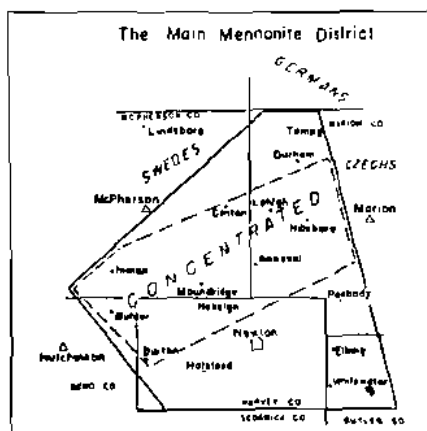


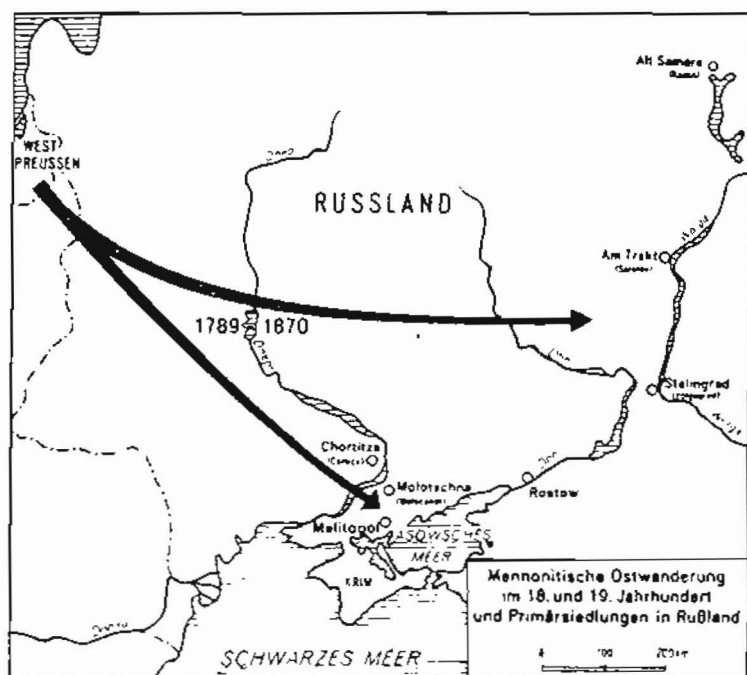
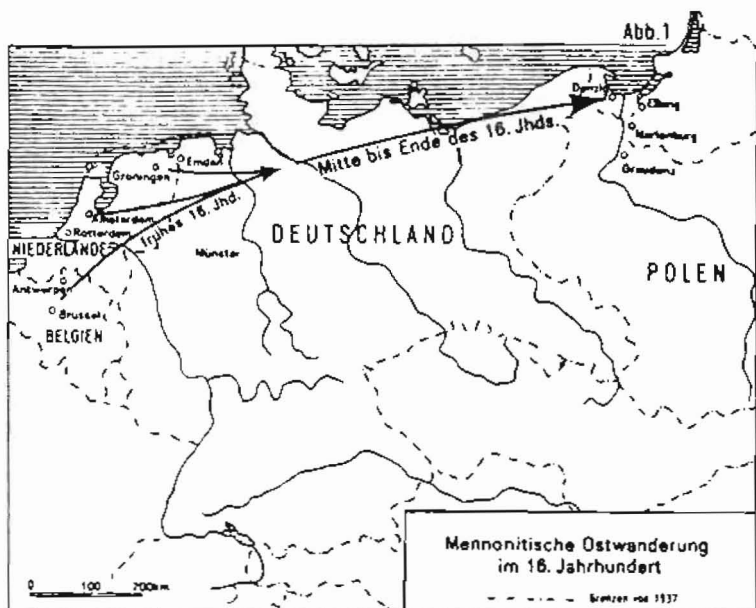
FROM THE NETHERLANDS TO KANSAS: MENNONITE LOW GERMAN

by
William D. Keel

Schuckel, schuekel, scheija
Oostre äät wie Eija
Pingste äät wie wittet Broot
Schoaw wie nich
Dann woa wie groot¹
(Children's rhyme, Buhler, Kansas)

