5. The Outside World

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THE OUTSIDE WORLD

The resentment of German farmers, burghers, and small-town intellectuals against “the world,” against the techniques of a competitive society, attained a religious and ethical meaning. Loyalty to a set of traditional attitudes became loyalty to a truer faith, obedience to a higher law.1

Writing in 1928, sociologist Heinrich Mauer was attempting to describe how religion and ethnicity affected “social accommodation” to American society. Ethnic and religious biases against the “outside world” established a powerful bulwark between German-Lutheran communities and American society. The Missouri Synod tried desperately to shield its members from “the world” through conservative doctrine and the use of the German language in church and school; preservation of the “true faith” demanded constant and unrelenting stewardship. “Thus, no matter which way he turned, the German Lutheran immigrant leader saw hostility and harassment, real or imaginary. . . . Every possible social, cultural, and theological weapon was to be wielded in this battle for survival in a hostile environment.”2 The term “outsider” was reserved for individuals not in the Missouri Synod fold, and synod leaders as well as local pastors warned the laity against interacting with nonmembers. Mildred Block reported a story that her second-generation mother had told her. “Pastor taught Mom and them in the school that if you weren’t a Lutheran you shouldn’t have anything to do with them [outsiders] or go to Hell. That was his philosophy. Wasn’t that something?”3

Small rural congregations such as Block successfully insulated most of their membership for decades, but advances in transportation and communication made this process more and more difficult, particularly in work-related and economic activities. Moreover, the limited amount of inheritable or salable land forced some members to seek jobs
and economic opportunities away from the core community. Finally, World War I and its aftermath made attempts at total isolation dangerous and undesirable, both for the synod and for its congregations.

Contact with the outside world proved to be the most important educational factor in promoting Americanization for individuals and families in Block. For rural communities like Block, the transition into the economic, political, and social realm of the outside world proceeded in a slow but steady manner. Initial movement into that outside world usually resulted from economic needs, and in the case of Block, from the production and sale of agricultural goods. First and second generations depended heavily on local markets, and economic life revolved around production for family consumption and the sale of crops and livestock. Neighbors and local merchants in Block, Paola, and other towns in the county had provided the primary market, but by the late nineteenth century farmers in Block were shipping crops and livestock to the regional markets in Kansas City. Small neighboring mills and merchants still did business but to a lesser extent, particularly after automobiles and expanded railroad service made transportation of crops, livestock, and people affordable and routine.

For families in Block, the expanding markets of large-scale commercial agriculture brought changes for every member: “The decisions to respond to economic exigencies, strategies of coping and surviving, were ethnic specific, most often made in the family context or with implications for the family as a first consideration.” Gender, age, and generational differences determined each family’s response to the changing economic environment. For males in Block, early contact with the outside world revolved around activities related to the sale and purchase of crops, animals, machinery, and land. Men handled cash, made legal transactions, and negotiated prices with local men and businesses throughout the county. Their travel included trips to banks, railheads, mills, mines, creameries, and dry-goods stores. Although the German Lutherans at Block did indeed make every attempt to trade with a fellow Lutheran, if one could not be found then another German would do. If trading with another German was not possible then the men in Block simply traded where they could receive the best price for goods.

The church certainly reinforced trading with other German Lutherans, and first- and second-generation men preferred to trade with someone they knew and trusted. Finding German merchants and busi-
nessmen became important for the men in Block if they were uncomfortable about making transactions in English. As businesses in Block lost trade with the growing use of the automobile, German-owned businesses in Paola increased their trade.

Peiker's clothing store and Wishropp's grocery store served the needs of the families in Block who chose to "come to town" to do their shopping or to sell their goods. Both German-born, F. O. Peiker and A. Wishropp began a store together in 1893 on the square in the neighboring town of Paola. When the men separated their business into two stores, Peiker sold clothing and Wishropp groceries. Both men cornered the market on trading with German clientele in the county and hired boys from Block to work for them. Wishropp's grocery store included an upstairs restaurant that often became the highlight of a visit to town. These two men, although not active members of the church in Block, provided an open door for German Lutherans in Block who chose or needed to trade outside the Block community. They also supplied a needed economic link for the community since both participated in the larger, heterogeneous mainstream of "town life."

The economic dealings of the men in Block offered them the opportunity to go out into the world when they chose to do so. In the early days of the community men formed cooperatives; they would alternate in making weekly trips to town to buy for themselves and the others. Although first- and second-generation males worked and interacted mostly with extended family and friends, these economic interactions also afforded men the opportunity to talk, interact, and observe people who did not come from similar backgrounds. Even warnings from pastors could not interfere with the basic economic necessities associated with agricultural work and business. Before the Americanization brought about by World War I, the synod adamantly warned members against bank loans (interest charges were perceived as usury), life and fire insurance, pensions, the stock market, and labor unions, but by the early twentieth century, synod leaders and local clergy had already lost most of their power to determine "business ethics." Most important, economic necessities gave males a justification to socialize with outsiders. Male acquaintances and friendships were formed from these business networks, and as the twentieth century approached, more men from Block became involved with outsiders in political and social functions as well.

