

GERMANTOWN, FRESNO
HISTORICAL CONTEXT

4 April 2006

for

The City of Fresno
Planning and Development Department



Germantown, Fresno Historical Context
City of Fresno, Planning and Development Department

4 April 2006

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Project Team	2
Summary	3
Project Methodology	3
Context Statements.....	5
Introduction.....	5
Overview of the Volga Germans.....	6
Emmigration & Settlement in Fresno, California.....	8
Early Industry & Agricultural Practices.....	10
Patterns of Development.....	12
Domestic Architectural Tradition.....	18
Religion.....	23
Church Architecture	24
Social.....	28
Endnotes	30
Bibliography.....	32

PROJECT TEAM

City of Fresno Planning and Development Department
2600 Fresno St. Third Floor
Fresno, CA 93721

Karana Hattersley-Drayton, Historic Preservation Project Manager

Architectural Resources Group
Pier 9, The Embarcadero
San Francisco, CA 94111

Bruce Judd, FAIA, Principal in Charge

Bridget Maley, Architectural Historian

Shayne Watson, Architectural Historian

Jody Stock, Project Manager/Architectural Historian

The individuals listed above all meet the Secretary of the Interior's Professional
Qualifications in Architectural History.

Acknowledgments

Research efforts were significantly aided by contributions of the following individuals and organizations:

American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, Fresno Chapter

Karana Hattersley-Drayton, Historic Preservation Project Manager, City of Fresno

Suzanne Guerra and Dr. Margo McBane, oral historians, Guerra and McBane LLC

Ray Silvia, Fresno Public Library, California History and Genealogy Room

SUMMARY

In May 2005, the City of Fresno contracted with Architectural Resources Group (ARG) to develop the Germantown, Fresno Historical Context. Over the subsequent six months, ARG staff conducted a preliminary windshield survey of the (former) Germantown neighborhood, and performed research to establish historical information for development of the Germantown, Fresno Historical Context. The Germantown area encompasses the blocks bounded by Church Street, Mono Street, G Street, and Fruit Street.

The historic context for the Germantown neighborhood of Fresno was prepared for the City of Fresno's Planning and Development Department. The City's historic preservation ordinance was adopted in 1979 and amended in 1999 and includes provisions for an Official Local Register of Historic Resources. Although several buildings within Fresno's Germantown are on this Local Register, and others have been included within reconnaissance surveys, the area has not benefitted from an intensive building-by-building survey. However, to understand the potential historical significance of any resource it is essential to have an overall understanding of the cultural and social history of that resource's context. The City therefore has commissioned this historic overview of the former Germans from Russia neighborhood as a first step towards fully documenting this community.

PROJECT METHODOLOGY

The research design and methodology for the project was outlined by the consultant during the course of the project and incorporated guidelines recommended by *The Secretary of the Interior's Standards for Preservation Planning and Developing Historic Contexts*. The following National Register Bulletins were consulted:

- *National Register Bulletin 24 Guidelines for Local Surveys: a Basis for Preservation Planning;*
- *National Register Bulletin 15 How to Apply the National Register Criteria of Evaluation;*
- *National Register Bulletin 16A How to Complete the National Register Registration Form.*

Archival Research

For the purposes of developing the context statements, the following collections were consulted:

- American Historical Society of Germans from Russia
- Fresno County Public Library (California History & Genealogy Room);
- Fresno City and County Historical Society;
- Department of Planning and Development (department files);
- Doe and Bancroft Libraries at the University of California, Berkeley; and
- Online Archives of California.

These collections and contacts provided background information on Fresno's Germantown and the development of the general area, which informed the context statements.

Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps of Fresno's Germantown were reviewed in order to establish periods of construction and development patterns. The Sanborn Map Company produced maps of municipalities for fire insurance purposes from the 1860s through 1950, with mapping continuing to the present in some communities. Sanborn Maps were created for the City of Fresno for the years 1885, 1888, 1898, 1906, 1918, 1948, and 1950. For each year Sanborn Maps were produced for the area, they show every building present, providing: the location, number of stories, footprint of the buildings and use (such as: house, flat, apartment, boarding house, shop, church, social hall, etc).

It should be noted that no archaeological or pre-historic Native-American resources were surveyed during this project. Additionally, limited pre-historic or Native-American contexts were developed. There is potential for the discovery of archeological resources in the survey area. In the future, when major construction projects are undertaken within the survey area, it is recommended that an archaeologist be consulted to assess the site and potential for resources.

INTRODUCTION

Fresno, the sixth-largest city in California and seat of Fresno County, is located in the center of the San Joaquin Valley. The city owes its beginning to the massive expansion of the railroad in the American West in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. In 1869 the directors of the Central Pacific Railroad toured the valley looking for a place to create a new rail stop and build a townsite. Central Pacific director Leland Stanford selected the A.Y. Easterby ranch, a lush wheat field in the middle of the bleak prairie. The company purchased land for the station and rail route, and by 1873 there was a small thriving town. That year voters determined the county seat would be moved from the nearby town of Millerton to Fresno. Racial segregation was established early in the new town. In 1874 community members held a meeting and determined that Whites would settle east of the railroad tracks and other ethnicities and disreputables would be relegated to the west side. The new town incorporated in 1885. Today, Fresno is an agribusiness hub in the center of over a million acres of farmland raising crops such as grapes, oranges, cotton, tomatoes, peaches, plums, prunes and lettuce. The city also includes diverse industries that manufacture or create farm equipment and materials, canned fruit and vegetables, clothing, computer software, electric wire, and other products.

Germantown is composed primarily of one-story bungalows and large religious structures dating from the late nineteenth century through the mid-twentieth century. The bulk of construction in Germantown occurred between the late 1800s, when the construction of Fresno's West Side commenced, to the 1930s when the number of buildings constructed diminished due to the Great Depression and other economic pressures. Few structures from the nineteenth centuries remain. Over the years the character of Germantown has been greatly affected by the demolition and alteration of buildings and the construction of freeways.

OVERVIEW OF THE VOLGA GERMANS

Catherine II, “The Great,” was crowned Empress of Russia on September 22, 1762, after overthrowing her husband, Peter III. Her autocracy (1762-1796) was one of the most successful periods in Russian history and her annexations extended the Russian border to the Black Sea. At the beginning of her reign, the Volga River region, which was then part of Ukraine, was overrun with Mongolian tribes. The northern coast of the Black Sea was Ukrainian property and the Crimean Peninsula belonged to Turkey (but would be officially annexed by Russia in 1783). Early in her reign Catherine II undertook a campaign to annex southern Ukraine and the Crimean Peninsula. Reacting to pressure from Russia, Ukrainians living in the central and southern regions of the Ukraine fled, leaving the northern coast of the Black Sea mostly vacant and open for Russian control. These annexations extended the Russian border and gained Russia strategic access to the Black Sea and its important fishing industry. Catherine II, hoping to dissuade nomadic tribes from using this recently acquired land to pasture farm animals, urged Russians to move to these regions. Yet the isolation and possibility of attack proved too unnerving for the Russians, and the land remained unsettled. Catherine II, after issuing a second manifesto on July 22, 1763, organized a massive recruitment effort across Europe in an attempt to convince “people of all Western nationalities – Jews were excepted – to [move] to Russia and settle there.”⁷¹ Catherine II promised prospective German* settlers the following: full religious liberty, exemption from military service, thirty dessiatines of land to each family (approximately 81 acres), total control over churches and schools, almost complete autonomy in local government, free transportation from Germany to



Figure A: Map of the Volga River and surrounding towns (courtesy of VolgaGermans.net).

