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German-Americans and ethnic political culture: Stearns County, Minnesota, 1855 - 1915

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GERMAN-AMERICANS AND ETHNIC POLITICAL CULTURE: STEARNS COUNTY, MINNESOTA, 1855-1915[1]

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The lure of America for nineteenth century immigrants was not only economic, but also political. America is a free land, they told themselves. Here we take off our hat to no man; here we govern ourselves. But what uses did immigrants make of that political freedom? How did they perceive it in practical terms? How central was it to their new lives? How was their participation conditioned by their homeland culture, and what were its consequences, for themselves and for the society they entered? I shall explore these questions through a case study of the Germans who settled in Minnesota's Stearns County in the 1850s. I shall use the notion of an immigrant political culture to argue that, contrary to frequent stereotyping, Germans could be active and successful participants in the American political system; that their participation, however, was carefully targeted and reflected a set of values and goals distinct from those of many of their fellow citizens; and that in this case, at least, it was fundamental to defining the bounds of their ethnic community and to reshaping the local political order. I will be speaking necessarily in broad sweeps, since time permits little detailed presentation of evidence, and will focus on the lifetimes of the first generation of settlers, ending about the First World War.

Immigration history has come of age during the past two decades. In the framework of a truly common discourse, scholars on both sides of the Atlantic have explicated the international migration process and resulting cultural transplantations and ethnic formations. Yet--perhaps owing to the international character of the project--it has remained strangely isolated from many central issues of American national history. Only in the area of class formation have immigration historians made a real effort to assess the significance for the national experience of the ethnic difference they have uncovered. The political realm has been particularly neglected. Most immigration historiography appears to accept implicitly the old argument that the mass of immigrants arrived unpoliticized. Defining political participation narrowly in terms of voting and officeholding, historians interpret it as epiphenomenal to the central concerns of ethnic life and thus as either a grab for material benefit or a final stage in assimilation.[2] The mass of German-Americans, for

[1] Paper presented at the Symposium on "America seen from the outside: Topics, models, and achievements of American Studies in the Federal Republic of Germany," on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the John F. Kennedy-Institut of the Freie Universität Berlin, December 1-4, 1988; the research was funded in part by the "Studien zur Assimilation der Deutschamerikaner, 1830-1930," research project directed by Willi Paul Adams at the Kennedy-Institut with support from the Volkswagen Foundation.

[2] Oscar Handlin, The Immigrant and American Politics," in David F. Bowers, ed., *Foreign Influences in American Life: Essays and Critical Biographies* (Princeton, 1944), 84-98; Handlin,*The Uprooted* (Boston, 1951), 201-26; Milton Gordon, *Assimilation in American Life (New York, 1964);* Edward Kantowicz, "Politics," *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1980), 803-13; John Bodnar, *The Transplanted: A History of Immigrants in Urban America* (Bloomington, 1985).

example, tend to be viewed as simple voting cattle, so unschooled in politics that they could be bought for the price of a few beers, with leaders too inept and divided even to mobilize them to elect compatriots to office in numbers commensurate with group size.[3]

Yet we know that nineteenth-century American nativism was obsessed with the threat that immigrants posed to the political order.[4] We know that ethnicity has had a massive influence on American voting patterns.[5] And in the German-American case, we know that they were surprisingly successful in mobilizing to ward off political threats to their leisure habits or the status of their language.[6] Political scientists suggest that general political awareness transfers rather easily to a new country despite lack of experience with a particular political system, and that the political participation it inspires can precede and encourage other kinds of integration.[7] Historians have been generally content to measure immigrant political behavior in terms of outcomes. Perhaps it is time to switch our attention to inputs, to what Daniel Elazar has pointed to as the "underlying political attitudes and values--and characteristic responses to political concerns" that comprise the essence of a political culture.[8] No matter how powerless immigrants had been in the national political systems of their homelands, they at least had developed characteristic sets of attitudes and expectations, and--if only at the local level--certain kinds of behavior patterns. New World circumstances could promote the abandonment, modification, or augmentation of that political culture. But as in other areas of behavior, such unthinking, ingrained patterns of political behavior would be slow to change,[9] and may offer a key to the varying political histories of immigrant groups in America, and to assessing their consequences for ethnic communities and for the political system.

