

Life in Their New Homes

Every nationality group is faced with problems of assimilation upon migrating to a new land. One group of foreigners may become quickly absorbed, while another may retain its distinct culture for a long time. Perhaps the most successful situation is one in which new cultural patterns are evolved while certain national customs or traditions are retained. Consideration of some aspects of the life of the immigrants in Iowa will reveal how different groups lived together and at the same time kept alive some phases of their culture.

The language barrier was a deterrent to assimilation for many. At Stacyville the 1870 census enumerator found some new residents from Luxemburg. "This family just from Germany," he reported, "are to [sic] Dutch to talk." As a result he was unable even to record their names.

The tendency was for people of the same nationality to band together where their own language could be heard. This was often evident in the hotels. In a hotel operated by Theodore Stemming, a German, in Dubuque, of twenty-six residents registered at one time, nineteen were from Germany (Hanover, Saxony, Bavaria, Prussia,

Oldenburg, Hesse Cassel), two from Switzerland, one from France, one from Holland, one from Luxemburg and two from Tyrol.

Even among the English speaking people there was the trend toward looking for others from the homeland. Such was the case in Falls Township, Cerro Gordo County, where there was a community of English farmers from such diverse places as Dorsetshire, Yorkshire, Nottinghamshire, Devonshire and Sommersetshire.

The above situation was not always true. In 1839 "a Wolverine among the Hawkeyes" reported on his trip through Eastern Iowa. At Dubuque he "was forcibly struck with the mixed mass of Germans, French, English, Irish, American, ect [sic], intermingling with each other in that cheerful manner, which is the true indication of happy hearts and smiling prospects."

Political parties in Iowa, as elsewhere in the United States, were always aware that the thousands of foreign born were potential voters. Consequently, steps were often taken in an attempt to show that a given party was the champion of the immigrant. At the Democratic County Convention at Council Bluffs held in June 1855, one of the resolutions read:

That every one who makes our country the home of his choice, and loves the Constitution, the Laws, the liberty of the Union, is in its largest sense, a true American. Our birth place is not of our own selection. Our religion is

between ourselves and God, and should be left to our own judgement, conscience and responsibility.

The State Convention of the Democratic party in Des Moines that year resolved that there should be "no bigotry or pride of caste or distinction of birth among American citizens." The 1867 Democratic state platform stated that they favored granting "the elective franchise to foreigners who have resided in the State one year and declared their intention to become citizens."

Iowa politicians began early to consider the right of suffrage for the foreign born. During the Constitutional Convention in 1844 Michael O'Brien of Dubuque County offered an amendment "that all foreigners who have resided in the State for three years, and who have declared their intentions to become citizens of the United States, shall be permitted to vote for Representatives and County officers." The proposal aroused a great deal of discussion among members of the Convention but failed to be accepted by a vote of 29 to 39.

Two years later, Sylvester G. Matson, delegate to the Constitutional Convention from Jones County, took the floor in an attempt to extend the franchise to foreigners.

It matters not to me where a man was born, provided he has the heart and feelings of an American. . . . I will give him welcome to all that I ask for myself — the right of a citizen of Iowa. . . . They know *better* how to appreciate the inestimable blessings of liberty than we do.

But again support for the provision failed to materialize.

Although many Europeans left home to avoid military conscription, they did not refuse military duty in the United States. As early as December, 1839, a regiment of Irish, Germans, Dutch, Scots, French and others was being formed in Dubuque. "Such a heterogeneous mixed multitude of all nations, tongues, languages and people is to be found no where on this earth except in the Du Buque Lead Mines."

In 1850 Fort Dodge was established under the command of Major Samuel Woods. The rolls of the army garrison that year listed thirty-four Irish, seven Germans, two from England and one each from Hanover, Scotland, Gibraltar, and Russia, while twenty-one soldiers were native born Americans.

With the outbreak of the Civil War many foreigners participated in the Northern army. Recruitment was carried on among all — whether native or foreign born. For instance, in Iowa City a call was issued for "a general rally of all citizens of this county who formerly served in European armies." The invitation was directed to "all those of our countrymen who fought the hirelings of tyrants in the eventful struggle of 1848 and 1849, to come forward to the rescue of our adopted country. . . . Our wives and children will be taken care of by the government for the defense of

whose stars and stripes we are so eager to meet freedom's foe once more. . . . Rally, ye sons of Germany, Bohemia, and France."

Few organizational units were made up of any one nationality. The efforts to organize German or Irish regiments in Iowa never materialized. The company known as the "Burlington Rifles," which was largely German, was organized in 1857 under Capt. Carl L. Mathies, who had been an officer in the Prussian militia before he immigrated to Iowa in 1849. On January 14, 1861, Governor Samuel Kirkwood accepted their services, and they eventually became Co. D of the First Iowa Volunteers.