⁷¹Germany was not a country at this time. Prussian Prime Minister, Otto Von Bismark, unified the states that would eventually comprise the German Empire in 1871. The geographical area that contained numerous disparate states will be referred to as “Germany” for the sake of brevity and clarity.

Germantown, Fresno Historical Context
City of Fresno, Planning and Development Department

4 April 2006

Page 7

Russia, freedom from paying taxes for ten years, and interest-free loans of 500 Rubles.² Germans were particularly eager to accept Catherine II's offer, as their country had been heavily impacted by the Seven Years' War (1756-1763), and many Germans were penniless and unemployed. Russian recruiters in Germany convinced anyone enticed by Catherine II's offer that the Volga River region was very similar to their own and that the climate was mild and the soil arable. In the 1760s Germans from all classes packed their belongings and left Germany to colonize the steppes of the Volga River region (in the province of Saratov) and the Crimean Peninsula. The Volga Germans who would later settle in Fresno, California came from Hesse, Saxony, the Platinate, Westphalia, Swabia, Baden, Wuertemberg, and Bavaria.³ Upon arrival they realized the Volga River "paradise" promised by the Russians was actually sparsely-populated, desolate, barren land. Winters were harsh, but the Germans, many of whom came from urban centers and had no training in farming, adapted to the land. Their colony eventually flourished. By 1910 the population of the Volga River region was 552,215.⁴ By 1914 there were 160 villages with a combined population of 668,896 on both banks of the Volga River.⁵ Yet, the Volga Germans still faced attacks from nomadic tribes, the Kalmucks, Bashkirs, Tatars, and Khirghis, especially. The nomads destroyed villages, killed thousands of Germans, and sold others into slavery.⁶ Despite these tragedies, the Germans were a resilient people and ultimately prospered. Prompted by great humiliation after the Crimean War (1854-1856), Emperor Alexander II launched into a period of reformations that particularly affected the governance of rural areas. His son and successor, Alexander III furthered the reformations by promoting a nation of one nationality, one language, one religion, and a single administration. Having enjoyed relative freedom until the latter half of the nineteenth century, the Volga Germans began to witness the dissolution of the promises made to them in Catherine II's manifestos. In 1871 the Russian government sent forth an edict that Volga Germans were no longer exempt from military duty. This command and a growing distrust of the government caused a general sense of despair among the Volga Germans. Two successive crop failures between 1879 and 1893 contributed to a poor economy in the villages and added to an already dismal morale. Later, the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905) brought even more strife to the country. Finally, word arrived from America that railroad companies were offering jobs to immigrants and some even paid passage. Many Volga Germans were enticed by America and a mass exodus to the United States commenced.

EMIGRATION & SETTLEMENT IN FRESNO, CALIFORNIA

The first group of Volga Germans arrived in Nebraska in 1874. They worked for railroad companies such as the Burlington Railroad. However, the first Volga Germans who would later settle in Fresno, California did not arrive in the United States until June 19, 1887. This group of people derived from the villages of Straub, Stahl, Bangert, Kukkus, Laub, and Jost on the eastern shore of the Volga River, the Wiesenseite, or “meadow side.”⁷ The exodus from Russia to Nebraska to Fresno continued until approximately 1914. There were several reasons why Fresno became the ultimate destination for this group. According to author Noel Frodsham:

While many thousands of Volga-Germans had migrated to the United States prior to 1887, few had reached the Pacific Coast, and apparently none had entered the San Joaquin Valley. According to Conrad Metzler, one of the original immigrants, he and a number of the prospective settlers had been in communication with an agent, Mislser by name, of the Nord-Deutsche-Lloyd Steamship Company, who recommended the “fertile lands” of the then little known San Joaquin Valley.⁸

Advertisements that fell into the hands of the Volga Germans referred to Fresno as the “Sommerland,” the land of constant summer. Other settlers mention articles in newspapers or brochures that spoke to them of the wonders of Fresno. On June 24, 1887, the *Fresno Republican* announced the arrival of the German settlers:

On Monday eight men and seven women [sic] immigrants from a German colony in Russia, arrived at Fresno having come for the purpose of securing occupation as farm laborers and, like most people from the old country, with the intention of securing land of their own in this country where land is yet so plentiful and so cheap. German peasants fresh from the fields of their nativity are not often seen here, and the odd dress of both men and women has attracted a good deal of attention...Bright colors predominate in the costumes...They are apparently sober and industrious people and are likely to find plenty of work...⁹

The first party of Volga Germans to arrive in Fresno was comprised of 31 men, women, and children. The group consisted of John and Catherine Berg and children Peter, Maria, and Henry; John and Elizabeth Kerner and daughter Elisa; Christine and Maria Karle; Michael Karle; Mrs. Christina Andreas; Mrs. Sophia Metzler, and children John and Christina; Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Mehling; Conrad Mehling; Philip and Maria Nillmaier; George and Philip Nillmaier and children John, Conrad, and Adam; and John and Catherine Steitz.¹⁰ The second and third waves of immigrants brought the

Germantown, Fresno Historical Context
City of Fresno, Planning and Development Department

4 April 2006

Page 9

Huberts, Bopps, Scheerers, Lieders, Diels, Gleims, Hartwigs, Roths, Schwabenlands, Bitters, and Heinzes.¹¹

Throughout the early 1900s, German-Russians continued to arrive in Fresno and eventually migrated to surrounding towns such as Kerman, Biola, Madera, Dinuba, Reedley, Fowler, Sanger, and Selma.

EARLY INDUSTRY & AGRICULTURAL PRACTICES

Land was prohibitively expensive when the Volga Germans arrived in Fresno in 1887, nearly \$600 an acre at the end of that year. The Germans had become experienced farmers in the steppes of the Volga River region of Russia, and their natural inclination was to continue to farm in Fresno. “After being forced to farm wheat in Russia, most knew no other trade when they came to the United States.”¹² Because land prices were beyond reach, the men in the group initially worked as day laborers and on odd jobs to save money for eventual purchase of their own farms and to support their families in the meantime.¹³ The economic depression of 1893 proved to be a windfall for the Volga Germans as land prices plummeted and many farms were forced into foreclosure. As the rest of United States faced devastation and poverty, many of the Volga Germans, a frugal group of people with substantial savings, swept up land and became farm owners. Although most of these farms were outside the boundaries of Fresno City, the German-Russian farms and farming techniques forged a lasting impact on Fresno County’s farming industry. Having transformed the arid steppes of Russia into a fertile, arable oasis, the German-Russians performed similar miracles on the arid land near Fresno. Fred Koch writes: “With their ‘prudence, perseverance and push these immigrants became the most outstanding viticulturists and horticulturists of the valley...”¹⁴ The German-Russians imported many agricultural products from Russia that would become staples in the United States, including: sunflower seeds (“Rooshian Peanuts”), the Klondike watermelon, and the hearty, frost-resistant strain of wheat known as Turkey Red.¹⁵ Farming was not the only means of occupation for Volga Germans. The 1910 census shows that many Volga Germans were employed as general laborers, packinghouse workers, or railroad employees.¹⁶

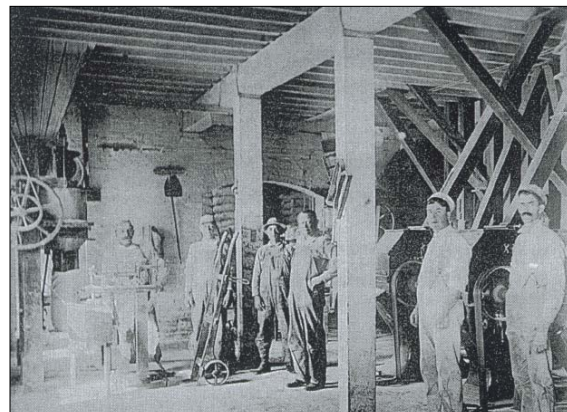


Figure B: John Fischer (third from left), immigrated to Fresno from Russia when he was a child. He’s pictured in Sperry Flour Company’s plant in Fresno in 1912 (photograph courtesy of The Fresno Bee).



