

AN HISTORIC GERMAN COMMUNITY

STATE CENTER, IOWA

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Nineteenth Century Ethnic Groups of Iowa

Professor Ron Roberts

May 6, 1992

AN HISTORIC GERMAN COMMUNITY:

STATE CENTER, IOWA

INTRODUCTION

One of the predominant ethnic groups that immigrated to the United States consisted of members from the German states. The number of German immigrants in America was second only to that of the English. The Germans tended to settle in small communities and many times formed communes, such as the settlement of the Amana Colonies in Iowa County, Iowa. Most German settlers were small farmers who were searching for a better life in the United States. The Midwest, with its rich soil and excellent growing seasons, attracted many a German pioneer. Iowa received its share of German immigrants which ranged from Hessians to Bavarians to Prussians to Saxons. The vast majority of Germans in Iowa settled around the Mississippi River area and around the Amana Colonies. Despite this fact, German settlements have been established in every county in Iowa (Clark 1976, p.47).

Although Marshall County, Iowa had a smaller percentage of Germans than many other Iowa counties (less than 2% of the total German population in Iowa), the Germans far outnumbered any other immigrant group. Figures taken from History of Marshall County Iowa by Gerard Schultz show that of the 3875 foreign-born citizen in Marshall County in 1890, 1217 of these are from German (1955, p.90). Thus, Germans made up approximately 31.4 percent of the foreign-born

inhabitants. Comparing this to the gross population of 8914, the Germans appear to comprise about 13.7 percent of the entire population. The next closest immigrant group is the Norwegian settlers with 572. The percentage of the foreign-born then stands at 14.8%, and Norwegians consisted of only 6.4% of the gross population. Hence, the Germans did cover a large amount of Marshall County. This paper focuses on a small community of Germans in Marshall County, Iowa, specifically in the State Center and Minerva Townships.

HISTORY OF STATE CENTER AND SURROUNDING AREA

Like many other small communities, State Center came into being through the railroad system. The Chicago and Northwestern Railroad laid its tracks from Marshalltown into the Linn Creek Valley and then out again onto the vast rolling prairie in 1863 (Whitehill 1977, p.11). There, on the flat planes comprising the future State Center and Minerva Townships, they opened a designated station--Centre Station (Appendix A). Soon afterward, the site became a booming community as a base of operations for further westward construction of the Chicago and Northwestern. The town of State Centre was incorporated on August 26, 1867, with mayor Washington Walker. (The spelling of the post office name was officially changed to State Center on July 5, 1893, upon petition of patrons.) Settlers poured in from all areas of the world to gobble up some of the richest

farmland anywhere in Iowa. By 1900, all land surrounding State Center was being cultivated and no homesteads were available (Whitehill 1977, p.29).

State Center became a typical Midwestern railroad town. As shown in Appendix B, all of the streets run parallel to the railroad tracks in a southwesterly direction. The central business district (or Main Street) is located on the first street south of the tracks. Because of this, businesses could have their merchandise conveniently dropped off at the back of their buildings. Farmers of the surrounding area also used the railway systems as a link to the markets in Chicago. In 1883 the Grinnell & Montezuma Railroad was also completed to unite State Center with Newberg (Whitehill 1977, p. 20). This new railroad further enlarged the market of area farmers and provided for an even better economy. Without the railroad system, State Center could not have grown into the flourishing town that it has become.

GERMAN POPULATION IN STATE CENTER

Before 1850, all settlers in Marshall County were American-born (Schultz 1955, p.28). However, this statistic drastically changed during the course of just a few years. Foreign-born inhabitants already numbered 209 by 1856, with 43 of those directly from Germany. A large number of Germans settled in the area called French Grove, which lies just north of State Center in the Minerva Township. These

families had an enormous effect on the community. As William Nelson Whitehill stated,

These [German] thrifty, hard working and dependable families and their descendants have left their mark on the community through the years. Such names as Riemenschneider, Hilleman, Goecke, Schoppe, Thake and Rohwedder, to name a few, identify the family as descendants of those early German settlers in the State Center community.

According to Helen Riemenschneider, a local State Center historian, the Germans residing in the town of State Center came down from the lower Minerva Township. The majority of the German settlers were, in fact, north of town near the site of St. John's German-Lutheran Church. Some of the early immigrants bore the names of Riemenschneider, Schoppe, Wantz, Garbelmann, Bader, Eckhardt and Weuve, to name but a few. Many Germans changed their surname upon reaching the United States. One prime example is the Garbelmann family of State Center. Due to the belief that the name was too hard to pronounce, three Garbelmann brothers decided to change their surname to that of their former country--Germany. However, a conflict arose as to the spelling of this new name. Two of the brothers wanted it spelled in the English tradition, or German. The other brother decided to keep some relation to the Garbelmann name and insisted on ending the name with a double "n," or Germann. Both sides got their way, and the family was from then on divided between the Germans and the Germanns.

One tends to ask, now, where the German settlers came from, and how did they reach State Center? Upon reviewing the personal biographical sketches of the 1907 atlas of Marshall County, it appears that most of the State Center Germans came from the area surrounding Wenzen, a small town in what was then the province of Braunschweig, Germany. A map of Germany and the approximate locations of these towns is provided in Appendix C. The town of Wenzen was not to be found on this map. However, the village of Weenzen appears to be around the location which was sited for Wenzen. This town lies about twenty-five miles south of Hanover and just east of the city of Braunschweig.

The reason for the Germans settlement around State Center is unknown. Most of those from Wenzen were "small farmers." Since the farmland around State Center is excellent for growing crops, it can be assumed that this farmland was one of the reasons for the influx of Germans to State Center. One of the first immigrants, Christian Riemenschneider, came to State Center in 1863; perhaps some families ended up following him to the New World. Most of the German settlers came to America between the late 1860's and early 1880's. Causes as to the large exodus may be speculated to be the rise of the Prussian government of Wilhelm I, the Seven Weeks War between Prussia and Austria in 1866 and the Franco-Prussian War in 1870. In 1882, 250,000 Germans immigrated to America (Anderson 1970, p. 80). The maps of land ownership in Appendix D show the

difference in the number of German farmers in both State Center and Minerva Townships between the years of 1871 and 1907.

Although the vast majority of German settlers were farmers, some did start small businesses in the town of State Center. George German began a dealership in harnesses and saddles, while the Westphall brothers organized a blacksmith shop. Appendix E exhibits advertisements for several businesses of German descent, as well as for many of the German farmers.