The linguistic and cultural heritage of the Great Plains is characterized by the richness of the ethnic backgrounds of the Europeans who homesteaded the region in the second half of the nineteenth century. For a number of counties north and west of Wichita, Kansas, that heritage is rooted in an immigrant language which is the product of several centuries of migration by Mennonites continually seeking a homeland where they could practice their religious beliefs and lifestyle in peace and freedom. Beginning in the mid-1870s Low German-speaking Mennonites from colonies in the southern part of the Russian Empire near the Black Sea were recruited by the Santa Fe Railroad to settle on farmland in Kansas that extended from near Hillsboro in Marion County across parts of McPherson, Harvey and Butler counties and into Reno County.² Until approximately 1950, this five-county area which included Pennsylvania German-speaking Mennonites and Amish as well as Mennonites from West Prussia, Volhynia and Switzerland remained a largely intact non-English-speaking speech island in south central Kansas.³





This Mennonite German speech island in Kansas still reflects the diversity of German dialects brought by the original settlers in the 1870s. The earliest of the Mennonite and Amish settlers in this part of Kansas came from the eastern United States and brought with them the varieties of Pennsylvania German or Pennsylvania Dutch which developed during the Colonial period in southeastern Pennsylvania among the large number of colonists arriving there from the German Rhineland, particularly from the area south of Mainz known as the Palatinate. In the Old Order Amish districts near Yoder and Partridge in Reno County, Pennsylvania German or *Deitsch* is still the language learned first by children in the home. For the other German-speaking groups the transition to English has already occurred. Only among members of the older generations can we speak of any fluency in the German dialects. With the passing of these older groups we will lose the Bernese Swiss German of the Mennonites from Switzerland in Butler County, the Palatinate dialect of the Swiss Volhynian Mennonites or "Schweitzer" near Moundridge and Pretty Prairie, and even the varieties of Mennonite Low German still spoken throughout the region.⁴ Until that day arrives, however, Mennonite Low German or *Plautdietsch* and its several varieties in Kansas are still very much with us.

The origins of Mennonite Low German take us back to the time of the Protestant Reformation in the Netherlands and northwestern Germany. Members of those Protestant groups who rejected infant baptism and insisted that church membership be based on an adult decision were labelled Anabaptists or Re-Baptizers and as such were viewed as heretics by the mainstream Reformed and Catholic churches. By the middle of the sixteenth century these groups in northern Germany and the Netherlands were being referred to as Mennists or Mennonites after their leader Menno Simons. The intolerance and the subsequent persecutions led these Anabaptists or Mennonites in the northwestern part of the German Empire to seek refuge in Polish-controlled West Prussia. Here they settled among other German colonists, largely from northern parts of Germany, but also from throughout the German Empire.

Some two hundred years later after the third partition of Poland when the descendants of those early Mennonites began migrating to the southern Russian Empire to form the colonies of Chortitza and Molotschna, they were speaking varieties of West Prussian Low German and were using literary German in their worship services and for all formal language situations. A major linguistic transition had taken place during the sojourn in West Prussia. Both the spoken dialects of northwestern Germany and the Netherlands and the written Dutch language had been replaced by West Prussian Low German and an eighteenth century version of standard German, respectively.⁵

The varieties of *Plautdietsch* or Mennonite Low German brought by the immigrants to Kansas in the 1870s became the common language of the home and community in towns such as Hillsboro, Goessel, and Lehigh in Marion County, Newton and Hesston in Harvey County, Inman and Moundridge in

McPherson County, and Buhler in Reno County. Until the 1930s most Mennonite families in these areas continued teaching their children Low German. During these early years many also learned enough standard German by attending German summer school to participate in worship services. The gradual integration and acculturation into the dominant English-speaking society, however, took its toll on the use of German and German dialects. The process of assimilation was accelerated by the anti-German hysteria accompanying the entry of the United States into World War I. The role played by the educational system cannot, however, be overestimated. When the children of the Mennonite settlers first encountered English as the language of instruction in schools during and after the World War I era, they experienced discrimination and humiliation. Many of those school children decided that the next generation should not have to experience that linguistic shock when they began school, and subsequently used only English when they started their own families. In the period from approximately 1920 to 1960, Mennonite Low German went from being the language of everyday discourse to a language used only by adults, and eventually to a language reserved for the generation of grandparents.