Figure C: Ohlberg’s second store on California Street (photograph courtesy of Dennis Ohlberg).

Germantown, Fresno Historical Context
City of Fresno, Planning and Development Department

4 April 2006

Page 11

Fred Koch noted: “beginning with the second generation, these people began to permeate the fields of education, commerce, religious vocations, arts, and professions. For most of them, their past ethnic affinity to the soil had become a matter of legend.”¹⁷ The German-Russians assimilated into the American culture relatively quickly and eventually held the same occupations as their American neighbors, who were often themselves immigrants from other nations).

The Ohlberg family from Kukkus, Russia arrived in Fresno in the late 1800s. In the 1920s they bought a store from another Russian-German family, the Stites. The original store, “Ohlberg’s,” was located near the 2300 block of California Street. In 1937 the Ohlberg’s moved their store to the corner of Kirk Avenue and California. Ohlberg’s stayed in this location until 1961 when it moved to Olive Avenue. The family-run operation was an institution in the Russian-German community and most Russian-German families purchased their groceries, meat, and drygoods from Ohlberg’s. Ohlberg’s German Sausage is still locally-famous today, however Ohlberg’s store closed in 1998.

PATTERNS OF DEVELOPMENT

At the turn of the twentieth century, Fresno saw a boom in immigrants from Russia. In 1900, 734 Volga Germans resided in Fresno. The population increased to 3,000 in 1908 and 8,000 by 1920.¹⁸ War erupted in Europe in 1914, and immigration to the United States ceased, essentially ending a three-decade flow of immigration from Russia to Fresno. In the late nineteenth century, the Volga Germans settled on the southwest side of Fresno's railroad tracks. Known throughout Fresno as the "wrong side of the tracks," West Fresno was home to immigrants from China, Japan, Armenia, and Russia. Noel Frodsham writes: "In 1887 the Nilmeier family purchased a lot on D Street near California Avenue. The Kerner, Metzler, and Schieb families moved into the vicinity of San Benito and G Streets the following year."¹⁹

Land was relatively inexpensive on Fresno's West Side, due mostly to the Depression of 1893, but also to the constant threat of flooding. Understanding the spatial patterns of development in the survey area is necessary to recognize where different types of historical resources are likely to be found. The growth and evolution of the survey area can be traced from an examination of maps and photographs. Sanborn Map Publishing Company Fire Insurance Maps were the primary source for understanding the physical development of the area. Hints of Volga German settlement appeared on Sanborn Maps in 1898. The area was developed sparsely, and vacant lots were prevalent. The next Sanborn Map publication was 1906, and this map reflects the immigration boom that took place after the turn-of-the-twentieth century. By this time almost every lot was developed and the community was thriving. "The 1910 census verified the area almost totally built-up, with pages of sequential addresses shown in the neighborhood, virtually all occupied by German families from Russia."²⁰ The 1918 Sanborn Map depicts a growing Germantown, firmly established with Volga Germans who migrated directly from Russia. The area had begun to spread south into areas that were previously undeveloped.

Germantown, or "'Rooshian Town' (a pejorative term used by those outside the community),"²¹ grew for almost fifteen years (1900-1914) and developed into a large triangular area of land bounded by Church Street, Mono Street, G Street, and Fruit Street. A former resident of Germantown recalled, "It was one of the cleanest sections of Fresno. Every Saturday, we went out with willow brooms and swept the alleys. We didn't have lawns, just flowers and gardens."²² Germantown was known throughout the Fresno area for its clean streets, tidy yards, and fastidious care of homes and the

overall neighborhood.

The Germantown neighborhood thrived until the late 1940s. In 1948 Highway 99 was constructed through the center of Germantown. According to Caltrans historian Aaron Gallup, land title records showed “a sudden rise in sales in the years 1947-48. This is symbolic of the demise of the neighborhood, and reflects the impact of the construction of the first freeway through the heart of the community...”²³ The Evangelical Lutheran Cross Church, center of Volga German religious and social activity since 1895, was in the path of the new freeway. The church was moved 900 feet to another location in 1948. Several Volga German homes that surrounded the church were demolished. Even more disheartening and devastating to the Volga German community, additional freeway construction in 1963 and 1966 necessitated the demolition of more homes and further bisected what was left of Germantown. Gallup states: “By the 1970s, a typical real estate sales transaction in the neighborhood was from German-surnamed sellers to Hispanic buyers.”²⁴ Germantown, once affordable for immigrants due to its relation to the railroad tracks and a propensity for flooding, became affordable for Hispanics and African Americans when freeways tragically dissected the area.

The Sanborn Maps that included sections of Fresno’s Germantown are from the following years: 1898, 1906, 1918-19, and 1950.

1898

In 1898, Germantown was a remarkably developed area of Fresno. Sanborn Maps only covered Mono to California Avenue and G Street to C Street. The area between Mono and San Benito Streets was developed only sparsely. Many of the blocks in this area contained only a single dwelling. Development was denser east of San Benito Avenue and the densest between San Benito and Monterey Avenue. The Cross Church, constructed in 1895, was located on block 223, lots 25 and 26 of F Street. Another church, listed as “Evangelical Church” on Sanborn Maps, was located on the corner of the same block of F Street at Los Angeles Avenue. The Armenian Library Union Hall was located one block west, an indication that Armenians and German-Russians lived in close proximity to one another at that time. G Street was densely developed between San Benito Avenue and California Avenue with all but one lot developed. There were signs of minimal development south of California Avenue, specifically between Lilly [sic] Avenue and Rose Avenue. Few dwellings had out buildings roughly the same size and dimension of summer kitchens, yet it was impossible to tell

if these outbuildings were indeed summer kitchens. A summer kitchen in the backyard is only a weak interpolation that German-Russians occupied the dwelling.

