

## The Adventures of Johannes Dietrich Dyck

Johannes Dietrich, the older brother of our direct descendant grandfather, Jacob Dyck (IV), would become a man of major legend in the Dyck family. Johannes was a prodigious writer, keeping diaries throughout his life span of 72 years. Not only did these diaries chronicle Johannes' life, but they provide information that gives insight on many family members. Drawing on these diaries and the oral history of the family, Johannes Dietrich's great grandson, Cornelius J. Dyck, wrote a biography of his great grandfather. This unpublished manuscript is the source of the information contained in this book about Johannes Dietrich Dyck.

After serving his four-year apprenticeship Johannes was offered the post of manager in Frau Hamm's grocery and dry goods store. This was a job of much importance for a young man of 16 years of age, but Johannes made a good accounting of himself and his period of employment with Frau Hamm was mutually satisfactory. In 1844 Johannes was baptized in the Ellerwald Mennonite Church by Elder Jacob Kroeker.

Probably as a result of leaving home at such a young age, wanderlust was in Johannes' blood. He left the employment of Frau Hamm and worked at similar jobs in Marienburg and Caldove (Caldowe) in the Vistula Delta. However, discontent with the storekeeper's life had set in. In the winter of 1847-1848 he returned to the home of his father and stepmother. He spent his time hunting, no doubt to supplement the family income and meat supply. This seems to be a rather radical departure from the norm for Mennonites, to own a gun and use it for hunting in the Vistula Delta area. A prelude of things to come.

While staying with his parents Johannes received word that a visitor from the Mennonite colonies in Russia, Johann Cornies, was looking for someone to accompany him back to Russia from West Prussia. Johannes Dyck eagerly sought out Cornies and the two made arrangements for the trip to Russia, planning to leave in eight

days. Before their departure, however, Cornies married and went back to Russia with his new wife. It must have been a whirlwind romance that caused Cornies to forget his prior agreement with Johannes. Apparently Cornies never even bothered to tell Johannes what took place.

With the trip to Russia scuttled Johannes made the decision to go to America to seek his fortune. He appears to have had in mind working, perhaps in the merchant's trade, saving his money, and returning with the means to purchase his own farm. Most likely he had his appetite whetted by Cornies and meant to buy a farm in Russia, in the colony of Chortitza or Molotschna. Before leaving for America Johannes had a piece of serious business to attend to. While working in Caldove he had fallen in love with Helene Jantzen and they announced their engagement prior to Johannes' departure.

Johannes left West Prussia on August 18, 1848, traveling by train to the port city of Hamburg. Once there he booked passage on the American ship *Joseph Fish* and set sail on September 1, 1848. Upon reaching open sea violent storms were encountered that forced the captain of the ship to sail north around England and Scotland before entering the Atlantic. Even then the weather was miserable and the voyage perilous. It would be a full two months before the ship reached New York, finally docking on November 2, 1848. Johannes was traveling with a friend named Berisch, and it was Berisch who had plans of going to the city of Chicago. Johannes tagged along. Taking a route that would be repeated by Abraham Claassen and his family in 1876, Johannes and Berisch went up the Hudson River to Albany, New York, and from there to Buffalo and Niagara Falls. A lake steam ship took them the rest of the way to Chicago. Johannes secured work as a bartender in the place where he lived and began learning English. One can imagine the language learned in a saloon in Chicago in 1848-1849. While working at this job Johannes heard the first stories of gold being discovered in California. He didn't have the money required for the long trip to California, yet.

In the Spring of 1849 Johannes traveled by boat on Lake Michigan to the city of Milwaukee, Wisconsin. There he met several people he had known in West Prussia, including the sister of



Johannes Dietrich Dyck (1826-1898), Uncle of Jacob J. Dyck. Johannes went to California during the Gold Rush of 1849 and was Mayor of the Am Trakt settlement in Russia from 1866 to 1884.

Photo:  
*A Pilgrim People.*

Frau Hamm of Robach, his former employer. Through this sister he gained employment with the importing firm of Fullton and after a couple of months was earning the respectable salary of \$45 per month.

Much of his work for the Fullton company required Johannes to spend considerable time aboard the company ships docked at Milwaukee. One day, while supervising the unloading of one of these ships, Johannes saw a young girl suddenly fall 30 feet from a bridge over the bay. Quickly calculating how far the current would carry her while he removed shoes and clothes, he dove into the water at the spot he thought she would resurface. Johannes had guessed correctly and was close enough to grab the girl when he caught a glimpse of her in the murky water. A boat picked them up and the young girl was revived by a doctor on shore. The next day the newspapers hailed the young German hero with headlines such as "Young German Risks Life To Save Drowning American Girl." Johannes received an invitation to dine with his employers, the Fullton brothers, who were no doubt pleased with the recognition Johannes' heroics brought to their company.

