

Never Settling: A Digital Memoir of the Peripatetic History of Volga Germans in America

Stevie Jarrett, Undergraduate in Liberal Arts
Dr. Katherine Wills, Mentor
Indiana University- Purdue University Columbus
School of Liberal Arts

Abstract

Stevie Jarrett explores her deep legacy as a descendent of Volga Germans living in America in the 21st century. She unpacks cultural and historical secrets that has afflicted her as an artist, grandchild, and citizen of the world. She captures the stories of a family of multicultural vagabonds, artists, and entrepreneurs. Her poster informs readers of ethnic-American ideas beyond the hypothetical German-American.

The Beginning

Catherine the Great invited Germans to live in Russia in 1762. These Germans were made promises of land, culture, and Russian citizenship. They settled along the longest river in Europe, the Volga River. In the early 1910s, the Volga Germans were leaving Russia for America or Argentina. The Russian government went back on their promises and would force Volga German men to serve in the Russian military.

Among those emigrants were my great-grandmother, Leta Amen. The Amen family came to America through Ellis Island and headed west for the Great Plains. Volga Germans settled primarily in Colorado, Nebraska, Kansas, and the Dakotas.

The Volga Germans faced hardships in the states. Mostly distrust from their neighbors that viewed them differently due to their unique ethnicity. The children of German immigrants were often bullied in grade school during World War II.

Introduction

“Deutschland, mein Herz in Flammen Will dich lieben und verdammen” – Rammstein *Deutschland*, 2019

(Germany, my heart on fire...want to love and damn you)

My family ancestry is a world map with notes in the margins, arrows, eraser marks, aged thumbtacks, and coffee stains. Our story is of train hopping vagabonds, Germans fleeing Russia, picking beets in a field, and trading a pony cart for circus animals. Some family's history start the minute they get off the boat in America, but my family's story starts in a German village 45 miles south east of Saratov, Russia.



(Amen family in the beet fields of Colorado. My great-grandmother is in the middle with her sister and father.)



(Amen family photo, my great-grandmother is on the far left in the white dress)

Reise “Journey”

Morrison, Colorado
2019

The afternoon wind blew my road trip hair away from my face as I stood among the cacti and trees of Colorado's Red Rocks. In Vans and a black lace dress, I dragged myself out there in hopes of hearing a voice or simply finding solace among the nature. Secretly, I was in search of an epiphany; a whisper blowing across the rocks.

I stood at the ledge and stared into the aerial view of the city. The blue of Denver was a stark contrast to the dusty, crimson rocks. Colorado was not my home nor was it the home of my ancestors. Colorado was simply a thumbtack of a map that represented the Amen-See family history.

As I looked towards the city, the sun draping down on me, I knew that I would have to do more than hike up the red rocks to hear the voices of my ancestors.

Kraut Bierocks

My ancestors rolled over in their graves as I lifted the damp tea cloth once more to check on the rising dough. Flour was splattered around my kitchen and the setting sun casted an orange gaze through the window.

“You need to be patient!” My mom hollered to me.

“I'm just checking on it!”

Every few months, I decide I am going to make kraut bierocks and it all turns out the same; a big mess.

Passing down sacred recipes in the family is a huge part of keeping culture alive. Except, it is highly important to include every specific measurement and direction in the recipe. Grandma wasn't exactly detailed in her recipe for kraut bierocks and left out measurements and steps of the process. Kraut bierocks are a Volga German staple of fried cabbage and onion rolled into a golden yeast dough.



(Fresh made kraut bierocks)



(John W. See, my great-grandfather)



(Leta Amen, my great-grandmother)

Materials and Methods

Personal research was conducted through family photos, journals, and interviews with my remaining relatives. Not much research has been conducted about the Volga Germans outside of the small community dedicated to preserving their culture.

In July of 2019, I took a road trip to Colorado and found the first spark of inspiration for this project. Driving through Kansas, on the way back, I realized I needed to tell the story of my ancestors.

From July 2019 to April 2020, I researched my family ancestry and connected with a long lost cousin living in Cheyenne, Wyoming.

Leta Amen and John W. See

My great-grandparents were John W. See and Leta Amen. One was a drifter from Missouri and the other was a Volga German immigrant. They met and married in Cheyenne, Wyoming when they were in their '20s. John worked for Union Pacific as a boilermaker. John and Leta had two kids, Burnadine and Wes, before converting a city bus into an RV and packing it all up to move to Indiana. They lived in an army tent with cardboard walls from a local grocery store. John began manufacturing ponycarts and playground equipment. A customer ordered a large amount of ponycarts, but canceled before the delivery. John and Leta decide to drive out to Iowa to sell them. They packed up the carts and their two kids and headed out west.

“We went to Iowa to a horse auction and sold all the carts. That was the beginning...” - Aunt Florence

The ponycarts led to John and Leta opening Frontier Trading Post Inc. They sold and manufactured ponycarts and western wear including saddles and reins. At one point, John traded a ponycart for a bear from a circus. In the 1980s, John and Leta would spend the winters in Phoenix, Arizona. John owned a American Artistic Advertisers and published poetry.



(My mom and aunt with my great-grandparents)

Conclusions

Culture is not bound by state lines and borders, but it is the moments of where we find ourselves among our own uniqueness. Ancestry is more than just briefcases of faded photos and personal contact information. It is the job of the next generation to pass down these stories, recipes, and voices. Even as I research my own family history, I realize that I am more than a descendent of Volga Germans. I am a traveler, a storyteller, a granddaughter, a seed simply planting its own roots.

References

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