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[3] The first historian of German-Amerca advanced this argument: Franz Löher, *Geschichte und Zustände der Deutschen in Amerika* (Cincinnati, 1847), 448-54; for a sophisticated modern variant, see La Vern J. Rippley, *The Immigrant Experience in Wisconsin* (Boston, 1985), 52-53. The literature is summarized in Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Germans," *Harvard Encyclopedia of American Ethnic Groups* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980), 421-22.

[4] John Higham, *Strangers in the Land* (New Brunswick, N.J., 1955).

[5] Richard Jensen, *The Winning of the Midwest: Social and Political Conflict, 1888-1896* (Chicago, 1971); Paul Kleppner, *The Cross of Culture: A Social Analysis of Midwestern Politics, 1850-1900* (New York, 1970) and *The Third Electoral System, 1853-1892* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1979).

[6] See the summary discussion in Frederick C. Luebke, "German Immigrants and American Politics: Problems of Leadership, Parties, and Issues," in Randall M. Miller, ed., *Germans in America: Retrospect and Prospect* (Philadelphia, 1984), 57-74; Luebke's work has been pivotal both in arguing for an expanded conception of immigrant political behavior and in documenting actual patterns of German-American political involvement.

[7] Jerome H. Black, "The Practice of Politics in Two Settings: Political Transferability among Recent Immigrants to Canada," *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue canadienne de science politique* 20 (1987), 731-53.

[8] Elazar, *Cities of the Prairie* (New York, 1970), 256. In "political culture" I thus include patterns of behavior as well as the "system of empirical beliefs, expressive symbols, and values which define the situation in which political action takes place" of Sidney Verba's classic definition (in Lucien Pye and Sidney Verba, *Political Culture and Political Development*, Princeton, 1965, 8, as quoted in Jean Baker, "From Belief into Culture: Republicanism in the Antebellum North," *American Quarterly* 37, 1985, 539). Political culture in Elazar's terms sets the framework for political behavior and limits the range of permissible attitudes and actions; it manifests itself particularly in the community's expectations from the political process, the recruitment of public actors, and the way politicking and governing are practiced (Elazar, 256-58).

[9] Cf. G. Carter Bentley, "Ethnicity and Practice," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 29 (1987), 24-55.

Take, for example, the case of the German Catholics from the Rhine Province, Westphalia, and Bavaria who sought in frontier Stearns County a haven for the practice of their faith and for the perpetuation of family farming. Within fifteen years they dominated twenty of the 1500 square mile county's 37 townships as well as St. Cloud, the seat of county government and only significant urban center.[10] State law gave them the right to vote four months after filing their declarations of intent to become citizens, which most of them did immediately upon arrival to safeguard land claims.[11] Because Minnesota law stipulated the township as the smallest unit of local government, and many of the townships were overwhelmingly German from the outset, immigrants were forced to assume certain kinds of political roles willy-nilly. Most of the earliest German settlers had served political apprenticeships elsewhere in the U.S., and could socialize newcomers in the fundamentals of the American system. Since the county's agrarian economy attracted few educated and liberal Germans, the immigrant elite, such as it was, consisted largely of self-made businessmen, manufacturers, and farmers; the only representatives of German *Bildung* were priests, schoolteachers--usually educated in a German Catholic seminary--and the odd editor or doctor. What kinds of values and behavior patterns structured immigrant political participation in this setting, and what were its consequences?

Politics as played from the outset of settlement by the county's native-born minority was the usual mix of ritualistic party sparring, personal struggle for place, and ideological conviction familiar to historians of the period, spiced by a peculiarly frontier competition for the resources flowing into the area from massive federal programs. As the county matured, local booster development schemes took over, and the fraternal politics of the deal prevailed.[12] The German peasants exhibited a very different pattern of political behavior, one whose contours seem to follow what Utz Jeggle, in the German context, has termed the "rules of the village." A set of ordering principles growing out of the survival needs of an agrarian economy, a system of certainties governing life, the "rules of the village" revolved around the defense of property rights, family continuity, and honor, and were maintained in the homeland by village government, informal sanction, and the beliefs and ritual of religion.[13] The continued adherence of German peasants to village values even

[10] Population totals compiled from U.S. manuscript census, population schedule, Stearns County Minnesota, 1870; microfilms available from the National Archives, Washington, D.C.

