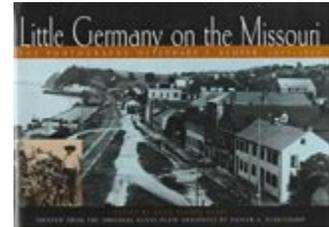


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Anna Kemper Hesse, ed. *Little Germany on the Missouri: The Photographs of Edward J. Kemper, 1895-1920*. Columbia and London, England: University of Missouri Press, 1998. vxii + 166 pp. \$29.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8262-1205-4.

Reviewed by Robert W. Frizzell (Bailey Library, Hendrix College, Missouri Life Trip)
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To Americans who know of it, Hermann, Missouri, seventy miles west of St. Louis on the south bank of the Missouri River, can seem to be Utopia, Arcadia, an idyllic small town where old fashioned order and pace of life prevail amid surroundings constructed on a human scale. When the *New Yorker* magazine published a profile of Hermann in its February 28, 1977 issue, the town was portrayed as a place of nineteenth-century pastoral beauty and charm, whose leaders were consciously seeking to avoid the moral and social decay of the late twentieth-century American city in general, and of St. Louis in particular.

For German-Americans, Hermann is especially iconographic. It is filled with the spirit of an ethnic heritage difficult to preserve or recover in an age of media celebrity and one-dimensional corporate conglomerates. Hermann was founded by a settlement company specifically to preserve German culture in every detail, and it retains a great many of its mid-nineteenth century buildings and its German values.

Die Deutsche Ansiedlungs-Gesellschaft zu Philadelphia was founded in 1836 by recent immigrants. Its founders hoped to build a city on the frontier where they could avoid the acculturation to Anglo-America which they saw among earlier generations of German immigrants in Pennsylvania. The first settlers arrived at Hermann late in 1837. That was a year of a great financial panic in the east, but much of the Mississippi Valley in 1837 enjoyed a great land boom accompanied by the founding of many towns.

Hermann differed from the most Midwestern towns of the era in its ethnicity, but it also differed from the bulk of Midwestern German-American communities. German

immigrants in forty North American cities and towns from Montreal to New Orleans bought shares in the settlement society. In contrast to nearby German-American communities, Hermann's residents were not chiefly peasants from a group of neighboring villages in Germany. No regional or religious group prevailed. Catholic and Evangelical churches were set on opposite hills while the first newspaper was a freethinker sheet. The founders chose a name for the town which reflected German national yearnings but had no connection to German religious, political, or regional factionalism.

What set Hermann apart even more strongly from other Missouri and Midwestern German communities was its early and quite successful viticulture. For a couple of years in the 1860s, just before California's Napa Valley vineyards were begun, Missouri led America in wine production, and most of Missouri's wine was produced at or near Hermann. By the 1850s, if not before, the town enjoyed sufficient prosperity that the first log cabins and simple frame houses could be replaced by, or enlarged into, the substantial brick, stone, and frame buildings which still comprise much of the town.

Edward Kemper was born in 1871 as the youngest son of German immigrants. He remained on the family farm outside Hermann until his death in 1952. In addition to general farming, he operated the Hermann Grape Nurseries. He shipped grapevines across America, to Mexico, and to Europe. After prohibition was enacted, he grew fruit trees and other nursery plants. He invented a farm implement that he was able to sell to the John Deere Co., and in 1915, he tried his hand at selling Ford cars.

Although not a professional photographer, in his spare time Kemper took photographs for his neighbors

and himself. Nearly two hundred of his glass plate negatives survive. More than ninety of them have been reproduced in this book. The first section has pictures of Hermann—its streets, buildings, workshops, and nearby farms. The second group shows the vineyards, the wineries, the work crews, and the grape harvest celebrants. The third section, entitled “Customs and Traditions,” captures the people outside and inside their houses, at their ceremonies and at their churches.

