

# Preface

The German experience in the Minnesota River Valley Frontier has been largely ignored by historians, despite the significant number of Germans that emigrated to the United States and settled in the Minnesota River Valley Frontier between 1852-1865. The only exceptions to this rule were a few passing references made to German settlement of the valley in survey textbooks on immigration history or in books describing the Dakota Conflict of 1862. In both examples, the German village of New Ulm in Brown County played the only significant role; however, there were more Germans living on the Minnesota River Valley Frontier than in this one particular location. In fact, there were 1,530 foreign born Germans and 708 foreign mixed Germans living in Carver County in 1860 compared to only 847 foreign born Germans and 339 foreign mixed Germans living in Brown County the same year.<sup>1</sup>

A historian doing research on the topic of German movement to the Minnesota River Valley Frontier should ask the following questions: Who were some of the German immigrants that played a role in the development of the Minnesota River Valley? What factors forced them to emigrate to the United States? Why did they settle in the Minnesota River Valley? What economic and political influences, if any, did they exert on the rest of Minnesota? How did the German settlers react to the two most traumatic social and political upheavals of their day; the Dakota Conflict of 1862 and the American Civil War (1861-1865)? Did the German settlers of the Minnesota River Valley Frontier play any significant role in these events? How did these events affect them? These are all questions that have never been fully answered. Even regimental histories, detailing the day to day lives of ordinary soldiers from Minnesota who served in the Civil War, have overlooked the German element, concentrating instead upon the lives of native-born American soldiers. Was life for the German soldier from Minnesota different than for his American counterpart? How did German soldiers overcome the language barrier or was it even a problem? This book is devoted to shedding light on these questions so that a better understanding of Minnesota's early history might be obtained.

The term "Minnesota River Valley Frontier" needs proper definition. In the context of its influence on German immigration, it was a geographical area extending from the southeastern corner of the Lower Sioux (Dakota) reservation, twelve miles southwest of New Ulm<sup>2</sup>, to the mouth of the Minnesota River. The northern boundary of the survey area would be the edge of the Minnesota River's floodplain on the north bank of the river. The southern boundary not only included the floodplain on the south bank, but also the watersheds of the Minnesota River's major tributaries; the most notable being the Blue Earth River. The counties included in this geographical area were: Brown, Blue Earth, Faribault, Nicollet, Le Sueur, Sibley, Scott, Carver, Hennepin and Dakota.

The book's subtitle, *Wir Stammten aus Deutschland nach Hausen Minnesota*, also requires explanation. It translates as, "we originated out of Germany and have come home to Minnesota." The phrase *nach hausen* is significant. The literal translation of *nach hause*

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<sup>1</sup>Hildegard Binder Johnson, "The Germans," *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups*, June Drenning Holmquist, ed., (St. Paul: Minnesota, Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981), 158.

<sup>2</sup>Roy W. Meyer, *History of the Santee Sioux: United States Indian Policy on Trial*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1967), "Sioux Uprising Sites" map.

is “at home.” The only time it was used in the German language was when someone had journeyed away and had returned home.<sup>3</sup> When the Germans left their homeland, bound for America; most of them never intended to return. Instead, these German immigrants planned to transplant Germany to the New World in the form of their language, customs and political ideals. When they settled in Minnesota and established their own cultural identity, these Germans believed they had “returned home.”

An enduring symbol of the German pioneers’ legacy on the Minnesota River Valley Frontier was the Seppmann Windmill, built in 1862-64. The author acquired his earliest interest in history by visiting the mill as a small boy with his parents. By using the mill as the cover illustration for his book, the author has revisited the scene of many cherished boyhood memories such as climbing to the top of the mill to peer out across the boulder strewn landscape of the Minneopa prairie. Like the immigrants he wrote about, the author himself has “returned home.”

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<sup>3</sup>Laurie H. Stenzel of Mapleton, Minnesota, interview by author, 29 December 2001, Mapleton. Oral Conversation with Notes.