

C. C. Becker: McIntosh County German-Russian Pioneer*

by Gordon L. Iseminger

When Christian C. Becker, his wife Carolina, and two-year daughter Ottilia arrived in McIntosh County, Dakota Territory, in the spring of 1885, they found country, conditions, and circumstances very much like those their countrymen had found when they arrived on the steppes of South Russia five generations before. An almost uninhabited prairie stretched to the horizon, broken only by the Fort Yates Trail that meandered from old Fort Sisseton, through Ellendale, to the Missouri River.

Opened for settlement in September, 1884, McIntosh County had only 390 inhabitants in 1885. A few were located in or near the single small town of Hoskins, but most were settled on farms scattered across the county. Becker settled on the Northwest quarter of Section 5, Township 129, Range 68, a few miles east of the present-day Ashley. He boasted that he was the first to file on land in the township, and he might well have been. Containing 1,008 square miles, divided into 4,032 quarter sections available for entry, McIntosh County in 1885 had less than three people per square mile.¹

Christian C. Becker was born on July 23, 1859, in Beresina, South Russia, to Christian and Sarah Becker (nee Ley). Becker's parents had both been born in Beresina and were prosperous farmers in this German colony located just above the Black Sea. Young Christ had a childhood typical of German-Russians. He worked on his father's farm and attended school where emphasis was on the Bible and religious instruction. Terms were arranged so as not to interfere with farm work.

On January 22, 1881, Becker married Carolina Schlenker. She had also been born in South Russia, in Borodino, on November 28, 1861. Unlike most German-Russians who came to North Dakota from the Black Sea area, Becker was not a farmer. At the time of his marriage, he was a shoemaker.

Responding to manifestos of Catherine the Great and Alexander I that offered them religious liberty, certain tax exemptions, exemption from military service, and land, Germans from Alsace, Baden, Bavaria, and Wurttemberg had left their homeland and established colonies along the Volga River and above the Black Sea in South Russia. By the time the first migration of German-Russians to the United States began, some 300 mother colonies had been established. They in turn had spawned almost 3,000 daughter colonies by the time of the Russian Revolution in 1917.

In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the Russian government, like governments in western Europe, was attempting to centralize, consolidate, and unify the country. As a

consequence, conditions for Germans in South Russia changed. Beginning in 1871, the Russian language had to be taught in German schools, records had to be kept in Russian, and Germans were subject to military conscription. German-Russians were dismayed. Assuming their rights and special position had been granted for all eternity, they believed themselves to have been wronged and began to consider emigration as an alternative to becoming Russianized.

Just at the time German-Russians were considering leaving Russia, millions of acres of land lying west of the Mississippi River in the United States were opened to settlement under the Pre-emption, Homestead, and Timber Culture acts. Almost providentially, America also offered the very freedoms even then being denied to the German-Russians, and there was no irksome compulsory military service in America.

News of the advantages to be gained by emigrating to America was sent back to South Russia by German-Russians who had come to America in 1873. Railroads, land companies, and other promoters also distributed literature in South Russia.

* The intent of this article is to recount the pioneer experiences of C.C. Becker, a prominent McIntosh County German-Russian. The story of his life in many ways is that of thousands of German-Russians who emigrated from the Russian steppes to the Dakota prairies between 1885-1905. Unfortunately, however, German-Russians were not ones to keep diaries and write letters which were subsequently preserved. Consequently, it has not been possible in every instance to document Becker's pioneer experiences. In those instances where gaps exist, anecdotal material from other McIntosh County German-Russians has been used. The substitution is no way misleading. Although Becker left no record, for example, of fighting prairie fires or feeling overwhelmed on occasion by the vastness of the prairie, it is a virtual certainty that he did.

¹ "The Dakota Territorial Census of 1885," *Collections of the State Historical Society of North Dakota*, IV (Fargo, N.D.: Knight Printing Co., 1913), pp. 369-72; *Resources of Dakota, 1887* (Sioux Falls [S.D.]: Argus-Leader Co., 1887), pp. 418-19. Unless noted otherwise, material for this article was taken from the files on German-Russians compiled by the Historical Data Project and located at the State Historical Society of North Dakota in Bismarck, from McIntosh County records, and from Becker family records. For maps and data about ethnic settlement patterns in North Dakota, see William C. Sherman, *Prairie Mosaic: An Ethnic Atlas of Rural North Dakota* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1983), esp. pp. 42-43, 48-51.

After the day's work was done, colonists gathered in front of their houses or in the village street and talked about the letters, newspapers, and pamphlets from America. Their yearning, anxiety, and uncertainty were expressed in the gesture of pointing to the sunset and exclaiming "*Dort naus ist Amerika!*" (Away out there is America!). America meant land and opportunity. But it was also a long way off and it was an unknown.