For the women the journey to the outside world occurred more spo-
radically than for their male counterparts. The agricultural economy of the family depended extensively on women's productive capacities and labor—not just for home consumption but for outside markets. Women's production of butter, eggs, cottage cheese, and garden vegetables provided a steady cash income during times of financial stress and in between annual or semiannual sales of farm products and livestock. Marie Block Prothe's white leghorn chickens produced thirty dozen eggs a day, which, along with butter and cottage cheese, brought cash weekly for material, dry goods, or children's shoes. Christina Bergman produced four hundred pounds of butter during 1875. Esther Prothe Maisch reported that in one day she canned as many as twelve quarts of peas from her own garden for home consumption and to sell.

The point here is not to document that rural women worked hard and productively—historians, sociologists, and the women themselves have already done so. The critical factor to examine is the way in which the women in Block connected to the outside world and the way that this world served to educate them. Recent analyses of women's work have focused on the separation of women's and men's work spheres; however, for rural women, the artificial dichotomy of private/public work ultimately does little to assess the amount of work done, the value of that work, or even how women felt about their work. By continuing to evaluate rural women's economic contributions based on public visibility and the amount of monetary exchange, researchers create a "false status" that tells little about what women did and the importance of that work to the family, community, and the outside world.

To compound the problem, historically both women and men tended to underrate and misrepresent the production and exchange of domestic goods. For example, in the early days of the Block community, women used spinning wheels to make wool thread and later wove the thread into garments. According to the 1865 Kansas State Census, Rebecca and Catherine Beckman of Block listed their occupation as "spinner" and Rebecca's daughter Catherine as "weaver," but in later census reports, the three women were simply referred to as "housekeeper." It is quite plausible to believe that these women made garments for others as well as for their families and that some form of barter or exchange was used. And it is quite implausible to believe that after the 1865 census they no longer functioned as spinners and weavers as the census label indicates. These labels, "housewife," or
“housekeeper,” not only imply a lack of productivity as it was normally measured but also devalue and misrepresent women’s contributions and interactions with the outside world.\textsuperscript{18}

In her study of women’s contributions in dairy farming Nancy Grey Osterud uses the term “valuation” instead of “value” to describe how men and women perceived and thought about women’s labor; such a comparison allows historians to note differences between the value (real worth) of women’s labor as opposed to the valuation (perception) of it. The reality of women’s worth is usually far greater than the perception. Osterud goes on to argue that mechanization and capitalistic expansion reinforced the importance of large market exchange, which increasingly devalued women’s work.\textsuperscript{19} Interviewees from Block remarked on the importance of women’s labor on the farm and viewed women of the community as “hard workers.” Yet as Osterud and other scholars have demonstrated, women often viewed themselves as “helping out” even when they had completed their daily domestic duties and then supplied farm labor whenever their husbands needed them. Women’s labor was flexible, constant, and oftentimes rendered invisible.\textsuperscript{20}

Although their labor was often devalued in the family setting, women in Block directly participated in the economic sphere of the outside world. These women produced goods for their families, neighbors, and friends, with the surplus going to Block, Paola, and neighboring general stores that sold their products to consumers. At times the demand for domestic goods may have outstripped the supply.\textsuperscript{21} Sometimes goods were bartered, at other times cash was exchanged. The sale of women’s domestic production was a reciprocal exchange that took place so often, usually weekly, that money was rarely deposited in banks or documented in legal transactions. Women, unlike men, were not involved in exchanges of large amounts of cash that resulted from annual harvests or the periodic sale of livestock. Although women’s domestic goods brought in small amounts of money, the value of women’s production lies in the fact that it provided a steady, continuous income.