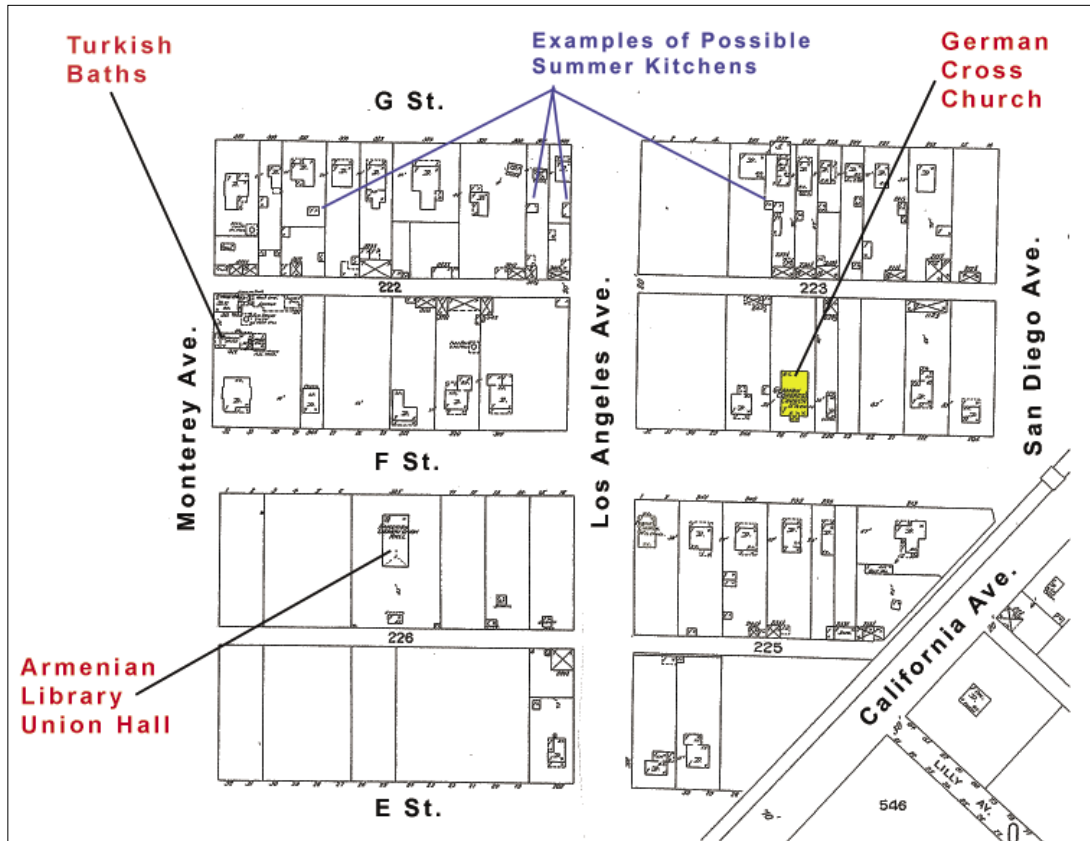


Figure D: Detail of a Sanborn Fire Insurance map, 1898. Volga German buildings and residences are shaded in yellow.

1906

By 1906, Sanborn Maps depict an almost completely developed Germantown. The sparsest areas of development exist on the two blocks bounded by G Street to the north, A Street to the south, Mono to the west, and Ventura Avenue to the east. Working backward from the 1918-1919 Sanborn Maps (the earliest Sanborn Map on which summer kitchens are labeled) it is clear that homes with summer kitchens are located predominantly on the blocks bounded by F Street, B Street, Ventura Avenue, and Monterey Avenue. This Sanborn Map depicts a large expansion of development south of California to Belgravia. The Roeding Olive Co. is located on the corner of G Street at Santa Clara Avenue. The Wartburg Evangelical Church is located on the corner of D Street and Ventura Avenue. The German Zion Congregational Church is located on the corner of E Street and Monterey Avenue, on the same

block as the Trinity Armenian Church (F Street and Monterey Avenue) and the Armenian Library Union Hall. The Evangelical Church remains on F Street at Los Angeles Avenue, and the German Congregational Church at the center of F Street between Los Angeles Avenue and San Diego Avenue has been rebuilt. Lincoln Public School is located on block 10 of C Street between Mono and Ventura Avenue. Kirk Public School is located on Belgravia between Lily Avenue and F Street.

1918-1919

In the 1918-19 publications, the Sanborn Company began to label summer kitchens in the backyards of dwellings in Fresno (see Figure E). It is easier to see patterns of German-Russian development by tracking the number of summer kitchens in the backyards of residences. By 1918-19, the triangular area bounded by G Street to the north, Mono to the west, and California to the south is fully developed and full of German-Russian residences. The homes in this area are larger than homes anywhere else in Germantown. Houses in this area that have summer kitchens are primarily located in the section bounded by F Street, Ventura Avenue, and California. Block 541, bounded by the railroad tracks to the north, G Street to the south, Los Angeles Avenue to the west, and San Diego Avenue to the east, is comprised entirely of homes with summer kitchens. Some of the smallest homes in Germantown at this time face the railroad tracks.

The area south of California has begun to fill in. The densest development exists in the area bounded by Cherry Avenue, Lily Avenue, California, and Church Avenue. Almost every house in this rectangular area has a summer kitchen in the backyard.

There is less development west of Lily Avenue and south of California, yet most blocks contain at least a single dwelling. The blocks that border California contain more dwellings than the blocks that are farther south. Half the homes in this area have summer kitchens. A home with a summer kitchen is located as far south as Geary and Maude [sic].

Lincoln Public School on C Street has doubled in size by this time and fills the entire block (10) between C Street and B Street. Edison Intermediate Public School is located south of Lincoln School and fills the entire block (244). Wartburg Church is still located at D Street and Ventura Avenue. The 3rd German Congregational Church is located at E Street and San Benito Avenue. The German Zion Congregational Church is located at E Street and Monterey Avenue. Both the Trinity Armenian

Germantown, Fresno Historical Context
City of Fresno, Planning and Development Department

4 April 2006

Page 16

Church and the Armenian Library Union Hall have been demolished, indicating the disappearance of the Armenian community from Germantown. The street on which the two Armenian buildings existed is now filled with German-Russian homes.

The 1918-1919 Sanborn Maps extend farther south than the 1906 Sanborn Maps. The 1st German Baptist Church is located at California and Poppy Avenue, and St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church is located at Lotus Avenue and California. The German Church of God is located in the small triangular plot of land bounded by Los Angeles Avenue, E Street, and California. The Ebenezer Church of the Evangelical Association was rebuilt and expanded at the corner of F Street and Los Angeles Avenue. The German Congregational Church at the center of the block on F Street, between Los Angeles Avenue and San Diego Avenue, is now a meeting hall. A much larger church, Free Evangelical Lutheran Cross Church (Fresno Historic Property #63), now exists at F Street and San Diego Avenue. (This is by far the largest building in Germantown.) The Emmanuel German Baptist Church exists at F Street and Lorena Avenue. Kirk Public School, much larger and rebuilt from its former cross-shaped plan to a larger, rectangular plan, is still located at Belgravia between Lily Avenue and F Street.

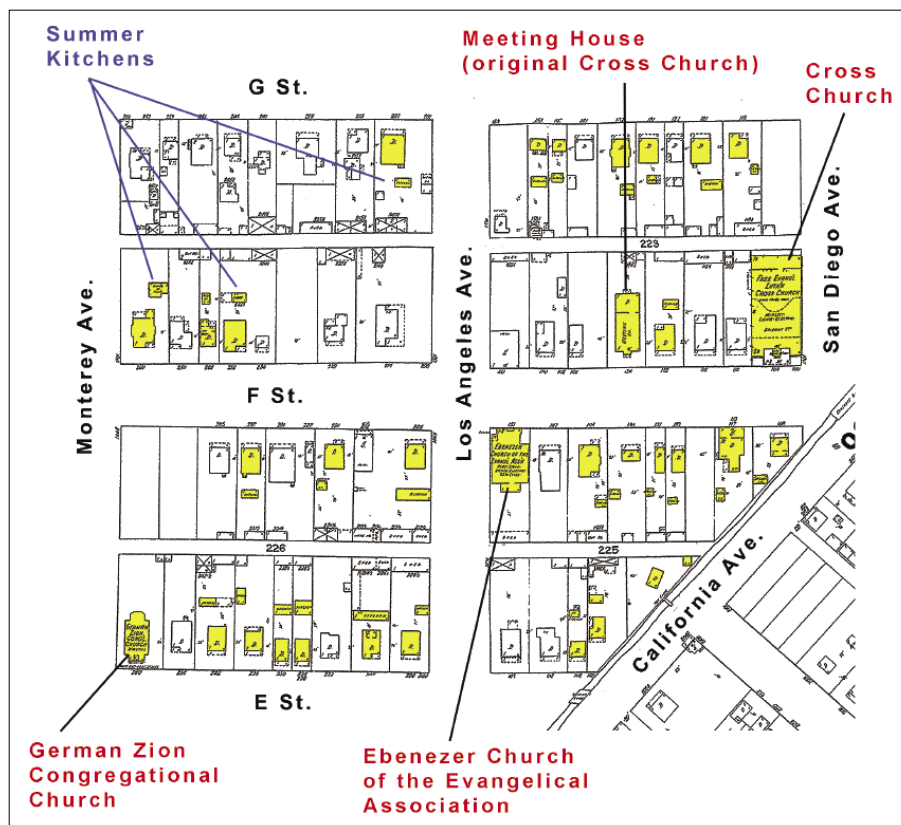


Figure E: Detail of a Sanborn Fire Insurance map, 1918-19. Volga German buildings and residences are shaded in yellow.

