

GERMAN IN OKARCHE, 1892-1902

By W. A. Willibrand*

Okarche is situated on the Kingfisher-Canadian county line, one mile west of the 98th Meridian, which was the eastern boundary of the Cheyenne and Arapaho country.¹ The place was a mere cattle-loading station on the Rock Island railroad until the afternoon of April 19, 1892, when participants in the run of that date transformed it into a village of crude and primitive shelters.² During the next ten years it was to develop as the center of a "Little Germany" in Oklahoma. By 1902 this community had something in common with the "Big Germany" across the sea: Several dialects were spoken there but standard German was the official language of four religious groups and of a locally organized mutual insurance society. To a lesser degree it was also used and taught in two parochial schools, and even the public school was not without its influence. And it was the language of the press for most Okarcheans. They subscribed generously to newspapers in the German language, some of which were published in Oklahoma.³

Okarche was not predominantly German during the years immediately following the "run." Early in 1893, when the editor of the local weekly urged that it was time "to make rapid and permanent strides towards metropolitanism," the officers of the Commercial Club were people of non-German origin. We find here the names of E. C. Coon, George Watson, H. S. Speer, Frank Wil-

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¹ The word "Okarche" is pronounced in three syllables, with the accent on *kar* and the last syllable like *chi* in "chicken," but unstressed. Orthographically the *Ok* is derived from "Oklahoma", the *ar* from Arapaho and the *che* from Cheyenne. Charles N. Gould, *Oklahoma Place Names*, (Norman, 1933), p. 90. (On the same page the coining "Okeene" is also described.)

² Golden Anniversary, *The First Bank of Okarche, 1892-1942*, p. 2.

³ Cf. *The Okarche Times* of May 13, 1898. The title of this weekly newspaper, (our main source of information) is abbreviated hereafter as *Ti* without a period. Use of files in possession of Mr. W. F. Voss and of Oklahoma Historical Society is hereby gratefully acknowledged.

liams, H. H. Laney, A. J. Thompson, and B. F. Buffington. A glance at the names of thirty-two places of business reveals a preponderance of non-Germans. Only the following can be positively identified as being of German origin: G. F. Gleichmann, I. H. Hummel, F. J. Waldman, Hermann Lindner, J. A. Becker.⁴ In some cases the names of firms were not surnames and it is therefore not always possible to determine the nationality of the owners of certain shops. The "First Bank of Okarche" was headed by Julius Loosen, a native-born German.⁵ Non-German, however, was Charles E. Hunter, editor and business pioneer not only in Okarche but in several other areas of Oklahoma.⁶ The early preponderance of non-Germans is also suggested by the fact that the Congregationalists built a church in 1892, several months before any of the German-speaking religious groups were ready to build.⁷

Early German settlers east of the 98th Meridian took the initiative in attracting people of German speech to the newly opened territory west of this meridian. Thus, William Lemke, later to become one of the original members of St. John's Lutheran congregation, had a considerable correspondence with prospective settlers who had read his letters to the editor of a German newspaper.⁸ There were no doubt others who wrote similar letters.

Prospective settlers interested in purchasing relinquished claims came from older German-speaking areas in the United States in considerable numbers. Early in 1893 a real estate man by the name of I. F. Crow found it advisable to secure the services of a Herr Herber to help him with his German-speaking clients.⁹ Four of the early-day religious groups, namely the Catholics, Lutherans, Evangelicals, and Mennonites, (to name them in the order of their numerical strength) were almost solidly German. In the spring of 1893 the Lutherans and Catholics had church buildings of their own and were thus able to attract settlers of their respective faiths. The prosperity of these people is indicated by their impressive ecclesiastical structures of a later date.

⁴ *Ibid.*, February 17, 1893; March 10, 1893; June 6, 1893.

⁵ *The First Bank of Okarche, op. cit.*, p. 4.

⁶ Hunter's varied pioneering ventures are outlined in Luther B. Hill's *A History of Oklahoma*, Vol. II, p. 35.

⁷ *Echoes of Eighty-Nine*. Kingfisher (Oklahoma) Study Club, p. 160.

⁸ For these facts the writer is indebted to Otto Lemke, son of the Okarche pioneer, William Lemke. The elder Lemke and Fritz and Carl Schroeder lived just east of the 98th meridian, in Old Oklahoma, before the run of 1892. They attracted German settlers to the area.

⁹ *Ti*, January 27, 1893. In the notes of Mrs. William J. Butler, the former Myrtle R. Thompson, there is a statement about the incoming Germans who purchased good claims at prices ranging from \$1500 to \$2000. Mrs. Butler is also the author of a manuscript life of her mother, Molly R. Thompson, Okarche pioneer. Mrs. Butler graciously made her manuscripts available to the present writer.