Women in Block remained important producers and connected directly to the economic sphere well into the 1940s, with the depression of the 1930s only reinforcing the importance of their production. Minnie Cahman Debrick sold cream, “but if I made it into butter, I got a few pennies more.”\textsuperscript{22} When the demand for domestic production de-
creased, women's temporary wage labor usually replaced it during
times of financial stress.\textsuperscript{23} In discussing rural women's economic con-
tributions Joan Jensen asserts that

although the purpose may have been preindustrial, that of provid-
ing for the family, the means were commercial. And the work was
of major consequence in providing an economic infrastructure for
the expansion of industrial capitalism. Farm families, like urban
families, could join in the new era of consumption. The difference
was that rural women remained producers as well as becoming
consumers of the new industrial age. And that was an important
distinction.\textsuperscript{24}

Certainly, their economic contributions allowed some women in
Block visible entry and exposure to people and places outside the Lu-
theran community. At first, their connections to the outside world
were often indirect, with their husbands serving as middlemen in eco-


nomic exchanges. Husbands and fathers initially took the domestic
goods to market, although many first- and second-generation wives
went along, and the task was performed together. How often women
traveled to neighbors and to town to sell their own produce varied
among families. Often female travel was affected by the age of their
children, weather and road conditions, and the quantity of goods to be
sold. When men went alone to sell their wives' products, typically the
women sent a list of deliveries and items to be traded or purchased in
exchange for their products. Irene Minden Prothe recalled that when
her mother was "too busy" to make the weekly trip to town she would
write up the bill for her goods and make a list of needed purchases; then
her father made the trip and returned with the necessary items and
groceries.\textsuperscript{25}

First- and second-generation women never went to town alone;
either they went with their husbands or the husbands went alone.
Some first- and second-generation husbands insisted on taking the pro-
duce to town themselves and procuring orders for their wives to fill.
Marie Dageforde Monthey recalled:

Mama knew that he had different ones that wanted [produce]
and she tried to provide it for him. And the kids stayed at home
and helped with the work. Mama didn't often go to town. . . .
My daddy, he was kind of a salesman like that. He went [to town] by himself and we all stayed at home and worked. When he came home we’d better have the work done or else he’d give us a cussin’.26

Age and generational differences clearly mark a transition in these trips to the outside world. Contrary to the popular conception of large rural families coming to town on Saturdays, residents of Block told a different story. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, even if both parents went to town together, often older children would be left at home. The wagon simply could not hold everyone, and children were expected to stay at home. For parents, leaving the children at home allowed a rare opportunity for privacy and time away from their family; for children, lack of town travel increased their isolation and provided further insulation from the temptations of town and outsiders.

For most third-generation women, particularly those who married around 1920 or later, the automobile provided the opportunity for taking their own goods to town, to barter or to collect the cash themselves. After purchasing a new car, fathers taught all their adolescent children to drive—girls as well as boys. The experience of Lydia Prothe Schultz typifies the transition between second- and third-generation women in Block. Lydia’s father taught her to drive the family car when she was seventeen, and she often ran errands to town alone. Her mother never learned to drive a car nor did she drive the family’s horse-drawn wagons. Fathers taught daughters to drive not to instill independence (which it certainly did) but for far more functional reasons; driving enabled them to run errands to town for fathers and brothers who could continue to work in the field until the necessary items arrived.27 Recent scholarship has suggested that the widespread use of the automobile fostered dramatic changes in rural women’s interactions with the outside world, both economically and socially.28

Advances in transportation and communication also connected the Block community to the outside world in other work-related ways. Nonagricultural jobs procured by residents of Block provided temporary and sometimes permanent entry into the outside world. Small numbers of men worked in local businesses, but most men had to go elsewhere if they chose not to farm or were unable to rent or buy farm-land. By the third generation, land became more difficult to divide
among sons or sons-in-law. Also, military experiences in World War I and advances in technology and communication opened doors for some men in Block, and they no longer chose to farm. Martin Prothe managed a small restaurant in the train depot in Paola. Lou Schultz worked on his uncle’s ranch in Wyoming before returning to live in the county as a mechanic on the Missouri Pacific railroad. Most men who chose to leave the farm or were compelled to in order to make a living moved to nearby towns to acquire work. Paola, the county seat, received most of these men, and the railroad, small businesses, and shops provided the employment.

As residents moved from the community, the outside world could no longer be ignored, and many former residents actively wished to
embrace town living and all its potential influences. By 1921 enough Lutherans from Block were employed and living in Paola that a daughter church was organized. First Lutheran Church of Paola began with only a few families (mostly young couples) but grew to rival its mother church in size and influence. A parochial school opened immediately, and for decades First Lutheran had only German surnames on its membership roles.\textsuperscript{31}

The relationship of the country church and the town church provides some insights into other social aspects of the Block community. With the exception of one charter member who was in his sixties, the town church was founded by young and middle-aged men (in their twenties to forties). Most were third generation and had either moved to town or chosen to associate themselves with town life. Their motives are uncertain but probably a number of factors precipitated the move. First, the Block community had undergone a difficult period during World War I. Initially, these young married couples may have chosen to Americanize themselves by living and working in town; land ownership may not have been available to them even had they wanted to farm. Second, English was always spoken in the town church, and from the beginning these couples wished to appear separate from Block in their male voters' assembly, the Ladies Aid, and in other church activities. Third, male leadership in Block stayed firmly entrenched in second-generation older males, so the new church may have been one way for younger men to assert their independence and their willingness to Americanize.\textsuperscript{32}