1950

By 1950, the Sanborn Maps depict the wide swath of the future Highway 99 cutting through the northeastern side of Germantown. (The swath is depicted on Sanborn Maps as blank white space.) Over eleven blocks were wholly or partially demolished to make way for the new highway. After having been moved, the Free Evangelical Lutheran Church is in its new location on E Street and Los Angeles Avenue. The German Church of God (formally Ebenezer Church of the Evangelical Association) is located across from the new highway at F Street and Los Angeles Avenue. The German Zion Congregational Church is still located at E Street and Monterey Avenue and St. Paul's Lutheran Church is still located at Lotus Avenue and California.

Very few outbuildings in backyards are labeled “kitchen,” a clear indication that the German population has dispersed. Interestingly, most homes that still have summer kitchens are typically located next to at least one other home, but there are usually not more than three homes in a grouping. Rarely is there a single home on a block with a summer kitchen.

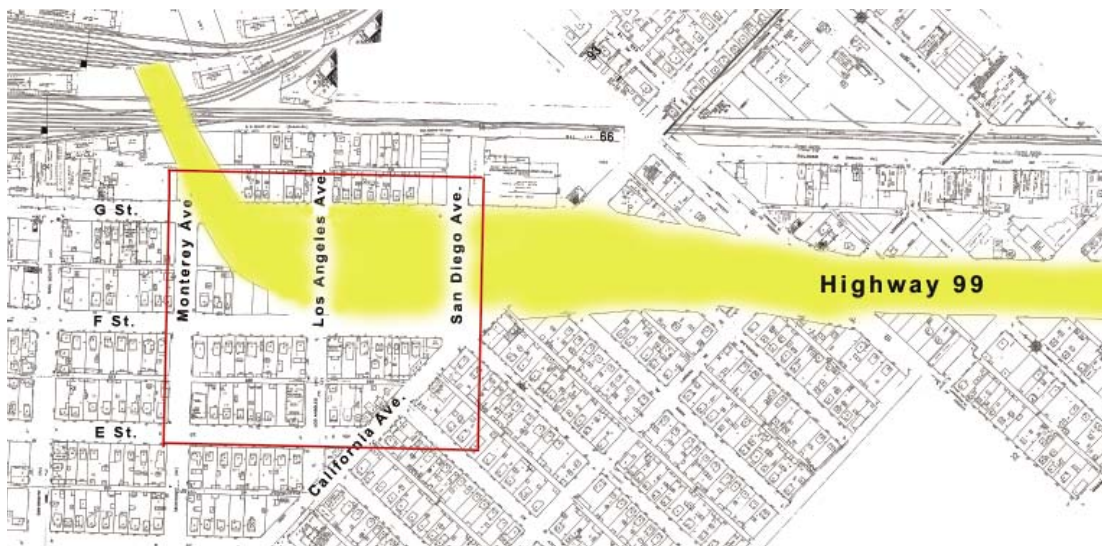


Figure F: Sanborn Fire Insurance Map, 1950. The red square on this image is the sample area seen in Figures D and E. The area highlighted in yellow represents more than eleven blocks that were wholly or partially demolished to make way for Highway 99.

DOMESTIC ARCHITECTURAL TRADITION

After Catherine II's edict and in preparation for the Germans' arrival, the Russian government organized a team of military engineers to survey the Volga River steppes. This team was responsible for identifying locations of the future villages and creating the village plans. The German immigrants were arranged into groups determined by families, friends, and religious affiliation in an effort to avoid clashes. Each group eventually formed its own village with an appointed elder. The village elders were given 12 blueprints of village plans created by the survey teams, from which they selected the layout of their future homes.²⁵

Volga German villages were arranged in a grid pattern with a single main street. The church was invariably located centrally in the village. When the Germans first arrived on the steppes, building materials were in short supply and buildings were initially constructed of mud and wattle (a framework of interwoven rods, poles, or branches forming structure). Eventually, timber was floated down the Volga River from the north and used in the construction of buildings. The typical Volga German house on the Volga River was constructed of wood, masonry, or mud, often painted white, and covered by a straw or tin roof. Most residences had porches. In addition to residences, each plot had its own barn, granary, and stable, all of which were enclosed by a fence. These fenced yards played an important role in the Volga German community as a social gathering place. Benches were attached to the street-facing side of the fence and women relaxed here and conversed with friends and pedestrians. Historical photographs of villages on the Wiesenseite, or meadow side, of the Volga depict predominantly single-story homes square in plan and with hipped roofs. The windows had multiple lites. Like the fences that surrounded the individual plots of land, the detached summer kitchen, (*summerkuche* or *backhaus*), was also a characteristic element of the Volga German residence. Kitchens were detached from the main house to avoid overheating the residence during the summer months and to help prevent fires.

Forced to escape the devastation and poverty of their home country and then ultimately forced out of Russia by the political situation, the Volga Germans undoubtedly yearned for consistency. One way of achieving this was a persistency in form and visual continuity. According to Richard Sallet, Volga Germans "did not build the customary American type farm house but, in the construction of their dwelling, tried to repeat the architectural style of their old home colony."²⁶ Elements characteristic of their residences on the banks of the Volga River were imported into the designs of the homes