Tens of thousands of German-Russians left for America, Canada, South America, and other destinations before emigration was cut off by the outbreak of the Great War in 1914. Christ and Carolina Becker made their decision to leave in the spring of 1885. It was a painfully difficult decision to make. They had a small child and very little money. The heartbreak of leaving home, family, and colony, the anxiety of moving halfway around the world, and the uncertainty involved with making a beginning in a strange country — all were expressed in the saying, "*Auswandern ist der halbe Tod*" (Emigration is half a death).

Physical preparations for the trip to America were much easier to make than the emotional. The Beckers' few personal belongings were sold to raise money for passage. Clothing, bedding, kitchen utensils, and hand tools were packed. Dried

meat, bread crisped in the oven, and scalded milk were prepared to provide food on the trip.

The bulk of German-Russians left South Russia from Odessa on the Black Sea, traveled by rail to Bremen, the Hansa port in northern Germany, and took passage on a steamship to New York. The Beckers sailed from Bremen on the *Ems* on April 19, 1885. Passage cost them \$45.00 apiece from Odessa to New York. No fare was charged for children traveling with their parents.

After a voyage lasting nine days, the Beckers landed in New York and boarded a train for the trip to Dakota Territory. They arrived in Scotland, in southeastern Dakota Territory, on May 22, little more than a month after leaving their home in South Russia. They were met in Scotland by Daniel Boettcher, a friend of the family. After seeing so many strange things since leaving Russia and after hearing so many different people speaking foreign tongues, it was comforting to hear a familiar voice and the familiar words, "*Ich freue mich Sie zu sehen*" (I am glad to see you).

Boettcher helped Becker buy a wagon, a yoke of oxen, a cow, and some supplies and to arrange the trip to Ipswich, the closest one could get by rail to McIntosh County until Eureka was established in 1887. In Ipswich, Becker bought

The family of Christian C. Becker: (Back row) Emma, Annetta, Ottilia, Lydia; (Center) C.C. Becker, Carolina Becker; (Front) Enoch, Hulda, Otto, Viola.

—Courtesy Gordon L. Iseminger



a cookstove for \$16.00, but had to mortgage the cow to pay for it. From Ipswich, the Beckers left by oxen and wagon for McIntosh County. The trip took two days.

For land-seeking German-Russians, McIntosh County had much to offer. Because the county was outside the Northern Pacific Railroad land grant, all of its more than four thousand quarter sections could be taken up by settlers under the terms of the Pre-emption, Homestead, and Timber Culture acts.² Rich soil covered the county in depths ranging from twenty to forty-eight inches and was advertised as being capable of producing fifteen to thirty-five bushels of No. 1 hard wheat to the acre. Blue joint, buffalo, and slough grass was abundant and would provide good grazing and winter feed for live-



A German immigrant from Russia proudly models his pelz. Originally published in an 1896 edition of Harper's Weekly, the photograph is reproduced from Richard Sallet, *Russian-German Settlements in the United States* (1974).

—Courtesy
North Dakota
Institute for
Regional Studies,
Fargo

stock. The land was gently rolling and was watered and drained by numerous springs and creeks. Good water for stock and household use could supposedly be found at shallow depths. Lying just north of the latitude of the city of Odessa in South Russia, McIntosh County — except for its winters — had a similar climate. In short, McIntosh County was very much like the Russian steppes from which the German Russians emigrated. In addition, settled country surrounded the county on all sides and three railroad lines were surveyed through it.³

The Beckers arrived too late in the season to break any sod or plant a crop the first year, but they were busy all sum-

mer nevertheless. Hay had to be put up for the livestock and for fuel, and a house had to be built.

In Ellendale, Becker purchased a few pieces of lumber from which to make window frames and a door, but the rest of the house was constructed from sod. Nina Farley Wishek remembered that the Becker house, in which she lived and taught school, was “the typical building of our McIntosh foreigners, sod, plastered inside and out with a native clay, and consisting of two rooms.”⁴ The floor was dirt, but was packed so hard it could be swept with a soft broom.

Until the house was completed the Beckers lived for several months in the wagon box which had been lifted from its wheels and placed on the ground. The canvas cover offered some protection from the rain and sun, but their living quarters were cramped and uncomfortable. The cookstove was set up on the prairie, and dry slough grass was twisted and used for fuel.