As with all parent-child relationships, the two churches experienced competition as the town membership grew and gained more members from the rural church. Still, each church invited the other as guests for important activities such as Mission Festivals, school picnics, Walther League activities, and dedication ceremonies. Although the town church appeared less conservative, particularly in language issues, each church needed the other's support since outsiders were still suspect as new Missouri Synod members.\textsuperscript{33}

Even as some married couples willingly began to move away from Block, limited employment opportunities forced young single men and women to look for work outside of the community. In the 1920s and 1930s, young unmarried men who wanted to farm but had no land or source of employment often traveled to another state or German-Lutheran community to find temporary work as farm laborers. Northern
Iowa, Washington County, Kansas, and Garfield County, Oklahoma, offered German-Lutheran communities and employment opportunities for some of these men. Elmer Prothe explained that young men worked in certain locales because they had a relative there or knew someone in a particular German-Lutheran community. Often many of a young man's friends followed him to acquire employment. During times of peak labor (corn-picking season in Iowa), "if one boy knew someone then they'd all go." Travel, new work surroundings, and a chance to make good money sent many young boys to these out-of-state communities. Sometimes boys had to travel farther from home to obtain work. In 1935 the local paper reported that "Lorenz Prothe wrote from Wenatchee, Washington, that he and other Block boys are picking apples in an orchard there." Although most of the young men returned to Block, a few married and stayed, buying land or renting from male relatives or fathers-in-law, which reinforced and maintained the practice of German-Lutheran endogamy well into the twentieth century. These experiences provided the third-generation males with new experiences, although much about their "new" surroundings remained the same—ethnicity, religion, and rural living.

For young single girls in Block, domestic service offered a steady means of transition into the outside world, providing a far greater contrast in lifestyle than that experienced by their male peers. After confirmation and graduation, most adolescent girls began an apprenticeship, initially honing domestic skills by working for the immediate family or relatives in the community. By the end of the nineteenth century, the neighboring town of Paola began advertising for live-in domestic servants or "hired girls." This experience in a young girl's life became a rite of passage prior to marriage. Girls from large farm families hired out to middle-class town families to work for weekly wages and to improve their domestic skills as future wives and mothers.

The importance of this exposure to the outside world cannot be overemphasized, particularly its power in assimilating young girls into American culture. Some scholars convincingly argue that because of this live-in experience, young German-American girls had better English skills and assimilated more quickly than their brothers. Other scholars maintain that domestic service reinforced female stereotypes and dependency and exploited young women with its low wages and monotonous drudgery. But for young girls from Block this hiring-out experience provided an opportunity for increased self-confidence, fi-
financial independence, female networks, assimilation into American society, socialization, and technological competence.\textsuperscript{38}

Hiring out fit well with the ethnic and religious prerogatives of the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod. Young girls had been working as domestics for centuries in Germany; synod leaders saw this activity as an appropriate and a “safe” way for a young girl to hone domestic skills in preparation for future family life.\textsuperscript{39} Yet synod leaders initially failed to see that this experience would place young girls in the homes of non-Lutherans and thus accelerate the assimilation process.\textsuperscript{40}

A close examination of the group of young women who hired out from the Block community reveals some interesting patterns. Sixty-three percent of the young girls confirmed between 1913 and 1937 worked as hired girls.\textsuperscript{41} At age sixteen or seventeen, most girls hired out to nonrelatives to begin live-in domestic work. Although the very poorest girls did not hire out, a parent’s property holdings did not seem to determine a daughter’s work experience, but other factors were significant. Birth order played an important role in determining which daughters worked as hired girls: In Block, 74 percent of all first-born daughters hired out; in contrast, only 49 percent of last-born or only daughters did. Nora Ohlmeier Prothe was the oldest of three girls in a family of eight. When asked why she worked out, she answered, “If you had a couple of girls at home why you couldn’t all stay at home.”\textsuperscript{42} A mother’s health also helped determine which daughters hired out. A last-born daughter might have stayed at home to help an ailing mother whose health had begun to fail after many pregnancies and the rigorous demands of the family farm. Lydia Prothe Schultz was the third of four daughters and she hired out for three years but returned home to help her mother when her younger sister married and left the home.\textsuperscript{43}

Most of the interviewees reported that they made the decision to hire out. Although pressure to avoid a financial strain and to begin adult responsibilities was great, it is likely that both parents agreed with the daughter’s decision to stay or leave since the decision affected the entire family. Before Irene Minden could leave for her Kansas City employer, her parents decided that she needed a new coat to “work in the city.” She recalls,  

And I never will forget when I was old enough to go to Kansas City to work, and I needed a coat, my Dad had to sell a load of wheat that I could get that coat. And here I thought to myself that I had
four brothers and sisters and Mamma bought me that one coat—it took a load of wheat.  