LIFE IN THE GERMAN COMMUNITY

In examining the lives of the German immigrants of State Center, it seems necessary to first investigate their journey to the United States and first impressions of the country. To accomplish this, one predominant German family of the area, the Riemenschneider family, will be focused on. In 1977 Ralph William Henry Riemenschneider traced his family roots back to his first German ancestors from Wenzel, Germany. The work he wrote as a result of his research covers the Riemenschneider family genealogical history from Zacharias Riemenschneider who was born around the year 1598. The following is a brief history of the Riemenschneider family as it progressed from Wenzel to the United States and eventually State Center.

Two branches of the Riemenschneider family are present in State Center today. One, the Christian Riemenschneider

family, came to America in 1855 from Hallensen, Germany, a small village near Wenzen. The other, the August Ludwig Riemenschneider family, immigrated in 1868 and came directly to State Center. The two branches were related through Hans Heinrich Riemenschneider, but neither family knew this until 1977 when the genealogical record was completed. Appendix F contains a genealogical record of the Riemenschneider and related families.

August Ludwig Riemenschneider followed his older brother Heinrich to America in 1868. Heinrich stowed away on a ship to America in 1867 to avoid reporting for service in the army. Both brothers went directly to State Center, possibly because Christian Riemenschneider has been in the area for almost ten years. While traveling through the mountains of Pennsylvania, August Ludwig "looked out of the window, shook his fist and said, 'If it's all like this, just wait until I get my hands on him (Heinrich)!'" However, August Ludwig did not have to worry. Upon reaching State Center he found the rich, flat prairie land, which he was able to buy for three dollars an acre (this price cannot be verified.) All of the Riemenschneiders became farmers, on a much larger scale than what they had been in Germany, and soon became predominant families in the State Center area. Usually, families consisted of the mother and father and six to twelve children, although only five to ten of the children reached maturity. All of the descendants typically stayed near the family homestead. Only two of August

Ludwig's six children moved away from the family farm. The history of the Riemenschneider family is much like that of other German settlers who came to America.

FARMING PRACTICES

One aspect of life that the majority of the Germans dealt with was the life of farming. The early immigrants were mostly "Small Farmers" in their respective villages in the Old World, and they kept their traditions and values here in America. Through their hard work, dedication and love for the land, the industrious German people became prosperous individuals and large property holders. Crops ranged from wheat, corn, rye, oats, barley, broom-corn, sorghum, garden vegetables and wild fruit. An early farmer sowed grain by hand, scattering seed from the sack tied over his shoulder. Corn, on the other hand was planted using a hoe or a single-row hand-planter. Not all farmers were planters, however. Many of the German farmers also raised hogs and cattle for market. This brought about the problem of fencing in one's land. As the number of settlers in an area grew, it became necessary to confine one's livestock to one's own property.

The proximity of the train was of vital importance to the early German farmers of State Center. It not only brought supplies to the town, but also opened up the large market in the Chicago area. Typically several neighboring farmers joined into a cooperative effort to bring the cattle

or hogs to the railroad stockyards where the animals would begin their journey to the slaughterhouse in Chicago. Cattle were simply driven across the prairie, but hogs had to be loaded into wagons and taken over the dirt roads from the farm to the market (Whitehill 1977, p.38).

Saturdays were generally shopping days for farm wives. They brought butter, cream, eggs, poultry and produce to the stores and exchanged these for their supplies for a week (Whitehill 1977, p. 29). Onions, rhubarb and cabbage were a staple in every German's diet. The typical Iowa "meat and potatoes" meal can possibly be traced back to German influence, as Germans preferred beef and pork over traditional American lamb and mutton (Clark 1976 p.50).

The greatest remnant of German farming tradition is in German barn architecture. Two types of barns, the forebay and the banked barn, are characteristic of German settlers. The forebay barn has an overhanging eave, while the banked barn has an earthen ramp to the hay mow. German barns also usually have a first story constructed of stone (Clark 1976 p. 50). Appendix G shows some examples of different types of German barns found throughout Iowa.

CHURCHES OF STATE CENTER

The biggest effect that the Germans had on the town of State Center regarded religious practices. State Center currently has one Catholic, one Methodist, one Presbyterian and three Lutheran Churches. The history of the three

German based churches--St. John's Lutheran, Trinity Lutheran and St. Paul's Lutheran--portrays the strong German Lutheran heritage of the area.

St. Paul's Lutheran Church first began in 1879 when a Lutheran pastor from Des Moines occasionally made a trip to State Center to conduct services. The church was officially organized in 1884 with founders William Schoppe Sr., August Schoppe, Conrad Funke, Carl Damman, Henry Koppey, Chris Wilkening Sr., Chris Wohler, Frederick Voss and William Severidt. Most of these men were members of the early German settlers, who felt the need for spiritual enlightenment in their new land. Some of the services were actually in German. Helen Riemenschneider remembers as a child learning to speak basic German from Reverend A.J. Oltman, as she lived next door to the church and the parsonage.

St. John's Evangelical Lutheran Church, a Missouri Synod Lutheran Church, has a turbulent history. It was founded in 1865 by a few charter members of the German population. These members include many well-known German families: Hartwig, Ohlsen, Schaper, Frohwein, Bader, Eckhardt and German. Along with their church, these families also formed a school in 1880, typical of German settlements in the United States. As with St. Paul's, the members of St. John's first received sermons from different circuit riding missionaries. The first active pastor was Reverend Frederick Doescher, who came in 1872.

Ruth Heismith, a long time citizen of State Center, remembers the night of January 1, 1945. On that fateful night, the original St. John's Church burned to the ground. All records were lost along with the structure. Mrs. Heismith could see the flames from her house. Shortly thereafter, the decision was made to rebuild. At the time of the fire, the membership of St. John's was approximately 800 people. A huge debate ensued as to the location of the new church. The congregation was split in two; half wanted to build in the town of State Center, and half wanted to build out by the remains of the old church and cemetery. The result was two churches: St. John's Lutheran on the original grounds, and Trinity Lutheran in State Center. Both churches have very active congregations.