From its beginnings to the present day the Lutheran congregation at Okarche has had German-speaking ministers. Its bilingual character is summarized as follows by the Reverend Paul Hoyer:¹⁰

From the time of its founding, St. John's used the German language in its services almost exclusively for about two decades, while its school was bilingual almost from the beginning. Later some English sermons were held on special occasions, and since the great world war a steady natural change has taken place. Children used the English language in their conversation, the school gradually lost the German more and more, and today altogether. While the church services are still fifty-fifty the attendance both in the services and at communion is 39% German and 61% English. At present we have German services at 9:30 and English at 10:45 every Sunday morning, except on the first Sunday of the month, which is always communion Sunday, and is alternately German and English. Business meetings of the congregation, as well as all meetings of the Ladies Aid and Walther League are conducted in English.

This paragraph was written eight years ago. Since that time the German services have continued at St. John's, but with a steady decline in attendance.

Like other frontier towns, Okarche did not have a stable population. Many of the first settlers left to participate in other "runs" or to try their fortunes elsewhere when lack of funds, drouths and bad crop conditions militated against early prosperity. There is an impression that the German element of the population remained in the community while many non-Germans migrated to other regions. This is true only to a limited extent. Church records and newspaper files suggest that many of the Germans were also inclined to be venturesome and migratory and that they, like others, wearied of the drab and harsh realities of pioneering or sought greener fields in the Cherokee Strip and in the Kiowa Comanche country.¹¹ The early membership of St. John's is a case in point. Only the following charter members of the congregation remained in the community: Fritz and Carl Schroeder, Fritz Peters, Sr., Fred Dannel, Sr., John Schulze, and the already mentioned William Lemke.¹²

The first resident pastor of these early Lutherans was Rev. von der Au, who also served Lutheran groups at Enid, Kingfisher, El Reno, Choctaw City and Shelly, all in the territory of the Rock Island Railroad. In his one-room rectory at Okarche, von der Au taught a handful of Lutheran children. This was the beginning of

¹⁰ *Golden Anniversary of St. John's Lutheran Church* (Okarche, 1942), p. 16. The present writer is greatly indebted to the Reverend Hoyer for his printed contribution to the history of Okarche and for other information given in an unflinching spirit of kindness and courtesy.

¹¹ *Ti*, August 2, 1901.

¹² *Golden Anniversary of St. John's Lutheran Church, op. cit.*, p. 6. Pages 3 to 11 of this 16-page booklet were written by the Reverend T. C. Otte, Pastor of St. John's 1913-1936. The remaining five pages were contributed by the pastor of today, Rev. Paul Hoyer.

what developed later as the two-room elementary school at St. John's.¹³ German was the language of religious instruction during those early years.

This was also true of the Mennonites and the German Evangelical group, who had no separate schools. The Mennonite Sunday school however attracted some non-German children because their parents cherished the fond hope that German might be picked up that way.¹⁴ The small Evangelical congregation held services in the Baptist church, where they were served by German-speaking pastors from Norman and Kiel.¹⁵ (Kiel was renamed Loyal during the local tensions caused by World War I.)¹⁶ By 1902 this group had become strong enough to build a church but it was a strength that did not endure as the years went by.

In the Catholic fold the situation was complicated by the fact that the head of the hierarchy in Oklahoma, Bishop Meerschaert, was not entirely sympathetic with the linguistic aspirations of the Catholic German-speaking settlers. Among these people, like among the Protestant groups, the need for German was both esthetic and religious. They liked to hear the hymns and prayers, scripture readings, announcements and sermons in a language which seemed beautiful and transcendent by comparison with their imperfect English and their German dialects. Some of them spoke only a few words of English and while their dialects were adequate to their material environment, the vocabulary of their inner life, their religious experience, was that of standard German, to which they had been accustomed by the schools and the pulpits of their native communities. This was the only language they could use adequately in going to the sacraments. They found priests in Oklahoma spoke other languages.¹⁷

The resulting tension was of more than local interest. In 1899 members of the parish at Okarche assumed a sort of leadership in the struggle for the German language. A meeting was called in Oklahoma City "for the purpose of appealing to the Pope for the privilege of holding services" in German. It was attended by the following delegates and visitors from Okarche: F. J. Waldmann, Mr. Kroener, F. Rother, William Knecht, B. Bogner, John Eck and

¹³ *Ibid.*, pp. 6 f and 12 f.

¹⁴ Notes of Myrtle R. Thompson.

¹⁵ *Ti*, March 7, 1902.

