

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF AMANA

*By Dr. Henry G. Moershel**

Dr. Petersen, Honored Members of the American Historical Association for State and Local History, Guests, Friends, Ladies and Gentlemen:

It is a pleasure and an honor for the Amanas to have you with us today. We are truly delighted with your visit here. We wish to extend to you a most hearty welcome, in which the weather even seems to join us in offering you a rather warm reception.

The history of the Amanas is the story of a faith which had its origin in southwestern Germany in 1714 through the efforts of two men — Johann Friedrich Rock and Everhard Ludwig Gruber. Both were connected with the church. Johann Rock's father was a Lutheran minister, while Eberhard Gruber himself was a Lutheran clergyman. These two men firmly believed that God could and would reveal his wishes to man by messages transmitted through inspired persons or prophets as in biblical days. Thus originated the name which was adopted in later years — The Community of True Inspiration.

Rock and Gruber soon had many followers. They experienced considerable persecution, however, and even sustained personal injuries by being whipped, beaten and stoned, all because of their doctrines and teachings which were both new and unorthodox. For instance, they did not think it proper to take an oath, and they believed in spiritual baptism and not in baptism with water. The latter dogma proved rather eventful for one of my forefathers, for when it became known that a baby had been born in his home, he was ordered by the local officials representing the clergy to have the baby baptized. Steadfastly loyal in his belief, he refused to comply and he was then fined a certain sum of money which he paid. In due time baptism was again demanded for the baby, and when the father declined and claimed that he had already paid his fine, he was placed in the local jail. While he was detained in this manner, a squad of soldiers with a clergyman were sent to the home and the baby was baptized without any regard for the wishes of the parents.

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This new sect also desired its own school system and was opposed to sending its children to state-controlled schools. In addition to all this, they refused to bear arms and became classified as conscientious objectors which, of course, did not go over too well in a country almost constantly torn by war. In fact, for one of my forefathers, such a claim proved all in vain. He was, unfortunately for him, six feet and six inches tall, and as King Frederick of Prussia was at that time constantly looking for men over six feet in height to place in his royal bodyguard, this forefather of mine was kidnapped by the King's agents one stormy night and taken to the King's barracks near Berlin and inducted into the royal bodyguard. He served in this regiment for a number of years, taking part in several military campaigns.

One day, while several companies of the regiment were swimming in a large river, he succeeded in escaping. As he was a powerful swimmer, he dove in and began swimming under water upstream. In some way he skillfully managed to surface for air at intervals without being detected. Finally, he reached a place which seemed like a good hiding place and there he remained in the water for the rest of the day. In the meantime, his companions missed him and began looking for him downstream, believing him drowned. As darkness approached, he left the river and made his way to a nearby wheatfield where he had previously concealed some civilian clothes, which he recovered, aided by dim moonlight.

Then began the hazardous journey home, at first traveling only at night. Once beyond the borders of Prussia, he felt relatively safe. However, he was not certain to what extent the King's agents had been alerted about him. In this manner he escaped, or shall we say, deserted from the Prussian army, and returned to his community in Hesse and, as he held the position of "Buergermeister" or mayor there, he was able to see to it that he had some sort of a bodyguard for himself after that. Had he been captured by the Prussians, it would have meant certain death by execution, and therefore it is obvious that he experienced many tense and anxious moments during his flight, which all served to strengthen his faith in grateful recognition of the Divine help and merciful protection which he had received. This is but one of many incidents which affected a few of my forefathers.

Rock and Gruber were quite active in southwestern Germany, France, and Switzerland. However, Gruber passed away in 1728 and Rock in 1749.

With their deaths the word and the power of the Inspiration was lost to the group and the members were satisfied with reading the testimonials which were the inspired messages left to them by their former leaders. At no time during their sojourn in Europe was there any communistic or communal living among these "Separatists" as they were known. The more wealthy members of the group endeavored to provide in some way for the less fortunate ones.

Without any definite active leadership, the faith suffered a gradual decline up to 1817 when Michael Krausert became inspired and created a revival. This work was taken up by Christian Metz and by Barbara Heine-mann. They, too, suffered considerable persecution and oppression and they therefore gathered their followers in large groups, renting good-sized estates where they resided as communities or "Gemeinden" in the Ronneburg, at Marienborn, Herrnhag, Arnsburg and Engelthal, all located in the tolerant province of Hesse. Of these various places, the Ronneburg was the most famous. The historical records of the Amana faith state that the Moershel family resided at the Ronneburg in 1753 and the records of the Ronneburg mention the Moershel name at a much earlier date. It was in this vicinity that the Amana ancestors lived and worked and worshipped. Here they weathered the war years of the Napoleonic era and the French invasion. The retreating French troops were wicked and stole much property. However, the Russians, who were supposed to be the allies of the Germans and the English, were even more demanding and inconsiderate. Thus the "Inspirationists," as they were also known, felt the impact and the suffering of war like the rest of the populace.