This family-decision process supports Virginia Yans-McLaughlin's research on Italian Catholics in nineteenth-century Buffalo. McLaughlin states that family values acted as independent variables on occupational opportunities and that girls and women would find appropriate work that did not challenge cultural values. In the case of girls from Block, financial needs merged with ethnic and religious imperatives concerning gender socialization and work.
Although one less person relieved pressure on the family budget, hired girls from Block were not viewed as additional sources of income for their families, unlike their Irish and Scandinavian peers, girls from Block controlled their money and were not expected to send it home. Wages bought clothes, trips home, or items for their trousseaus. Every hired girl interviewed stated adamantly that she kept her own money and either saved it or bought items for herself. The family did not expect their daughters to send money home, but the young women were expected to care for their own financial needs and purchases.

For $3.50 a week hired girls in Paola did the cooking, housecleaning, washing, and ironing and were expected to babysit if the need arose. If they had evenings free they would make arrangements to spend time with each other, meeting downtown or in one of their rooms. Ida Minden Peckman remembered “going with the girls around the square” on Saturday afternoons because “you always met somebody you knew.” Lydia Prothe Schultz remembered times spent with seven or eight girls from Block who worked in Paola around 1918. “We played cards, ate, and talked. We called each other on the telephone. Two or three girls worked at a boarding house and they were given permission to entertain all of us in the hotel dining room.”

For young girls coming of age after 1920, domestic service in Kansas City provided a chance for higher wages and educational opportunities in all facets of their lives. The contrasts in urban and rural lifestyles loomed large for young girls who had rarely if ever been away from the Block community and their families. Girls from Block worked for some of the wealthiest people in Kansas City. Irene Minden Prothe described her fear and excitement when at sixteen she took a job with a family in Kansas City. Some friends met her at Union Station and took her from her first train ride to her first streetcar ride and then to her new job. “Oh my goodness, I will never forget that. I had to wear this apron [uniform] and I had to serve and cook the meal. Things you don’t [know], everything was so fancy, and [her employer] had a menu all made up, and there was things on there I had never heard of before.” Older girls from Block helped Irene to adjust to her new surroundings, taking her to movies, shops, parks, and to church on Sunday. Driving a car, using a streetcar, and catching a train became routine events for many hired girls. For the young women from Block, attending Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Kansas City opened doors to new people and social activities. Emmanuel Lutheran be-
Irene Minden Prothe with friends she met at Emmanuel Lutheran Church in Kansas City, September 2, 1928.

longed to the Missouri Synod, but in many urban churches the transition to the English language and to Americanization occurred much sooner than in rural churches. All the women from Block in Kansas City attended Emmanuel Lutheran and participated in the social activities. A young church member remembered that "they fit in just beautifully. They may have been a little shy, here and there. . . . Mostly they knew that they belonged."50

Train travel home once a month provided a link with Block and the family. Although some young woman returned home after two or three years in Kansas City, 64 percent stayed and married men there. Others came home to care for ill parents, to help the family, or to marry local men. This hiring-out experience undoubtedly gave young girls from Block new perspectives about themselves and the outside world. The combination of urban lifestyle, financial independence, and the chance to live in homes of non-Lutherans afforded them a broad, rich edu-
Six Block hired girls enjoying a free Sunday afternoon in Kansas City, 1928.

cational experience unparalleled in the lives of their mothers or grandmothers.

This generation of women from Block was the first to control their fertility, the first to take an active role in selling their own domestic goods, the first to have extensive exposure to wealthy, urban, non-German Lutherans, the first to have independent banking accounts, and the first to gain experience with the latest in communication systems, electrical appliances, and transportation. Most important, this educational experience may have facilitated change in their expectations and behavior. Most women's experiences were similar to Irene Minden Prothe's: “I learned a lot and I cried a lot because I didn’t know how to do things... I learned.”

Work and economic opportunities forced the Block community to connect with the outside world. Ethnic and religious misgivings about the secular world could not erase the need to be a part of the economic system. For men, these economic interactions often laid the groundwork for networking with outsiders in the political system as well.

In Block, male political behavior in many ways mirrored the voting patterns and political behavior of the Missouri Synod nationally. In the
nineteenth century, C. F. W. Walther encouraged "political quietism," and pastors were actively discouraged from engaging in any political activity from the pulpit. The distinct separation of church and state was held in high esteem by the synod, and members were encouraged to respect the dictates of the state unless spiritual concerns were under attack.