Companies B, G, and K of the 16th Iowa Infantry were half German while two-thirds of Company F of the 5th Iowa Cavalry were Germans from Dubuque and Burlington. The 2nd Iowa Regiment was approximately half German.

Among the Iowans who volunteered for Federal service were 995 British Americans, 1,015 Englishmen, 1,436 Irish, 2,850 Germans and 1,618 from various other foreign countries.

Many of the foreign born in Iowa found ways to perpetuate national customs and traditions. Sometimes this was in the form of schools that used native languages for instruction. The foreign language newspapers was another means. Finally, societies were frequently formed for promotional and social purposes. During the Civil

War, for example, various nationalities had organizations which helped with relief measures for soldiers' families. There was the Bohemian Relief Society of Iowa City which gave a ball for the benefit of the poor and needy while the German Supporting Society of Iowa City staged a masquerade ball.

Among the Germans many societies were formed. There were the Turner groups in Davenport, Dubuque, Des Moines, Muscatine, Burlington and other cities. These societies encouraged gymnastics and other physical educational programs.

Frequently there were musical organizations such as the German Maennecher Society and Strasser's Band in Des Moines and the German Band of Dubuque who participated in parades and gave concerts. There were also worker's groups, such as the German Mechanics' Aid Society of Muscatine. Another society was the German Rifle Association who had semi-annual target practice with contests at which prizes were given. Included among the prizes in 1860 were a bureau worth \$25, a dictionary worth \$15, whist tables, a silk hat, bitters and beer glasses. German shooting societies were located in many of the larger towns.

Among the French in Dubuque a Societe Francaise was formed. During the 1860's and 1870's a Bal Francaise was held under the auspices of

the sons of France. The Bal was "not exclusive, but open to all nationalities." The hall was usually decorated with the national colors of the United States and France. The Bal of 1870 was declared a big success — \$317.00 had been taken in.

There was also a Scottish organization in Dubuque at this time. In 1869 the St. Andrews Society met at the Tremont House to commemorate the birth of Robert Burns. One hundred and fifty couples attended. Among the toasts that night were the following:

The President Elect

America — The land of our adoption. She invites the overcrowded millions of the Old World to come and, by untrammelled industry and honest labor, develop her boundless resources and build themselves a happy home under her free and benign institutions.

Scotland

The Complete Union of all our States

Robert Burns

Our Sister Societies — We greet them and shall ever maintain and cherish a reciprocal spirit of friendship.

The Danes organized the Denmark's Minde in Emmett County in 1895. This group was formed to promote "harmony and sociality among the Danes living here, to keep fresh the memories of our native land, to preserve the Danish language and to give aid in case of sickness." They held frequent picnics and social gatherings and main-

tained a library of several hundred volumes, mostly in the Danish language.

Of course there have also been the Friendly Sons of St. Patrick and the Ancient Order of Hibernians in many Iowa cities. Each year we still have celebrations, such as the Tulip Festival at Pella and Orange City, which present some of the cultural practices of Iowa's nationalities.

In 1868 the Germans of Des Moines made known their intentions to establish a German school. The *Des Moines State Register* gave its whole-hearted support to the movement. "We rejoice to see so much spirit manifested in their educational affairs," the editor wrote, "and hope to see this institution grow under patient, skillful management until some day it will be called a college."

In December, 1868, a successful fair was held by the Germans as a benefit for the school. Profits were \$929 with which they planned to purchase a lot. The following March "The German American Independent School" was established under the supervision of Prof. Conrad Beck. English was taught in the forenoon and German in the afternoon. In June the cornerstone for a new building was laid, and the school was hailed as the first proof of the organized existence of a German population in Des Moines.

Iowa place names frequently commemorate the nationalities that live in a particular area, or that

honor a certain personality or nationality. The community of Scotch Ridge in Warren County and Wales in Lincoln Township, Montgomery County, are obvious in the derivation of their names. Bremer County was named after Fredricka Bremer, the Swedish novelist. Among German names are Guttenberg, Luxembourg, Holstein, Schleswig, and Westphalia Township in Shelby County. Bonaparte and Dubuque are French names; Birmingham and Cambridge were named after towns of the same name in England. Among the counties named after Irishmen are Emmet, O'Brien, and Mitchell.

Truly, the comments of I. Hendershott about the citizens of Burlington in 1840 still apply to all Iowans since then, even in 1962. To paraphrase his letter to the editor of the *Burlington Gazette and Advertiser*, "Although the habits of Iowa's citizens have been *migratory*, yet before long they became *assimilated*, upon a high and elevated standard."