[11] Article VII, Section 1, Constitution of Minnesota, reprinted in Charles Kettleborough, ed., *The State Constitutions* (Indianapolis, 1918), 723; after 1896, state residency requirements were extended to six months, a thirty day district residency requirement was added, and only those who had been citizens for at least three months were permitted to vote.

[12] See e.g. the diaries and letterbooks in the Christopher C. Andrews Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul. For an excellent description of one not atypical local political culture in this era, see Patrick F. Palermo, "The Rules of the Game: Local Political Culture in the Gilded Age," *The Historian* XLVII (1985), 479-98.

[13] Utz Jeggle, "The Rules of the Village: On the Cultural History of the Peasant World in the Last 150 Years," in Richard J. Evans and W. R. Lee, eds., *The German Peasantry: Conflict and Community in Rural Society from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Centuries* (New York, 1986), 265-89. See also, e.g., Cathleen S. Catt, "Farmers and Factory Workers: Rural Society in Imperial Germany: The Example of Maudach," in Richard J. Evans and W. R. Lee, eds., *The German Peasantry: Conflict and Community in Rural Society from the Eighteenth to the Twentieth Centuries* (New York, 1986), 129-57; Wolfgang Kaschuba, "Peasants and Others: The Historical Contours of Village Class Society," *ibid.*, 235-64 (quotation, 261); Albert Ilien and Utz Jeggle, *Leben auf dem Dorf: Zur Sozialgeschichte des Dorfes und zur Sozialpsychologie seiner Bewohner* (Opladen, 1978), 50-61; Josef Mooser, "Gleichheit und Ungleichheit in

amidst the prospective plenty of the Minnesota frontier was evident in their large families, their commitment to property accumulation without speculation, their addiction to personal violence and litigation in defense of honor, and in the central communal role of the church.[14] It was no less evident in their political behavior. Even if seldom explicitly articulated, we can trace the contours of a distinctive political culture in four particular areas: in the agenda they set for local government, in their criteria for local officeholding, in their attitudes towards partisanship and conflict resolution, and in their forms of participation in state and national election campaigns. By the standards set by their values and behavior we can then attempt to measure their effectiveness as political actors.

First, we can discern from their behavior several key interests that formed an underlying political agenda. To begin with, the intense preoccupation with property rights engendered by the close and necessitous world of the peasant village left an abiding concern for the protection of property from both public depredation--particularly in the form of exorbitant taxes or eminent domain--and from private trespass. The former required control of tax assessment and collection procedures, the latter the assurance of easy access to the courts and sympathetic judges and jurors. "The Germans of the county should never underestimate the advantage of having a fellow countryman as county assessor," the local German newspaper warned in 1876.[15] Equally importantly, Germans as severely undercapitalized settlers wanted any communal assistance they could obtain for farm-making without increasing the tax burden, and they wanted access to public relief in times of need. This meant the manipulation of township government. Thirdly, they wanted freedom from undue police harassment and the ability to communicate with the minions of the law, particularly in instances where the German sense of appropriate public behavior might differ from the Yankee norm, or where misunderstanding of the law--as in the service of writs--might threaten property. This required control of law enforcement and, once again, sympathetic courts.

Courts that they could dominate were also critical to their fourth requirement, the ability to use government to resolve intrafamily and intracommunity quarrels and questions of honor in customary fashion, and to their fifth requirement, the means to defend themselves against attacks on essential elements of their traditional lifestyle like drinking habits, card playing, dancing, and Sunday celebration. "The German fundamentally hates all temperance and related coercive laws," they noted, "not because he is no friend of moderation, but because he yields to no one the right to mix in his personal affairs in unseemly fashion."[16] Defense against "das Muckertum" mandated control of town and

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der ländlichen Gemeinde: Sozialstruktur und Kommunalverfassung im östlichen Westfalen vom späten 18. bis in die Mitte des 19. Jahrhunderts," *Archiv für Sozialgeschichte* 19 (1979), 231-62; Heide Wunder, *Die bäuerliche Gemeinde in Deutschland* (Göttingen, 1986); Ingeborg Weber-Kellermann, *Landleben im 19. Jahrhundert* (München, 1987).