In her study of the linguistic transition from German and Low German to English in the Hoffnungsau community in Harvey, McPherson and Reno counties, Mary Schmidt provides a detailed account of that process.⁶ The German-language summer vacation school began in the 1890s with a four-month session. As the term for the regular, English-language public school increased in length, the period for the German school was shortened. In the years immediately following World War I, the German summer school was only in session for four weeks and at times was only held for one or two weeks in a given summer. By 1927 training in the use of literary German for religious purposes in such summer schools had ceased.

However, church services in Hoffnungsau were held exclusively in German until 1932. Over a period of several years in the 1930s English was gradually introduced, first in the Sunday school classes, then in the worship services, and finally in the baptismal rites. It was not until 1941 that the actual number of English services began to outnumber the German services. Although German was still used for parts of the worship service until 1950, the last totally German worship service was held in 1947.

The transition from the use of *Plaudietsch* to English parallels the transition of literary German to English. The maintenance of the Low German dialect, however, continues about twenty years—or one generation—beyond that of literary German. The real decline in the use of the dialect does not begin until the late 1930s or perhaps a few years later. J. Neale Carman in his detailed study of non-English languages found in Kansas claims that the use of Mennonite Low German in families with children reached what he refers to as "the critical year" about 1935, although for some communities such as Goessel he argues that the critical year was not reached until 1950. The "critical year" was based on

Carman's estimate of when fewer than half of the families with children in the home in a given community were using the dialect.⁷

Again, Schmidt provides a detailed overview of the transition from *Plautdietsch* to English in the home for the Hoffnungsau community. Based on her interviews and research she divides the population into language-use groups by date of birth:

1. Persons born prior to 1917: These individuals were raised in a nearly exclusive Low German environment. The dialect was used at home while literary German was learned in school and used in church. In the mid-1970s this group still enjoyed speaking Low German at gatherings of family and close friends.
2. Persons born 1918-27: These individuals grew up with a mostly Low German home life with occasional use of English. They were still exposed to some formal training in literary German and attended church services in German until they reached adulthood. A critical difference in this group is that they used English in speaking to their children. This observation corresponds to Carman's estimate of the "critical year" in the late 1930s.
3. Persons born 1928-47: These individuals grew up with some Low German in the home, but English dominated. They had no formal training in literary or standard German and can only recall attending German worship services as children. They may often have a good passive knowledge of the Low German dialect, but can typically speak only short phrases and individual words.
4. Persons born 1948-57: These individuals typically did not hear Low German spoken in the home and lack the passive understanding of the preceding group. This group has had no experience with literary or standard German in either school or church.
5. Persons born 1958-67: These individuals have had virtually no experience with Low German and yet have what Schmidt calls a "keen awareness" of their community's linguistic heritage.⁸

An immigrant language which has survived several migrations while undergoing major and minor transitions is a reflection of the cultural history of that speech community. In the Mennonite Low German or *Plautdietsch* still spoken in south central Kansas we encounter that cultural legacy. We have used the term Low German to characterize this dialect, yet many of the speakers in these communities are aware that their ancestors left the Netherlands some four hundred years ago. Many claim to speak Dutch or a language similar to Dutch. In terms of the sounds and the grammatical structures of *Plautdietsch* it must be classified as a variant of West Prussian Low German. But the Dutch origins of the speakers can still be found in a few words such as *venoach* 'today' which is

obviously related to modern Dutch *vandaag* rather than the more common West Prussian Low German *hidde* which is that dialect's reflection of standard German *heute*. A few Russian words, such as *Rabus/Orbus* 'watermelon' from the Russian *arbus*, were assimilated during the hundred-year stay near the Black Sea. Of course many American English terms, such as *Foamasch* 'farmers', have been adopted by the dialect speakers.

