

St. Michael Historian



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St. Peter's Colony

St. Michael and the Canadian Migration

By Bob Zahler



120,000 Acker
des besten und fruchtbarsten Landes, geeignet für
Ackerbau und Viehzucht,
in der deutschen
St. Peters Colonie,
SASK, CANADA.

Jeder sollte die Gelegenheit benutzen,
diese herrliche Gegend zu besetzen,
da wir im Stande sind, Ihnen Fahr-
karten zu ermäßigtem Preise auf der

GREAT NORTHERN
und der
CANADIAN NORTHERN
Eisenbahn via St. Paul, Quebec und
Winnipeg bis nach Pumbett in der
Colonie zu besorgen.

Für weitere Auskunft und Besorgung
der Fahrkarten wende man sich an die

GERMAN AMERICAN LAND CO.,
LIMITED
St. Cloud, Minn.

Above left: Abbot Peter Engel, who had spent his boyhood in St. Michael. He was elected abbot of St. John's in 1894. In 1902 he gave his name and his permission to establish St. Peter's Colony for German Catholics in Saskatchewan. Above right: an ad promoting the colony, in German, by the German American Land Company of St. Cloud.

be claimed after settlement. Furthermore, after 1896 the Canadian Minister of the Interior, Clifford Sifton, began vigorously promoting immigration to Americans and non-British Europeans, which was not popular with many Canadians worried about losing their Anglo culture; but Sifton was convinced that only "sturdy" people with a strong agricultural background would remain on the land in that severe climate and develop successful farms. German Catholics from Minnesota were interested in taking advantage of the Canadian government's offer, but before they went, they wanted assurances that the Church would send priests, and so they started making requests.

One priest who received requests from parishioners was Fr. Conrad Glatzmeier, OSB, the pastor at Albany, who then reached out to his superior at St. John's, Abbot Peter Engel. Abbot Engel grew up on his family's pioneer farm in St. Michael where, he said, "My parents soon noticed that I showed no liking for the work on the farm, but some aptitude for study." He went to St. John's, became a Benedictine priest, and by 1902 was in his eighth year as head of the abbey.

Fifty years after the first pioneers scouted the territory that would become St. Michael, some of the sons of those pioneers explored the virgin plains of Saskatchewan, Canada to establish German Catholic communities, just as Germans a generation earlier had done in Minnesota. And like the earlier generation, the impetus for this move was the shortage of land. By 1900 the land surrounding St. Michael could not support the many sons and daughters of the first immigrants who still wanted to farm. Family sizes in St. Michael were large; often 8-13 children per couple. With older sons often inheriting or given first option on purchasing the family farm, younger sons had to find other work or go someplace else to farm. At about the same time, the Canadian government was trying to encourage settlement in Saskatchewan, part of what had been called the North-West Territories. Settlement on the Canadian plains was slow since rail expansion across Canada was delayed. Consequently, throughout most of the 19th century, Canadians were more likely to migrate to the United States rather than the other way around.