[14] Kathleen Neils Conzen, "Peasant Pioneers: Generational Succession among German Farmers in Frontier Minnesota," in Steven Hahn and Jonathan Prude, eds., *The Countryside in the Age of Capitalist Transformation: Essays in the Social History of Rural America* (Chapel Hill, 1985), 259-92; Stearns County Criminal and Civil Court Case Files, 1855-1900, Minnesota State Archives, St. Paul; St. Paul Archdiocese Parish Histories Microfilm Collection, Minnesota State Archives, St. Paul.

[15] *Nordstern* (St. Cloud), October 12, 1876.

[16] *Ibid.*, July 13, 1876.

county boards as well. And finally, religious and familial values combined to demand German control of local school boards to insure that classes were taught in German and by Catholics; only so could they screen out Protestant or secular values, promote communication between parents and children, and save the extra expense of parochial schools.[17]

To represent them in their efforts to obtain these goals--and this is the second major aspect of Stearns County's German political culture that I wish to emphasize--they tended to seek persons of status, property, and dignity: the same kinds of men who had held leadership positions in the villages of the homeland. As a young teamster commented when he heard Carl Schurz speak in St. Cloud in 1859--the reporting is that of an English-language newspaper--"He talk sense. He no like dat Rothe [another German politician], come up here and talk nonsense--try to make beobles laugh, and laugh first himselv...Schurz he talk sense...dat ish de way a gentleman talk in Germany."[18] When a German editor praised a German officeholder for his "faithful attention to duty, his honesty, and his independence of party," and cited his long county residence and experience in public affairs, he was listing the qualities that Germans sought in their officeholders.[19] Favored officials were returned to office year after year: John M. Zapp served as country treasurer for 28 years, John M. Rosenberger as St. Cloud city treasurer for 27 years, Barney Overbeck as county coroner for 23 years. Township office similarly remained in the same hands year in, year out: in St. Martin, for example, organized in 1859, only three men held the office of town clerk before 1918--and one of those only served a single term--while the same small set of family names, drawn from the longest established and most prosperous farmers within the town, dominated the supervisors' roster. As in Germany, it was not unknown for a town to elect its priest to office, and even more common was pastoral direction of political affairs, whether through sermons, threats of denial of pastoral services, or marching parishioners to register or vote, while the so-called *Kirchenväter*---seminary-educated schoolteacher-organists found in most German towns--frequently served interminable terms as town clerk, thereby controlling local memories and agendas.[20]

In a political culture where individual virtue, wealth, and age were the most important qualifications for office, party was inevitably distrusted--this was a third defining characteristic of the political culture. Party meant decisions based on self-interest rather than communal good, and hence corruption. Georg Geissel stepped down from a five-year term as sheriff in 1876 because, he stated, he could no longer assent to the corrupt politics of the county, and a German editor greeted the onset of another "election campaign spectacle" with the comment, "Glücklich, wer nichts damit zu thun hat." But he also went on to point out that it was the duty of every citizen to participate in the political affairs of the

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[17] *Nordstern* (St. Cloud), January 20, 1887.

[18] *Visiter* (St. Cloud), October 5, 1859.

[19] *Nordstern* (St. Cloud), January 1, 1887; similarly, see *St. Cloud Journal*, April 2, 1872.

[20] *St. Cloud Times*, October 31, 1883, November 8, 1882; Collegeville's first and long-term town clerk was a Benedictine. For the German parallel, see Jonathan Sperber, *Popular Catholicism in Nineteenth Century Germany* (Princeton, 1984).

county "auf gerechte und anständige Weise" and to contribute his best to the "allgemeinen Wohl."[21] Germans paradoxically found in their single-minded commitment to the Democratic party--a commitment they inherited as Catholics--a way to avoid party conflict on the local level. Most important local contests took place either within Democratic party conventions, to which delegates were elected--a system that could resemble the indirect elections of Germany--or they took place through independent or people's parties that coalesced immediately before an election to nominate a ticket and then disappeared.[22] This device, plus frequent factionalism within Democratic ranks, also permitted individual alliances with Republicans willing to do a deal: most notoriously in the early 1880s when Republican capitalists, led by a recent convert to Catholicism, allied themselves with a younger generation of Germans impatient with the old order to form a "court house ring" that in Luxembourg-born John P. Hammerel gave Stearns County its first and only "boss."[23] But its distinctive political culture meant that even the county's flirtation with bossism was non-partisan, and it was no accident that the non-partisan tenets of progressivism found a natural home in Stearns County in the early twentieth century.[24] If it took peasants in Germany a considerable period to feel comfortable with party politics, the rise of progressive reform meant that they could delay their acclimatization to party even longer in Ameria.[25]