Despite Dutch, Russian and English lexical items, the basic structure of the language is that of one of the many Low German dialects of the eastern part of northern Germany. A survey of some key words identifies *Plautdietsch* as Low German. The West Germanic consonants *p*, *t*, *k* remain unshifted in such northern or Low German dialects when compared to the southern German dialects and standard German (High German). This lack of shift of *p* > *f*, *pf*; *t* > *s*, *ts*; *k* > *ch* is also characteristic of Dutch and English. Compare the following forms:

Plautdietsch	High German	Dutch	English
Tiide	Zeiten	tijden	tides (times)
Woata	Wasser	water	water
Feet	Füsse	voeten	feet
Piapa	Pfeffer	peper	pepper
schleepe	schlafen	slapen	sleep
opp	auf	op	up
koake	kochen	koken	cook
Malkj	Milch	melk	milk

In terms of the consonants *p*, *t*, *k* Dutch, English and Low German generally agree, whereas High German exhibits so-called shifted consonants—the *t* in *water* as opposed to *ss* in High German *Wasser*, the *p* initially and medially in *pepper* as opposed to High German *Pfeffer*, the medial/final *k* in *cook* as opposed to High German *kochen*. The last item on the comparative list of words, *milk*, provides an example of the palatalization of back or velar consonants which is so characteristic of the eastern Low German dialects such as West Prussian and which differentiates *Plautdietsch* from Dutch and western Low German. The final consonant in *Malkj* is variously pronounced as a strongly aspirated *k* or as a palatal stop like the *ch* in *church*. This palatalization affects all back or velar consonants in *Plautdietsch*. Additional examples of this palatalization are: *ekj* 'I'; *Weakje* 'weeks'; *triggj* 'back'; *hingje* 'behind'. In contrast the corresponding forms in Western Low German are *ik*, *Weken*, *trigg*, *hinner*, and Dutch *ik*, *weken*, *terug*, *achter*.⁹

A major grammatical feature also helps to classify *Plautdietsch* as eastern Low German rather than Dutch or western Low German. The present tense personal endings of the verb clearly place Mennonite Low German in the eastern

Low German region. Contrast the following verb forms of the verb 'to help' in the three languages (I help, you help; he, she helps; we, you, they help):

Plautdietsch	West Low German	Dutch
ekj halp	ik help	ik help
du halpst	du helpst	jij helpt
hee, see halpt	he, se helpt	hij, zij helpt
wie, jie, die halpe	wi, ji, se helpt	wij, jullie, zij helpen

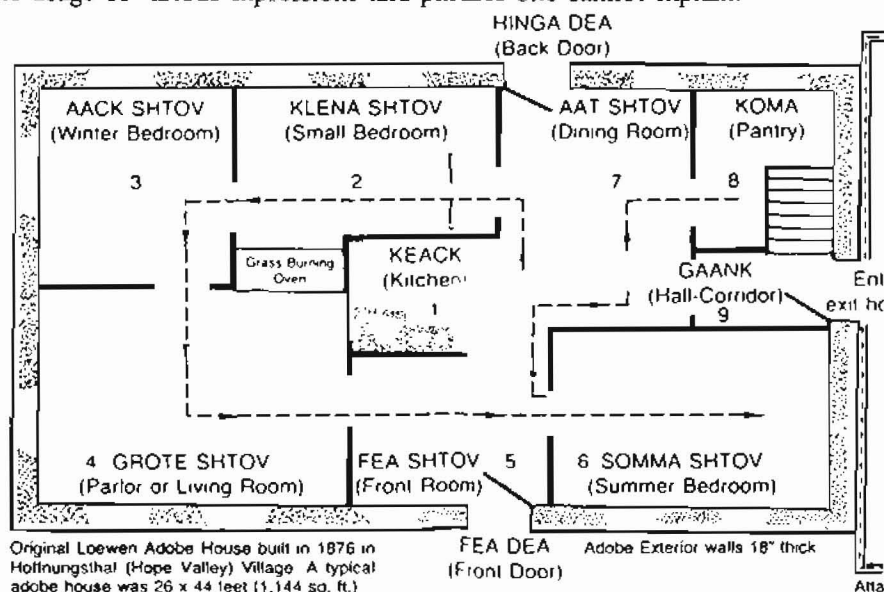
From this comparative verb paradigm we note several important facts for our classification of Mennonite Low German or *Plautdietsch*. First of all, we note the presence of a different stem vowel in the verb 'to help' in Mennonite Low German than in the western Low German and Dutch. Second, there are several differences in the realizations of the personal pronouns—note especially the second person singular *du* in the "German" versus the *jij* in Dutch. Finally, we find two differences in the actual personal endings of the verb: *-st* vs. *-t* in the second person singular; *-e* vs. *-t* vs. *-en* in the common plural ending. In fact, it is the common plural ending in the present tense conjugation which has traditionally been used as the basis for distinguishing East and West Low German. Mennonite Low German with the common plural ending *-e* is thus classified as East Low German.

