The German-Russian Lutherans of the Dakotas and The Brotherhood Movement

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My mother still talks about the trip we took about twelve years ago through the Dakotas and on to Yellowstone. She just couldn't get over how fascinated my second oldest brother and I were with the flatlands and prairie. The majesty and beauty of the Rocky Mountains did not grasp our attention as much as the wide open spaces did, for one reason or another. Perhaps the reason was that we were able to see so far in the distance in the prairie, as we kept our eyes peeled for antelope, or prairie dogs, or the next town, or whatever else a young boy's imagination could picture. Perhaps the fascination was due more to the fact that we had lived for eight years in a small, Minnesota town not far from the Dakota border, a town situated in relatively flat land itself. Or, perhaps there was a deeper, more hidden reason, one that my mother might have guessed, but not we boys.

You see, our ancestors on mother's side settled in the Dakotas about a hundred years ago. And with all the talk about roots these days, I wouldn't be surprised if that had something to do with our fondness for the prairie. I wouldn't want to press the point, however, especially now, since that is not the purpose of this paper. Rather, I would like to speak more about the people who settled in the Dakotas many years ago, which included some of my ancestors.

These people were known as "German-Russians," or, if you wish,"Russian-Germans." As their name suggests, they have a very interesting history, also quite involved. I surely don't intend to give the entire history of them in this paper, but only one aspect of it. An aspect that seemed a bit surprising

to me came up as I read about the history of the German-Russians. It has to do with two facets of religion among these people--Lutheranism and pietism. More specifically, the paper will deal with the influence that a pietistic religious movement called the "Brotherhood" had upon Lutheran German-Russians in the Dakotas.

Now, I have introduced two groups of people already that I will have to speak more about before getting to the heart of the matter. First of all, let me summarize the history of the people known as German-Russians. The first part of their two-fold name gives the ethnic background of them. They were German people through and through. The second part tells us the geographic background of them. They lived for over a century in southwest Russia. In the 1760's the Russian Czaress Catherine II invited some German people into her country to work the land for her. The Germans were very skillful at farming, and that fact, along with poor economic conditions in their native land, caused many of these Germans to accept the invitation. They were promised much freedom by Catherine, such as freedom of religion, freedom from serving in the Russian military, and others. And so, for over a hundred years these German people made a living for themselves in the Black Sea area, as well as along the Volga River. Here they grew and prospered, while retaining their German heritage and continuing to worship their Lord.

In the late nineteenth century, however, a new czar came to power. His attitude towards the Germans was quite a bit different than was Catherine's. He wanted to change the Germans into Russians, completely. He revoked the freedoms that had

once been guaranteed to them. And that meant that they would now be required to serve in the Russian military. Because of this attempt at "Russification," most of the German people living in Russia left. Some went back to Germany, while many came over to live in North America. They had heard back in Russia about plentiful land available in the United States, made possible by the Homestead Act of 1862. And they had heard about the many freedoms guaranteed to those who lived in this prosperous nation. And so they came over to seek out a new existence in North America. Between 1870 and 1920, there were about 300,000 people living in North America who were of the German-Russian strain.

A large contingent of these German-Russians settled in the Dakotas. Among them was my great-grandfather, Christian Bauer. He came over after having lived in the Crimean Peninsula along the Black Sea, and was one of the first men to settle in a town called Zeeland, North Dakota. He raised a large family, starting a line that has produced many members of our Wisconsin Synod, including several full-time workers in the church. I would like to say at this point that the main thrust of this paper, the influence of a pietistic group upon the German-Russian Lutherans of the Dakotas, may apply in general to that people, but not specifically to my great-grandfather's family. I am sure that they were as orthodox as the day is long.

At any rate, that gives you a sketch of the German-Russian people who settled in the Dakotas. I should also mention before going on that approximately 45% of these people were

Lutherans, a figure that also reflects the number of Lutherans there were among them while they were still in Russian territory. This represented the largest religious affiliation among them, with the rest being split up between Catholic, Reformed, and a few minor others.