Kemper photographed Hermann during the Golden Age of German-America. The Hermann he gave us is one of people busy with their work and their families, proud of their community, and confident and happy with themselves. To readers familiar with Michael Lesy’s *Wisconsin Death Trip* (Pantheon, 1973), this book will seem a direct opposite, almost a deliberate refutation. Both are primarily books of photographs from Midwestern small towns during approximately the same era. Lesy juxtaposed the photographs of Black River Falls, Wisconsin with contemporary newspaper reports in order to spin a tale of a society oppressed by early death from epidemic, suicide, and stillbirth, as well as by insanity, logging accidents, loneliness, and despair. In preparing his book, Lesy could choose from a cache of thirty thousand glass plates taken by a professional photographer. Thus he could choose scenes which seem less commonplace than do some of Kemper’s photos of Hermann. The Wisconsin photos were also published in a larger format more pleasing to the eye.

Given its great contrast to the Wisconsin book, is *Little Germany on the Missouri* just too celebratory? Is it unworthy of serious notice due to a filiopietistic tone? By no means! Kemper was especially interested in how the community earned its living, which he sought to document rather than distort. His photos are often formal, but at the same time realistic. His wonderful picture, printed in tint on the book’s dust jacket, of adolescent girls in white dresses, dancing around a maypole in a meadow, is balanced by such photos as the clutter of a construction site at which a new wine cellar is being put in place.

Accompanying the photos are judicious and informative essays. Adolph E. Schroeder writes on the history of Hermann. Erin McCawley Renn writes on the culture of Hermann as revealed in the photos. Oliver A. Schuchard, who made the prints from Kemper’s glass plates and whose own photos of Hermann supplement those of Kemper in the book, writes on Kemper as a photographer. Anna Kemper Hesse is joined by Schroeder for an essay about Kemper the man. Mrs. Hesse has

worked courageously since the early 1950s to promote awareness of Hermann’s heritage and to preserve the historic character of the town in a way which insures its economic vitality. For a dozen years, she wrote annual historical pageants. That Mrs. Hesse is Edward Kemper’s youngest child only enhances the value of the book. With her help, we understand Kemper in a way we would not otherwise.

One can debate matters of historical interpretation with the essayists. More might have been done to make clear that during World War I, the Missouri Council of Defense only accelerated a decline in German language usage already well under way a decade earlier. All signs outside the town’s business establishments were in English in Kemper’s earliest photographs. The photos do indeed document many Teutonic architectural and cultural elements, but some of the houses pictured, including that on page 132, are more characteristic of antecedents in Maryland, Virginia, and Kentucky than of German antecedents. The mules in the photos are by no means the only evidence that this is the *Missourital*, not the *Rheinthal*. More might have been made of tensions between the Germans and Anglo-Missourians who originated in the states mentioned above, but the cultural gulf is noted in commentary accompanying a picture of the winery on the Kemper farm. Few of the Anglo-American southern frontiersmen who first settled Missouri appreciated wine. When the staff officers of Missouri Confederate General Marmaduke camped in front of the winery during the 1864 invasion, they thought they had found barrels of whiskey. When the contents proved to be wine, in their frustration, these soldiers from further west along the Missouri River broke open the vats and let the precious fluid run down to the river.

For all its distinctive Germanic character, modern Hermann has a good deal in common with Missouri River towns in areas long dominated by the Anglo-Americans who came from the Upper South. Many of these towns, in common with Hermann, enjoyed flourishing economies in the nineteenth century but by now have suffered a century or more of stagnation or decay. Historic Hermann was preserved not only by its German consciousness and German economic conservatism but also by economic decline resulting from the rise of the Napa Valley, World War I, and the destruction of the wine industry by national prohibition. Arrow Rock, Glasgow, and Lexington, Missouri, all Anglo-American river towns, went into dormancy when railroads replaced steamboats as the chief means of transport. At about the same time tens of thousands of slaves were freed in the Missouri River Val-

ley and the hemp industry quickly died. Both the Anglo-American towns and the German-American towns along the lower Missouri are little-known, and off the beaten path, but well-worth a visit in order to see nineteenth-century architecture (and some culture as well) preserved in place. Thanks to Anna Kemper Hesse, we can now visit

Hermann during “the Golden Age of German-America” in a trip to the library or to Amazon.com.

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