In his typical German-Russian house, Becker, who had learned the art of brickmaking in Russia, built a typical German-Russian stove of stones and sun-baked bricks. Clay was used as mortar. When completed, the stove was about four feet wide, five feet long, and six feet high. It was built into the partition between the two rooms so that it would warm both.

The foundation for a “Russian” stove was prepared by wetting and packing the soil until it was hard and smooth. Then the stove’s outer walls of stones were built up to a height of three feet, leaving the inside of the stove open. Over this opening a wide plate of iron was laid that nearly covered the opening except for a place at one end for the flue. On this plate the bread was placed for baking, or the food for cooking. From some discarded wagon wheels he found on the prairie, Becker stripped the iron tires; these he cut, pounded flat, and used as the plate.

The outer walls of the stove were then continued to a height of six feet. Passages were left for the smoke and fire to flow about the baking compartment and out the chimney. The chimney was constructed from sun-dried clay bricks. In the side facing the kitchen, Becker made an opening twelve by sixteen inches and fitted it with a door. Through this door the stove was fired.

Such stoves were fueled with twisted hay, straw, reeds, or dried manure and needed to be filled only twice a day — once in the morning and once in the evening — to keep the

² *North Dakota Blue Book, 1919* (Bismarck: Bismarck Tribune Company, 1919), p. LV.

³ From the first issue of the *McIntosh County Herald*, November 12, 1884, and reproduced in the *Ashley Tribune*, June 1, 1933; *Harper's Weekly*, July 11, 1896, p. 690. Many pioneers later criticized the glowing descriptions of McIntosh County and its agricultural potential because no mention had been made of the stones that lay so thick on the land. Claims that one could plow a straight furrow for a mile without hitting a rock were later recognized as being ridiculous. Almost every acre had to be cleared of rocks before it could be farmed, and many farmers cleared by moonlight the land they intended to plow the next day. Also not mentioned was the incessant wind, reputedly so strong, according to the disenchanted, that sheep had been known to have been blown against the side of a barn and held there until they starved to death.

⁴ Nina Farley Wishek, *Along the Trails of Yesterday: A Story of McIntosh County* (Ashley, N.D.: Ashley Tribune, 1941), pp. 168-69.

houses comfortable. Bread baked in these stoves was noted for its taste and texture and often was the only food available.

Fuel, livestock feed, and building materials were readily obtainable on the prairie, but not so the food to sustain human life. Among the greatest problems facing immigrants newly arrived in Dakota, especially those with little or no money, was providing food for themselves until the first crop could be harvested. What money Becker had brought with him had been spent for the oxen, wagon, cow, and stove. He had planted no crop in 1885 and would harvest none. Yet food had to be found for the winter of 1885-86.

German-Russian men often wore Russian sheepskin coats, the *Schafpelz*, or *Pelz*, as they were called. The long, curled, dark astrakhan was on the inside and the tanned yellowish hide was on the outside. They were long and heavy and homely in appearance, but in them men could endure the most intense cold. Many German-Russians brought these coats to America and those settlers who knew what to expect during Dakota winters coveted them for the protection they afforded against the bitter cold. The Beckers had brought a number of *Pelz* with them from Russia, and Becker prudently traded the coats for wheat; when ground into flour, it provided the family with bread until a crop could be harvested.

Becker also tried to find work so that he might earn money with which to purchase supplies for the winter. But the area around him was so undeveloped and so sparsely settled that no jobs were available. Finally, in early September, he was hired on a threshing rig. He worked for three weeks at \$2.00 per day and board. He slept in barns or in straw stacks.

And, like others for whom they were almost the only source of income during the early years, Becker collected buffalo bones. When German-Russians arrived in McIntosh County, the buffalo were gone, but their bones lay thick on the prairie. The bones could be picked up, taken to a town on the railroad, and sold or exchanged for supplies. The bones were shipped east to make carbon black used in refining sugar. The price of bones fluctuated, and declined in later years, but Becker was paid \$10.00 per ton for the nearly six tons he hauled to Ellendale that first fall.³

³ See LeRoy Barnett, "The Buffalo Bone Commerce on the Northern Plains," *North Dakota History*, 39-1 (Winter, 1972), pp. 23-42.

Nina Farley Wishek's *Along the Trails of Yesterday: A Story of McIntosh County* included this picture of a typical homestead house. The building, made from clay brick and stone, has a thatched roof.

—Courtesy Gordon L. Iseminger



By the time winter arrived, the Beckers had acquired few possessions besides the wagon, oxen, cow, and cookstove. Some dishes had been purchased in Ipswich and a few were given to them. Using only a saw, hammer, and knife, Becker fashioned a trunk, table, benches, and bed from rough lumber. In Ellendale he bought a small kerosene lamp for thirty-five cents, the only lamp the family used for many years. With his buffalo-bone money Becker bought a clock and a kitchen cupboard. And they had their land and their sod house. It was a beginning, and, as a German-Russian proverb expresses it, "*Aller Anfang ist Schwer*" (All beginnings are difficult).