The story of the Brotherhood movement also begins back in Russia. This was a movement led by those of a pietistic bent that attained quite a bit of influence already before the German-Russians came over to North America. As one authority on Germans who lived in Russia put it, this was a "spiritual auxiliary" to the Protestant churches in Russia.[1] That is a very appropriate term for them, because as it turned out, those who belonged to the Brotherhood were actually required to be members of an established church body.

The name "Brotherhood" was adopted as the official name for the movement in order to distinguish itself from other pietistic movements that were going on in Russia at the same time. That is just a bit ironic, however, since it seems that just about anybody could take part in the Brotherhood's worship. But that's what they were called, and it should be kept in mind that they were not a church body as such, but a movement, whose followers were members of other churches.

In America the people who followed the Brotherhood's steps were referred to as "Bet-brueder." They were called so because the main characteristic of the movement was the prayer meeting, conducted by lay people in their own homes, or in the town schoolhouses. These prayer meetings were very informal, as contrasted with the formal services of, say, the Lutheran church. Here the people spent a good deal of time in prayer, sang

their hymns with great fervor, and listened to one or more of their members explain some Scripture. Such meetings were held generally two or three times a week. This is what went on back in Russia, and the same pattern was followed in North America. In addition, there were revivals every now and then conducted by the Bet-brueder after they had settled in the Dakota regions.

The Brotherhood movement had an influence upon the Lutherans among the German-Russians of the Dakotas. How great was that influence? Here I have no statistics to show, but I can only draw some conclusions on the basis of various testimony. For one example, recall what was said earlier about followers of the movement being required to be members of an established church body. Since the Lutheran faith was the largest in both Russia and the Dakotas among the German people, one might suppose that not a few Lutherans were also involved in the Brotherhood.

Fred Koch, a descendant of the Volga Germans himself, hints also to this conclusion when he says: "The Brotherhood's adherents among the immigrants were suspicious of the churches, whereas many Lutheran functionaries, or synod policy, rejected them for participating in an unrecognized religious service outside the regular church."[2] That statement would strongly suggest that there were some members of the regular church, which would most likely include the Lutheran church, who were also going to prayer meetings, and thus were rejected by the synod to which the regular church belonged.

Then, there is the testimony of some of our own early

missionaries, who worked among the German-Russians in the Dakotas from early on. Pastor Julius Engel was one of these, a Minnesota Synod pastor whose exploits out in the Dakotas were described in a couple of articles in the 1944 Northwestern Lutheran by one Pastor Armin Engel. We cite one portion of the article which speaks about Julius Engel's experience with some pietists: "At other times some of the Russian-born caused him much trouble. These were unequaled fanatics, so-called 'Bet-brueder,' who wanted to be masters in the Scriptures. In his efforts to convince them he went to the greatest length, only to be told to finally come again indeed, 'but of their prayer and revival meetings they would leave nevermore!'"[3]

Again, I would conclude from this that since Julius Engel was doing work in setting up churches among the Lutherans out in the Dakotas, the Bet-brueder he ran into and tried to convince must have been Lutherans, too. Otherwise, why would they have been of so much trouble to him?

The Centennial Committee of the Joint Synod expressed the same concern over trouble caused by such pietists in their history of the Dakota-Montana District. We find there this statement, which lends further support to the conclusions I have drawn: "Much harm was done in this vast field by church bodies and synods who were not one with us in spirit. The revivalist groups among the American churches found a fertile soil in the pietistic sentimentalism of many of the settlers."[4] The Joint Synod would of course not have fellowship with the pietist revivalists among the settlers. But there must have been other Lutheran synods that did indeed welcome the fanatics into their midst. And that naturally caused harm for the mis-

sion efforts of our synod's forefathers.

Finally, if my grandfather's reaction is typical, then there must have been quite a few Bet-brueder around and among the Lutherans. When I asked him over Easter break whether he remembered anything about the people called Bet-brueder, he immediately went into a story about one such Bet-bruder who lived down the road from them in Zeeland. The story seemed to hint at this man being a little on the weird side--something about him shooting a dog because it was hanging around the neighborhood too much.

