

The Loretta community had its roots in the “New Immigration” movement from southern and eastern Europe late in the nineteenth century. During the autumn of 1874 approximately 20 German-Russian families, seeking new homes, looked over lands still available to immigrants in the area around the site that soon became Loretta, in Hancock Township of Bon Homme County. Their arrival represented the courage of Menno Simons, who had renounced Catholicism in Holland in 1536. His followers led pacifist groups into various regions of Europe to escape persecution. Eventually, a manifesto from Catherine the Great of Russia invited these homeless Mennonites to live in her country. “Each settler was to receive 16 acres of free Crown land, a loan of 250 rubles and rations until first harvest.”¹ The colonists also were promised exemption from military service, freedom of religion (fore-

most among Mennonite goals), and rights of local self-government. One community in the Graudenz area of Prussian Poland responded, when its king imposed restrictions on freedoms, by accepting Catherine’s offer; all of its members migrated to the West Ukraine, not far from Kiev.

There they established the “Kolonie Heinrichsdorf” in 1848. With thrifty and knowledgeable management of agricultural matters, they created a situation that became one mutually beneficial to themselves and Russian leaders. Unfortunately, in 1871 Czar Alexander II, who had succeeded Catherine, revoked the “Codes of Colonists” that had assured German immigrants of rights to exemption from military service. As a consequence, a great migration of German-Russians (or Germans from Russia) began in 1873 and continued until 1941. Delegations from the colonies went to various

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Tjark's stone building near Loretta, S.D. John Moser operated a grocery there about 1880. (Notice that the unknown photographer left his or her shadow).

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countries seeking new homelands.

The group from Heinrichsdorf left behind most of its possessions and traveled overland to Antwerp, Belgium, where the members set sail on a first-class, screw steamer, the *Colina*. Its ship roster showed a large group of immigrants arriving at New York on September 2, 1874. One party proceeded by train to Yankton, Dakota Territory, arriving on September 7. A small delegation moved from Yankton to examine available homesites in the surrounding region, and about 20 Mennonite families chose the area that would be occupied by the Loretta settlement, some 40 miles west of Yankton. A Pre-emption Claim (sometimes called a Cabin Claim) comprising 160 acres, authorized by the Distribution-Preemption Act of 1841, could be obtained by filing a claim, living on the acreage for six months, and paying \$200 in cash to the federal government. After payment each settler could file for an additional 160 acres on the same terms, at \$1.25

per acre.²

Five hardy families braved the winter of 1874-1875 at the Loretta area, by using sod huts for shelter, while the rest of the group remained in Yankton until spring. These first families included Heinrich B. Boese, Reverend Cornelius Ewert, Frederick B. Dirks, Heinrich T. Schultz, and Reverend Benjamin P. Schmidt, and their wives. The winter was bitterly cold with frequent snowfalls that buried the desolate landscape.

Oral tradition holds that after having been confined for some time, Mrs. Schmidt set out to visit her nearest neighbor--the wife of Henry Schultz. Having trudged through deep drifts with no view of a house, suddenly she spied the top of the stovepipe of the Schultz sod house and called down through it. Upon getting a response, Mrs. Schmidt dug far enough with a shovel to pass through the door and, after some digging, freed her neighbors.

The summer of 1876 brought one of the



Hand feed separator with straw carrier near Loretta, S.D., about 1900.

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The cyclone of May 2, 1905, damaged farm buildings of Charles Miller near Loretta.

heaviest infestations of grasshoppers in regional memory. The critters devoured all the grain, and the resultant poor crops added to the misery of pioneering residents. Members of the group helped one another, however, shared whatever was available, and sustained themselves through faith. In Russia they had been wagon makers, blacksmiths, masons, and carpenters. Here they employed their skills to earn wages for survival through hard times.

Although their settlement was located just a few miles east of the Yankton Sioux Reservation in Charles Mix County, and might have been perceived by Yankton people as an intrusion into their lives, the Loretta settlers seem to have had few confrontations with Indians, and not a great deal of fear. One early Mennonite settler was a blacksmith who shod many horses for Yankton

people. In time he became expert in their language and served as an interpreter. Occasionally Indians came to Mennonite homes for food, which settlers provided either out of generosity or diplomacy. Doubtless, reservation residents recognized a connection between the presence of these settlers and primary sources of food.

Not many years ago on one descendant's land, tracks remained visible to show where herds of cattle, driven up from Texas across the Missouri River near Running Water, made their way to market at Fort Randall and other sites along the Missouri River. Federal employees purchased livestock for slaughter and distribution as meat rations issued to Indian family heads as annuity goods. The cost was charged to tribal funds created in exchange for land by treaties.

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In 1887 Philip Pfaltzgraff appeared in Bon Homme County to settle. Having been born in Alsace Lorraine, he arrived in the United States at the age of two, living in Iowa. After coming of age he bought land near the Loretta settlement, about a mile west of its original location, built a general store, and relocated the post office there. At first Pfaltzgraff car-

ried only salt, pepper, sugar, and yeast in his store. Later he added almost everything people wanted to buy. A picture taken by H. A. Unruh about 1896 advertised "Dry Goods, Groceries, Hardware, Post Office." It is assumed that Pfaltzgraff also bought and sold grain.

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For these and other reasons, the Loretta group had cordial relationships with Indians, while its families increased in number and size, and developed community services. Abraham T. Schultz married three times, for example, and begot 27 children. The first Sunday church meeting was in his house, and subsequent services were conducted in other homes until a building was completed in 1878. Reverend Benjamin P. Schmidt, one of the original settlers, served as the minister for 40 years. School classes, too, were first held in the homes until a school building was completed in time for the academic year of 1886.