¹⁶ Professor Gould is probably in error in deriving Kiel "from a red rock sometimes called kiel or keel." *Oklahoma Place Names*, p. 95.) Before the name of the place became Loyal it had been changed from Cottonwood Valley to Kiel by a German settler named John Wahling, probably in honor of the large "Fatherland" city in Schleswig-Holstein.

¹⁷ *Ti* February 8, 1901, quoting from *St. Louis Catholic Review*.

S. Schneeberger. The press story indicated that it was the intention of the delegates to appeal from the decision of the bishop.¹⁸

Many German-speaking Missourians had come to the newly opened territory and it was therefore quite natural that Missouri journals should take an interest in the conflict. *The St. Louis Catholic Review* carried this news story in 1901 when the conflict seemed to be coming to a head.¹⁹

The German Catholics of Oklahoma recently held a convention in Oklahoma City, in which they renewed the assurance and promise of their fidelity to the Catholic faith and their loyalty to the Holy Father, but complained bitterly in a series of strong resolutions against the policy of Bishop Meerschaert, who they assert, denies them pastors able to speak their mother tongue, sends the few German priests in his diocese to non-German parishes, and gives the German congregations Belgian and Irish pastors, who either speak no German at all or very little. They intend to take a census of the German Catholics resident in the Territory and request the Catholic press to assist them in their battle for equal rights.

We have not sufficient knowledge of the actual conditions in Oklahoma to be able to say whether their complaints are well-founded. If they are the bishop ought to be compelled by higher authority to do his duty; if they are not, the kickers should be publicly exposed and silenced.

The foregoing passage probably refers to a meeting held in Oklahoma City in the fall of 1900. F. J. Waldmann was again a member of the Okarche delegation and this time he presided at the meeting. Other delegates from Okarche were Henry Hoeschler, F. Rother, John Heinen, Mr. Hau, Sr., B. Bogner, Anton Weber, William Knecht, J. Jacobs and R. Brueggen. It will be remembered that Waldmann, Knecht, Rother and Bogner also attended the meeting of 1899. Another St. Louis paper which took an interest in the matter was the weekly *Western Watchman*. From this outspoken Catholic journal we quote two sentences: "We are with the Germans in this fight. We sternly oppose any interference with the parish organizations and the obtrusion of a foreign tongue in their services."²⁰ Obviously the term "foreign tongue" here means any language not native to a given group. The *Western Watchman* stood for the principle of parish option in the matter of a parish language and it was this principle that finally prevailed.

The Okarche Times was sympathetic with the position of the German settlers. It was also concerned with fact that the language conflict might keep desirable settlers out of the Territory:

Some claim it is also a detriment to the Territory in keeping away a thrifty law-abiding class of farmers, as the Germans are generally conceded to be, and wealthy merchants who are welcomed everywhere

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, April 21, 1899.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, April 8, 1901. During those years there were many German-speaking priests in the U. S. but they were probably not available to Bishop Meerschaert.

²⁰ *Ti* December 8, 1901.

and who have helped to build up the great west. We wish our German Catholic friends success in their struggle, which seems to be endorsed by the English press of their own faith.²¹

It should be observed that while some English-speaking Okarcheans favored German as a language of worship, not all German-speaking citizens were sympathetic with the continued opposition to the Bishop's policy. The large majority however wanted a pastor with a fluent command of German; it didn't matter particularly whether such a pastor was of German or of non-German birth.

The man who finally became their pastor and solved the language difficulty was born on French soil. Father Zenon Steber, a German-speaking, Alsatian-born Frenchman was assigned to them in fall of 1902. Ordained at Lyons, France, July 9, 1893, he came to Oklahoma in 1896 and built churches at Corn, Independence and Lawton.²² As a builder, however, both of parish harmony and of actual structures for religious purposes, he achieved his most significant mark during the many years of his pastorate at Okarche. The end of the linguistic turmoil in the community was the beginning of real parish development. It also removed a barrier to the further settlement of German Catholics in the area. Aside from the Latin ritual, German could now flourish undisturbed as a popular language of worship in the Church of the Holy Trinity. To be sure, English was also used there; and the Catholic High School had German in its curriculum until 1914 while the Catholic elementary school remained bilingual until 1917. Sermons were heard in both German and English until 1936.²³ Today only a few of the older people in the parish make an occasional use of German.²⁴ The struggle of the turn of the century, which was so tense and dramatic because of the spiritual values involved, is still remembered in Okarche.