The influence was there, and how great it was depends on how one views things. If you consider how many Lutherans were actual participants in the Brotherhood movement, the influence may or may not have been real strong. The Brotherhood movement, by the way, eventually became an established church body, known as the German Congregational Church, which one scholar estimated made up 30% of the Russian-German people in North America.[5] I happen to feel that there were many Lutherans that did participate, but certainly not any who would be sanctioned by the Joint Synod.

If you consider the influence as being an hindrance to mission efforts on the part of the Minnesota Synod, and later the Joint Synod, then I think there is no question that the influence was great. The Dakotas offered a wide open field for mission work, especially since so many of the German-Russians there were historically Lutheran. But because of fellowship reasons, all those who went along with the Bet-brueder could not be allowed to become members of our synod. The prayer meetings were unionistic, and who knows how much false

doctrine could be taught at them by some lay preacher who was not trained in the Scriptures properly?

There were some very logical reasons for why the Brotherhood movement was able to influence Lutheranism among the German-Russians in the Dakotas. The most obvious would be that the situation was simply transplanted from Russian soil to the prairie soil in the Dakotas. As is the case with many a group of immigrants, the way things were done in the "old country" is the way things happened in America. The Brotherhood movement had gained a strong foothold in Russia already, and those who were a part of it did not lose their pietistic sentiment on the way over. In fadt, the German-Russian immigrants are characterized as a whole as pietistic by one authority, Richard Sallet, who says: "The appeal which the 'Brotherhood' enjoyed characterizes the pietistic mentality in the Russian-German."[6] That mentality was fostered already back in Russia.

Another logical reason for the influence comes up when one recalls from church history what the conditions were among the Lutheran chuch at this time. When the German-Russians came over, those who were Lutheran among them found that the Lutheran church was splintered into twenty-one synods at this time. Which one were they supposed to turn to? How could they know the difference between them all? And, as was noted earlier, they soon found out that some synods would not accept all of them, because synod policy forbad it. As it turned out, the Iowa Synod was the first to get started in the Dakotas, beginning their work around 1879, and by ten years later they had this to report: "So enstand im Jahre 1889 der Dakota-

Distrikt mit 24 Pastoren, die ungefaehr 75 Gemeinden und Predigtplaetze bedienten, mit Pastor Bischoff als erstem Praeses und Pastor E.R. Melchert als Sekretaer."[7] The first Minnesota Synod pastors began their mission work in the Dakotas at about this same time, 1888.

There may have been many Lutheran synods at the time when the German-Russians came to the Dakotas, but the congregations, and, especially, the pastors to serve them were few and far between. Many of the towns were not able to hold services every Sunday because there was no pastor there. Many Lutherans might easily have felt inclined, therefore, to attend the worship services of the Bet-brueder, who met at least twice every week.

The accounts of Julius Engel's work in the Dakotas bears out the fact of the scarcity of pastoral care among the German-Russians. Following are some snatches of Pastor Armin Engel's articles in the Nörtwestern Lutheran, which graphically describe Julius Engel's field of mission work. Note also the two appendices at the end of the paper which include a map of his field and a song he once wrote depicting his life as a missionary in the Dakotas.

> "They (the delegates of a Minnesota Synod convention in 1893) were told of his field 150 miles long and 50 miles wide, extending over eight counties of western prairie, bordering the 'Big Muddy' Missouri...According to the concentus of many, there was no rain in Dakota, no crops, no bread; only much snow, terrible storms, and bitter cold. Here settlers die of starvation, thirst and cold unless they shake the dust off their feet in time and leave for better country. No wonder it was so hard to win travelling missionaries for the new Dakota territory...Although the Minnesota Synod pro-