But, German-Russian beginnings in Dakota were particularly difficult because German-Russians were different — different in speech, dress, mannerisms, and culture — more so than any other immigrant group. A practice that struck other settlers as strange, for example, was that German-Russian women worked in the fields and in the barns. And German-Russian women bore many babies. Families with ten, twelve, fifteen, or twenty children were not uncommon. In busy times, such as seeding and harvesting, it seemed that they could scarcely spare the time to deliver their babies. Carolina Becker, for example, gave birth to a baby girl in the shade of the hayrack while in the hayfield. Leaving her newborn baby in the care of an older daughter, Mrs. Becker then returned to work helping her husband put up hay.

German-Russians also encountered on the prairie situations to which they were unaccustomed. Indians are an excellent example. A large proportion of German-Russians in both Dakotas lived near reservations and were unnerved by the sight of Indians and by rumors that they were on the warpath.

Also fearsome was the loneliness experienced on the prairie. True, German-Russians had come from the steppes of South Russia and, true, the Russian steppes were much like the Dakota prairies. But there was a difference. In Russia they had lived in villages. In Dakota the nearest neighbor was often miles away. Many experienced feelings of despair and "To the Homeland I would like to go" was a song frequently sung during the early years. When asked by Nina Farley Wishek whether he was content in America or regretted leaving Russia,

C.C. Becker replied "Ach Gott, yes, I wish I was back in Russia."⁶

Another serious problem, especially during the first years, was the lack of farm machinery to break and till the stubborn prairie sod. It was the fortunate settler indeed who could boast of owning more than a yoke of oxen, a wagon, and a breaking plow. In partnership with Christoph Nitschke and Frederick Wahl, with whom he had come from South Russia, Becker owned a mower and a hayrake.⁷ Threshing the first year was done by having the oxen tread the grain from the straw on a threshing floor, but in subsequent years threshing machines were used.

Lacking money with which to purchase farm machinery, enterprising German-Russians improvised. At first they used short, rough logs bound together to work the plowed land, break up the lumps, and prepare a seedbed. Becker and his neighbors soon devised a better method. The butt ends of tree branches were secured between two two-by-fours that were bolted together. Large stones were laid on the branches to make a heavy drag and fastened to the two-by-fours was a doubletree to which the oxen or horses were hitched. Such an implement was moderately effective in working the soil, but it demanded infinite patience, stubbornness, and perseverance on the part of the farmer. The stones fell off and the branches wore out and had to be replaced frequently.

Sleds were another necessary piece of equipment. They were often the only possible means of transportation when the prairies were drifted over with snow. During the winter of 1886-87, Becker used his sled and oxen to haul groceries from Ellendale to the store at Hoskins. He was paid \$1.00 per hundred pounds and during the winter earned \$100.00.

The three greatest hardships faced by McIntosh County German-Russians were droughts, prairie fires, and blizzards. All were forces greater than they and against them they had almost no defense.

Years of insufficient moisture were not uncommon on the Drift Prairie where many German-Russians settled, but 1890 was the worst drought year in the memory of Becker and other McIntosh County pioneers. For months no rain fell. Because the prairie grass did not grow, there was a shortage of summer grazing and a lack of hay for winter feed and for fuel. If grain was sown, the kernels did not sprout. With no crop, there was no money with which to buy supplies for the winter. Some men walked as far as Jamestown to find work on threshing rigs and were paid as little as \$1.00 per day. A few scattered buffalo bones remained, but it sometimes took a week to pick up a wagonload and the price had dropped to \$2.00 per ton.

That no crop had been harvested in 1890 meant that there was no seed wheat for the 1891 planting. The county commissioners took steps to provide seed for those needing it, but Becker and his neighbors preferred to help themselves. They had heard of a George Joos near Jamestown who had seed wheat for sale. They were reluctant to ask for seed when they had no money with which to pay for it, but Becker agreed to be the spokesman for his neighbors and they agreed to do his fall plowing while he was gone. Becker made the long

trip to Jamestown and arranged with Joos to buy a carload of seed wheat on credit. Joos also agreed to pay the freight to Edgeley, the nearest the grain could be taken to Ashley by rail. Crop yields were good in 1891, and Becker and his neighbors paid Joos \$1.00 per bushel for the wheat he had sold them the year before and also reimbursed him for the freight costs to Edgeley.