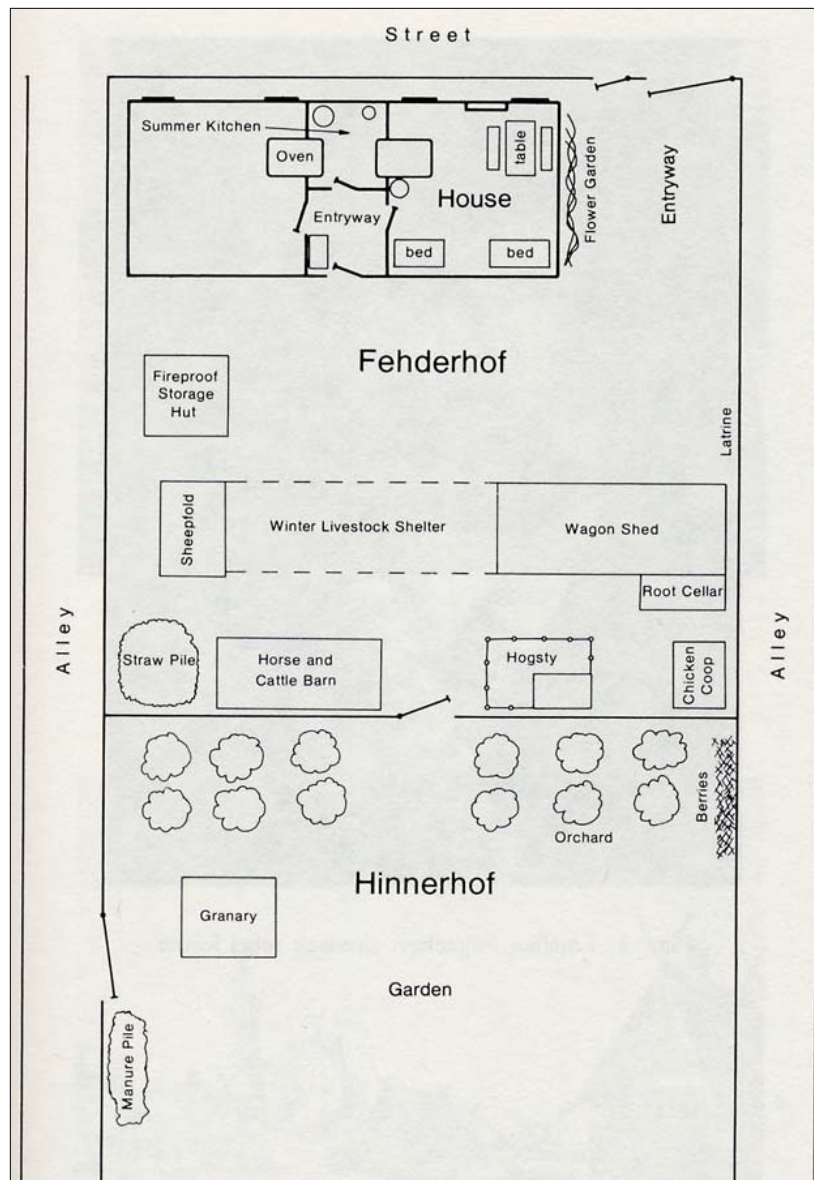


Figure G: Typical Volga German Farmyard (image courtesy of VolgaGermans.net).

of German-Russians in Fresno –particularly: square-shaped plans, single-story houses, hipped roofs, fences that surrounded properties (including street-facing benches), and detached summer kitchens. Streetscapes in Fresno’s Germantown around the turn-of-the-twentieth-century undoubtedly resembled those of a village on the banks of the Volga. Aaron Gallup writes: “...the basic hipped-roof form seemed to have had a special appeal for the Fresno immigrants, being reminiscent of the traditional house types found in their home colonies in Russia.”²⁷



Figure H: Volga River streetscape, City of Balzer (photograph courtesy of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia, Fresno Chapter “AHSGRFR”).

The home of Mr. and Mrs. Frederick Bopp (see Figure J) is a good example of a typical German-Russian residence constructed in the late 1800s. The Bopps arrived in Fresno with the second wave of immigrants. When compared to typical residences on the Volga River, the similar elements are readily apparent: single story, pyramidal hipped roof with a ridge, two windows per each façade (in most cases), and fences that surround the properties. The Bopp house was raised several feet from the ground to prevent flood water damage.



Figure I: Volga River streetscape, Norka, Russia (photograph courtesy of VolgaGermans.net).

In the late 1880s when the German-Russians were able to afford to build homes, they had already begun to assimilate into the American culture. In a gesture of cultural assimilation, they constructed homes that maintained traditional elements yet included elements of the traditional small American home. This was done through simple additions such as spindle-work on porches and gabled dormers ornamented with spindle-work and decorative shingles.

Carl Legler, a second-generation German-Russian immigrant and the first pastor of St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church, built a house on E Street in c. 1900 that borrowed from a traditional American design vocabulary. This residence is Fresno Historic Property #62 (see Figure K).



Figure J: Home of Frederick Bopp, Fresno, CA, c. 1900 (photograph courtesy of AHSGRFR).



Figure K: Carl Legler Home, Fresno, CA (photograph courtesy of AHSGRFR).

The Volga German custom of constructing a kitchen detached from the residence (the summer kitchen or *backhaus*) also persevered in Fresno. Noel Frodsham describes this custom:

Because fields were sometimes miles away from the village, it was often the custom in Russia to construct a small summer house in the vicinity of the family's farm. This eliminated the loss of time trekking back and forth from the village, as well as maintaining the regular home clean and free from the heat caused by baking and cooking. The extremely warm summer months of the San Joaquin Valley found the summer-kitchen admirably fitted to the immigrants' new situation.²⁸

Detached from the residence, the summer kitchens in Fresno were typically located at the rear of the lot abutting alleys, as far from the house as possible, and roughly the size of a small garage. A stove was typically located at one end of the kitchen and a long table with benches filled the rest of the room.

The summer kitchen located behind the residence at 635 N. A Street (constructed in 1913) is still extant and is representative of an important vernacular property type in Fresno. Applied Earthworks, a cultural resources consultant, conducted a historical study that designated the summer kitchen at 635 N. A Street eligible for the Fresno Local Register of Historic Resources. (See Figure L.)

The summer kitchen located behind the Schmidt Home, originally located at 460 N. Street, is still extant and a good example of a smaller summer kitchen. (See Figure M.)



Figure L: Backhaus, 635 N. A Street, Fresno, CA (photograph courtesy of Historic Property Survey for Fresno Unified School District Proposed West Fresno School Survey).



Figure M: Schmidt Summer Kitchen, circa 1920, formerly located behind the home at 460 N Street (photograph courtesy of Karana Hattersley-Drayton).

RELIGION

The Volga Germans generally continued to practice the same religion to which they had adhered while living in Germany. “Of the 104 colonies established from 1764 to 1768 there were 29 Catholic colonies and 75 Protestant settlements.”²⁹ Catherine II insisted that the villages be comprised of Germans who shared the same religious beliefs in order to avoid ideological clashes. This settlement approach was successful and the area remained strife-free. Of the Protestant wing of Christianity, the Lutheran Church was the most prevalent with seventy-eight percent of the members. Twenty-two percent of Protestants were members of the Reformed Church.³⁰ Carl J. Meier, former pastor of the Free Evangelical Lutheran Cross Church, writes: “There were 104 churches in 22 parishes with 259,656 members on the ‘Wiesenseite’ or meadow of the Volga River,” where most of the immigrants who would later settle in Fresno lived.³¹ Catherine II promised the Germans religious freedom if they moved to Russia. When Catherine II sent forth an edict forcing the Volga Germans into military duty, the Volga Germans viewed this as an attack on their religious freedom, as many of them were pacifists. Thus, when the opportunity arose to move to the United States and enjoy its religious and political freedom, the Volga Germans packed their belongings and embarked on the long journey.

The Volga German settlement in Fresno, California, was comprised mostly of Lutheran Protestant Evangelicals. Among the few possessions they were able to carry with them to the United States, many of the new immigrants brought copies of the *Bible*, a prayer book, and the *Catechism*. After settling in Fresno, religion continued to play a dominant role in the lives of the Volga Germans. The early pioneers hosted prayer meetings in their residences from 1887 until 1891. Soon, the German-Russians decided to organize a formal church. A parochial teacher living in Straub, Russia named Jacob Legler, was asked to move to Fresno to oversee the organization of the new church. Legler and his family arrived in Fresno in 1891, and he was ordained as a minister shortly thereafter. Legler initially conducted services in the local Armenian Hall. On March 15, 1892, Fresno’s first Volga German church, the Cross Church, was officially organized with 85 charter members. Mennonite Volga Germans settled mostly in the Reedley area of Fresno County.