Although more Missouri Synod Lutherans affiliated with the Democratic party in the nineteenth century, party associations changed according to the controversial issues of the time. Alan Graebner describes two major worries that could galvanize the synod into political activism: fear of Roman Catholicism and fear of moral and social reforms. Missouri Synod Lutherans had an immediate aversion to any person or any issue that appeared to expand the power—real and alleged—of the Roman Catholic church. Legislation sponsored by Protestants that attempted social amelioration proved equally repugnant, particularly Sabbatarianism, prohibition, and women's suffrage. Ironically, nativist legislation enacted before and after World War I forced the Lutherans and the Catholics into an uneasy alliance to save the parochial school system.

Nineteenth-century Block voted strongly Democratic, and a few residents joined in political activity in the late 1870s. Frederick Luebke's research on German-American political activity provides some possible explanations as to why nineteenth and early twentieth-century Block voted as it did. Luebke concludes that many "religious Germans" resisted the strong anticlerical rhetoric of prominent German-American leaders; also, the early Republican leadership was associated with the antiforeign Know Nothing party. Because the Democrats of the mid-nineteenth century were perceived as more favorable to the immigrant, the Democratic party in Missouri had the support of many German Americans, including conservative Lutherans and the majority of Catholics, who would not join a party that was perceived to harbor attitudes that prompted their worst fears about lack of religious freedom and ethnic intolerance. Block's large Missouri contingency and its religious conservatism probably determined the strong Democratic support.

Although the majority of males in Block did not actively pursue political interests, some individuals ignored synod dictates and enthusiastically embraced American politics. Initial political activity was rare, but interest increased as the Block community expanded to include the
bulk of East Valley Township. Soon, males in Block ran for township offices and attended county political conventions, and in 1877 Dietrich Block was elected constable for East Valley Township. All elections in the 1880s, 1890s, and early twentieth century showed solid Democratic votes in the township. In 1880 a county vote on prohibition was soundly defeated forty-nine to eight in East Valley Township. Frustrated with his Democratic constituency, a non-German resident of the township complained to the editor of a county paper that he wanted to move because the “damn Dutch” were “too beastly Democratic.” In 1904 East Valley Township elected six delegates from Block and five alternates to the county Democratic convention.

The resentment directed toward the Wilson administration after World War I precipitated the gradual downfall of the Democratic majority in East Valley Township. Through the 1920s the Democrats lost support in the township, and in the 1928 presidential election, East Valley Township resoundingly rejected the Catholic Democrat, Al Smith, for the presidency. Thereafter, the township retained a slim Republican advantage for most elected officials.

The early and strong support voters in Block gave to the Democratic party is particularly interesting because it was greatly affected and nurtured by an outsider. B. J. [Barney] Sheridan, a second-generation Irish Catholic, grew up on a farm in Osage Township and had many friends and associates in the nearby Block community. Sheridan became editor of the *Western Spirit*, the county Democratic paper, around 1880. For over fifty years he actively participated in county Democratic politics and significantly dominated the party for many years. Flamboyant and opinionated, Sheridan grew up near the Germans and eagerly courted their votes. He attended weddings, school picnics, and sometimes special musical events or speeches in Block. More important, he gave these events press coverage, attempting to connect Block to the outside world. In contrast, the other Paola paper, the *Miami County Republican*, gave the Block community little attention until the 1920s. Sheridan’s obvious attempts to shelter the Block community from anti-Germanism during World War I may have alleviated the potential for violence, particularly in 1918. Although he could be opinionated and controversial, most residents in Block saw a friend in Sheridan. Herman Clausen, a staunch Republican, never subscribed to the *Miami County Republican* but always read the Democratic paper because “he liked to hear about Barney Sheridan.”
Besides the established political parties, another male link to the outside world included group membership in a controversial organization that crossed party lines but had a decidedly political agenda. In 1880 a notice in the Paola paper announced the formation of a new male society that called itself the Anti-Horse Thief Protective Association (AHTA), and men interested in joining such a vigilante group were invited to attend the first meeting. This first AHTA in the county represented a national network of associations (mostly midwestern and western) initially spawned in northern Missouri after the Civil War. By the turn of the century, Miami County boasted ten lodges and some ladies auxiliaries, and Paola hosted the state AHTA convention in 1901. The AHTA was “organized for the purpose of restoring property to its owners” and to “protect private property”; it functioned as a cavalry unit with appointed officers, lieutenants, and riders attending weekly meetings at their appointed lodges. When a theft occurred the local riders gathered at the lodge and then attempted to “arrest thieves and create public sentiment for the observance of law.”