A politics ideally based on the qualified individual rather than the party also tended to turn political disagreements into personal insults that could be expunged only through public challenge and be resolved not via the ballot but only through formal apology, physical violence, or lawsuit. It likewise encouraged recourse to sources of authority outside the electoral system. "We, the undersigned," advertised two German politicians in 1866, "will pay $500 reward to any one who will prove...that we wrote...that the real estate was assessed too low....We further brand Joseph Broker and all those who concocted and circulated such falsehoods as malicious slanderers unless they shall bring proof to sustain their charge and obtain the above reward." Twenty years later, the German county attorney wrote to the German chair of the county board, "I have no objection to be present at the meeting of your Hon. Board, provided the board will guarantee to me that I shall be treated in a decent and respectful manner, and that I will not be subjected to the insults of your chairman..."[26] Not fully comfortable with the assumptions of the democratic process, Germans confused political with personal disagreement and continually appealed political issues directly to the court of public opinion or to higher

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21 *Nordstern* (St. Cloud), November 16, 1876; June 1, 1876.

22 Republicans frequently also added to their ticket popular Democrats already nominated by that party, citing "the fitness of the men for the positions, strengthening the general ticket, and the utter impossibility of defeating them;" *St. Cloud Journal*, September 5, 1872.

23 *St. Cloud Times*, August 30, 1882. Hammerel's ambiguous entry, clearly not self-composed, in a county history of the period is worth quoting: "He is a man of more than ordinary attainments, which seem to be appreciated by his fellow citizens; he has held the office of town Supervisor, and County Commissioner for several terms, and is at present, Chairman of that Board, and Mayor of the City of St. Cloud." N. H. Winchell, *History of the Upper Mississippi Valley* (Minneapolis, 1881), 390.

24 Gertrude Gore, "Micropolis in Transition," in Edward L. Henry, ed., *Micropolis in Transition: A Study of a Small City* (St. Cloud, 1971), 153-70.

25 Wunder, *Bäuerliche Gemeinde*.

26 *St. Cloud Times*, January 14, 1885.

authority.[27] One can almost hear the exasperated sighs of the American judges who had to deal with the frequent slander suits and assault cases arising from such habits. Equally puzzling to Americans was German willingness to turn to the courts to resolve other types of political issues, as when Hammerel in 1884 sued to stop the distribution of certain moneys to his political enemies for services rendered to the county once he could no longer control a safe majority on the county board.[28]

A final characteristic of the county's German political culture was German electoral behavior in state and national elections. In contrast to the personal politics of the local level, Germans tended to vote a straight party line in higher contests regardless of the character of the officeseekers, they showed little disposition to press for German candidates, and election campaigns were boozy broths of beer, music, and torchlight rather than reasoned discourse. Local American politicos commented freely on the ease with which German votes could be bought--as long as they could be cast under the Democratic party label--and on the necessity for free beer to bring out the German vote. There is little indication that they were incorrect in their perceptions.[29] Such behavior suggests that German voters made a crucial distinction between local and higher levels of government. In Germany despite their new status as citizens they had had a most indirect say in higher levels of government, which they experienced as fundamentally oppositional and confronted through the mediation of their own elites, expecting in return a certain level of dignity, culture, and authority in government agents that would justify their own subordinate status.[30] They had little reason to expect anything more from American higher governments. What they most wanted was respect for their status as equal citizens. Hence their allegiance to the anti-nativist Democratic Party, even when it ran counter to direct self-interest, as in 1860 when it was the Republicans who supported a free Homestead Bill. They voted, because that was their right as Americans, but except for times when national or state elections raised questions of ethnicically defined status or interest, they were willing to be led to the voting box to elect appropriately grand and usually Yankee leaders for those offices, and equally willing to challenge with disrespect and evasion the local agents of distant governments. Thus German draft evasion in Stearns County during the Civil War was notorious,[31] and excise laws were treated with similar disrespect. In such a context, national and state election campaigns were more significant as rituals of German inclusion in the American polity than as actual acts of political choice, and how better to symbolize German importance than by forcing Americans to conduct those campaigns by the rules of village culture?