A good salary and the afterglow of heroism were not enough for Johannes. He had promised his betrothed Helene that he would return to West Prussia within 2-3 years and he had no intention of returning in the same financial condition he had left in . The lure of the gold rush to California finally overcame Johannes and he set off on the overland route, lacking the money it would take for the faster route by ship via Panama to San Francisco. His first destination was St. Joseph, Missouri, the jumping-off point for the Oregon and Santa Fe Trails. He arrived outside of St. Joseph, on March 14, 1850, at the Mormon settlement of Canesville, Missouri. There he sold his wagon and bought a pair of oxen for \$80. With a group of 22 other people and five wagons, Johannes ferried across the Missouri River on March 19 and headed west. Reports of massacres of previous travelers by the Pawnee tribe and a fear of getting lost on the vast Plains made Johannes' group stick to following the Platte River. No hostile Indians were encountered and the group reached Ft. Laramie, Wyoming, on July 22, 1850. At Ft. Laramie Johannes met a man who made a lifelong impression on him. His name was Louis Mellon and he had been a mountain man for over 25 years. Originally from Canada, Mellon had not seen civilization for the better part of the two and a half decades he spent ranging the Rocky Mountains trapping. Mellon could speak many Indian languages and knew the route to California well. He agreed to let Johannes accompany him. They made a relatively easy crossing of the Rocky Mountains and reached Ft. Bridger, Wyoming, in mid-August. In Ft. Bridger Mellon met up with an old friend, the famous scout, Kit Carson. Carson warned the men not to take the southern route into California at that time of year

because of the snowstorms in the Sierra Nevada Mountains. On this advice the men traveled the northern route over the Cascade Mountains into Oregon.

This route from Ft. Laramie, Wyoming, to Oregon, follows the famed Oregon Trail. Johannes' entire path once he had crossed the Missouri River near St. Joseph, Missouri, follows this famous Trail first discovered by Robert Stuart in 1812-1813. Stuart and a group of companions left the trading post of Astoria in Oregon and traveled east taking a route much further south of previous explorers Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. The South Pass through the Rocky Mountains in Wyoming is what made this such a viable route for the waves of settlers that would come to Oregon in the years 1820-1860.

Along this route into Oregon Territory, Johannes remembered seeing as many as 30 graves a day. Hostile Indians and cholera took their toll on travelers heading for Oregon. On September 12, 1850, Johannes was involved in his first encounter with hostile Indians after finding three scalped bodies along the trail. Though indeed attacked, the small party of men all escaped and continued on to Oregon. From Oregon Johannes wrote to his Helene in West Prussia that he hoped to return to her in one year. It took that long for the letter to reach Helene, and Johannes was still in California. Helene's letter of response, closed with the words, "Yours, even unto death," was saved by Johannes and no doubt it comforted him on many lonely nights yet to come.

Johannes reached the gold fields of California sometime in 1850 and joined thousands of other miners from around the world that had come seeking their fortunes in the gleaming yellow metal. Stories of failure far exceed those of success in finding gold in amounts worth the backbreaking labor and danger inherent in these primitive mining operations. Johannes was one of the lucky ones. After three years he felt he had enough gold to return to West Prussia. Together with two companions and packhorses loaded with their treasure, Johannes began the return journey across America. The return route was through the desert Southwest, possibly headed for Santa Fe, New Mexico. From Santa Fe they could use the well-traveled Santa Fe Trail that would take them in a northeasterly direction toward St. Joseph, Missouri. They never made it. Not far into the trip they were attacked by hostile Indians who quickly overcame one of Johannes' companions and then the second. Only Johannes' fast and durable white horse saved him from being captured and surely killed by the pursuing Indians. Although Johannes escaped with his life, the fruit of three years work in the gold fields was gone. With heavy heart he turned around and headed back to California.

Johannes would spend an additional four years in California attempting to recover his losses. He would have at least one more

close call with death. Camped with a partner, Johannes awoke the following morning to find the man murdered in his sleep and all their possessions gone. Eventually Johannes had what he considered enough gold and made the return trip to West Prussia, no doubt taking the safest route available to him. When he arrived in the fall of 1858, after having been gone for ten years, Helene Jantzen was still waiting for him. What a reunion this must have been for these two remarkable people. Johannes and Helene were quickly married and spent the winter of 1858-1859 in West Prussia before joining their relatives in the Am Trakt Colony, Samara Province, Russia.

Much had happened in West Prussia during the ten years of Johannes D. Dyck's absence. His father, Dietrich "Dirk" Dyck, had died June 25, 1849, at Steegenwerder (near Poppau), West Prussia, of an apparent heart attack. His son Cornelius found him dead in the fields of his farm. His older sister Catharine had married on November 20, 1849. Johannes' older brother Dietrich and two younger brothers, Jacob (IV), our direct descendant grandfather, and Cornelius had sold the family farm at Poppau, West Prussia, and emigrated to Am Trakt, Russia.