Severe droughts were to be dreaded, but they occurred infrequently. Prairie fires were a constant menace, and although they usually occurred in the fall — often in October — they could break out any time. German-Russians had fought prairie fires on the Russian steppes, but they were unprepared for those they experienced in North Dakota. The prairie grass was five to six feet tall in places and so thick it was matted. Fires roared through the dry grass like thunder and could be heard burning at night from ten to fifteen miles away. As a fire increased in size and as its heat became more intense, it began to generate a fierce wind and often moved so fast it could outrun a horse. They were almost impossible to check and sometimes ran for miles, burning everything in their paths. During the early years, there were few plowed fields, graded roads, or railroad embankments to serve as barriers to the spread of the fires.

The prudent built firebreaks around their haystacks, grainstacks, and buildings by plowing parallel furrows a few feet apart and burning the grass on the intervening strips. But burning wisps of hay, cow chips, or other materials were tossed ahead of the flames, and fires sometimes leaped across firebreaks fifty and sixty feet wide. A large fire could leap across a stream of water.

Settlers fought fires with wet sacks and blankets and on occasion stripped off coats, jackets, and overalls and used them to beat out the flames. Very large fires were sometimes fought by skinning a cow or horse and pulling the green hide, flesh side down, over the flames from ropes tied to two horses. A man rode on the hide to give it weight and in this way the fire was smothered. Others followed behind to extinguish the smaller flames. People became exhausted fighting fires that threatened to consume their possessions, buildings, livestock, feed, and often their very lives.

Among the worst of the many prairie fires that occurred in Becker's neighborhood was one in 1889 that burned out of control until it left not a green spear of anything for miles in all directions. The fire generated a strong wind that enabled it to leap firebreaks thirty feet wide and lift bundles of grain from the grainstacks and toss them about as if they were wisps of straw. Buildings, livestock, feed, crops, machinery — all were burned. Among the few houses spared were sod houses and many of them suffered damage to their roofs. Many people died.

German-Russians had experienced in South Russia almost all the natural disasters they would face in Dakota — drought, prairie fires, cyclones, hailstorms, grasshoppers, and gophers — but not blizzards. Winters in the area immediately north

⁶ Wishek, p. 235.

⁷ *Ashley's Golden Jubilee, 1888-1938*, pp. 148-49.



An important tool for the new German immigrant from Russia was *Ahn's American Interpreter*, published by the German Society in New York. Christian C. Becker purchased his copy in 1885 en route to Dakota Territory.

—Courtesy Gordon L. Iseninger



of the Black Sea were mild. Grapes could be grown and wine produced. Farmers could be in their fields in February.

Even were it not for the numbing cold, a number of circumstances combined to make winters in North Dakota miserable and dangerous. Prairie fires in the fall burned off much of the grass. There were few farms, trees, graded roads, or railroad embankments to prevent the snow from drifting. It drifted across the bare prairie in the slightest breeze until it came up against haystacks, buildings, or other man-made objects. Sod houses were built low to the ground and snow often drifted over them until only the chimneys were visible. Snow drifted over the tops of the barns, sometimes to such depths that steps had to be cut down to the doors to allow the livestock to get out. Sometimes the snow was so deep that feed and water had to be lowered through holes cut in the barn roofs and the livestock had to spend weeks in their cramped quarters. Drifting snow covered the wells to such depths on occasion that water could be obtained only by melting snow. Weary of trying to keep paths shovelled through the snow, homesteaders sometimes dug tunnels connecting their houses with the other farm buildings. Such tunnels might be as many as ten feet beneath the surface of the snow.

Under the best of circumstances, Dakota winters were severe. They were even worse if they set in early or lasted too long into the spring. Livestock feed was fed up before pasture was available. Fuel stocks were depleted. Flour was used up. Many lives were lost in attempts to secure additional livestock feed, fuel, or food.

C.C. Becker remembered the winter of 1888 as the worst. According to Bismarck weather bureau records, minimum temperatures for January, 1888, averaged sixteen degrees below zero, and the month remained for many years the coldest

January on record. The lowest mark recorded in Bismarck was thirty-seven degrees below zero on January 14. It was forty degrees below zero at Ashley. There was a heavy snow cover.