Although German was sometimes humorously and disparagingly referred to as "Dutch," there was a noticeable growth in the prestige of the language during the 1890's. New business and professional men who could handle the language wanted the public to know about it. At the closing exercises of the public school in 1898 pieces were spoken in both German and English.²⁵ At the annual school meeting in 1899 it was suggested that German be taught in the

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Cf. *Okarche Chieftain*, July 15, 1943; *Ti* November 14, 1902; "Holy Trinity Parish in Okarche" in *The Orphans Record, Official Organ of the Diocese of Oklahoma*, Vol. 4, No. 7, (July, 1918), pp. 4-9

²³ Some of this information was graciously supplied by the late Monsignor Z. Steber, pastor of Holy Trinity at Okarche.

²⁴ Based on information kindly given by Father E. von Elm, present pastor of the Catholic Church at Okarche.

²⁵ *Ti*, June 3, 1898.

public school.²⁶ It seemed important to some people to learn the language of a comparatively prosperous section of the community.

German newspapers were widely read in the area. In 1898 the local editor complained that "many families" did not subscribe to an English language paper. Significantly he gave his piece of complaint the headline, "All Dutch."²⁷ A little later he made a feeble start at giving his weekly a bilingual character by publishing some news and advertising items in German.²⁸ It would have required more writing talent and a more energetic approach to compete successfully, even on a local scale, with German-American newspapers, some of which had already been established in Oklahoma.

In the economic field the seemingly well-entrenched position of German is manifested by a manuscript entitled, *Protokol Buch des Deutschen Farmers Gegenseitigen Feuer Versicherungs-Verein von Okarche Oklahoma*.²⁹ Some exception may be taken to the syntax of this title but it obviously designates the official book of minutes of the "German Farmers Mutual Fire Insurance Association of Okarche, Oklahoma". In those early days the Constitution of this group provided, in Article 5, that the business of the Association had to be carried on in German. Article 6 provided that only those members who spoke and wrote German could become officers. There was no language test for membership. One just had to be of good moral character, own land, and sign the Constitution of the Association.³⁰

From 1899 to 1926 the Minutes of the Association were kept in German. When the change to the total transaction of business in English was accomplished the officers continued to be men of German origin. The early members agreed to remain associated in the mutual insurance business for twenty-five years. That period has now been more than doubled. Only one business organization in the community is older, namely the First Bank of Okarche, which has been controlled by the Loosen family since the date of its establishment October 28, 1892.³¹ The fire insurance association began to

²⁶ *Ibid.*, July 14, 1899.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, May 13, 1898.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, December 16, 1898; January 6, 1899; July 6, 1899.

²⁹ As evidence that this mutual insurance association was known outside of Okarche, it might be pointed out that the company was variously mentioned in the German language press of Oklahoma. Thus, *Die Enid Post*, May 22, 1903, and *Oklahoma Volksblatt*, May 12, 1904.

³⁰ In the archives of the association there is also a printed list of rules, dating back to 1914, entitled *Nebengesetze und Regeln der Deutschen Farmers Gegenseitigen Feuer-Versicherungs-Gesellschaft von Okarche, Canadian County, Okla. Druck der Enid, Okla., Staatszeitung*.

³¹ *The First Bank of Okarche, op. cit.*, p. 13. Among those who gave oral information to the present writer were members of the Loosen family. A former president of the bank, the late Emil C. Loosen, and the present head of the bank, J. Paul Loosen, gave unsparingly of their time. Paul Loosen's significant contribution to the present-day development of Okarche deserves separate treatment

spread early to a number of other communities, with Okarche retaining the home office. Today it has district secretaries at Yukon, Edmond, Kingfisher, and Okeene. The mutual principle for which its founders stood appeared again later in other local cooperative undertakings, which do much to give Okarche an atmosphere of prosperity.³²

This paper has been concerned primarily with the first decade of Okarche's history. During this time the community became predominantly German in language and in the character of its people. As the non-German element of the population decreased there was a corresponding increase in the German element. The language was fostered by thriving religious groups and by a strong economic organization which cut across denominational lines and tended to bring about a closer spirit of cooperation among the German farmers around Okarche and in neighboring regions. A more important cohesive influence was the German-American press, which reflected the traditional values and civic virtues of both the American and the German Fatherland. Eventually the language was to disappear almost completely but before it did so, it helped to mold the consciousness of a community which had something to contribute to the development of Oklahoma.

elsewhere. His beautiful home and garden have been the subject of journalistic treatment outside of Okarche.

³² Among these undertakings are "The Farmers Co-operative Association of Okarche"; a flourishing similarly-operated creamery; a community hospital. The story of such projects would be a chapter by itself. It can be safely said that the co-operative spirit of the German pioneers in Okarche had a decisive influence on local business developments and on neighboring communities.