

Coming to Missouri

The New World was seen as a great land of opportunity for many people in Europe. They were facing social unrest, political struggle and famine. Many were also being displaced by the industrial revolution. For them, America offered an abundant landscape, where their hopes for a great future could soar. America indeed was a symbol of economic opportunity and religious freedom. By the mid-1800's thousands of immigrants had flocked to its shores.

Welcome to Hermann. We're celebrating Maifest, a traditional German festival. This is traditional German dress, and this is celebration at its best.

Music

A German festival in Missouri? Sure! They're just one of the many groups that came to call Missouri home. People from France, Ireland, Italy and Africa, just to mention a few, have also come to live in Missouri. So how did they come to call Missouri home? Stay tuned.

I do not conceal the fact from you that the entire life of the inhabitants of these regions, seem to me like a dream at first. It seems to me almost a fantasy, when I consider what nature offers man here.

Due to an uncertain future back home, German immigration began in the 1830's. Almost an entire continent was waiting to be settled. Missouri was an especially popular destination. Why? Because of the writings of one important man, Godfred Duden.

How often I have thought of the poor people of Germany. What abundance and success would the industry of a few hands, bring to whole families, whose condition in their own country, an American born farmer cannot imagine to be possible. There is still room for millions of fine farms along the Missouri River.

In the 1820's there was a man who lived here for about 2 ½ years who wrote a book promoting Missouri: Godfred Duden, by name. He was one of only several writers, but his became the best known, and he is the one reprinted in English now, if anybody would like to see what he had to say. And at that point, the soil is so good here, and the two winters he was here was so mild, that he raved about how splendid the weather was, all year round, you didn't have to build barns here, livestock, you just threw seeds out and they sprang out of the ground...and it was just fantastic.

So many Germans came to America that they called it immigration fever. In 1847 alone, more than 100,000 Germans crossed the Atlantic. By 1860, more than half of Missouri's foreign-born citizens were German. Half of them gave up the notion of living off the land, and moved back to St. Louis. Others were busy growing grapes, and building Missouri's wine industry into an all-time high of more than 1,000,000 gallons of wine sold by 1904.

Hermann has many great examples of German architecture and state historic site is one you can visit. C'mon, let's check it out.

The Maifest can be a lot of fun, because often we get such super people who don't come at other times of the year, because there's so many activities going on. All the old traditional crafts are carried on again during celebrations like this, right now, this particular weekend, we have a wood carver, we have a rope maker, we have a hair artist on site, we have various people doing needlework, we have a variety of activities, and that's true all over town.

Of course, when the Germans settled here, they brought the spirit of Germany with them in many ways, like these wooden clogs, and they're really much more comfortable than they look. And it wasn't just shoes and winemaking. German immigrants transported much of their culture to middle America, just look at these buildings.

Henrietta Bruns was one of the individuals influenced by Godfred Duden's writing. Her legacy is a remarkable series of letters written to her family back in Germany. These letters offer us a unique insight into the lives of the German settlers. Jetta, as she was called, and her husband, Dr. Bernard Bruns, settled in Westphalia, Missouri. The house, they, and a score of fellow countrymen began in 1836, is still standing. A testament to the skill and craftsmanship of its builders. But of course, no construction project is without its problems.

August 1837. Dear Heimlich, we have had very little luck with anything that we have tackled this year. And it takes a great deal of perseverance and patience not to discourage. You know that we believed we would be able to occupy our house soon after our arrival. But only the skeleton is standing and a few shingles have been attached to indicate how the roof will be. Our carpenter, to be sure, has done his work very well, but has proceeded so very slowly that the entire world is amazed.

Unfortunately, Jetta's disappointments went far beyond her frustration with the carpenter. Three of her children died of dysentery shortly after arrival. Another son, fought and died for the Union during the Civil War.

Her husband, Bernard, also serving the union as a doctor, died of the illnesses he tried to cure.

November 15, 1883. Dear August, now the cruel winter is at our door and what will happen? With everything that has happened to me in my life, with hard trials and heavy losses, I always found strength and courage at the right time, and was never completely discouraged. Many regards to you and to all, with love, Your sister, Jetta.

Her homesickness for her native Germany continued throughout her life. But the letters she left us bear testament to the hardship and courage of our immigrant forefathers.

Missouri still proudly displays the influence and spirit of its early German settlers. Hermann retains its German character and spirit and communities like Westphalia, Marthasville and many others across the state celebrate the culture and traditions of their German homeland. Hermann, and the Maifest, it's all a part of our Missouri heritage.