

# Volga German Beliefs and Superstitions

by S.J. Sackett

**F**or several years my students and I have been engaged in collecting beliefs and superstitions in western Kansas and now have several thousand items. Those which are copied below were all collected in Ellis County, Kansas. Probably several others in the collection from this county should have been included here, but I limited this selection to those which contained a notation on the card that they were taken down from informants belonging to the Volga German enclave. To those collected by my students and me, I have added material from two other sources. Informants and collectors are listed at the end of this essay.

The reader will notice that several of the items included here are common throughout the United States. There are two possible reasons for this: perhaps the Volga Germans absorbed them from the surrounding culture, or perhaps they are so widely diffused throughout all European nationalities that they have been imported into the United States by several immigrant groups.

Since informants were asked only for beliefs and superstitions which they were familiar with, not necessarily those they held, this list cannot be used for drawing conclusions about what Volga Germans currently believe, although it doubtless reflects many widely held beliefs from previous generations.

## *Animals*

1. If you find birds' nests and steal the eggs, the cows will give bloody milk. [EB]
2. If you kill a barn swallow, the cow will give blood. [JS]

## *Plants*

3. To insure a good potato crop, plant the potatoes on Holy Saturday, St. Joseph's Day, or St. Patrick's Day. [G]

## *Weather*

4. After the feasts of the "Icemänner" (St. Gervase, St. Protase, and St. Boniface, whose feasts are May 12, 13, and 14), there will be no heavy frost. [MS]

5. When all the food that is on the table for a certain meal is eaten, there will be a change in the weather. [JB]
6. When there is a large number of flies around a screen, it will rain in a couple of days. [JH]
7. If black robins (crows) caw and caw and caw, they cry for rain. [EB]
8. The way it winters is the way it summers. [JK]
9. The "Welt Kugel" (literally "world ball") turns over in dry weather, hits her head on the dry ground, and produces water. (This refers to the equinox.) [JK]
10. Red sky in the morning, sailors take warning: red sky at night, sailors delight. [BR]
11. A dog lying on his back forecasts a storm within the next twenty-four hours. [J]
12. If a dog eats grass in the pasture, it is indicative of impending stormy weather. [J]
13. A cat crawling up a fence post is a sign of rain. [J]
14. If smoke goes straight up out of the chimney, colder weather is the rule. [G]
15. If the smoke rolls downward, it means warmer weather. [G]
16. A ring around the moon is a sign of a storm. [G]
17. Cattle always face the wind if a storm is brewing. [G]
18. If it rains on Easter Sunday, the next seven Sundays will have rain. [G, J]
19. Turtles going to high ground are a sign of floods or much rain. [G]
20. If the atmosphere is very, very quiet, it will cause thunderstorms. [G]
21. A red horizon, caused by a cloud's extraordinary refraction of sun light, is an indication, so parents tell their children, that *Christ-Kindlein* is baking cookies and sweets for the following Christmas. [J]

#### *People*

22. Women whose eyebrows were grown together over the nose were supposed to have witchcraft powers. [GR]
23. The higher up the hair line, the smarter the individual. [DK]
24. If you have a sore tongue, you have told a lie about someone. [EB]
25. If your right ear tingles, someone is saying something good about you. [EB]
26. If your left ear tingles, they are saying something bad about you. [EB]
27. If your right shoe comes untied, a man is thinking about you; the left one, a lady. [EB]

28. If your nose itches, you will hear something new. [G]
29. If a person gets up from the left side of his bed, he will have a bad disposition. [G] cf. 44.
30. If you hear a ringing in your right ear, it means that someone is talking about you. [U]
31. If you drop a fork, a woman is coming to visit; if you drop a knife, a man is coming to visit; if you drop a spoon, a child is coming to visit. [U]

