Life at Four Corners
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Published by University Press of Kansas

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Life at Four Corners: Religion, Gender, and Education in a GermanLutheran Community, 1868 -1945.


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NOTE ON SOURCES

Any historical or ethnographic study is always defined, and sometimes limited, by the availability of primary sources. Extensive quantitative and qualitative source materials for this research permitted a comprehensive examination of this village church and community. Trinity Lutheran Church of Block, Kansas, has preserved a plethora of primary materials. The official church recordbook registers baptisms, confirmations, marriages, and deaths from 1868 to the present, an invaluable record that includes birth information, school enrollment, marriage age, life-course data, and cause of death. Besides the church recordbook, information from the quarterly Protokoll "minutes" from the voters' assembly from 1870 to 1945 provided details on theological and individual controversies, business and monetary concerns, and routine administration of church activities and events. Insights into exclusive female activities from 1912 to 1945 can be found in the Ladies Aid minutes. These monthly minutes provide information on both formal and informal activities of the churchwomen. Minutes of the Walther League (a young people's group) from 1924 to 1938 supplied information on adolescent and young adult behavior and activities.

Until 1936 many church documents were written in Old German script, and Ursula Huelsbergen, an experienced translator who made verbatim translations of these documents, added greatly to the research. Fortunately, the church recordbook had been translated in 1982 by Myrtle and Elmer Thoden, lifelong members of the church and community. Elmer had been taught to write in the Old German script in the Trinity Lutheran school, and he still had his old grammar books to serve as resources if his memory failed.

Oral interviews provided another useful source for this investigation into community life; fifteen older residents or prior residents willingly discussed their lives in Block. The thirteen women and two men interviewed were born in Block between 1897 and 1920. Nine of the interviewees still live in the Block community, and five other interviewees
live in the neighboring town of Paola. Only one of the interviewees had lived her adult life outside of Miami County. Their stories, anecdotes, and memories enrich this study and give life to the reams of quantitative and literary material. Photos, personal correspondence, and newspaper accounts also add to the documentation.

Other useful sources of information include state and federal census data; statistical yearbooks, journals, booklets, and magazines published by the Lutheran Church–Missouri Synod; and World War I alien registration documents. During the anti-German hysteria of World War I, President Woodrow Wilson ordered registration of all unnaturalized German-born Americans, and the state of Kansas, unlike most states, did not destroy these fascinating records, which include information on immigration, occupation, literacy, and families as well as fingerprints and photographs.

Sources on material culture provided an added dimension. Many families in the Block community have lived for several generations on the same land. Many community members still farm, and some land and houses have passed through the hands of four generations. Since public documents deal primarily with male activity and experience, women's activities may go unrecognized unless investigated from other angles. The study of material culture such as quilts, furniture, household items, tools, and other items of daily work provides important insight into women's activities and experiences. Presently, many residents in Block have a significant number of objects in their homes that date from their families' departure from Germany. A discussion of those objects during interviews frequently led to interesting information that might otherwise have been forgotten.

These quantitative and qualitative sources effectively mesh to provide a comprehensive and multifaceted portrait of a village community. Although a sense of chronology is important, I have used a topical approach in order to identify the overlapping, reinforcing patterns that characterized education in Block and defined the links between individuals and the community they created.