In addition to these characteristics in the sound and grammatical systems which lead to an East Low German classification, there are also distinctive vocabulary items which can only have originated in the West Prussian region of East Low German. Several such examples can be found in food items. Mennonite Low German *Iatschock* 'potato'; *Suakomst* 'sauerkraut'; *Schmaunt* 'cream'; and the weekday *Sinnowent* 'Saturday' all lead us to the area round the Vistula Delta in West Prussia.

Although the spoken usage of Mennonite Low German may be decreasing, there is at present an attempt to preserve a written version of the dialect. The efforts have for the most part been in the Mennonite-settled areas of Manitoba where a large number of immigrants from Russia settled following World War I and where active use of the dialect has continued to a greater degree than in Kansas. Prose and poetry have been published in the dialect.¹⁰ The writings of J.J. Janzen (1878-1950), who appears to be the first to publish literary works in *Plautdietsch*, have received wide attention in the Mennonite communities. Janzen began writing in Russia prior to World War I and continued to publish poetry and prose after immigrating to Canada in the 1920s. A second Russian-born author who participated in the 1920s immigration to Canada, Arnold Dyck (1889-1970), received little attention during his lifetime. New editions of his works have recently been published in Canada employing a standardized orthography developed in 1982 by a group headed by Al Reimer at the University of

Winnipeg. Reimer's proposed orthography has not been followed completely by other writers.¹¹ Two dictionaries of *Plautdietsch* have also appeared since the late 1970s.¹² And, a translation of the New Testament into *Plautdietsch* was published in 1987.¹³ This flurry of publishing and the attempt to establish a writing system for Mennonite Low German at this late date may be indicators of "last hurrah." On the other hand, these publications have stimulated many in the Mennonite communities in both Canada and Kansas to appreciate their dialect and to make an effort to read it as well as speak it.

Instruction in the dialect has also been attempted as a means of preserving fluency and interest in the immigrant language. An evening language class in *Plautdietsch* has been offered for a time at Bethel College in North Newton, Kansas. Using learning grammars prepared by lay persons and trained linguists, older speakers of the dialect have attempted to refresh their memories of a language which they used years ago. But students at the college also learn enough of the dialect to perform skits in Mennonite Low German at the Fall Festival each October at Bethel College. However, as Marian Penner Schmidt notes in her manuscript grammar of Low German used by Mennonites, "it is almost impossible to learn Low German properly—i.e., for an adult—one must have been 'born into' a Low German family to get the right pronunciation and the usage of various expressions and phrases one cannot explain."¹⁴



Mennonite Adobe House in Hillsboro. Floor Plan in Low German.