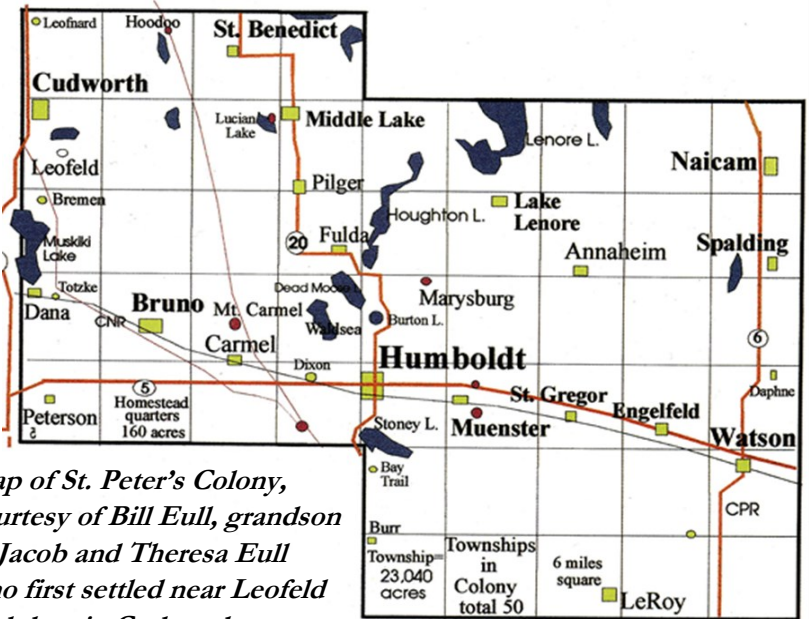
This situation began to change after 1885, by which time the Canadian Pacific Railway had connected eastern and western Canada, and other lines connected to US railroads. The CPR had been granted millions of acres of land, but that land would only be profitable to the railroad if they could encourage settlement. The Canadian government had passed its own version of the Homestead Act, called the Dominions Land Act, in which the government granted a quarter section (160 acres) to settlers for the filing fee of just \$10, provided that they live on the land for at least six months each year and that within three years they cultivated at least 30 acres. An additional quarter section could

The Benedictines came to Minnesota from Pennsylvania nearly fifty years earlier for the precise reason of serving German Catholic pioneers. Abbot Engel decided it was time to continue this mission. Creating a German Catholic colony in Canada with a priory of Benedictine priests to serve them seemed the best way to fulfil this mission; and so in August of 1902 Engel sent Fr. Bruno Doerfler, OSB, to scout the best farmland for these German Catholics to settle. Accompanying Fr. Bruno were three Catholic laymen from Stearns County: J. J. Haskamp, Moritz Hoeschen, and Henry Hoeschen. These men were interested in a partnership of sorts. If the Benedictines would supply priests, they knew that settlers would be willing to leave for Canada, and they wanted to help sell the land. The party of four traveled by train as far as they could and scouted the region as far west as Calgary, and then continued

north to Westakawin near Edmonton. Still not finding the kind of soil they thought necessary for good farming, they headed east. Upon reaching Saskatoon, Henry Hoeschen apparently felt discouraged and decided to return to Minnesota while the other three pressed on. The threesome traveled northeast by rail to Rosthern, and then east and southeast by wagon. According to Fr. Bruno's own account "...As we proceeded, our enthusiasm increased over the found treasure, for we found the soil to improve continually. When we finally arrived at the summit of the slope, we were greeted by a gently rolling plain, studded with beautiful groves and crystal lakes. The soil of this plain was the very choicest, for it was deep black humus."

Returning to St. John's in September 1902 with glowing reports of the land's possibilities, the Benedictines decided to take religious responsibility for Catholics who agreed to settle the proposed colony. As soon as this decision was made, Haskamp and Hoeschen quickly formed the German American Land Company and purchased 108,000 acres of railroad land with the intent of selling the claims to settlers. The Canadian government agreed to reserve 50 townships for the proposed colony provided that the land company get at least 500 settlers on homesteads each year for the next three years. A Catholic Settlement Society was also established in St. Paul to advertise the project and to assist settlers in making their claims. The Bishop of the Diocese of Prince Albert transferred the spiritual care of the 50 townships to the Benedictines, and these townships became known as St. Peter's Colony, named in honor of St. Michael's native son, Abbot Peter Engel.