The members of the German Lutheran churches were dedicated to their church and their family. One of the original founders of St. John's, George German, married a Presbyterian woman shortly after St. John's was founded. However, German promised his mother on her deathbed that he would always stay a Lutheran. Although he consistently attended the Presbyterian church, he never actually became a member of it and instead remained Lutheran. The laws of the churches were very strict. One member, Heinrich Schaper, committed suicide. Because this was seen as a mortal sin, Schaper was not buried with the church members in St. John's cemetery. Instead, his tomb rests at the far end of the cemetery--surrounded only by the fence which marks the

boundaries of the cemetery. Appendix H contains pictures of some of the gravestones of St. John's cemetery, including Henry Schaper's headstone.¹

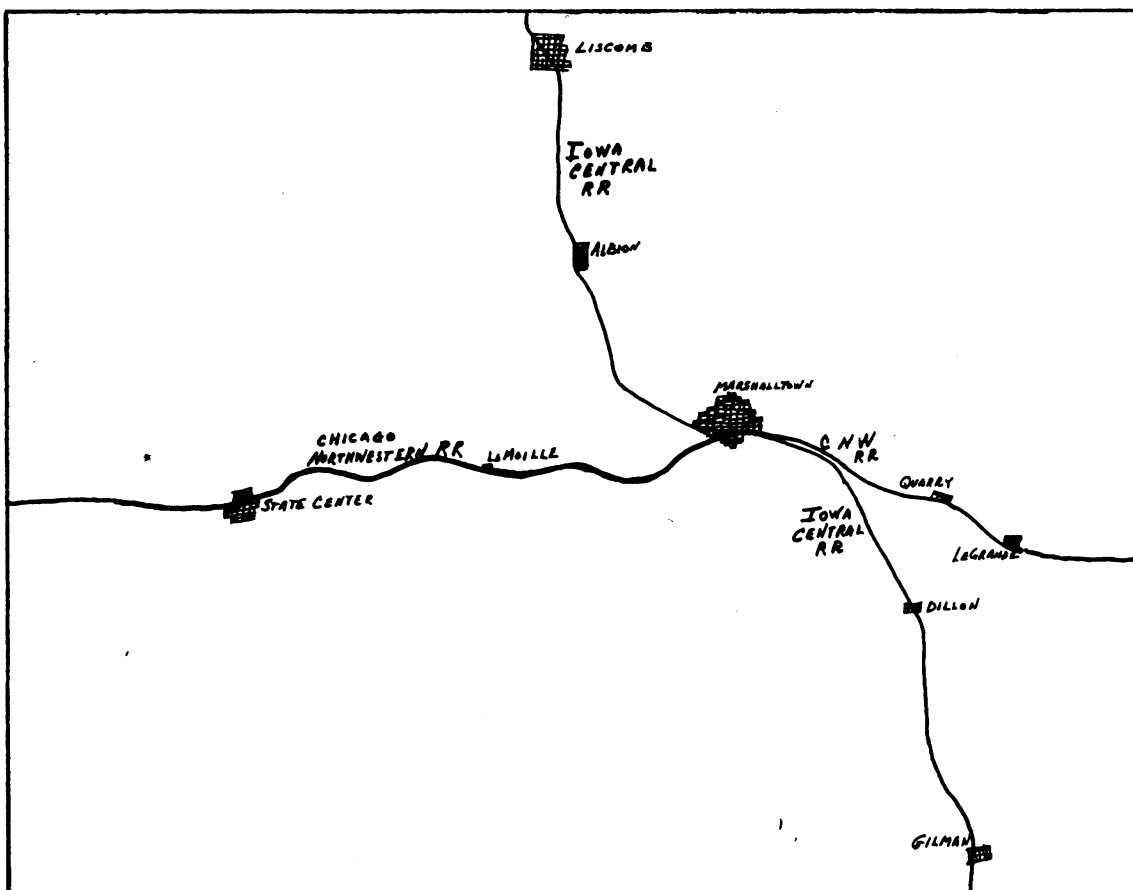
CONCLUSION

The German element around State Center has been very active in the community. The influence of the Germans is seen in the architecture, religion and determination of this small Iowa farming community. Despite this, very few records of the Germans exist. Many were destroyed in fires, such as the St. John's fire in 1945 and the fire of 1917 which destroyed the State Center Enterprise, the town newspaper. State Center has a history rich with German-American culture--something of which the citizens of State Center should be very proud.

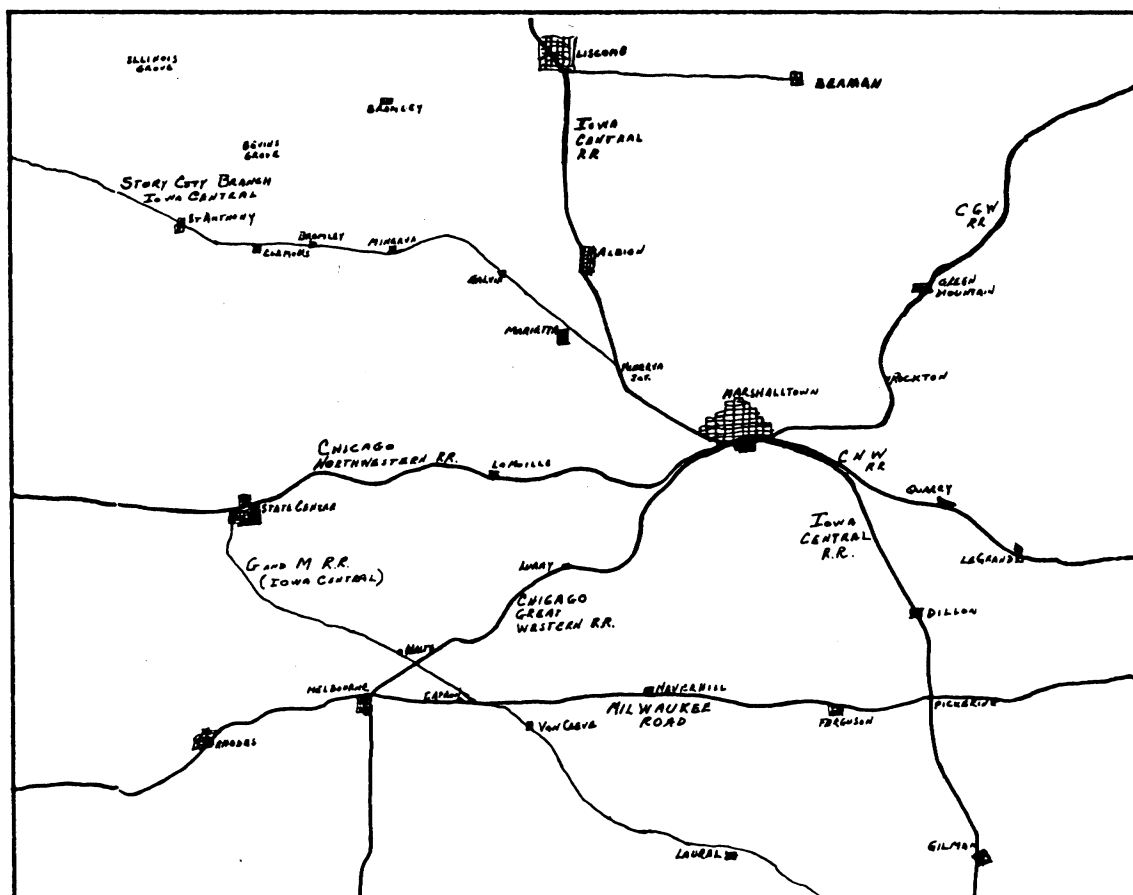
¹ Unfortunately, these are not the original headstones of the families. Like other area cemeteries, the dead were buried as they died, not in family plots. Some years ago, the old headstones were torn up, and new ones replaced so as to provide for family plots. Helen Riemenschneider inquired as to the original gravestones and was told that they now rest in the bottom of a creek in the neighboring pastureland. None of the living relatives were informed of the change.