Aggravating the cold was a three-day blizzard that struck early in the morning on January 12. The blinding snow was driven by winds that were in excess of fifty miles per hour, and at one point the thermometer fell to forty degrees below zero. The storm claimed the life of Christ Kaul, one of Becker's neighbors. Returning to his home after having checked on his parents who lived just west of him, Kaul lost his way. He walked all afternoon and into the night until he found an abandoned sod house in which he sought shelter, but in which he froze to death. Searchers traced Kaul's footsteps and concluded that he had passed between his house and barn during his wanderings. He had been unable to see them because of the swirling snow.⁸

Struggling against the elements and wresting a living from the rock-studded prairie sod left settlers little time for anything else, but they did not neglect entirely the things of the spirit. Christ Becker was a leader in establishing both the school and the church in his neighborhood.

Nina Farley Wishek's first teaching experience as a young, unmarried woman was in schools held in German-Russian communities. Aware that the German-Russians spoke no English, she was certain that living among them would resemble being stranded on a desert island. She was tempted, however, by salaries of \$30.00 to \$32.00 per month and by, to use her word, the "adventure." And it was an adventure. Wishek spoke no German and her pupils spoke no English. Communication was difficult and progress was slow.

Nina Farley Wishek taught the 1886-87 term in the first school to be organized in Becker's neighborhood. Becker was

⁸ Wishek, pp. 187-90.



The land office in McIntosh County became a focus for German-Russian landseekers. Agent John H. Wishek stands third from the right.

—From *Nina Farley Wishek, Along the Trails of Yesterday: A Story of McIntosh County.* Courtesy Gordon L. Iseminger

on the school board, the school was held in his two-room sod house, and Wishek lived with the Beckers. She was paid \$30.00 per month in warrants. Parents purchased their children's school books at Tony Bjornson's drug store in Hoskins. The Beckers kept to themselves in the kitchen, and school was held in the living room, which was also the bedroom. Becker thought Wishek was attempting to teach her pupils too much, but she preferred this criticism to the one that she was teaching them too little.⁹

While living among the German-Russians, Wishek observed that they were innately religious and strict in the observance of the Sabbath. Churches were often established and built before schools, and more money was spent on churches than on schools. Mission work had begun in 1884 in the area ten miles southeast of Ashley, and St. James Lutheran Church, the oldest church in the Ashley Lutheran Parish, was organized in March, 1889, by a Reverend Zapf. C.C. Becker was a charter member. That same year the first building was erected, at a cost of \$650.00. Members did most of the work themselves.

Mission work was also begun by the Lutherans in what was known as the Jewell parish east of Ashley by a Reverend

Bruun about 1890. In 1896 Bruun started a preaching station in Ashley. Worship services were held first in private homes, then in the schoolhouse, and finally in a room in the courthouse. Zion Lutheran Congregation was organized on September 25, 1903. By this time Becker had moved to Ashley and became a charter member of this congregation as well as of St. James. The first church building was completed in 1904 at a cost of \$2,000 and dedication services were held in May.¹⁰

Before any church buildings were built or congregations organized in Becker's neighborhood, however, worship services were held in his home. People came to the services on foot, on stoneboats, in wagons, even on hayrakes. Pastor Frederick Brey from Leola, in present-day South Dakota, was the first pastor. He was supported by the synod because the parishioners could not afford to pay him a salary. They did, however, give him money or gifts, depending on what they could afford. On those Sundays when Brey could not lead

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 180-82.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 158-61; *Ashley's Golden Jubilee, 1888-1938*, p. 55.

Known as the "Farmer House," the first McIntosh County Courthouse was built by subscription after an 1894 meeting led by C.C. Becker. The courthouse served until 1920.

—Courtesy Gordon L. Iseminger





With C.C. Becker as a charter member, the Zion Lutheran Church was organized in 1903 in Ashley. The photograph first appeared in Nina Farley Wishek's *Along the Trails of Yesterday: A Story of McIntosh County*.

—Courtesy Gordon L. Iseminger

the worship services, Becker conducted them, reading the Bible, leading the prayers, and reading from a book of sermons.

In yet another area Becker provided leadership. When McIntosh County was organized in 1884, Hoskins was the county seat. The "courthouse" was in the same building that served as claims office, law office, post office, hotel, and store. Early in 1885, after proving up on his claim, John H. Wishek moved his claim shack into town and county business was then transacted in that building. When the county seat was moved to Ashley in 1888, Wishek's former claim shanty was also moved and continued to serve as the courthouse. The

¹¹ Wishek, pp. 339-43; the replacement courthouse, designed by the St. Paul firm of Beuchner and Orth, is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

¹² *Ashley Tribune*, July 1, 1904; May 22, 1908. As County Treasurer, Becker in 1904 issued 612 warrants for 198,890 gopher tails on which bounty was paid totalling \$3,877.80. Only in Ward County were more bounties paid on gopher tails than in McIntosh. It was estimated that the gophers killed in McIntosh County during the spring of 1904 would have filled two large boxcars. *Ashley Tribune*, May 20, June 10, 1904.