### *Marriage* (cf. 49, 50)

32. If a bride laughed on her wedding day, she would weep ever after. The marriage would be a failure. [JK]

### *Death*

33. Death comes in threes. [KW, SS]
34. If it rains in an open grave, there will be another death in the family within the year. [BR, U]
35. When someone dies, close his eyes immediately, or he will see who he should come and take next. [JK]
36. If a person dies before his natural death (by some accident), his spirit would have to travel here until his natural death. [JK]
37. Do not go swimming on Trinity Sunday, or you will surely drown. [JK] cf. 58.
38. If you dream that you have a tooth pulled and it bleeds real bad, some of your relation dies. If it bleeds just a little, then it is just a close friend that dies. [EB]
39. If a person chops wood on Sunday or on a holy day of obligation, his face will appear in the moon after his death. [J]
40. If a child drowns, throw a loaf of bread into the water and it will float and stay on top of where the child is lying. [U]

### *Dreams*

41. If you sleep at a place for the first time and dream, that dream will come true. [ES]

### *Wishes*

42. If two people say the same thing at the same time and make a wish, that wish will come true. [JB]

### *Luck*

43. When a person enters any place coming in a different door than the one he left, it will bring bad luck. [CD]
44. If you get up on the left side of the bed, everything on that day will go wrong. [FB] cf. 29.
45. If your right hand itches, you will have to spend money. [EB]
46. It is bad luck to bring a hoe into the house. [BR]
47. If a tailor takes a stitch without a knot in his thread and pulls the stitch out, it means he will lose his luck. [EB]

48. If a man starts to go someplace and a woman gets in his way, that is bad luck. [EB]
49. It is bad luck to have it rain on a wedding day. [EB]
50. If the bride shows her wedding dress to the groom before the wedding, it will mean bad luck. [LD]
51. If you could catch a swamp light, you would be richly rewarded. [GR]
52. If your left hand itches, you'll get money. [EB, G]
53. Eat eggs laid by hens on Holy Trinity Sunday, and you will never get hurt. [JK]
54. If you kill a spider, you will lose some of your sins. [EB]
55. It's good luck if it rains on a funeral day; rain brings new life. [EB]
56. It is unlucky to cry on New Year's Day; if one does, he will cry all year. [J]
57. Whenever the birth rate of boys notably exceeds that of girls in a given community, it is said to indicate a prosperous year. [J]
58. Trinity Sunday is an exclusive day of prayer. Outings that would include joy riding, rough sports, or swimming are frowned on. Accidents, serious injuries, and drownings that have happened in the past on this holy day are taken as indications of heaven's disapproval. Accordingly, parents are slow in granting their children permission to go swimming. Little children are constantly watched so that they will not go near the watering tanks for cattle, lest they drown. [J] cf. 37.
59. If your eyes sting, you will have reason to cry. [G]
60. When moving into a new home, carry a loaf of bread and the crucifix in first to insure plenty to eat and steadfast faith. [G]
61. If you see a spider in the morning, it brings bad luck and sorrow. [G]
62. If you see a spider at noon, it will bring you good luck on the third day. [G]
63. Morning rain brings good luck and blessings. [G]
64. If you spill salt, you will have something to cry about. [G]
65. If you spill sugar, you will laugh about something. [G]

#### *Occupations*

66. Hunting isn't good when the moon is full. [GS]

#### *Cures*

67. A cure for warts known to the people and felt by some to be effective is the following: anyone having warts should tie as many knots in a string as he has warts and bury the string in some spot where the sun will not shine on it until it has rotted. By that time the warts will have disappeared. [J]

68. Rub a piece of potato on a wart and then bury it (the potato). When the potato rots, the wart will leave. [BR]
69. Skunks were trapped in the fall and killed. Then the fat was stripped off them. To cure a cold, you ate skunk grease with sugar. [GR]
70. If you have the hiccoughs, someone is thinking about you. If you can think of the one who is thinking about you, the hiccoughs will stop. [EB]

### *Miscellaneous*

71. An apple a day keeps the doctor away; a rosary a day keeps the devil away; an onion a day keeps everybody away. [LV]

### *Conclusions*

Several observations are suggested by this material. One is that the predominantly agricultural concerns of the Volga Germans are reflected in the many beliefs about how weather may be predicted; from this standpoint, however, it is surprising that there are not more beliefs about animals and plants which farmers might raise. The seriousness with which the people viewed their religion is evident in several of the beliefs, especially those associated with Trinity Sunday. The number of beliefs concerning spiders and rain indicates that some significance was associated with those.