Appendix A

13



Railroads in Marshall County in 1870 (above) and in 1900 (below).



Taken from: Ups and Downs of Iowa's Railroads by William Nelson
 Whitehill

Appendix B

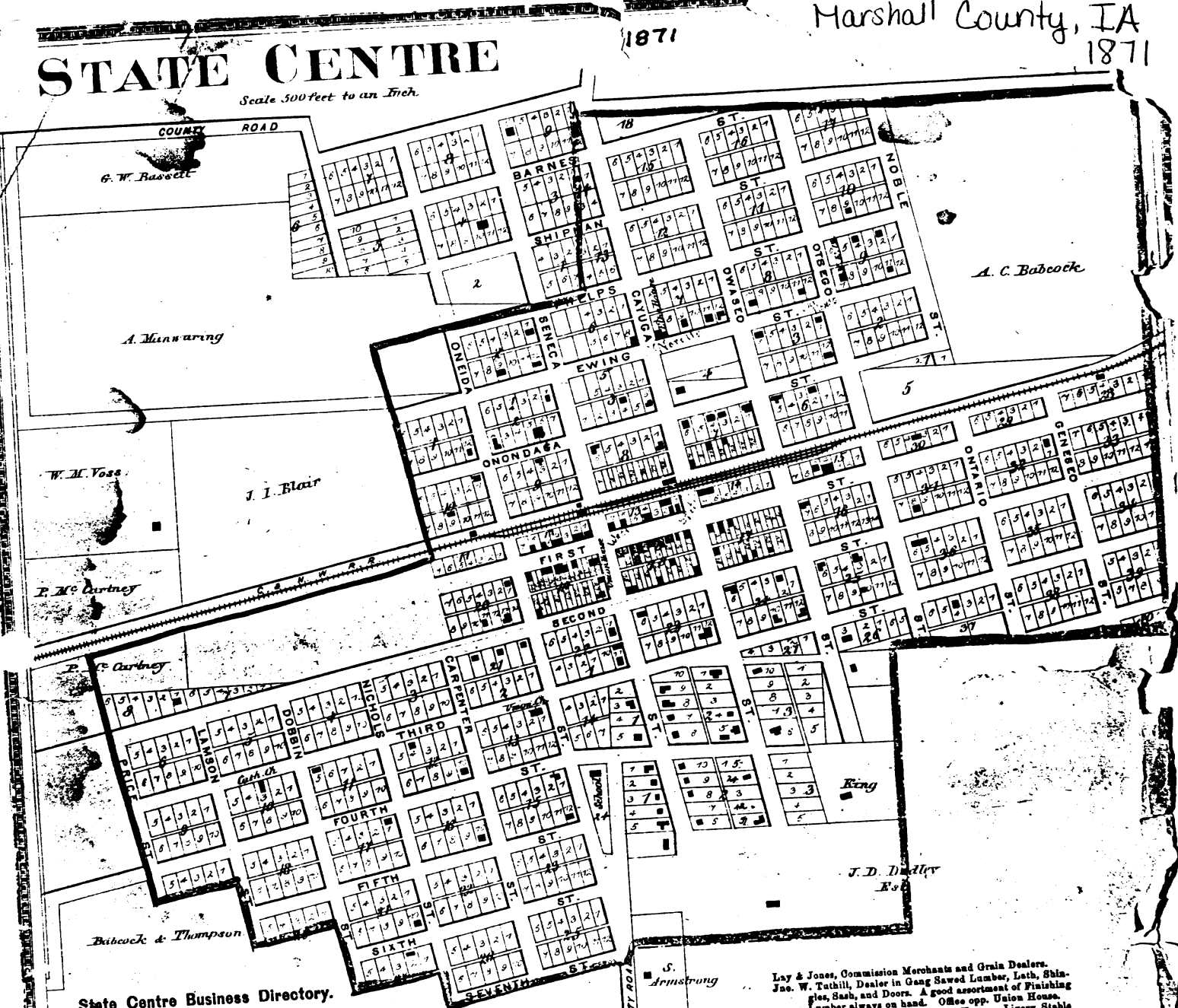
14

Taken from: Atlas of
Marshall County, IA
1871

STATE CENTRE

Scale 500 feet to an Inch.

1871



State Centre Business Directory.

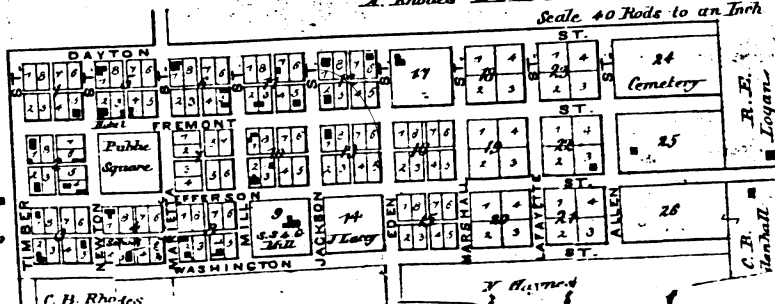
J. W. Dobbin, Banker. Money Loaned. Collections made a specialty.
James A. Bartlett, Attorney-at-Law.
Frank Walker, Notary Public, Real Estate and Collection Agt.
E. P. Thompson, Real Estate Agent and Dealer in Improved and Unimproved Lands. Also, City Lots for Sale.
O. G. Hunt, Physician, Surgeon, and Druggist.
V. J. Shipman, Dry Goods, Tailoring, and Farm Machinery.
Ewing & Goodrich, Dealers in General Merchandise. Highest price paid for Country Produce.
Stipp, Nichols & Co., General Dealers in Groceries, Crockery, &c. Grain and Farm Produce a specialty.
A. C. Baker, Dealer in General Merchandise.