How word of St. Peter's Colony came to St. Michael is not known for certain. It could have come from Abbot Peter himself as he personally knew many from St. Michael; or it is probable that he simply wrote to Fr. Deustermann, pastor at St. Michael in 1902, and encouraged him to announce this opportunity from the pulpit. Among the first to be a part of this new colony was Jacob Eull, the eighth of eleven children of the immigrants Peter Eull and Margaretha (Thull) Eull. According to available records, Jake was among a group of 26 men from central Minnesota to first stake out claims in the new colony in the fall of 1902. Others from St. Michael in this Group of 26 were John Duerr, Nick Daleiden, Adam Neis, and George Frey. Jacob Eull had recently married Theresa Kasper, daughter of Simon Kasper and Katharina (Halter) Kasper. As his older brothers were farming the family land, Jake was struggling to make a living in construction and other ventures, but the desire for acreage ran deep in his veins. After returning to St. Michael with the scouting party in late 1902, he and Theresa made plans to move to Saskatchewan in the spring of 1903. Another Duerr, Joseph F. Duerr, son of Peter Duerr and Mary (Frey) Duerr also headed north in 1903. Joe Duerr was a first cousin to John and he (Joe) was married to Mathilda Barthel, a daughter of Jacob Barthel and Christina (Maus) Barthel. The marriages and familial relations seem to be significant in terms of who from St. Michael made the move to Canada as just about everyone who migrated had a connection to another settler that was no further distant than first cousin. Others who moved to the colony were Joe Duerr's brothers Thomas and Anton P. Duerr; John Duerr's sister Bertha and her husband Daniel Schmitz; and Mathilda (Barthel) Duerr's sister Katharina and her husband Albert Becker.



Map of St. Peter's Colony, courtesy of Bill Eull, grandson of Jacob and Theresa Eull who first settled near Leofeld and then in Cudworth.

The family who had the greatest number of members to move to St. Peter's Colony was the Jaeb family. Six sons of the Michael Jaeb and Louisa (Duerr) Jaeb family ended up moving to the colony in the Fulda and Humboldt districts. Through their mother, they were all first cousins to John and Joseph Duerr. Additionally, the oldest of the Jaeb brothers, Anthony, married Margaret Barthel, a sister to Mathilda (Barthel) Duerr and Katharina (Barthel) Becker. The other Jaeb brothers who moved to the colony included Hubert, Louis, Frank, Michael Jr. and Alois. There had been a total of 13 children born to Michael and Louisa Jaeb, and despite the fact that several of the boys became blacksmiths and didn't farm, the land opportunities in Canada were too tempting. Four of the six Jaeb brothers left for St. Peter's Colony in the spring of 1904. Alois remained behind as he was not yet 21 years old and thus unable to claim land for himself. He joined his brothers in 1906 when he turned 21. Michael Jr. didn't move until 1915 when he went to take care of Louis' farm after his unexpected death. Except for Anthony, the other Jaeb boys were single when they departed St. Michael. Frank had been courting Josephine Barthel, yet another daughter of Jacob and Christina (Maus) Barthel, before he left. After Anthony and Frank had their first crude homes built on the prairie, Anthony's wife Margaret and their six children made the trip to the colony in the fall of 1904 bringing Frank's fiancé Josephine with them. Frank and Josephine were the first couple married in the log church of St. Joseph's in Fulda, Saskatchewan in October 1904. Three of the Jaeb brothers found wives in the colony: daughters of widower Lawrence Frank who came to the colony from Germany via Wisconsin.



The Jaeb brothers who helped start St. Peter's Colony, L to R: Anthony, Hubert, Louis, Frank, Michael Jr., and Alois. Photos from about 1900

The trip for the colonists who went in 1903 and 1904 was about the same for all. Trains could take them all the way to Rosthern, but from there it was at least 80 miles, depending on the destination, by wagon through numerous sloughs and across the Saskatchewan River, which was relatively easy to cross in the winter, but treacherous in the summer. Since they were not traveling on established roads, numerous times the wagons got stuck and they had to unload the wagons and unhitch the teams to get the wagons loose. Using claim maps, they first had to locate the corner markers of the property they intended to claim. Then they had to create some sort of shelter, which was not easy since there was very little timber. Most of the settlers' first homes were sod shanties or "soddies". If they were able, some traveled back to St. Michael after settling their claims, cut wood on family-owned land, had Bernings mill it into lumber, and then shipped it by railcar to their homestead. This is what the Jaeb brothers did. In this way, many of the first comfortable homes in St. Peter's colony were built with St. Michael-grown lumber. In 1905 the trains reached the village of Humboldt about in the middle of the colony, and so other machinery and goods could be shipped within a couple of day's journey from most claims. Nonetheless, the first few years on the Saskatchewan plain were still very challenging since in addition to building homes, they had to plow the