This brings us then to the question of the relative success of Stearns County's Germans in realizing their political objectives, and to the consequences of this political

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[27] E.g. *St. Cloud Journal*, November 22, 1866, October 27, 1870, January 16, 1871.

[28] John P. Hammerel vs. Stearns County Board of Commissioners, Stearns County District Court Case Files, Minnesota State Archives, St. Paul.

[29] E.g. *St. Cloud Democrat*, July 15, 1860; *St. Cloud Journal*, February 22, 1872; *Nordstern* (St. Cloud), November 9, 1876; *St. Cloud Times*, November 15, 1882, November 12, 1884.

[30] Ilien and Jeggle, *Leben auf dem Dorf:*, 40-45.

[31] See e.g. the "wanted" poster in for Minnesota draft evaders in U.S. National Archives, Washington, D.C., Record Group 110 (Provost Marshall General's Bureau), Minnesota, 2nd District, 1864.

culture for the ethnic community and the local political system. We can explore these issues through a brief survey of three arenas of public life: township government, the court system, and party politics at the county level and beyond.

Although the first township governments, owing to the nature of the settlement process, were usually interethnic collaborations, Germans quickly took over in the townships they settled. Berlin, for example, was organized in 1859 at a meeting held at a Yankee-owned farm; a Yankee was elected moderator, and Yankees were elected constables and justices of the peace, but two of the three supervisors, the town clerk, the tax collector, the assessor, and one of the two overseers of the poor were German. Within two years, it was rare for more than one Yankee name to be found on the list of officers. By the time that the township of Farming was organized in 1873, all of the town officers were immigrants from the outset.[32]

It is easy to dismiss the significance of town government. There was, after all, only one annual town meeting, with supervisors meeting only infrequently during the year to carry out the limited functions assigned them by law. But the town minutes that recorded their doings--often in distinctly Germanic orthography--also make clear the extent to which a wider set of community functions were expressed in local government. The annual rotation of the daylong meeting from house to house literally brought home the formal expression of community. Other citizen involvement included three days' annual road labor, and jury duty at a minute's notice. The four to eight road districts within each town had their own periodic meetings, as did the school districts. When a new road was needed, or a dispute arose about an existing one, citizens went to the town government. When there were complaints about fencing or boundaries, the supervisors constituted a fence-viewing committee; when sickness struck, they became a board of health. Town meetings regulated the communal use of uncleared, unfenced land for grazing. Their attention extended to bounty raising during the Civil War and to selling Liberty Bonds during World War I. They set rates for the poor fund and decided who would receive support from the town. They protected the town from nuisances ranging from peddlers to polluters, and by investing tax surpluses that accumulated in their road, poor, and general funds, they wielded a significant source of local loan capital.

Township government was often virtually synonymous with parish administration. Each parish had an annual meeting and a board of trustees who directed its fiscal affairs. The same men frequently served both entities, and what began as a parish trustees' meeting could quickly turn into a town supervisors' session or vice versa. Responsibilities frequently blurred, particularly on social and school issues.[33] Nowhere is the relationship more evident than in the way that parish limits generally followed preexisting town boundaries. The men who founded the parishes were neighbors already accustomed to working together to create the basic infrastructure of the town's economic life. Similarly incestuous were the school boards, which in an era of lax state supervision were virtually

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32 Statements regarding township are based on analysis of the records of the towns of St. Augusta (Berlin), St. Cloud, Rockville, Farming, Spring Hill, Krain, and Collegeville.

33 E.g. *St. Cloud Times*, July 28, 1884.

autonomous. By controlling the language and religion of instruction in the local public school regardless of the stipulations of state law, they could effectively close a community to any but German settlement and insure the reproduction of community values.