CHURCH ARCHITECTURE

Several villages on the banks of the Volga River were combined to form single parishes. The villages of Straub and Stahl, from which most of the original Volga German settlers in Fresno derived, were located within the Privalnoje (Warenberg) parish. The oldest standing church in this parish is in the village of Warenberg, just south of Straub. Constructed in 1843, the Warenberg Church (see Figure N) is visually quite similar to the Free Evangelical Lutheran Cross Church in Fresno, constructed in 1915 (see Figure Q).

Historical photographs of churches in Norka, Jost, and Straub depict similar designs. According to the Volga German website:

Almost all Lutheran and Reformed churches on the Volga were constructed in the village and city colonies at the same time. These were massive new buildings which were built in the same style and by the same architects and builders and so this style is referred to as the *kontor* or bureaucratic style.³²

All the churches had cross-shaped plans. The main entrance was typically distinguished by a grand pedimented portico supported by Doric columns. There were usually two side entrances at the transept with pedimented porticos. Most churches had apse extensions at the rear. The character-defining feature of Kontor style churches is a multi-storied bell tower, square in plan, located at the front of the church. All historic photographs of churches on the Wiesensite of the Volga River region depict a dome cap on top of all the bell towers. Crosses were mounted to the top of the domes.



Figure N: Warenberg Church, Warenberg, Russia (photograph courtesy of VolgaGermans.net).



Figure O: Church in Norka, Russia (photograph courtesy of VolgaGermans.net).

The Volga German website states:

The church had three bells of different sizes, which were rung each evening at seven o' clock. They served to call people to worship; to announce a death in the village-- often telling the age of the deceased by measured toll; to announce a fire; and it rang for hours at a time to guide persons to the village who might be lost in a storm.³³

This tradition was carried to Fresno by the Volga Germans. "The churches...told the community when someone died, tolling the bells nine times for an older person, six times for a younger one, and three times for a child."³⁴ According to local lore, twelve Volga German churches existed at the same time in Germantown.

Cross Church, Fresno

In Fresno one of the first major building projects undertaken by the German-Russians was a church. On April 7, 1894, members of the future Cross Church voted to build a church on lots 25 and 26 of block 223 in the center of F Street.³⁵ The first Volga German church was erected in Fresno, California, in 1895. The construction of the Cross Church was funded through donations and cost \$1,077.80. The church was designed in a simplified version of the Kontor style. "The churches of the Volga Germans in the U.S.A. are also variously patterned after those of the old homeland. Especially striking examples are the two Evangelical churches in Lincoln, Nebraska, [and] one in Fresno, California..."³⁶ The characteristic bell tower and pedimented entry were included in the simple design of the Cross Church, yet hardly



Figure P: Original Cross Church, Fresno, CA, constructed in 1895 (photograph courtesy of AHSGRFR).



Figure Q: Free Evangelical Lutheran Cross Church, Fresno, CA, constructed in 1914 (photograph courtesy of AHSGRFR).

as ornate and massive as the Kontor originals in Russia.

As the German-Russian population increased, the congregation eventually outgrew the small church on F Street, and a new building was erected in 1915 for a cost of \$27,046.24. This building closely resembled the Kontor style churches in Russia in both ornamentation and massing. Characteristic of Kontor style churches, the Free Evangelical Lutheran Cross Church has a cross-shaped plan, a stately pedimented portico (main entry), and a tall bell tower capped by a rounded dome. Members of the Cross Church were informed in 1947 that Highway 99 would be constructed over the site of the church and the congregation was forced to have the church moved or it would be demolished. On November 3, 1947, the 62' x 130' church was moved off its foundation. The move took 22 men and cost \$66,700. This building served as Fresno's main German-Russian church from 1914 until it was sold in 1966. The church is now known as Fresno Temple Church of God.

St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Fresno

Located on California and Lotus Avenue, St. Paul's Evangelical Church was dedicated in 1913. Carl Legler, son of Jacob Legler, the first pastor of Cross Church, was the original pastor. St. Paul's Church did not follow the pattern of the Kontor style churches, yet resembled churches from the west side of the Volga River (villages such as Kamenka and Messer). The design is a simple rectangular plan with minimal ornamentation. A square bell tower was located at the front of the church, with the main entry at the lower story of the tower. The top of the bell tower was not rounded, as in the Kontor tradition, but instead rose into a sharp pyramidal cap. The Gothic arch shape was dominant and found in fenestration and vent openings that punctuated the bell tower.



Figure R: St. Paul's Evangelical Lutheran Church, Fresno, CA, c. 1913 (photograph courtesy of AHS-GRFR).

Other Fresno German-Russian Churches

According to the 1937 city directory, the following German-Russian churches (besides Cross Church and St. Paul's) existed at that time: Zion Congregational (Monterey & E), Church of God (Los Angeles & E), Emmanuel Baptist (Lorena & Kirk), Third Congregational (San Benito & E), Wartburg Evangelical (Ventura & D), and Seventh Day Adventist (California & B).³⁷

SOCIAL

Church

The first few waves of German-Russian immigrants were more concerned with earning a living than promoting and attending social activities. However, religion provided a strong sense of community for the group. Dr. Norman Bitter, son of one of the later immigrants to arrive in Fresno from Russia, spoke of the Volga Germans:

Almost their entire social life in Fresno was centered around the church. They would spend Sunday morning in Sunday school, the afternoon in fellowship and the evening in church, as well as Monday night and Wednesday night. And the men would have fellowship on Saturdays.³⁸

Churches served as the foundation of the community, and the German-Russians enjoyed spending time with their congregations, as everyone spoke the same language and practiced the same customs. The individual churches became community centers where almost all social activities were held, such as weddings, dances, and parties.

Sport

The only game or sport to survive the move from the Volga River region to Fresno, California, was pigeon-fancying. Little historical information exists about this hobby, yet the lore of pigeon-fancying has survived by word-of-mouth. Noel Frodsham asserts that pigeons were originally brought from Germany and then to Russia and finally to the United States. In Fresno the birds were raised for both food and hobbies, including pigeon-racing, pigeon-capturing, and homing-missions.

Weddings

The traditional wedding celebration was an important part of German-Russian social life in Fresno. Often, the weddings lasted as long as three days and involved the extended families of the bride and the groom, relatives, friends, and neighbors. The wedding was usually held in the winter when the fields were fallow and the festivities would not interrupt the families' livelihoods. The ceremony took place at a church in town and was followed by a celebration at the home of the groom's

parents. Since the traditional Volga German wedding celebration was often prohibitively expensive, wedding guests helped with costs by donating money. One of the bride's shoes was stolen during the celebration and would be sold to the highest bidder at the end of the night. This money was donated to the bride and groom. This custom still occurs at Volga German weddings to this day. Another wedding custom was a type of *money dance*, referred to by non-Germans as the Dutch Hop, where guests would pin money to the bride's dress in order to dance with her. By the end of the wedding festivities, the bride and groom were often weighted down with money, literally.



Figure S: Typical Volga German wedding celebration, Fresno, CA (photograph courtesy of Adam and Mollie Meisner).