Lay & Jones, Commission Merchants and Grain Dealers.
Jas. W. Tathill, Dealer in Gang Sawn Lumber, Lath, Shingles, Sash, and Doors. A good assortment of Finishing Lumber always on hand. Office opp. Union House.
R. B. Bullock, Proprietor of Union House. Livery Stable connected with the House.
P. B. Ellis, Proprietor of Ellis House. Good Stabling in connection.
H. A. Miller, Manufacturer of Wagons, Carriages, Sleights, &c. Repairing done on short notice.
S. W. Lamson, Nurseryman and Wholesale Dealer in Orange Plants.
P. P. Nicholls, Farmer, Carpenter, and Joiner.
H. Hutten, Farmer and Stock Grower.

EDENVILLE

A. Rhodes

Scale 40 Rods to an Inch



Edenville Business

Jos. Lacey, Proprietor Hotel.
Geo. Cury, Dealer in Dry Goods, Groceries, and Sausages.
A. J. Bule, Physician and Surgeon.
O. B. Mendonhall, Farmer and Dealer.
Sec. 18, Eden Tp.
H. Haines, Nurseryman, Dealer in Fruit Trees.
A. Rhodes, Farmer and Dealer in Eden Tp.
C. B. Rhodes, Farmer and Dealer in Eden Tp.
Hulse & Watkins, Farmers and Settlers.
Wm. C. Weeks, Farmer and Thresher.

Die Bundesländer

The Federal States



Taken from: Deutsch im Sprachgebrauch by Reinhold K. Bubser

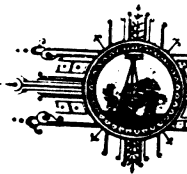
☐ German landowners

MINERVA

[illegible]

17

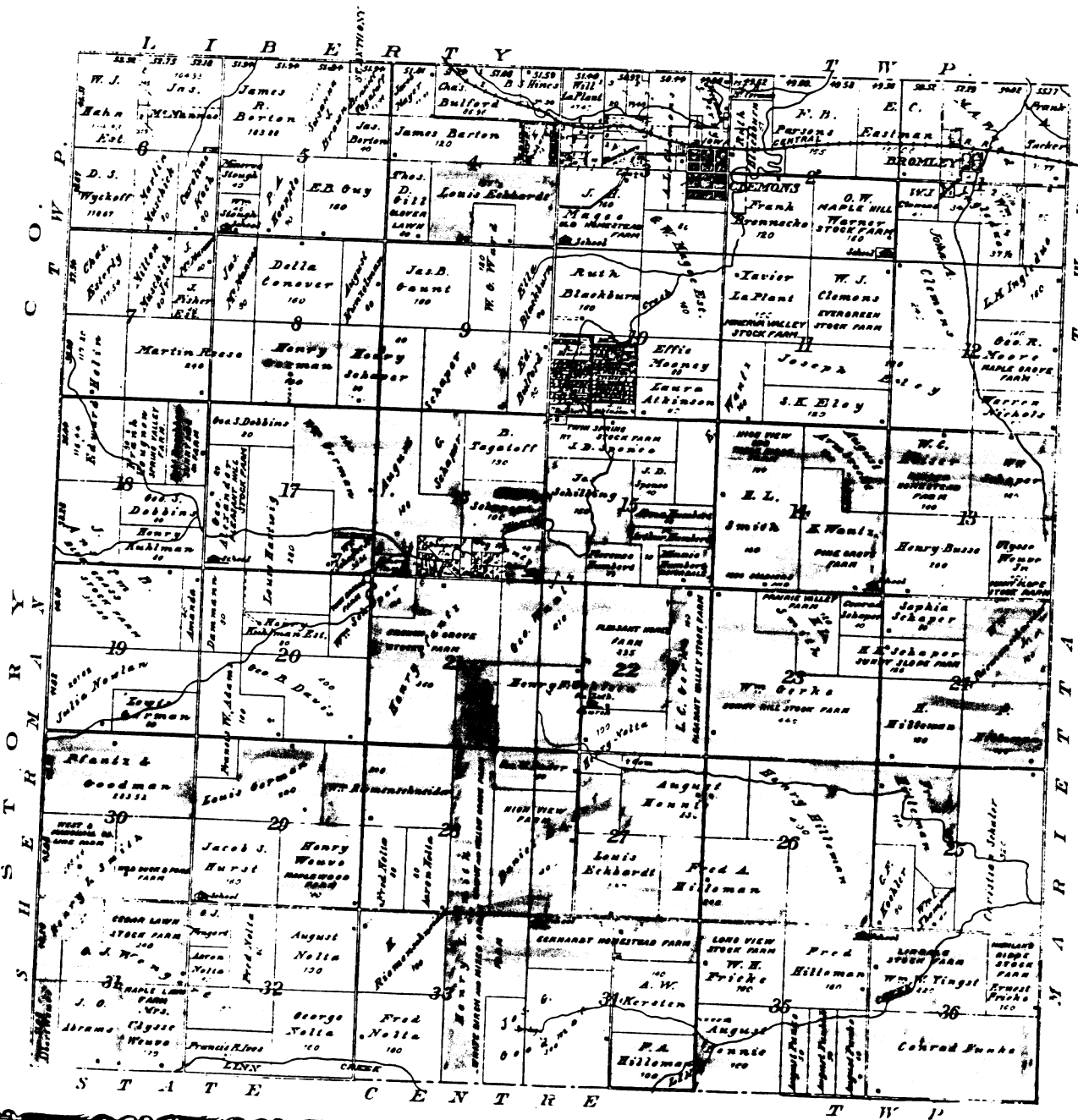
☐ German landowners ²⁷

[illegible]

MARSHALL COUNTY, IOWA

Township 84 North Range 20 West of the 5th P.M.

