

Bree Ackermann, daughter of Ron and Becki Ackermann, granddaughter of Gilbert Ackermann, grew up in Lincoln, NE as the eldest of five and graduated from Lincoln Pius X High School this May. She will attend Wayne State College this fall to continue her volleyball career and education in elementary education. In the future, Bree plans to become a teacher and volleyball coach. She is grateful for the opportunity to share her family history and appreciates the Gwen Pritzkau Scholarship as it will help with some upcoming college costs.

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Germans from Russia Heritage Society Essay Contest

“Germany, Russia, Americas—Giant Steppes toward Freedom”

The Pulse of Opportunity

There is work ethic, determination, appreciation for opportunity, and faith running through my veins. Proof of this blood line is shown throughout my ancestors' journey to America in search for freedom. My German ancestors capitalized on opportunities to farm in Russia and eventually my home state of Nebraska. Again, signs of the inherited traits appear in my grandfather's struggle to keep the family farm. Times of hardship allowed such opportunities for success and freedom.

The appreciation for opportunity begins with the hardships of post war Germany: starvation and financial deprivation, especially among the farming communities. Seeing an opportunity to improve the Russian culture level, Catherine II published a manifesto encouraging German farmers to settle on the steppes of Russia. In 1808, my great-great grandparents seized the opportunity and left their home in Baden to resettle on the steppes of South Russia, north of the Black Sea, taking not only an immense risk, but a crucial step towards freedom.

While facing difficulty on the steppes, German pioneers prospered, portraying their determination and faith. Despite the scarcity of trees and the troubles of breaking the sod of the

steppes, “With perseverance and strong belief in God’s faithfulness, they flourished and created a satisfying life for themselves, producing the much-needed food in due time” (Ackermann). This prosperity eventually led to another obstacle to face, even within the extreme demands farming entails, the jealousy of the native Russian neighbors.

In 1874, twenty four years after my great-great-grandfather was born, the jealousy grew so strong that government action took place, opposing the hardworking German colonists. Czar Alexandar II revoked the once promised freedom from military service and young German men were forced to serve in the Russian wars. Czar Alexandar III then issued a course of action threatening the diversity of culture in Russia. Within these endeavors, another opportunity emerged. Word of the Homestead Act of 1862 reached Russia and capturing the opportunity just as his father did, my great grandfather set out to farm in the Great Plains.

In October 1886, my great-great-grandfather, Peter, set out to sea with his wife, eight children, and his brother’s family. A group of German speaking pioneers had arrived earlier in Sutton, Nebraska and agreed to sponsor such a large family. Successfully settling in freedom also contained quite a bit of heartache because four of my great-great grandfather’s brothers and families were still in Southern Russia struggling to survive. Trying to help his loved ones in need, my grandfather sent money, only to find out it was confiscated by Communist authorities. Limited contact and knowledge of the atrocities in Russia only made the freedom sweeter and gave Peter the opportunity to appreciate his loved ones.

Peter and his wife, Margret, prospered on their farm four miles northwest of Grafton, Nebraska. They had 15 children, six boys and nine girls. Born and raised on the farmstead home, my great grandfather, Andrew, met my great grandmother, Elsa Katherina Huber, who settled with her family on a farm north of Sutton in June of 1877. They married on March 28, 1916 at

my great grandmother's home. Having nine children kept life upbeat and moving on the farm. Andrew and Elsa both died on the farm on January 11, 1953 and June 15, 1931, respectively.

My grandfather, Gilbert, was born September 7, 1929 and lived to continue the family farm. After buying acres from his siblings, Grandpa continued to work hard farming and never lost sight of his goals, even after military service in Korea. Honest and determined, Grandpa farmed eighty acres even after selling the land. Upon retirement, my grandfather sold the farm itself in 2000. It was hard to part with the land that had given so many opportunities and memories within 106 years. As my great aunt Wilma said, "Nevertheless, we cherish our memories of this place we called home for so many years and 'letting go' gave us a feeling of nostalgia and loss. This farm...now our 'land legacy lost'."

Through my ancestor's example I've learned that materials will only get one so far. It's the determination, appreciation, and faith that'll lead to success and prosperity. In the end, one appreciates the memories, freedom, and values earned rather than a price tag. I appreciate times of hardship because I know an opportunity for personal growth arises in the end. It's in my blood. I am a descendant from the Germans from Russia.

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