One interesting belief brought to the New World from the much more humid climate of the Volga region is only hinted at in these items. The spirit of someone who died by accident was thought to travel through the world (36) in the form of an *Erdlicht* (earthlight), an eerie light caused actually by illuminated methane gas like the "will-o'-the-wisp" of Anglo-American folklore. Even though such swamp lights were supposed to reward mortals who could catch them (51), the *Erdlichten* were regarded with fear and dread because they were believed to cause much harm to humans if they caught the humans before the humans caught them.

Unfortunately, none of the material drawn on here contains one of the most interesting cures utilized by the Volga Germans. Someone who exerts himself too hard physically, it is thought, may put his navel out of place. The symptoms of this are nausea and vomiting. When this happens to someone, he may be cured by having him lie down flat on his back; a half-dollar or other small, flat object is placed on his navel, with a small candle affixed to it; the candle is lighted, and a glass is inverted over the candle and allowed to rest on the stomach. When the candle goes out, it has burned up the air in the glass, thus creating a suction on the stomach muscles which pulls the navel back into place. When the cure is complete, the glass falls off.

There are other interesting folk cures practiced by the Volga Germans which the archive material cited omits. Just as the navel could be dislocated by excessive exertion, the womb was thought to be dislocated by childbirth; the new mother was expected to lie very still for nine days, and on the tenth day the womb would return to its proper position. Similarly it was believed that the *Halszapfe* (uvula) might be dislocated. The symptom of this was that the person had trouble swallowing. Certain men and women in the communities were held to have the power to cure this malfunction; they did so by placing a pinch of pepper on the afflicted person's tongue, grabbing some hairs on the crown of his head, and jerking hard on the hair. Other specialized healers were applied to in cases of a kind of skin rash called *Derfleck* (dry blotch). The healers who were expert in this disease used the sole of a baby shoe which had been worn smooth and shiny; they rubbed it over the afflicted area.

In addition to persons who thus functioned as specialists in specific maladies, there were general practitioners known as *Brauchers*, who were applied to in the case of nearly any illness; although one reason they flourished was that doctors were rare and expensive in early-day Kansas, and had been even rarer and more expensive in Russia, these faith healers had many successful cures to their credit and doubtless would have been preferred even if regular physicians had been more available. While the activities of the *Brauchers* ran counter to the official doctrines of the Catholic Church, the people themselves perceived these faith healers as functioning in a religious fashion. The procedures of the *Brauchers* usually involved the laying on of hands while intoning impressively rhymed formulas calling upon Jesus and the Holy Trinity. In addition to references to the Trinity and its Members, the *Brauchers'* formulas characteristically included some pattern of three—a reference to three virgins, perhaps, a characterization of the ailment as having three components, or a promise that the cure would be accomplished in three days. A *Braucher* might be either a man or a woman.

Two beliefs listed above reflect the dominance of males in the patriarchal, patrilocal Volga German society. One is that an excess of boys to girls born in a community is a sign of prosperity (57); while this derives chiefly from the fact that the Russian government allotted land on the basis of the number of male children in the family and probably also indicates the usefulness of male farm workers, it doubtless also shows the greater value placed on masculinity. The other is that it is bad luck for a woman to stand in a man's way when he wants to go somewhere (48). This may reflect the attitude, widely held in many cultures, that when a man sets out on an enterprise, and feminine interference will result in the failure of the enterprise. But it is phrased in

a way as to imply that for a woman to get in a man's way may also be bad luck for the woman, for the man may remove her forcibly.