> vided the means for traveling, this synodical conveyance had to be hunted together. Two Indian ponies long past their best days were found eighty miles distant on a farm...When he made his first acquaintance with the members entrusted to his care, he soon noticed how mistrustfully and dubiously he was received. 'Are you also going to do as your predecessors, leave soon and depart from us?' some of them asked most painfully...The nearest preaching station was ten miles away, the farthest was eighty miles distant...so that for a time he had fifteen places to look after. Every five weeks he made the rounds and each time covered 500 to 600 miles per horse and buggy...Thus Julius Engel soon learned, that the traveling missionary must often make use of these unfrequented roads to visit his distant members 'of the household of faith,' living mostly on roads that are not to be thought of in Dakota today. He frequently slept under the canopy of the heavens, with dry bread and water for nourishment awaiting him at home on his return. 'Many a time I was obliged to go hungry from one morning until the next. I speak the truth and lie not,' he writes in one of his mission sermons...Julius Engel moved into this northern field (now known as Zeeland, North Dakota) shortly before Christmas, 1892, and found the people of 'one heart and one soul.'..In reference to his sod hut he later writes: 'Here I lived happier than many a millionaire in his palace.'..Services were announced before hand and usually well attended. Some still came with oxen and as a rule were the first to arrive. Churches were not as yet in existence. Wherever possible schools and courtrooms were used. Often only private homes were available for worship with many disturbances...The people in general with whom Julius Engel dealt on his itinerary were a mixed class of German, Lo-Germans, and Russian-born Germans. The Russians were very religious, strong emotionalists and therefore subject to fanaticism. Usually, after butchering time revivals were led from house to house by enthusiasts who came into the community and confused the people. In his mission report with reference to another place we read: 'Here also still rages an entirely too unionistic-pietistic spirit.' He carried the glad tidings of salvation to the homes of settlers, and labored along the prairie with the same self-sacrificing zeal far and near striving to keep them from falling into the hands of the sects..." [8]

The last few sentences bear out the conclusions drawn earlier about Lutherans getting involved with the Brotherhood.

Apparently they did. But the entire quote suggests to me one plausible reason why, namely, the scarcity of pastoral care. Julius Engel could not simply be everywhere at the same time, which would also hinder his effectiveness at instructing the Lutherans against unionism or pietism.

Still another reason for the influence of the Brotherhood is found in the area of language. Sallet speaks about this subject when he writes: "The departure from the traditional Evangelical belief among the younger ones however in part can be explained by the fact that the Lutheran Churches in America considered it proper to conduct English services along with the German services in order to retain the English-speaking young people. Many violent disagreements arose in this matter and as a result, old settlers often left their traditional churches, declaring that they would not accept a language switch. The 'Brotherhood' groups who had lay preachers instead of ordained pastors were felt to answer the need of the old people in a better way: you did not hear an English word in their religious services."[9]

That kind of reaction to change in language is, of course, nothing new or unique in this instance. Many Lutheran church bodies experienced disagreement and departure in that regard. But in this case it does add to the reasoning behind the influence that the Brotherhood had among the German-Russians in the Dakotas.

One more reason that I'd like to offer, which I can't document, however, stems from the living conditions that existed among these people. The articles by Armin Engel spoke in detail about those conditions, too. The people

were very poor, but worked very hard to get what little they had. The weather could be devastating at times, even as it can be on the prairie today. One could understand readily, I feel, how an emotional spirit would stem from such a hard life. Today we are blessed with much better shelter, much more money and food, and with more accessible ways of getting together. The need is not as great for extra worship services as it was for those settlers one hundred years ago. One can hardly fault the desire for added spiritual exercise. But yet, when it leads to pietism or unionism, it must stop.

There is a difference between understanding something and condoning it. In the story of the influence that the pietistic Brotherhood movement had upon Lutheranism among the German-Russians, I can understand how many got caught up in the fervor of that movement. But I can't condone it. And the same would apply in similar cases today. There certainly are those who feel a certain need for added spiritual enrichment, and seek that "spiritual auxiliary" from another church body or group with which our synod is not in fellowship. We may have more than just a few members who are going to outside prayer meetings.

The Brotherhood movement got started in Russia among the Germans as an offset to the rigid formalism of the established church. People were probably bored with their services, or else not fulfilled with what they were hearing or doing at their services. They felt a need for more, but they were mis-guided in meeting that need. Today also I'm sure that there are many who just don't seem to get much out of church. They are bored with it, unfulfilled, and feel

a need for added spiritual outlets. And when you really think about it, the only way a parishioner can actively participate in the Sunday service is by singing and reciting, and actively listening. But what if the person doesn't like to sing, or doesn't like music, period? Or what if the man who preaches just doesn't have what it takes to keep the parishioner awake Sunday after Sunday? What if all too many are turned off by what they feel is too much formalism in our church?

