut Schmahl discusses the migration of German emigrants from Rhenish Hesse who settled in eastern Wisconsin in the mid-1800s and emigrated for many of the same reasons previously mentioned. He shows how recent immigrants encouraged others from the Rhenish Hessian communities to join them in Wisconsin by describing the advantages of the state in letters home. Schmahl also illustrates how the agricultural practices of the Rhenish Hessian farmers reflected their attempts to maintain some of their former way of life. For example, they increased their wheat production to adapt to U.S. markets, but also produced rye for their traditional foods.

The final section of the volume deals with immigrants' experiences with the land in Wisconsin. Kevin Neuberger focuses on Rhenish Prussian families who came from the Westerwald and settled in Dodge County, the same area studied by Anke Ortlepp. He explains how most of the German settlers obtained their land from "Yankee" landowners (American citizens) who had purchased the land from the government. New immigrants' landholdings in Wisconsin were much larger than those in their German homeland and were not scattered across the community, as had been their prior experience. Migration to Wisconsin occurred primarily within family units and German farm families enjoyed new freedom in being able to make their own decisions about agricultural production as opposed to being regulated by communal authorities.

In the second essay of this section, M. Beth Schlemper discusses immigrants who came from the German Eifel region and settled in a region known as the "Holyland" in east central Wisconsin. Many of the same "push" and "pull" factors influenced them to migrate, and published reports from the early emigrants gave them confidence to follow. This group, however, also wanted to practice its Catholicism freely and its cohesive influence persists today in towns that dot the scenic landscape (such as Mount Calvary, St. Anna, St. Peter, Jericho, and Marytown, among others).

In the final substantive essay of the volume, Suzanne Townley compares the agricultural success of Rhenish Prussians with that of other immigrant groups that settled in Cross Plains, the same study area that Ulrich Sanger referenced. Her study addresses stereotypes about American farmers already in place and German farmers, and she suggests that further study might help explain why farming practices differed among the groups of various origins. For example, the settled American farmers raised more beef cattle and milk cows, while the Cologne farmers raised more hogs and the Bavarians grew more rye (p. 235).

Overall, the contributors have produced a thoughtful work about German-Americans and the development of their relationship to the land in Wisconsin. The contributors expand upon existing research and attempt to link their essays in terms of the three thematic sections of the narrative in order to provide a more complete perspective of what was involved in the entire process of migration. By focusing on a specific geographic area (not just the state of Wisconsin but the southern part of the state), by expanding to a transatlantic view of the migration process, and by making land the central theme of the immigration experience, the authors advance our knowledge about German-speaking migration to America.[3]

Notes

[1]. Anke Ortlepp is the author of another study about German American women's clubs in Milwaukee. [Auf denn, Ihr Schwestern!: Deutschamerikanische Frauenvereine in Milwaukee, Wisconsin 1844-1914](#) (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2004).

[2]. See also Johannes Strohschank and William Thiel, [The Wisconsin Office of Emigration 1853-1855 and Its Impact on German Immigration to the State](#) (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004).

[3]. For those interested in learning more about Wisconsin Germans, see most recently Trudy Knauss Paradis and E. J. Brumder, [German Milwaukee: Its History, Its Recipes](#) (St. Louis: G. Bradley Publishing, 2006). This colorful coffee-table book shows how German immigrants enriched the city of Milwaukee, the gateway to Wisconsin, where they disembarked from boats that had brought them through the Great Lakes from New York State. The photography depicts the strong German influence Timothy Bawden alludes to in his discussion about Milwaukee as America's "German Athens" (pp. 83-84).