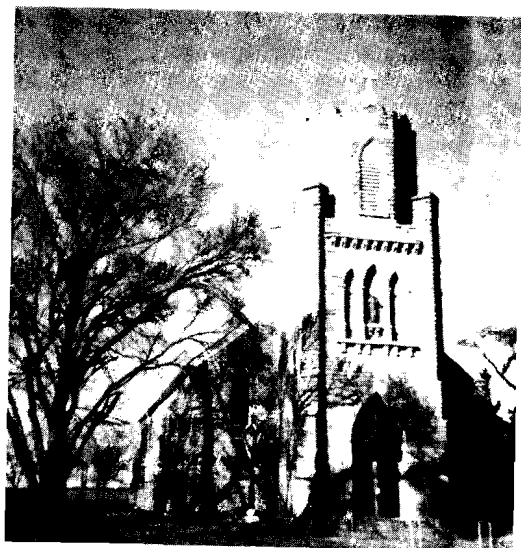
The preponderance of beliefs concerning luck, contrasted with the single formula for wishing, suggests a generally passive outlook on the world. While it is true that some of the luck beliefs certainly specify actions which can be taken to control luck, most of them indicate that what happens to a person is the result of forces over which he has no control; and even the solitary wish belief depends on a fortuitous circumstance which cannot be controlled. Whether justified or not, the impression left by this small sampling of Volga German beliefs is of a people who hold fatalistically that good or bad fortune happens to people regardless of what they do and that there is not much action that can be taken to make their wishes come true.

#### LIST OF INFORMANTS AND COLLECTORS

- [BR] Collected from Mrs Ben Rupp, Ellis, by Sr M Hilda Stuhna, 9 April 1960
- [BS] Collected by Bob Schreiner, Hays, 5 May 1961
- [CD] Collected from Clemens Dinkel, Victoria, by Marlene Dinkel, 3 March 1959
- [DK] Collected from Devon Knoll, Hays, by Carroll Knoll, 1 January 1961
- [EB] Collected from Mrs Elizabeth Breit, Hays, by Sarah Binder, April 1957
- [ES] Collected from Mrs Eddie Schmidtberger, Victoria, by Marlene Dinkel, 14 April 1959
- [FB] Collected from Frank Brungardt, Victoria, by Carroll Knoll, 1 January 1961
- [G] Collected from Mrs Nick Gabel and Mrs Joe Breit by Mrs Wayne Gabel, Hays, 1 July 1970
- [GR] Collected from George Ruder, Hays, by Eva Redin, 1 May 1961
- [GS] Collected from G.J. Schreiner, Hays, by Bob Schreiner, 1 May 1961
- [J] Listed in M. Eloise Johannes, *A Study of the Russian-German Settlements in Ellis County, Kansas* (Washington Catholic Univ. of America, 1946), pp. 129-130
- [JB] Collected from Mrs John B. Kuhn, Victoria, by Marlene Dinkel, 27 February 1959
- [JH] Collected from Joe Hammerschmidt, Victoria, by Marlene Dinkel, 1 March 1959
- [JK] Collected from John Kuhn, Ellis, by Sr M Hilda Stuhna, 9 April 1960
- [JS] Collected from Jacob Schumacher, Hays, by Sr M Hilda Stuhna, 9 April 1960
- [KW] Collected from Kenneth Weigel, Hays, by Ronnie Cook, 28 October 1959
- [LD] Collected from Mrs Louise Dinkel, Victoria, by Marlene Dinkel, 13 March 1959
- [LV] Collected from Leo VonFeldt, Victoria, by Carroll Knoll, 1 January 1961
- [MS] Collected from Sr M Georgine Sander, Hays, by Sr M Luke Shouse, 20 March 1960
- [U] Unpublished MS. Western Collection, Forsyth Library, Fort Hays Kansas State College



St. Anne's Church, Walker.



St. Francis's Church, Munjor