

MIGRATION AND THE PRAIRIE

The Minnesota prairie with rich soil and abundant plant and animal life is the product of the interaction of nature and human energy and purpose. For hundreds of years before the modern era it was shaped by the activities and controlled fires of native peoples into a grassland that supported the food resources that made possible a comfortable and productive communal life.

During the last three hundred years the area has seen the immigration of wave after wave of new peoples. Basing themselves on the resources of the prairie they have created new homes, new societies and new cultures. Their interaction with the prairie has changed them profoundly and they in turn altered it.

The first of the newcomers of the modern period were the Dakota people who migrated out of the eastern forests in the 18th century and gave up their forest hunting, gathering and agricultural life to become plains hunters. The Dakota created a new culture built around the horse and the buffalo just before the time of the American Revolution. In the process, they became the dominant people of the region for the next century. Pushed out by the tragic war of 1862 they have since returned to southwestern Minnesota. Their presence and their culture are an abiding testament to their early contribution to the making of the region.

The mosaic of settlement by European groups is one of the most varied and complex patterns found anywhere in the Midwest. Although the area had been visited by French Canadian, European and Yankee traders, explorers and travelers only a few settled in the area before the 1860's. The real settlement by European ethnic groups did not begin until after the Civil War. Just as their Dakota predecessors had shaped the environment of the region to suit the needs of a hunting culture, the newcomers remade it for a world of market agriculture built around the family farm.

The first of the new groups to come were New Englanders and New Yorkers, many of them Civil War veterans and their families. They pioneered some of the earliest farms in all parts of southwestern Minnesota. But their real contribution was the building of the railroads and the creation of towns. They laid down the transportation arteries of a whole new society and constructed its nerve centers. The names in the cemeteries adjoining the Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Methodist churches they founded in the towns of the region attest to their role in reshaping of the prairie. They were followed into the towns and the nearby farmland by immigrants from the British Isles and Canada who shared their language, religions and cultures. Lyon and Redwood counties saw the heaviest rural settlements by Scots, Welsh, English and Canadian immigrants.

The countryside being created by the new forces came to be dominated, however, not by Britishers, Yankees or Yorkers, but by people from continental Europe with a more intense desire for the land and often with better farming skills. German-speaking settlers - Frisians, Germans from Russia and Poland, Luxembourgers, Prussians, Sudetens, Pomeranians, Saxons and Rhinelanders - settled on farms in all parts of the region in substantial numbers. Their migration was matched by other groups of skilled farmers from the Low Countries: Dutch Catholics and Belgian Flemings in Lyon County and Protestant Dutch in the areas near Iowa. These peoples became among the most successful farmers on the prairie.

As elsewhere in Minnesota, Scandinavian settlers also moved onto the land in large numbers. Prosperous Norwegian farms and accompanying Lutheran churches cropped up everywhere in southwestern Minnesota with particularly heavy concentrations in Chippewa and Yellow Medicine counties. Smaller groups of Danes, Swedes and Icelanders joined them. The Danes set up a distinct religious ethnic community built around a folk school at Tyler. The Swedes settled a few successful colonies such as the one at Balaton while the Icelanders who brought with them their great love of books and oral poetry created a distinctive community at Minnesota.

East Central Europe also contributed some elements to the new society being born on the prairie. Czechs, or Bohemians as they were known locally, settled on farms in settlements in Redwood and Renville counties. Poles and Slovaks came later as immigrants from small farms in their homelands to urban America. They often toiled years in the mines and the steel mills of Illinois and Pennsylvania before they could buy the land for which they hungered. The Slovaks settled in several small colonies in places such as Jackson county, while the Poles created a flourishing community around an imposing Baroque-style church at Wilno in Lincoln County.

A second wave of French Canadians followed their voyageur predecessors to southwestern Minnesota. Coming from Canada and Illinois they founded a farming colony and a church in Lyon County. Another small but distinct group of immigrants were the Irish who settled at Avoca and Currie, encouraged by the efforts of Archbishop Ireland of St. Paul who also brought other groups such as Germans, Belgians and Poles to the area. The Irish newcomers had to master farming techniques quite different from those they knew in the old world to succeed. The continued presence of Irish names in today's platbooks in the region show that many learned them well.

By the second generation, small numbers of the children of all of the ethnic groups in the countryside, but especially those from the Scandinavian groups, moved to the English-speaking towns and cities of the region to take jobs and start businesses. There they were joined by groups of Jewish immigrants, many of them refugees of failed Jewish Midwestern farming colonies, who brought new energy, capital and business skills to the main streets of southwestern Minnesota.

The men and women of the European migrations which followed the Dakota people to the prairie created their own distinctive American identities as they built their separate communities. But they also learned from each other and from the land which nurtured them and gave their families a home in the moral and physical universe.

The region is now seeing a new wave of immigrants of Mexican, African, Hmong, Laotian, Vietnamese and Cambodian ancestries seeking livelihood and homes as earlier immigrants did. And like their predecessors, many will stay to create communities and add new elements to the prairie mosaic and a new chapter to its story. African Americans, coming to study or work, are also drawn to The region in increasing numbers as part of the latest wave of modern migrants who promise to enrich our society even more with their cultures and talents.

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