As the settlement grew, people of other nationalities moved into the area, seeking farm sites or setting up businesses. The Dutch, Scandinavians, Danes, and others of German ancestry homesteaded or purchased land adjoining that of the Germans from Russia. To serve them, the post office of Loretta opened on October 23, 1882, in the home of John Moser, who also operated a little country store in the Tjark's stone house one mile east of Loretta. In early days of settlement, Mr. Moser operated a grocery wagon for families of the Loretta and surrounding communities.

In relation to present-day Avon, Loretta was located six and a half miles south, and one mile west, on Section 5-93-61. The town took its name from the post office.

There was in Loretta by that time, too, a

blacksmith shop operated by Abraham Schultz, father of John Schultz who, in 1991, still lived on the same section of land. Sim Luke operated a second blacksmith shop in Loretta, later moving it to Avon. At one time there was a broom factory in a building north of Tjark's stone building. By 1900 a new hardware store appeared, managed by John B. Schmidt, known as the Schmidt-Lidtke Hardware Store.

After Rural Free Delivery mail routes radiated out from larger towns in Bon Homme County, small post offices were discontinued. Records show that the one at Loretta closed March 31, 1910. Soon thereafter, businesses also were abandoned or moved to Avon, which now emerged as the commercial center of the area.

Loretta became a fading memory. Two circular holes surrounded by cement and rock mark the doorway supports of Pfaltzgraff's store. Old cistern holes and a few foundation rocks indicate where other businesses stood. Weathered plum thickets accent an otherwise barren pasture, and prairie sod remains unturned. Immigrants from 1874 who trekked across much of Europe as they fled persecution said of the Loretta community: "This is our new homeland. Here we and our children's children will be free and will prosper." A small core of their descendants remains on farms in the area as the state of South Dakota enters its second century.

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Notes

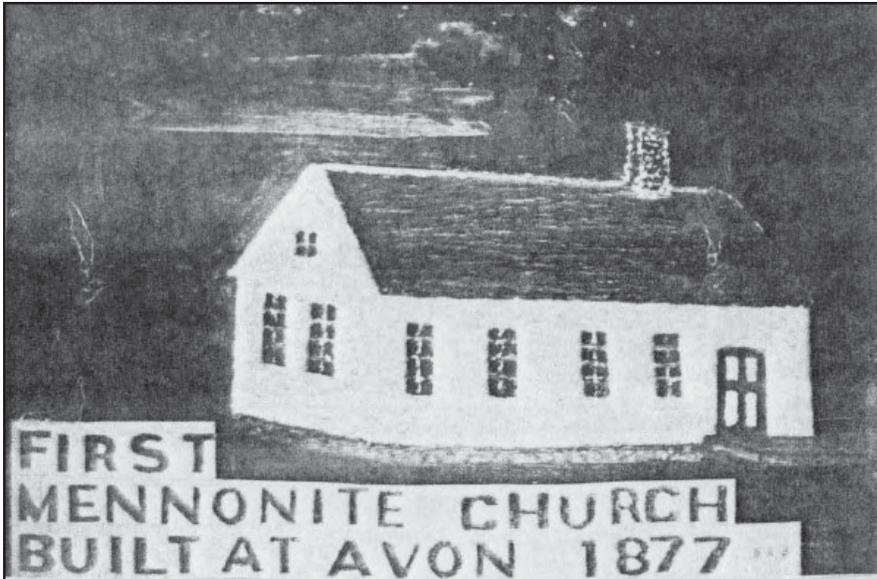
1. John Edward Pfeiffer. "The German Russians and Their Immigration to South Dakota." *South Dakota Historical Society Collections*, XXXV, 303-319.

2 Federal land legislation allowed a settler to purchase 160 acres under the Preemption Act, and to occupy an additional quarter section under the Homestead Act of 1862, with an option to buy at \$1.25 an acre after six months of occupancy instead of proving up a homestead claim through five years of residence. The decision to gain title through purchase suggests that these immigrants arrived with financial resources at their disposal.



Horse-powered corn sheller near the Loretta Store, circa 1890.

Friedensberg Mennonite Church



An excerpt from the manuscript
"Friedensberg Mennonite Church,"
by Sunshyne Thaler.

Not far from where Loretta was located is the Friedensberg Mennonite Church. Although it was six and one-half miles south and a mile west of Avon, it was associated with the Avon community.

The first structure was built of logs obtained with great effort from areas as many as ten miles away. The best logs were found in the Missouri River bottom where trees grew tall and not too thick, ideal for shaping. The building was 28 x 40 feet, had a shingle roof, was covered on the outside with boards and painted, resulting in a strong building, which was named the Friedensberg Mennonite Church and dedicated in 1878. The word 'Frieden' is a German term meaning peace, and 'Berg' a term meaning fortress or bulwark; thus, the name of the church translates 'A Fortress of Peace.'

Twenty years later the need for a larger building prompted the congregation to dismantle the building and salvage the original logs. These were sawed into boards, and by 1899 a new church building was finished and dedicated. Still later a basement was made, the building moved onto it, an entry added, and the interior renovated and redecoreated.

Mennonites constructed their third church building in 1978, all on one level, which can seat nearly 300 people. They also finished a new parsonage in Avon about the year 1983. In 1991 the minister is Reverend David Manning.