Some males in Block wanted to join an AHTA lodge that formed in the community. The vast majority of AHTA men were non-Lutherans, but eventually some Lutherans from Block joined the ranks. Missouri Synod doctrine was adamantly opposed to members joining secular associations, and because the AHTA was also a secret society the organization was inherently “evil” in the eyes of the synod and local pastors. The synod always saved some of its most virulent rhetoric to attack secret societies, which were seen as particularly threatening because members mixed with outsiders and because secret societies often had rituals and prayers. The synod considered such activities heretical. Indeed, Freemasons and other lodges were blamed for much of the nativist legislation enacted in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; the lay magazines constantly warned members about joining such groups.

In January 1901 at the quarterly voters’ meeting, Pastor Senne confronted the men who had joined the secret AHTA, stating that the “oath that one takes and the secrecy are against God’s word.” At the special meeting called later in the month, the pastor reminded the men that the church constitution they had signed clearly stated that oaths and secret memberships were a “sin.” A few of the men apologized and said they would leave the AHTA. One year later some men still remained in the group, and the pastor gave them an ultimatum—quit the
Most men rejected the AHTA and remained in the church; however, a few resisted and subsequently left the church. One interviewee told me that her grandfather refused to give up the AHTA and never returned to the church at Block, although his wife attended with her children every Sunday.

Certainly the temptation was great for some men in Block to be a part of a secular organization that wielded power for over four decades. The AHTA was simultaneously feared and supported by people in the county. Although little if anything was ever recorded in the local papers, the vigilantes did more than threaten to find and arrest thieves. Marie Dageforde Monthey described a scene her mother had witnessed as a young schoolgirl. A horse had been stolen approximately three miles east of Block, and the AHTA was called to find the thief.

[The horse owners] notified the neighbors that they knew [the thief] and [AHTA] all got together and took that man to the barn and hung him in a tree besides the barn where he stole that horse. . . . And when he was dead, they put him on that wagon without sideboards and drove right past the [public] school-house and the teacher let all the kids get out to see that. They wanted the kids to see what the AHTA did to people that didn’t behave themselves. 68

Although secular and secret organizations were forbidden, two church-sponsored activities eventually brought the outside world to Block. Mission festivals and school picnics initially had functioned strictly as church events, but both activities gradually expanded, allowing access first to other Lutherans from outside Block and then to non-Lutherans or outsiders.

The first mission festival documented in the church records at Block was held in fall 1888, although the local paper mentioned a “mission meeting” in 1886. 69 The purpose of the festival was to have a special Sunday service devoted to raising money for Lutheran missionary work. The festival imitated a secular celebration [Volksfeste] held in Germany that had begun in the late eighteenth century; the first American mission festival was celebrated in Edwardsville, Illinois, in 1855. Held outdoors, the morning worship service was followed by a dinner and another service in the afternoon. 70
Block's mission festivals, held in late summer or early fall, grew dramatically when other Lutheran congregations were invited and friends and relatives made special trips to attend the celebration. Families brought blankets and basket dinners and were excited about the opportunity to hear two visiting pastors speak. The festival also provided an opportunity to visit with out-of-town friends and relatives rarely seen the rest of the year. Henry Block's grove, west of Four Corners, provided the outdoor setting that became a yearly favorite of many. Nora Ohlmeier Prothe remembered the scene. "All day, we'd go to the timber. Take our dinner, go all day and have two visiting ministers talk. [They] had seats and a platform where the minister was. They'd take an organ over there . . . That was a great day." 71

The local paper covered the event in 1893 and pronounced it "grand entertainment," with the sermons "beautifully delivered." 72 In 1900 the mission festival changed a key ingredient that opened the event to non-Germans; beginning in that year one of the two sermons was always delivered in English. 73 In the 1920s and 1930s the local paper always covered the event and never failed to mention the upcoming festival, announcing the names of the ministers and the time of the English service. 74

Although this event may sound similar to the Protestant revivals that occurred throughout the Midwest, the mission festival operated differently. The purpose of the mission festival at Block was to provide reaffirmation of the faithful, not to convert the outsider. The event never included faith healings, emotional outbursts, speaking in tongues, or dramatic conversions typical of many Protestant revivals. Indeed, initially only German Lutherans were encouraged to attend; certainly any emotional outbursts by the audience would have horrified the clergy, who expected their audience to be silent and docile.

Along with the mission festivals, the school picnic provided an even larger space for outsiders to enter into Block's world and interact socially with members in the community. The "children's feast" began in 1904 and was similar to the mission festival, with a service in the morning and a program prepared by the schoolchildren in the afternoon. 75 By 1910 a six-member committee was preparing the annual school picnic and outsiders were not only welcomed but encouraged to come. The schoolchildren prepared an elaborate program and performed on a platform for parents and friends; songs, marching drills, recitations, and plays were part of the entertainment. Although the
picnic had more of a secular than a religious bent, the “Germanness” remained. In 1914 the front page of a local paper reported the celebration and described the scene. “Arriving at 2:00 the Paola Ladies Band surprised the picnic and played music. . . . [a] concert for the Germans with whom a great hit was made by playing ‘The Watch on the Rhine’ and other airs of the fatherland.”