¹³ Wishek, p. 338; *Ashley Tribune*, December 7, 1906.

building also housed sleeping quarters, a bank, the post office, and the office of the *McIntosh County Republican*, a newspaper published in both English and German.

Although additions were built at various times, the building became increasingly crowded. Christian Becker believed that McIntosh County could do better by itself and began to promote the construction of a courthouse building. No county funds were available for construction, however, and the county was already bonded over its \$9,000 limit.

In May, 1894, Becker called a meeting for the purpose of raising money and planning construction. The meeting was held in front of Gulack's implement shop and Becker presided over the gathering while standing in a wagon box. His plan was simple: if each of 800 farmers contributed \$2.00 to the project, the \$1,600 raised would be enough to design and construct a courthouse. When his plan was put to a vote, his listeners cast their votes by moving to one side or the other of the open area in front of the wagon. All were in favor of Becker's plan except those farmers from the northwest corner of the county who preferred to have the county seat located closer to their farms. Because Ashley was the county seat, however — and the only town in the county at the time — there was no other choice. Becker had prepared a subscription list, and Gottfried Heinrich was the first to sign. Heinrich and six others were selected to collect subscriptions in the county.

Two bids were submitted for the construction of the new courthouse, one by Herman Hardt for \$1,600 and one by a Mr. Huber of Eureka for \$1,500. The lower bid was accepted. More than enough money was collected; the contractor and all bills were paid in cash.

The building was first called "The Farmer House" because the farmers of the county had built it and they owned it. In 1902, the structure was deeded to the county, free of debt and with enough money to pay for a coat of paint. Later enlarged and remodeled, it served as McIntosh County courthouse until 1919 when it was replaced by a brick structure.¹¹

Unlike thousands of his countrymen who remained on the land, Becker left the farm ten years after arriving in McIntosh County. In the fall of 1894 he was elected Judge of Probate Court, an office he held for two terms, and in May, 1895, he moved his family into a new home he had built in Ashley. In 1901 he was elected to a term as County Treasurer. Becker prospered in Ashley. The addition of a second story in the summer of 1904 made his house one of the largest and finest residences in town. In the spring of 1908, cement sidewalks were laid on his property.¹²

By the time Becker completed his term as County Treasurer, pioneering days in McIntosh County were over. In December, 1901, Ashley had telephones linking the First State Bank, Rogers Lumber Company, the courthouse, and the residences of C.C. Hammond and G.O. Gulack. Five years later, in 1906, the new telephone directory listed thirty-eight phones in Ashley.¹³ Although they were still so new they attracted attention, steam traction engines were being used for plowing, and John Geiszler had a gasoline threshing engine on display at his implement shop where he handled the Case

line of farm machinery. Calculations were made easier in the County Auditor's office with the installation of a \$350 Burroughs adding machine, and housewives no longer needed to spend hours stooped over scrubboard and washtub. The Cash Bazaar advertised One-Minute Washers — "The machines that save time and make washing easy." John H. Wishek's new automobile arrived from Bismarck on May 14, 1909, and caused a sensation on Ashley's streets.¹⁴

C.C. Becker was a German-Russian, but in many ways did not fit the stereotype that grew over time to characterize people of that ethnic heritage. German-Russians, for example, were supposedly possessed by a land hunger. In the late 1930's, Becker stated on his Historical Data Project questionnaire that he had emigrated to Dakota because he wanted land and that he settled on a quarter section in Jewell Township in 1885. In 1894, however, he sold this land to Gottfried Heinrich for \$900 (there was a \$350 mortgage on it). Becker subsequently bought land on the outskirts of Ashley, on which the Ashley airport is now located, but did not farm. He clerked in Ashley stores, such as the Cash Bazaar; worked in banks in Ashley, Linton, and Merricourt; and had an interest in the Merricourt bank and in the Union State Bank in Ashley.¹⁵ When interviewed by the WPA Field Worker for the Historical Data Project, Becker had retired, and he and his wife were making their living weaving rag rugs. No land hunger here.

Another aspect of the German-Russian stereotype was their alleged aversion to politics and office-holding. Their experience in Russia taught German-Russians to distrust politicians and government officials. Russian officials were outsiders in the German colonies and they were often heavy-handed and venal. Politics was outside the community and, because foreign, to be avoided.