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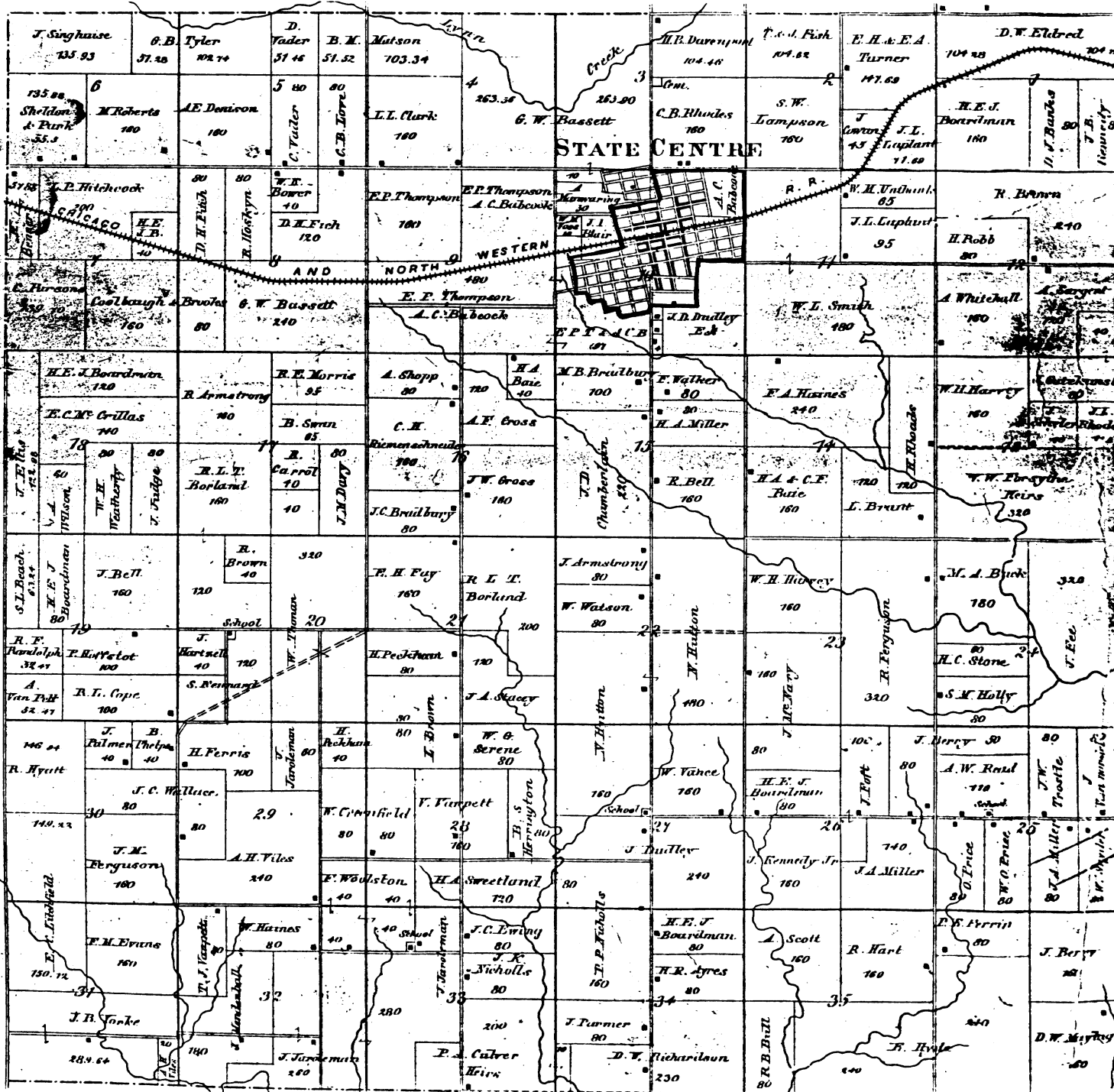
Taken from: Atlas of Marshall County, IA 1871

☐ German landowners

Township 83 North
Range 20 West
(of 5th Principal Meridian)
1871

STATE CENTRE

Scale 1 1/4 inches to the mile



Appendix D

Taken from: Atlas of Marshall County, IA 1910

☐ German landowners 29



SCALE 2 INCHES TO 1 MILE.

MARSHALL COUNTY, IOWA.

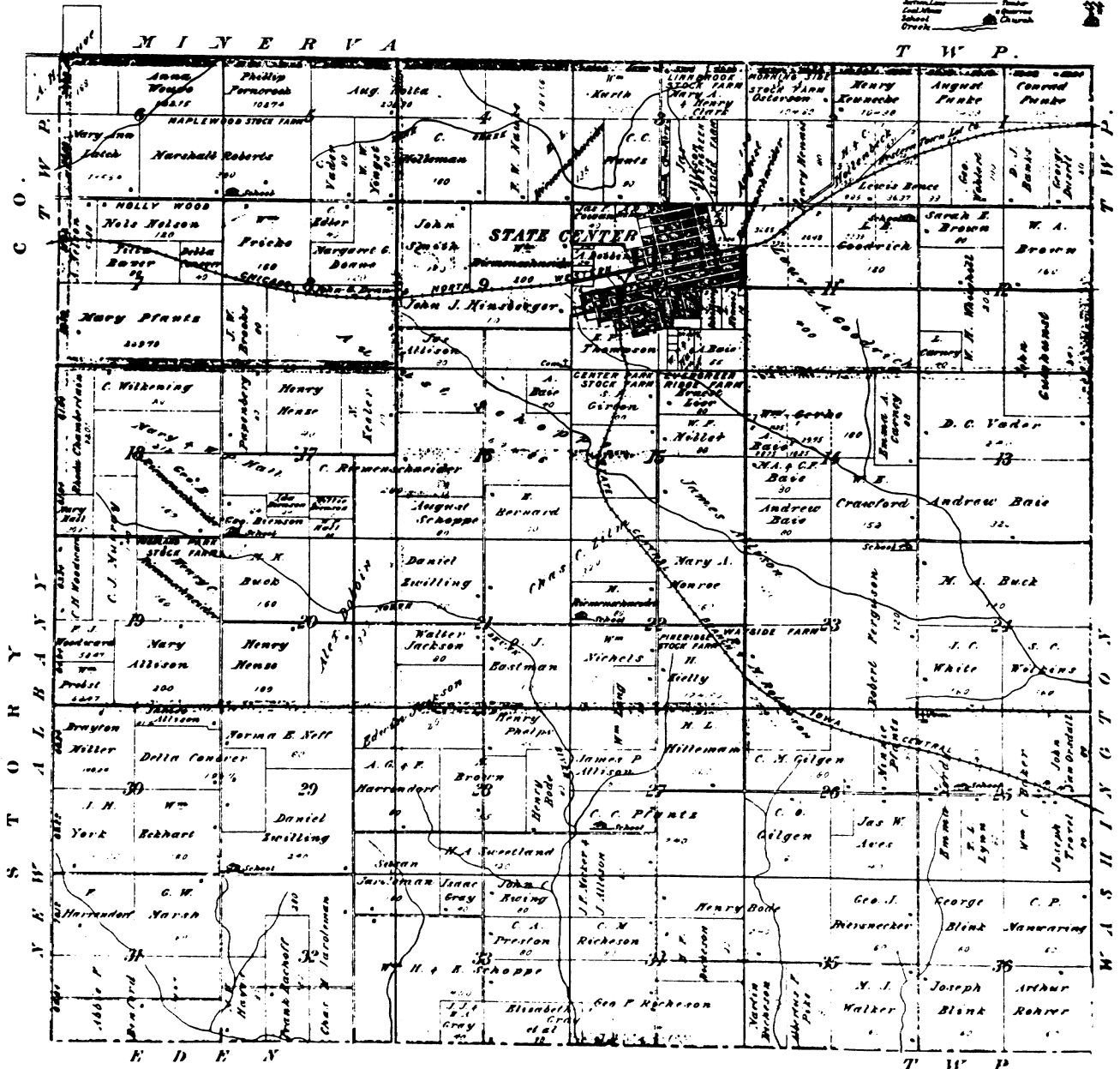
Township 83 North Range 20 West of the 5th P.M.