Above left: a sod shanty that was built near Swift Current, Saskatchewan. It was typical of the settlers' first homes. Above right: Jacob and Theresa Eull and their children Vera, Ella and Harry in 1912 at their new home in Cudworth where Jake and Theresa started a butcher shop after moving off of their original farm on the prairie.

virgin sod, build barns and sheds for animals and grain, dig wells, and help establish churches; this was not a life of leisure by any means. This part of the Saskatchewan plain was heavily dotted with sloughs, ponds, and lakes. The mosquitoes were ever present. Ludwig Jaeb sent a letter home to family in St. Michael with toenail clippings in the envelope that he claimed were “mosquito ribs”. Winters were not necessarily colder than in St. Michael, but the flatness of the land meant that the wind blew without hindrance. Life on the plains was harsh and not everyone felt that it was worth the struggle. Nick Daleiden was one who went to Canada to take a claim in the colony, but he eventually came back to St. Michael, selling his claim to

Jake Eull who expanded his holdings. Nick then bought a farm near Beebe Lake. Many felt that the church and land company overstated how easy life would be on the plains and came back disappointed. Other St. Michael natives like George Frey, Lawrence Barthel, and Oscar Weiss traveled further west in Canada and ended up in Alberta and British Columbia. Hubert and Anthony Jaeb eventually moved back to the US, in part because they sought a more temperate climate.

As for the Benedictines who helped initiate this venture, they established the new priory of St. Peter’s at what became the town of Muenster. Providing priests for the priory was aided by the coincidental closing of the Cluny priory in southern Illinois in 1902. The members of Cluny needed a new mission and Abbot Engel was able to convince them to relocate to Canada and establish a new priory there. Eventually the priory became St. Peter’s Abbey. Each of the monks was allowed to claim land for himself, and so the future income of the religious enterprise was partially built upon 3,200 acres of land claimed by members of the order. Of course, they still had to farm it to retain the right to the claim. By 1906, just three years after the start of the colony, the Benedictines had established eleven churches. Sixteen parishes and missions held church services on a regular basis and four of the parishes had a resident pastor; the rest were served by priests from the priory in Muenster. St. Peter’s would eventually establish a newspaper, a high school and a college. Today, 30 parishes are still served by the priests of St. Peter’s Abbey. The lasting mark of the Benedictines is also seen in the names of several villages including Englefeld, named in honor of Abbot Peter Engel; Bruno, named in honor of Fr. Bruno Doerfler, and St. Benedict, named in honor of the founder of the Benedictine Order. Their heroism and faithfulness continues to inspire confidence in God’s providence.

In writing this article I am indebted to the research of Bill Eull of Port Perry, Ontario; Daniel Jaeb of Forest Lake, Minnesota, and our own “resident” genealogist, Stephen S. Barthel.

Right: St. Peter’s Abbey in Muenster, Saskatchewan today



Photo courtesy of Fr. Paul Paproski, OSB

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Meetings are held on the second Monday of the month at the St. Michael City Hall in the Gries and Lenhardt Public Meeting Room adjacent to the library.

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Upcoming Events

All events and meetings held at the Gries Lenhardt Allen Library Room at City Hall

NO MEETING IN DECEMBER

Jan. 14, 7:00 PM	Regular Board meeting
Feb. 11, 7:00 PM	Regular Board meeting
Mar. 11, 7:00 PM	Regular Board meeting