Linguistic studies of the Mennonite Low German spoken in Kansas have been quite rare. Marian Schmidt's 37-page hand-written teaching grammar of

Mennonite Low German is modelled on a booklet for learning Dutch. In twelve chapters she covers pronunciation, articles, pronouns, numerals, adjectives, and verb forms. Actually, seven of the chapters are devoted to the various grammatical categories in the verb. Nouns are treated throughout since except for plural formation the noun exhibits no variant forms. In a similar vein is T. Dale Nicklas's "A Survey of Molotchna Platdutch."¹⁵ Nicklas provides a linguistic description of the dialect based on the historical origins of all Low German dialects in the earliest written records of Old Saxon. There is also one unpublished dissertation on Mennonite Low German in Kansas. Marjorie Baerg's study of "Gnadenau Low German: A Dialect of Marion County, Kansas" is based on the speech of one informant and is intended to provide a descriptive analysis of the phonology and inflections of the dialect spoken by the Gnadenau community near Hillsboro, Kansas.¹⁶ The *Plautdietsch* near Henderson, Nebraska, is analyzed by Robert H. Buchheit in his dissertation "Mennonite *Plautdietsch*: A Phonological and Morphological Description of a Settlement Dialect in York and Hamilton Counties, Nebraska."¹⁷

As many have already noted, the last generation to have learned Mennonite Low German in Kansas are now in their sixties. What will happen to the dialect over the next couple of decades? The answer seems obvious. We are witnessing the demise of an immigrant language. But, we must also note the eleventh-hour attempts to save what remains of *Plautdietsch*. The dialect may survive in one form or another in areas outside of the United States such as Mexico and South America, and perhaps for a while longer in Canada. However, with its passing we will lose one of the cultural features which marked the Great Plains for the past century.

APPENDIX

Sample sentences of Mennonite Low German are based on an interview conducted in September 1990 in northeastern Reno County, Kansas. The informant was female, born in the vicinity of Inman, Kansas, in 1945, and spoke the dialect on a regular basis with her parents at the time of the interview. She did not speak the dialect to her husband, who was of Pennsylvania German background, nor with her two children. These sentences were translated into the dialect from an English version of the first ten of the so-called Wenker sentences utilized in German dialectology since the 1870s. The English sentence is also provided following the dialect version.

Wenker Sentences 1-10 in Mennonite Low German, Reno County, Kansas, 1990:

1. Im Winta blose de driehe Bledda rum in de Lufft/Wint.
'In the winter the dry leaves fly around in the air.'
2. Dout woat bolt oppheare met schnee-e, dann woat de Wadda beata woare.
'It will soon stop snowing. Then the weather will get better.'

3. Doh de Kohle en de Owe so dout de Malkj woat bolt aufange te koake.
'Put coals in the stove so that the milk will soon start to boil.'
4. De goode olle Maun brook deach de Ies met sien Piat un full en de kolde Woata.
'The good, old man broke through the ice with his horse and fell in the cold water.'
5. Hee schtuaf fea ooda sass Weakje triggj.
'He died four or six weeks ago.'
6. Dout Fia wea too heet, de Keek brent schwuat fun ungie.
'The fire was too hot. The cakes burned black on the bottom.'
7. Hee äät immer Eija ohne Salt un Piapa.
'He always eats eggs without salt and pepper.'
8. Ekj wea bie de Fru un sädd et te ahr, un see sädd, see wuod ehre Dochta dout uck sääje.
'I was at the woman's and told her, and she said, she would tell her daughter, too.'
9. Miene Feet deede so weh, ekj jleef, ekj ha dee aufjegohne.
'My feet hurt so much. I think I walked them off.'
10. Ekj well dout niemols wadda dohne.
'I won't ever do that again.'

Numbers from one to twelve:

eent, twee, dree, fea, fief, sass, säwen, acht, näajen, tian, alf, twalf

Days of the week beginning with Sunday:

Sinndach, Mondach, Dingisdach, Middweakj, Donnadach, Friedach, Sinnowent

Pronouns (I, you, he, she, it, we, you, they):

ekj, du (dü), hee, see, et, wie, jie, dee

Selected Verb Paradigms (Present Tense):

	senne 'to be'	habe 'to have'	gone 'to go'
ekj	sie	ha	go
du	best	hast	jeist
hee	es	haft	jeit
wie	sent	habe/ha	gone

A Poem in Mennonite Low German:

Plautdietsch
by J. H. Janzen

Maunch eena kaun kjeen Plautdietsch mea
un schämt sikj nich eenmol:
Em Jääjendeel, he meent sikj sea
met siene huage School,
rädt Huagdietsch, Engelsch, Russch—soo väl
daut eenem dieslich woat.
Weat es de gaunze Kjlätamähl
nich een Schinkjeschwoat.