If township government provided Stearns County's German farmers with an essential framework for the coalescence of community, the court system gave them a means to maintain the inner lines of the culture by punishing deviants and protecting community members from outside cultural pressure. Both justices of the peace and district judges were elected. Each town had one or two justices competent to hear minor civil and criminal cases; they also served as courts of initial hearing for most other cases that were remanded to district court. Because they were elected locally, justices usually reflected local values more than any real knowledge of the law. On appeal, the questionable legality of some of their decisions undoubtedly caused consternation or mirth among the legal community, but more important was the immediate resolution of personal disputes in accord with community norms that they often provided, just as their counterparts had done in Germany.[34]

Their courtrooms were farmhouse kitchens or general stores, the language usually German if both parties were German and no lawyers were present. "Let's go to the Squire and see if there's law in America," feuding families would say, and gathering their witnesses they would proceed forthwith to demand a hearing. Weighing the rights and wrongs of community squabbles, seeking amicable agreement where possible, forcing husbands to post bond to keep the peace with their wives, fining neighbor women for fighting, determining when consensual sex became rape, deciding if cattle had strayed or been lured, fining sowers of wild oats and illicit cutters of wood, finding husbands for unmarried women and fathers for bastards, and of course--a primary duty--assisting the collection of debts, the farmers, shopkeepers, and artisans whom the American system permitted to serve as J.P.s were essential to the maintenance of moral harmony and familial honor.

Only when the village consensus broke down and cases were appealed to the county court did the formal stipulations of American law really come into play. At this level it was the jury, both grand and petit, chosen from the county's voters, that was the most important defender of village values. German juries were notorious both for their reluctance to convict unmarried mothers of infanticide, for example, and for their willingness to bring bastardy convictions to save towns the cost of poor support. But the jury proved one of its greatest values in defending Germans against liquor regulation. A case in point: in 1891 three St. Martin saloonkeepers were charged by the state with serving alcohol on Sunday. A dozen witnesses paraded before the county grand jury to testify that they had seen beer sold in the three saloons on various Sundays to some 55 different men. Then the grand jury voted fourteen to seven against indictment. The law was a dead letter. In another case, witnesses testified that though they had seen various

[34] Statements regarding the functioning of justice courts are based on analysis of all cases appealed from justice courts to the district court from 1855 to 1900, and on surviving justice dockets for the towns of Spring Hill and Krain, the villages of Albany and Melrose, and the city of St. Cloud, consulted at the Minnesota Historical Society and the Stearns County Historical Society.

persons drinking in a saloon on Sunday, they couldn't say whether the brown stuff being consumed was coffee or beer! "The number of those who think the jury system a delusion and a farce upon justice, has lately increased in this city," a Yankee editor noted after one such occasion.[35]

Germans were equally successful in controlling other areas of county and St. Cloud city government that they defined as central to the free exercise of their values--the third measure of effectiveness that I wish to note. Germans were elected as county and city treasurers almost without exception after 1856 and 1859 respectively. They held the posts of register of deeds and auditor continuously from 1860 and 1864 respectively, insuring that property could be defended in a familiar tongue. The offices of city chief of police and county sheriff were virtual German monopolies from the later 1850s, they controlled the coroner's office, charged with ruling on accidental or violent deaths, almost continuously from 1862, and by 1868, with one interruption, also dominated the county superintendency of schools.

It was not just their numerical majority that insured Germans these positions, but conscious judgments of what was appropriate and necessary. Thus Germans generally held the office of judge of probate court, with its vital oversight of the transfer of family property, from 1876 onward, and made sporadic attempts at the office of county attorney in the same period, but the first German clerk of court was not elected until 1903, the first German court commissioner and circuit court judge not until 1913. Village values continued to assert the necessity of dignity, of participation in the dominant culture, for these high offices, even when German attorneys were available; only when the second generation came of age were Germans seen as eligible, though Irish Catholics formed an acceptable compromise in the transition period. Similarly, although the system of district representation insured a German majority on the county board, so that by the 1880s only one or two of six supervisors were not German, until the 1880s the chairman was generally aYankee. And in St. Cloud, despite German electoral majorities from the outset, only four of the 48 mayoral terms to 1911 were filled, at widely spaced intervals, by Germans. Likewise, not until the 1890s were Germans consistently chosen to chair the city council.[36]

As these patterns suggest, during the initial years of settlement Germans were largely content to let Yankees take the lead at the county level as long as their vital interests were not be threatened. After the Civil War they made more active use of certain powers of government--road building, education, justice, and public welfare in particular--to shape the kind of world they wanted, but remained content to follow the lead of St. Cloud boosters in what might be called the "external affairs" of economic development, provided some of the benefits flowed their way. It was not until the collapse of the economic boom of the late 1880s brought rising levels of government indebtedness, and the American-born second generation came of age, that Germans finally took full control. Adapting the

[35] Stearns County Grand Jury Minutes, 1891, Minnesota Historical Society; *St. Cloud Times*, June 20, 1883.