The answer is of course not that they should join themselves with other religious groups that teach false doctrine and are unionistic. The answer really is that a conscious effort must be made on the part of both parishioner and leader to make the worship service, as well as the whole congregational life, ever more edifying. And here we could mention a number of ways to do that. The pastor can work harder at improving his preaching skills. The parishioner can listen harder to the sermon, or learn to like singing. Opportunities for more spiritual outlets within the congregation can be made more available, such as through Bible Class, a biggie in that regard, or through choir, or youth functions, another biggie. Fellowship with our own is of utmost importance in a church, whether it be in the spiritual realm or the recreational. As the writer to the Hebrews said: "Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another--and all the more as you see the Day approaching."

The story of the German-Russians of the Dakotas has helped me understand and realize this need, this command, all the more.

NOTES

[1]Fred C. Koch, The Volga Germans (Penn. State Univ. Press, 1977), p. 117.

[2]Ibid., p. 120.

[3]Rev. Armin Engel, "Early History of Our Itinerants in Dakota," Northwestern Lutheran, May, 1944, p. 111.

[4]Continuing In His Word, Centennial Committee of Joint Synod, (Milwaukee: Northwestern Publishing House, 1951), p. 132.

[5]Richard Sallet, Russian-German Settlements in the United States, (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1974), p. 90.

[6]Ibid., p. 91.

[7]E.G. Eisenberg, Geschichte des Ersten Dakota-Distrikts der Ev. Luth. Synode von Iowa u.a.S., (1922), p. 12.

[8]Engel, op. cit., March, 1944, p. 70; May, 1944, p. 110.

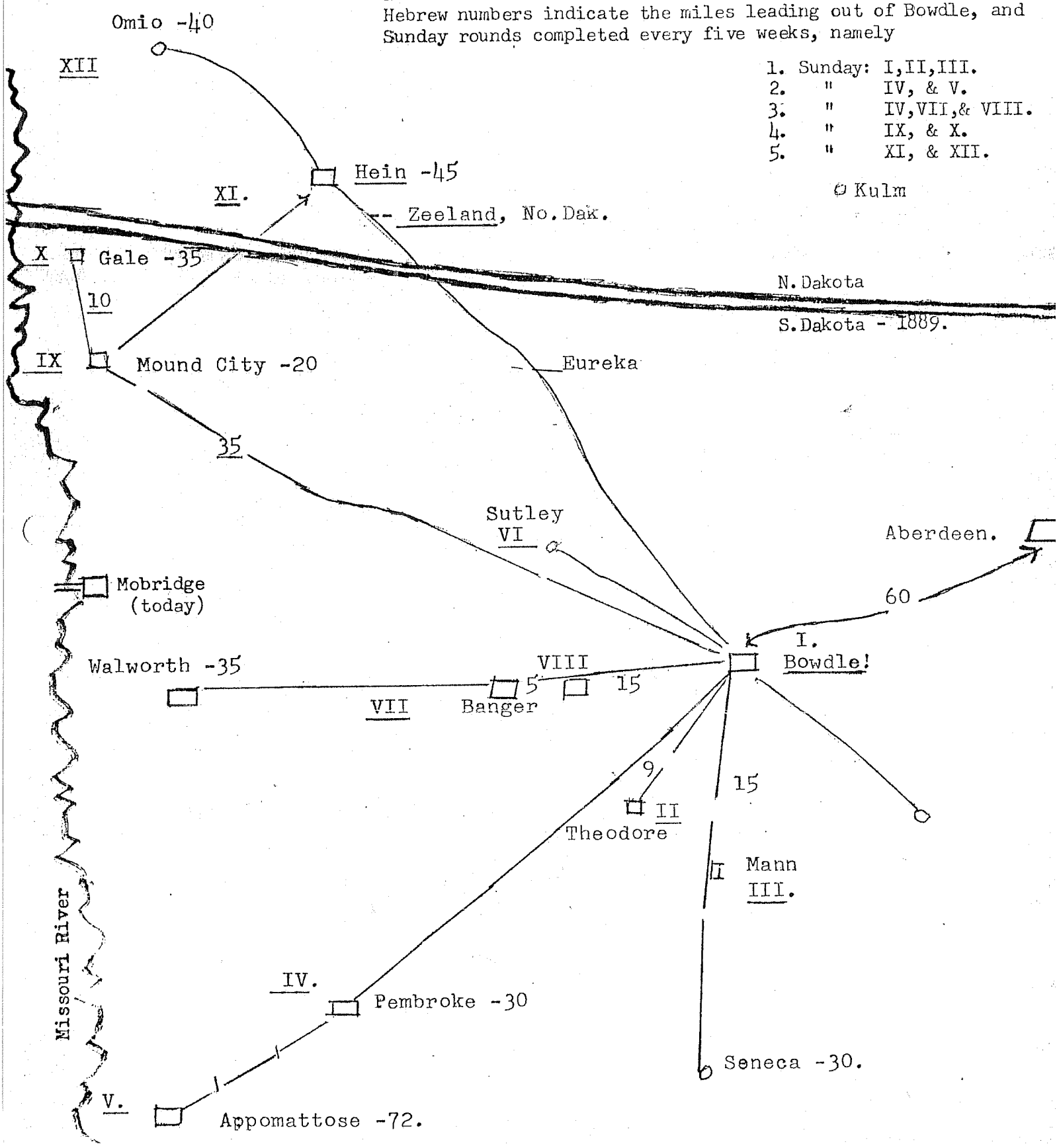
[9]Sallet, op. cit., p. 91-92.