Aus ekj noch kjeen wea, saut ekj oft
bi Mutta opp'e Schoot,
opp Plautdietsch säd se,—O, soo oft—
"Mien Jung, ekj si di goot!"

Waut Mutta Plautdietsch too mi säd,
daut klung soo woarm un tru,
daut ekj daut nimmamea vejät
bat too de latzte Ruh.¹⁸

NOTES

1. Children's rhyme "Rock-a-bye, rock-bye/At Easter we eat eggs/At Pentecost we eat white bread/If we do not starve (die)/We will grow up (get big)," recorded September 1990 near Buhler, Kansas (northeast Reno County); All transcriptions are in a broad orthographic form based on the orthography of modern German.
2. Norman Saul, "The Migration of the Russian Germans to Kansas," *Kansas Historical Quarterly* 40 (1974): 38-62.
3. J. Neale Carman, *Foreign Language Units of Kansas: I. Historical Atlas and Statistics* (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas Press, 1962), pp. 95, 165, 189, 193, 247.
4. Robert Buchheit, "Language Maintenance and Shift among Mennonites in South-Central Kansas," *Yearbook of German-American Studies* 17 (1982): 111-21.
5. William Keel, "A Russian-German Settlement Dialect in Kansas: *Plautdietsch* in South Central Kansas," *The German Language in America, 1683-1991*, ed. Joseph C. Salmons (Madison, WI: Max Kade Institute for German-American Studies, 1993), pp. 138-57, and Reuben Epp, *The Story of Low German and Plautdietsch: Tracing a Language Across the Globe* (Hillsboro: KS: The Reader's Press, 1993), p. 71.
6. Mary Schmidt, "Linguistic Transitions of the Russian-Mennonites in Kansas," M.A. thesis, Emporia State University, 1977.
7. See Buchheit and Carman.

8. Schmidt, p. 60.

9. The Dutch form *achter* is related to English *after* and is etymologically not related to the *Plautdietsch* form.

10. See for example Jack Thiessen and Victor Peters, *Plautdietsche Jeschichten* (Marburg: N.G. Ewert Verlag, 1990), and Arnold Dyck, *Collected Works of Arnold Dyck*, vols. 2 and 3, ed. Al Reimer (Winnipeg: Manitoba Mennonite Heritage Society, 1986, 1988).

11. See Epp, pp. 109-11.

12. Herman Rempel, *Kjenn jie noch Plautdietsch?: A Mennonite Low German Dictionary*, rev. ed. (Winnipeg: Mennonite Literary Society, 1984), and Jack Thiessen, *Mennonite Low German Dictionary* (Marburg: N.G. Ewert Verlag, 1977).

13. J.J. Newfeld, trans., *Daut niehe Tastament: Plautdietsch* (Winnipeg: Kindred Press, 1987).

14. Marian Penner Schmidt, "Low German Grammar," Ms, January 1979, Archives, Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church, Goessel, Kansas.

15. T. Dale Nicklas, "A survey of Molotchna Platdutch," TMs, September 1980, Archives, Alexanderwohl Mennonite Church, Goessel, Kansas.

16. Marjorie Baerg, "Gnadenau Low German: A Dialect of Marion County, Kansas" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 1960).

17. Robert H. Buchheit, "Mennonite *Plautdietsch*: A Phonological and Morphological Description of a settlement Dialect in York and Hamilton Counties, Nebraska" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 1978).

18. Epp, p. 110. Text edited by Reuben Epp. Epp's translation follows: Some cannot speak Low German now/ and aren't a bit ashamed:/Contrariwise, they pride themselves/in schooling they have gained,/speak German, English, Russian—yes,/so much, it spins my mind./Such claptrap is not even worth/a paltry bacon rind.//When I was small, I often sat/upon my mother's knee./She'd say, "My boy, I love you so;/you mean so much to me!"//What mother said in her own tongue,/that rang so warm and true;/that I shall nevermore forget/until my final due.