[36] Electoral information compiled from newspapers and William Bell Mitchell, *History of Stearns County Minnesota* (Chicago, 1915).

political agendas and habits of their fathers to the new rhetoric of reform, they converted what had been an ethnic political culture into a local one that would endure in recognizable form far into the twentieth century. Political scientists in the 1950s would find in Stearns County a prototypical exemplar of midwestern isolationism and McCarthyism; two decades later, Stearns County farmers with tractors and shotguns defied state efforts to run high tension power lines across their fields.[37] As late as 1971, St. Cloud government was still defined by its nonpartisan elections, small tax base, low per capita taxation, understaffed public sector, and obsolescent municipal infrastructure--the product of a defensive and inward-turning political culture eternally suspicious of external agency.[38]

Stearns County's German immigrants, I have suggested, participated early and actively in politics at many levels, they did so with a distinctive ethnic style, sought to achieve certain ethnic ends, and on their own terms were not unsuccessful. Their political effectiveness helped them create the kind of world they wanted on the Minnesota frontier: a world in which they could achieve the familial economic success they had lacked in Germany but one free of outside pressures to conform in other ways. They could make their own communal decisions within the townships they dominated, they could largely shape county policy in accord with their values, and they could use local government to shield them from some of the adverse effects of state and federal law while accepting their powerlessness in lawmaking at these levels. Their political culture was not totally dissimilar from that of some of their non-German neighbors in many respects, but it is important to note that it was not simply derivative or imitative, but proceeded on its own tangent from its own distinctive point of departure.

I do not wish to make exaggerated claims for the role of political participation in shaping German life in the county. It was only one of a number of factors that combined to insure an exceptional degree of ethnic autonomy on this American frontier. It did not guarantee--and nor did they want--a permanent ethnic enclave. By settling a new land, by helping construct its public institutions, by participating in its politics, not only were they serving ends that grew out of a traditional culture; they were also quite consciously acting as Americans. "[W]e old pioneers can be proud," Joseph Capser proclaimed in 1916. "We belong to the gang that cut the pathway to this far, widespreading west. We belong to the party that planted this mammoth tree that branches out all over this great civilized, richly-settled country to which the entire United States looks for its bread and butter."[39] Over time, as new generations replaced the old and the entire context of American society changed, their world too would change, but in ways tht were never free of the initial values

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[37] Samuel Lubell, *The Future of American Politics* (2nd ed., Garden City, N.Y., 1955); Barry M. Casper and Paul David Wellstone, *Powerline: The First Battle of America's Energy War* (Amherst, Mass., 1981).

[38] Henry, *Micropolis in Transition*, 9-10.

[39] Speech of Joseph Capser at the Sauk Center, Minnesota, Homecoming festivities, September 1916, quoted in Laurence Hall, "The Story of My Grandparents in America," in W. P.A. Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

that had brought them to the frontier, and what was originally ethnic gradually became local in a process better described as parallel integration than assimilation.

How far can we generalize the Stearns County German political experience? Certainly each German community would have its own variant, depending on the mix of its settlers and their homeland origins, their degree of homogeneity and dominance within the broader community, the forms of local government and the traditions of local party politics. But many aspects of Stearns County's political culture--its fiscal conservatism, its commitment to nonpartisanship, its targeted officeholding, its dedication to "personal liberty"--run through virtually any account of German-American politics. It is time to widen our conception of immigrant political behavior, to explore how it grows out of and helps shape ethnic cultures, to judge its effectiveness by the standards of the group, and to use it as a way of helping to assess the consequences of ethnic cultures for broader American developments. It may be no accident, for example, that the states of the upper midwest most dominated by immigrant settlement also have retained some of the nation's most distinctive political cultures.[40] We cannot know what role immigrants may have played in shaping those cultures until we begin to look at the full range of immigrant political behavior and its variation by group, place, and time.

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[40] John H. Fenton, *Midwest Politics* (New York, 1966); Kevin Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle, N.Y., 1969).

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