Community Activities and Organizations

A weekly German language newspaper with statewide circulation was published in Fresno. The Edison Social Club, a social organization for young German-Russians was formed in 1921 and was located on California at A Street.³⁹ Other German-Russian activities were held at Hermansohn's Hall. A great fundraising effort brought the community together after World War I. Peter Klassen states: "When World War I, the Russian Revolution, and the acute food shortages in 1919 and 1920 ravaged the Volga colonies, the Fresno German-Russians responded generously and quickly."⁴⁰ The Volga Relief Society raised funds and collected donations for relatives still living in Russia. Today, the cohesiveness of the German-Russian community is due to the Fresno chapter of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia (AHSGR), established in 1971. Each year, the Society organizes cultural fetes such as a May Festival and an Oktoberfest celebration. During the summer the AHSGR holds a weeklong summer camp for children that teaches the customs and traditions of the German-Russians.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Frodsham, Noel. *A Study of the Russian-Germans in Fresno County, California*. Thesis, University of Redlands. 1949: 3.
- ² Schwabenland, G. Ray, Dr. Peter J. Klassen, and Noel Frodsham. *The History of German-Russians in Fresno County*. Unpublished manuscripts from the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia. n.d.: 1.
- ³ *ibid.*
- ⁴ Frodsham, 11.
- ⁵ Meier, Carl J. “80th Anniversary of the Free Evangelical Lutheran Cross Church of Fresno, California.” Unpublished Manuscripts from the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia Library. n.d.: 6.
- ⁶ *ibid.*
- ⁷ Koch, Fred C. “The Volga Germans in Russia and the Americas, from 1763 to the Present.” University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978: 215.
- ⁸ Frodsham, 28.
- ⁹ Clough, Charles W. *Fresno County in the 20th Century from 1900 to the 1980s, Volume Two, an All New History*. Ed. Bobbye Sisk Temple. Fresno: Panorama West Books, 1994: n.pag.
- ¹⁰ Laughnan, Woody. “The Volga Germans: Industrious People Come to Our Valley.” *The Fresno Bee*. 19 September 1978: n. pag.
- ¹¹ Clough, n. pag.
- ¹² Golston, Jacalyn. “The Germans: From Russia They Came.” *The Fresno Bee*. 10 February 1980: n. pag.
- ¹³ Frodsham, 34.
- ¹⁴ Koch, 216.
- ¹⁵ Clough, n. pag.
- ¹⁶ Gallup, Aaron. Supplemental Historic Architecture Survey Report for Highway 41 Construction in the City of Fresno. Unpublished manuscripts from the City of Fresno Planning Department. June 1991: 6.
- ¹⁷ Koch, 217.
- ¹⁸ Koch, 215.
- ¹⁹ Frodsham, 42.
- ²⁰ Gallup, 6.
- ²¹ Gallup, 3.
- ²² Golston, n. pag.
- ²³ *ibid.*
- ²⁴ *ibid.*
- ²⁵ Beljakova, Vera. “Book Review: Deutsche Architektur an der Wolga.” Volga Germans.com. <http://www.volgagermans.net/volgagermans/Deutsche%20Architektur%20Review.htm> (accessed 19 August 2005).
- ²⁶ Gallup, 4-5.
- ²⁷ Gallup, 7.
- ²⁸ Frodsham, 43.
- ²⁹ Meier, 6.
- ³⁰ Meier, 8.

³¹ *ibid.*

³² VolgaGermans.net (accessed August 2005).

³³ *ibid.*

³⁴ Golston, n.pag.

³⁵ Meier, 47.

³⁶ Gallup, 5.

³⁷ Unpublished manuscripts from the City of Fresno Planning Department. n.d: n. pag.

³⁸ Golston, n. pag.

³⁹ Schwabenland, G. Ray. "The Volga Germans." Unpublished Manuscripts from the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia Library. n.d.: 16.

⁴⁰ Klassen, Peter J. "The Volga Germans in Fresno County." *The Journal of the Fresno City and County Historical Society*. 22.4 (Winter 1980): 3.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Bell, Diana. "110 Years in Fresno, California." Speech at San Jose Convention. 23 July 1997.
- Beljakova, Vera. "Book Review: Deutsche Architektur an der Wolga." Volga Germans.
<http://www.volgagermans.net/volgagermans/Deutsche%20Architektur%20Review.htm>
(accessed 19 August 2005).
- Clough, Charles W. *Fresno County in the 20th Century from 1900 to the 1980s, Volume Two, an All New History*. Ed. Bobbye Sisk Temple. Fresno: Panorama West Books, 1994.
- Cordova, Carlos. "A Landmark Gift to Fresno."
- Coyle, Wanda. "Our Valley Heritage, Germans from Russia: Their history." *The Fresno Bee*.
- Dixon, Bernice Brase. "A Tale of Volga Germans." *The Fresno Bee*. 29 June 1986. *Faces & Places: Fresno and the Central San Joaquin Valley, Volume 1*. Fresno: The Fresno Bee, 2002.
- Frodsham, Noel. "A Study of the Russian-Germans in Fresno County, California." Master of Arts Thesis. The University of Redlands, 1949.
- Frodsham, Noel. "Early Life of Immigrants." Unpublished Manuscripts from the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia Library.
- Gallup, Aaron. Supplemental Historic Architecture Survey Report for Highway 41 Construction in the City of Fresno. Unpublished manuscripts from the City of Fresno Planning Department. June 1991.
- Golston, Jacalyn. "The Germans: From Russia They Came." *The Fresno Bee*. 10 February 1980.
- Heupel, Dana. "Our Valley Heritage, Germany: Its history." *The Fresno Bee*.
- Hyde, Henry J. "History of German Russians in Fresno, CA." Unpublished Manuscripts from the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia Library.
- Kirwan, Tom. "Volga Germans Are Far from the Volga." *The Fresno Bee*. 12 July 1971.
- Klassen, Dr. Peter J. "The Mennonites." Unpublished Manuscripts from the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia Library.
- Klassen, Dr. Peter J. "The Volga Germans in Fresno County." *The Journal of the Fresno City and County Historical Society*. 22.4 (Winter 1980).
- Koch, Fred C. "The Volga Germans in Russia and the Americas, from 1763 to the Present." University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1978.
- Laughnan, Woody. "'German Rooshians' and a Rousing Fresno Oktoberfest – ya ya!" *The Fresno Bee*. n.d.

Germantown, Fresno Historical Context
City of Fresno, Planning and Development Department

4 April 2006

Page 33

Laughnan, Woody. "The Volga Germans: Industrious People Come to Our Valley." *The Fresno Bee*. 19 September 1978.

Meier, Carl J. "80th Anniversary of the Free Evangelical Lutheran Cross Church of Fresno, California." Unpublished Manuscripts from the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia Library.

Wendy M. Nettles. "Historic Property Survey for Fresno Unified School District Proposed West Fresno Middle School in Fresno County, California." Prepared by Applied EarthWorks, Inc. for the Fresno Unified School District, April 2004.

Pollock, Dennis. "Rich Heritage Celebrated in High Style by Germans from Russia." *The Fresno Bee*. n.d.

Reeves, Scott. "Early Fresno House Awaits Restoration." *The Fresno Bee*. 14 March 1989.

Sallet, Richard. *Russian-German Settlements in the United States*. Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, North Dakota State University, 1974.

Schwabenland, G. Ray. "The Volga Germans." Unpublished Manuscripts from the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia Library.

Spomer, Roy W. "German Influence in the History of Fresno County." 1989. Unpublished Manuscripts from the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia Library.

"The Emigration from Russia to America." Unpublished Manuscripts from the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia Library.

Weber, Linda Kay. "Germans Fled Russia for Fresno: About 100,000 descendants live in Fresno." *Fresno Neighbors*. n.d.

"Who Are the Germans from Russia? Their years in Russia and America." Unpublished Manuscripts from the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia Library.

Wills, Ted C. "Mayor Traces Ancestry in Talk." *The Fresno Bee*. 11 June 1972.