Julius Engel, an early Itinerant Missionary in South Dakota was kept on his course by these trails, riding his circuit, visiting early settlers from 1892 to 1895.

Note: Map of his preaching schedule

Roman numerals indicate all twelve preaching stations.
Hebrew numbers indicate the miles leading out of Bowdle, and Sunday rounds completed every five weeks, namely

1. Sunday: I,II,III.
2. " IV, & V.
3. " IV,VII,& VIII.
4. " IX, & X.
5. " XI, & XII.



My father wrote a song in which he pours out his heart. He spent his 26th birthday at the home of Fehlau, in Bowdle, where the two missionaries pooled their talents in putting the words to music. I understand they delivered it at pastoral conference for the benefit of their fellow pastors.

1. Der Prediger von Hein
Der faehrt ueber die Praeirie
Und predigt sein 'n Gemein 'n,
Ermahnt u. staerket sie.

Chor: O ja! O ja! gar lustig ist's ein Prediger sein
An diesem Orte Hein, an diesem Orte Hein!

2. Er faehrt dahin so schnell
Am warmen wie am kalten Tag,
Und Niemand sein Gesell
Auf seiner Fahrt sein mag.

Chor: O ja! O ja! gar traurig ist's ein Prediger sein
An diesem Orte Hein, an diesem Orte Hein!

3. Denn stuermt's und wettert's gar,
Muss er doch oft aus seinen Haus;
Und so geht's manches Jahr,
Hinaus in Sturm und Braus

Chor: O ja! O ja! gar uebel ist's ein Prediger sein
An diesem Orte Hein, an diesem Orte Hein!

4. Und was das schlimmste ist:
Sein Wirken wird doch meist veracht,
Selbst, der sein will ein Christ,
Nur oftmals Ihn verlacht.

Chor: O ja! O ja! gar schwer ist's ein Prediger sein
An diesem Orte Hein, an diesem Orte Hein!

5. Doch spricht er: "Ich thu's gern,
"So lang mir Gott Gesundheit giebt,
"Will dienen meinem Herrn,
"Der mich so sehr geliebt.

Chor: O ja! O ja! gar koestlich ist's ein Prediger sein
An diesem Orte Hein, an diesem Orte Hein!

6. "Hat Er sein heilig Blut
"Fuer mich zum Opfer bracht: O sag!
"Wie sollt ich ihn zu gut
"Nicht thun, was ich vermag? "

Chor: O ja! O ja! gar herlich ist's ein Prediger sein
An diesem Orte Hein, an diesem Orte Hein!

Jul. Engel Bowdle, S. Dak. Apr. 24 '95.

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