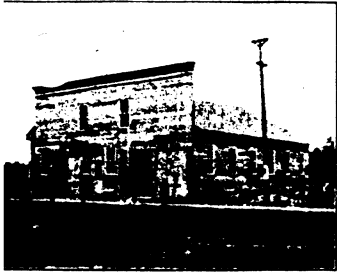
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DAVENPORT, IA.

LEGEND

Black	Water
Blue	Highway
Red	Section Line
Green	County Line
Yellow	City
Orange	Village
Pink	Hamlet
White	Unimproved Land
Grey	Swamp
Dark Green	Forest
Light Green	Grass
Dark Blue	Stream
Light Blue	Lake



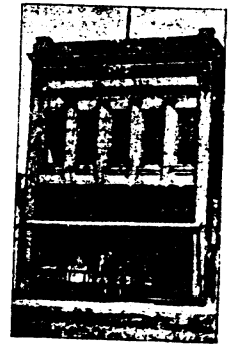


WESTPHALL BROS.
PROPRIETORS OF
General Repair Shop
—AND—
Wagonwork Blacksmiths
PHONE NO. 156
STATE CENTER, IOWA



GEORGE W. GERMAN
Manufacturer of
and Dealer in

Harness, Saddles, Bridles,
Blankets, Robes
STATE CENTER, IOWA



E. H. SCHILLING G. F. SCHILLING
SCHILLING BROS.
DEALERS IN
Hardware and Farm Implements
Organs and Pianos
STATE CENTER, IOWA

Taken from:
Atlas of Marshall
County, IA 1907
FARMERS

H. F. OEHLSEN
Farmer and Stock Raiser
Pleasant Home Farm
Sec. 22, Minerva Twp. State Center, R. R. 2.

August Armbrrecht
Farmer and
Stock Raiser
Sec. 14, Minerva Twp. Clemons, R. R. 1

A. HENNIS
Farmer and
Stock Raiser
Sec. 35, Minerva Twp. State Center, R. R. 2.

L. ECKHARDT
Proprietor of
The Eckhardt Homestead Farm
Sec. 27, Minerva Twp.
OCK RAISER AND FEEDER
State Center, R. R. 1

W. W. YINGST
Proprietor of
The Lindale Stock Farm
Sec. 36, Minerva Twp.
FEEDER AND SHIPPER
State Center, R. R. 1

H. H. SCHAPER
Proprietor of
The Sunny Slope Farm
Sec. 24, Minerva Twp. State Center, R. R. 2.
Stock Raiser

HENRY L. SMITH
(RETIRED FARMER)
—PROPRIETOR OF—
**Walnut and
Willow Grove Farm**
Sec. 28, Minerva Twp. STATE CENTER, R. R. 1

AUGUST FUNKE, JR.
Farmer and
Stock Raiser
Sec. 35, Minerva Twp. STATE CENTER, R. R. 1

WM. C. KAISER
Proprietor of
The Kaiser Homestead Farm
Sec. 13, Minerva Twp. Clemons, R. R. 1
FARMER AND STOCK GROWER

Ulysse Weuve, Jr.
Farmer and
Stock Raiser
Sec. 13, Minerva Twp. STATE CENTER, R. R. 2



O. E. LIER
Farmer and Stock Raiser
Section 22, State Center Township

GEORGE W. BADER
Farmer and
Stock Raiser
High View Farm
State Center, R. R. 1
Sec. 27, Minerva Twp.

HENRY SCHOPPE
**FARMER AND STOCK
RAISER**
Section 16, State Center Township
State Center R. R. 1
THE ASH GROVE STOCK FARM

G. B. RIEMENSCHNEIDER
Farmer and Stock Raiser
Section 18, State Center Township
P. O. State Center R. F. D. No. 3

G. J. WENGERT
PROPRIETOR OF
THE CEDAR LAWN STOCK FARM
Sec. 31, Minerva Twp.
STATE CENTER, R. R. 1
FARMER AND STOCK RAISER

E. G. FRICKE
BREEDER OF
Thoroughbred
Short-horn Cattle
—AND—
Poland Chir
Hogs....
INSPECTION
INVITED
STOCK FOR SALE
Sec. 36, Minerva Twp. P. O. STATE CENT
HIGHLAND RIDGE STOCK FARM

H. L. PFANTZ
Proprietor of
The French Grove Stock Farm
Sec. 21, Minerva Twp. STATE CENTER, R. R. 1

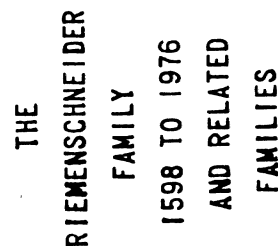
WM. SCHOPPE
**FARMER AND STOCK
RAISER**
Section 8, State Center Township
State Center R. R. 1
PLEASANT VIEW FARM

H. C. RIEMENSCHNEIDER
The Highland Stock Farm
Farmer and Stock Raiser
Section 19, State Center Township
P. O. STATE CENTER R. R. 3

ROBT. BUSCHBOM
PROPRIETOR OF
THE SUNNY SIDE FARM
Sec. 18, Minerva Twp.
STATE CENTER, R. R. 1
Stock Raiser

21

1976
CHAS. VI
L.H.L.



Appendix F

Photos of
Christian and
Catherine
Riemenschneider

Taken from:

Past and Present
of Marshall County,

Iowa, by Judge William Battin
and F. A. Moscrip



MRS. CATHERINE RIEMENSCHNEIDER

22



CHRISTIAN RIEMENSCHNEIDER

Appendix G

23

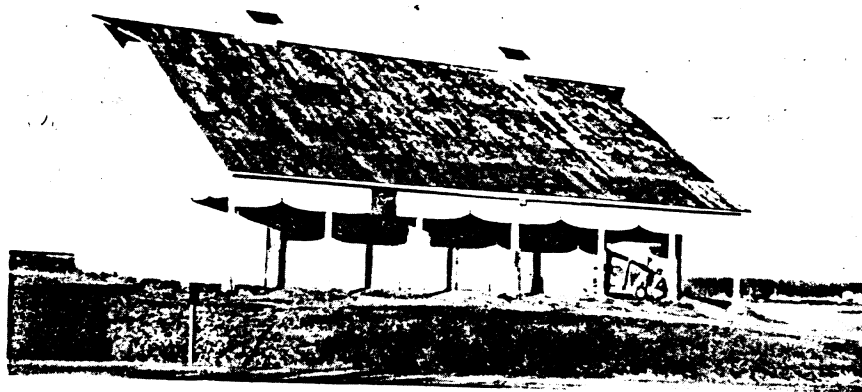
Figure 1. A German forebay barn in Iowa County, Iowa



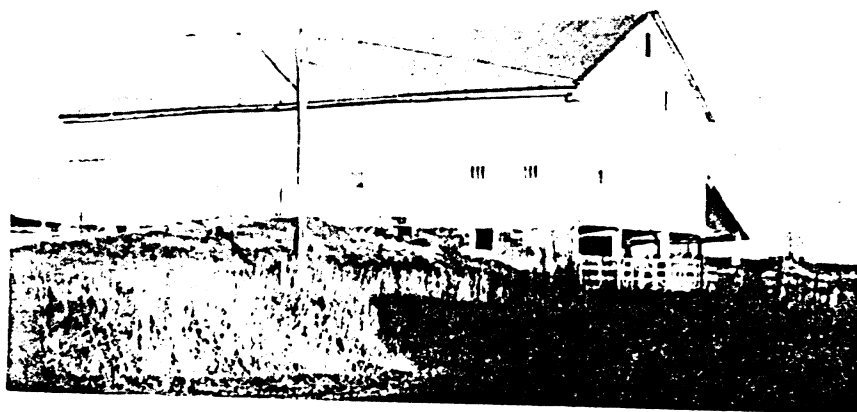
Figure 2. A vestigial forebay barn built by the Amish in Johnson County.



▲ A forebay barn in South Amana



▲ A banked barn with a one-story stone foundation.





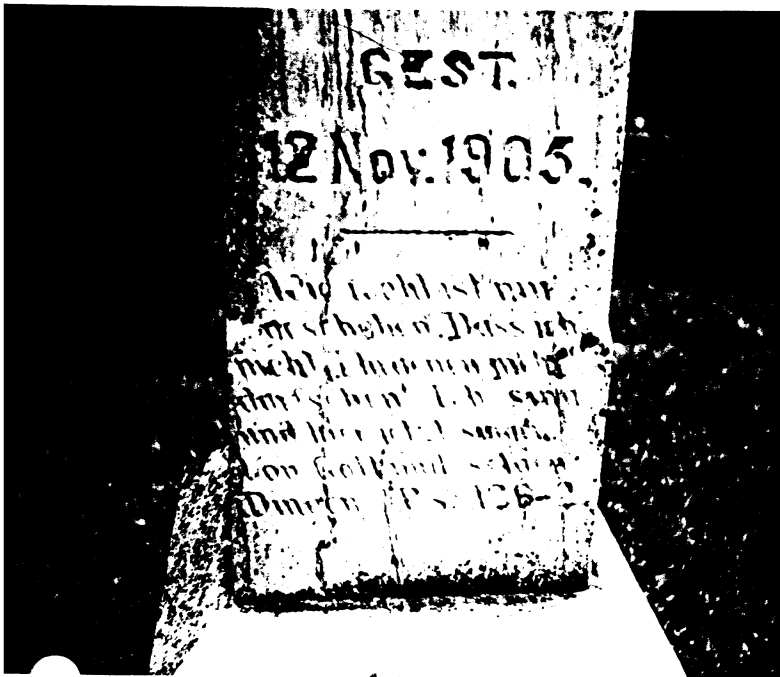
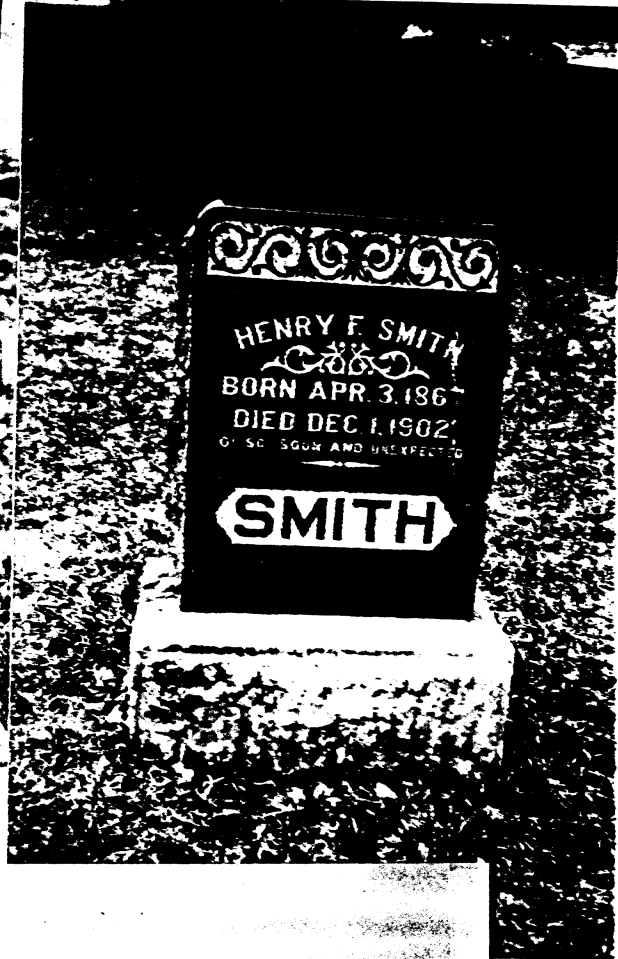
As many old tombstones were deteriorating, this plaque was erected.



Many German cemeteries are surrounded by Austrian pine

Appendix H

One of the ²⁵
"new"
↓ headstones.



The
lone
grave
of
Henrie
Schap
a
victim
of
suicide

Note
the
foreb
barn
in bac
grav

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