In 1894 Becker was elected McIntosh County Judge of Probate, an office he held from 1895 to 1901. He then served a term as McIntosh County Treasurer. In May, 1904, Becker represented McIntosh County Republicans at the State Republican Convention in Fargo where he was a member of the Committee on Permanent Organization. Also in 1904, and again in 1908, Becker was elected Chairman of the McIntosh County Republican Central Committee. It indicates Becker's position in Republican circles that he and his wife were invited to accompany Senator Porter J. McCumber on a trip to Canada in 1903.¹⁶ Little aversion to politics and office-holding here.

Another supposed characteristic of German-Russians was that they disliked free public education and compulsory-attendance laws. Becker, however, served on the first school board organized in his district, and the first term of school was held in his sod house. Becker always stressed the importance of acquiring an education and told his children that because schooling in America was free they should take advantage of it. All of his eight children attended high school. Of his six daughters, Ottilia, Emma, and Lydia were teachers in McIntosh County rural schools or in the Ashley school system.¹⁷ No dislike of free public education and compulsory-attendance laws here.

Ashley, N.D.

Jan. 10th 1901

Rec'd of La Motte Miller for
the following items balance
due county at the time of
last change Jan 7th 1901

Balance in 1st State Bk. Wishek	
Balance due on tax	11,422.63
	Re 12.32
Paid vouchers	736.26
Checks	278.89
Gold	176.00
Silver	3.00
Dimes & cents	22
	\$12,628.32

Christ Becker
Co. Treasurer

Rec'd the following also.

\$2.77 part pay on tax on Prop. Judgment

3.00 to apply on tax of Philip J. J. J.

for 1898.

67 cents to apply on tax of Geo. J. J.

Christ Becker
Co. Treasurer

McIntosh County's new treasurer, C.C. Becker, took over in January, 1901. His official statement of the county's financial condition shows some cash on hand, including gold and silver, and much in unpaid taxes.

—Courtesy Gordon L. Iseminger

Among the best-known characteristics of German-Russians is that they held fast to the mother tongue. While in Russia they refused to learn Russian and when in America they resisted learning English. On his way to Dakota Territory, however, Becker purchased for twenty-five cents a book published by the German Society of New York entitled *Abn's Amerikanischer Dolmetscher — Abn's American Interpreter*. With this book Becker taught himself English (and from it his English-speaking grandchildren later learned German), and, against the wishes of his wife, taught his children English. Ten years after his arrival in McIntosh County, Becker was elected to a county office. Records were written in longhand, in English. Becker's acquaintances remember that he claimed to be able to speak six languages. No clinging to the mother tongue here.

C.C. and Carolina Becker had eleven children, three of whom died in infancy. They celebrated their golden wedding

¹⁴ *Ashley Tribune*, April 19, May 10, August 2, 1907; May 21, 1909.

¹⁵ Wishek, p. 271; *Ashley Tribune*, May 27, 1908; *Platbook of North Dakota* (Rockford, Ill.: W.W. Hixson & Co., n.d.).

¹⁶ *Ashley Tribune*, January 6, 1905; May 20, 27, October 28, 1904; March 13, 1908.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, March 11, June 3, December 2, 16, 1904.

anniversary on January 22, 1931. Mrs. Becker died on December 10, 1945. Becker died on February 19, 1953, at the age of ninety-three. He was survived by one son, six daughters, two sisters, twenty grandchildren, twenty-four great-grandchildren, and four great-great-grandchildren.

Christian C. Becker was a McIntosh County German-Russian pioneer who successfully made the transition from the Russian steppe to the North Dakota prairie. He learned English, sent his children to public school, participated in politics, and held public office. But his funeral service was read in German.

Estat of Barbara Nies

79

State of North Dakota.
McIntosh County ss.

In the Name of the
Benevolent Father of all;
I Barbara Nies of Jewell North Dakota
do make and publish this my last will
and testament.

I give and devise to my beloved
son Friedrich Nies the south East Quarter
(58th) section five (5) Township one hundred
and Twenty nine (129) Range sixty eight
(68) which is now my Homestead.

In testimony hereof, I have hereunter
set my hand and seal, this 12th day
of May in year 1890.

Barbara Nies + (seal)
signed and acknowledged by said
Barbara Nies as her last will and
testament in our presence, and
signed us in her presence

Henrich Nies (seal)
Christian Mayer (seal)

Recorded
February first in the year 1895
Christian Becker
County Judge

After C.C. Becker was elected County Judge of Probate in 1894, he assisted with preparing wills, as this document drafted in 1895 indicates. The spelling of many words suggests greater familiarity with German than with English. Note that the maker of the will, Barbara Nies, signed by making her mark.

—Courtesy
Gordon L.
Iseminger



STATE
HISTORICAL
SOCIETY
OF NORTH DAKOTA