The war changed the character of the picnics, and the celebration in 1918 revealed no German influence but overflowed instead with American patriotism.77 Like the mission festivals of the 1920s and the 1930s, the annual picnics were well advertised and well attended. In 1925 the local paper reported that the event was “attended by many Paola merchants and families”; the 1932 coverage stated, “A year without the Block picnic would be blank indeed . . . [the picnic was] a country gathering where good order, good will and wholesome enjoyment ruled the hour.”78 Throughout his life Barney Sheridan, editor of the Western Spirit, rarely missed a school picnic at Block. In announcing the upcoming picnic in 1935, he wrote a fitting tribute to the community and this yearly event.
The Block community along with the baseball experts and the scientific horseshoe pitchers never fail to put up an interesting and instructive program. The amusements are all lively yet moral, and it reflects the religious, educational, and industrial elements of the German colony which has contributed so abundantly to the good name and progress of Miami County.79

Although the mission festivals and school picnics gave the Block community a chance to welcome outsiders on its own terms, other social events enticed community members into town or out to the county for other means of social activity. With few exceptions, most social contact with the outside world occurred after World War I, but one activity, inherently American, lured the men in Block into weekly summer encounters with outsiders. Baseball came to Block's school playground in the 1890s. Although the parochial schoolteacher introduced the game to the children, adult men soon began to play the game in organized leagues, putting them at odds with the pastor, who did not want the game played on Sunday. This was one disagreement the pastor lost since the community was adamant about its team.80

From May to September, young men worked six days a week, went to church Sunday morning, and then played baseball in the afternoon. By 1913 the "Block Grays" played teams throughout the county and in western Missouri. The Paola newspaper announced the upcoming games and often printed box scores and descriptions of previous games. The newspaper loved to describe the team's games in ethnic terms: "The Germans from the country have a nifty little ball club and will welcome a game with any of the leading teams of the county." Often called "the bunch from the settlement" or "the Germans," Block's team had supporters "in great numbers."81 Although described in ethnic terms, the team "spoke American" when it came to baseball. A young man might have been born Heinrich August Herman Wendte, but a great fastball transformed him into "Lefty" Wendte when he walked to the pitcher's mound on a Sunday afternoon.

Until the United States entered World War I the Block team and fans continued to make weekly trips throughout the county, challenging any community with a team. After the war, Block's baseball team disbanded for a while, and the local paper said little about the team in the 1920s. But by the 1930s Block was fielding a strong team once again, and the local papers continued to publicize its exploits.82
Block baseball team, circa 1912, first known as the Block Blues and only later as the Block Grays.

Although some women attended the baseball games, this activity was predominantly male. Because men had more social independence and mobility as well as more economic and political contacts, their presence in the outside world typically preceded women's involvement outside the community. Before the 1920s, with the exception of baseball games, the men and women of Block uniformly stayed close to the community, particularly for social activities, but the local and national events brought about by the war and the needs and interests of young adults coming of age during or immediately after the war made isolation undesirable for many individuals in the community. Advances in transportation and communication also made continuous isolation impossible; the third-generations' mobility forever changed the isolationist attitudes within the community.

As members of the community moved to town and as Block's young people found employment farther from home, the residents began to interact with outsiders in secular groups and organizations. Schoolchildren became involved in county spelling bees and contests, and
families took trips to visit relatives out of state. Both men and women traveled to town more often than their parents or grandparents had. The men joined the Farm Bureau, participated in American Legion activities, and played in sporting events. Women joined "mixed groups" for quilting and service projects, and the Ladies Aid began to serve dinners for auctions and other secular affairs. Weddings, anniversaries, and birthdays included non-Lutheran guests and visitors.83

Although far from being integrated into mainstream American society, Block's residents slowly began to emerge from predominantly religious and ethnic networks. Economic, political, and social encounters firmly connected them to the outside world, where new networks taught valuable lessons in Americanization. Age and gender continued to define interaction, but these outside contacts undoubtedly served as a highly significant educational experience.

Unlike many urban German-American communities, the Block community was effective in maintaining a slow, controlled assimilation. By allowing members entrance into the outside world only after careful indoctrination within institutional and family networks, the religious/ethnic community at Block supported and sustained the "old" even when surrounded by the "new."84 Only war with Germany greatly accelerated the transition, forcing the Block community and many of its residents into the outside world.