As the years went by, the rents for these estates were consistently raised and by and by became so exorbitant that the necessity of moving away had to be considered. The first indication of such a possibility was found in the inspired word of Metz in 1827, and again in 1840 the prophecy was renewed and it grew into a reality in 1842 when a committee consisting of Metz, Noe, Ackermann, and Weber, with his young son, were sent to America. They reached New York on October the 26th, 1842, after a stormy, 40-day trip. From New York they journeyed to Albany and from there on the Erie Canal by barge to Buffalo. The trip on this boat was far from being pleasant, as they were lodged with a group of seven Irishmen and two Americans in a small 7 x 10-foot cabin. It would have been less annoying if they could have passed some of the time on deck. However, it

rained every day which necessitated their remaining in the over-crowded cabin almost constantly for one terrible, aggravating week.

After reaching Buffalo their agent took them to the Seneca Indian Reservation nearby where eventually a purchase of 5,000 acres of land was negotiated. Unfortunately, they experienced considerable difficulty with the Indians who were rather reluctant to leave, and for awhile were under the impression that these newly-arrived Germans were building houses for them. Not only were the Indians unfriendly but they stole everything they could lay their hands on. Finally, after three years of negotiations, and assisted by the government, these colonists were able to establish their communities known as Middle Ebenezer, Upper Ebenezer, Lower Ebenezer, New Ebenezer, and two communities in Canada — Canada Ebenezer and Kenneberg.

After a short while it was found that, as Buffalo was growing rapidly, it would again be necessary to move. After much prayer the Inspirationists were counseled to seek a home in the west. Accordingly, in 1854 Christian Metz, with a committee of three others, went to Kansas. This trip was rather disappointing and almost disastrous, as the members of the committee became seriously ill, but they finally returned to Ebenezer late in 1854. Their mission had been a failure. Then another committee consisting of Wittmer and Meyer journeyed to Iowa and these men were very much impressed with the terrain here. They returned to Ebenezer, and because of their favorable report of what they had seen here, the colonists decided on giving up their Ebenezer homes and moving to Iowa. Amana was the first village to be erected in 1855. Then followed West Amana, South Amana, High Amana, East Amana, then Middle Amana, and later on Homestead was purchased because of the train service which at that time had reached Iowa City. Previously, everything had to be hauled overland from Muscatine by ox team which required several days for one trip.

Christian Metz was a very able leader. Although a carpenter by trade, he was quite efficient in organizing and managing the group in their communistic or communal system, which had been introduced in Ebenezer and which continued to be maintained in Iowa up to 1932.

In search of water power for their woolen mills and flour mills, a canal about six miles in length was dug virtually by hand and ox and horse power, conveying the water from the Iowa River to the various mills. These seven Amana villages are scattered over the 26,000 acres of land in

a circle-like arrangement, five villages being on the north side of the river, and two villages on the south side. The timberland furnished building material and firewood. Industries were introduced, but each village was practically self supporting. Each had its own bakery, slaughterhouse, ice house, village store, its farm department, its various shops like blacksmith shop, wagonmaker shop, harness shop, etc. The food was prepared in a number of community kitchens, and each village had a number of church buildings. Life in general was leisurely, pleasant, and "gemutlich" in one respect and quite strict in other ways, especially in regard to church attendance.

I still remember the days when we had eleven church services each week, now usually only one or two, but they have so far retained their original form since 1714, the women wearing the same style of dresses to the church, including a black cap, neckerchief or "Halstuch" and an apron. The services are in German. However, English services are being contemplated as a necessity in the near future. There is no organ music or musical accompaniment. The "Vorsaenger," or a song leader, leads the singing of the hymns which are found in the German hymn book, known as the "Psalter-Spiel." Such books consist of 1169 hymns, some of which contain only a few verses. One hymn dedicated to the 119th Psalm, the longest in the Bible, contains 88 verses. The hymns have been composed by some 233 known authors. There are a few over 300 tunes or melodies which may be employed for the singing of these hymns.

Our communion services are held every two years. Formerly they were quite lengthy and all day affairs. The wine which was served was the very best which the community winery had to offer. Usually one large goblet was served to two persons, and each person received one or more slices of bread.

The words "Ebenezer" and "Amana" are biblical names, Ebenezer taken from the first book of Samuel, chapter four, verse one, and also in chapter seven, and means "Hitherto the Lord has helped us." Amana means "remain true" and it is found in the Song of Solomon, chapter four, verse eight. It is up to the Amanas now to follow the meaning of Amana to "remain true."

We realize that inroads have been made and changes are gradually taking place and that problems from within and without have to be met. Some of these facts will be discussed by my associate, Martin Dickel.

I thank you for your patience and for your interest.