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C. Emigration and Settlement Patterns of German Communities in North America

New Harmony, Indiana, September 28–October 1, 1989

Conveners: Antonius Holtmann (University of Oldenburg); Jörg Nagler (German Historical Institute); Ruth Reichmann (Indiana University, Indianapolis).

Sponsored by the German-American Center of Indiana University, Indianapolis; the "Forschungsstelle Niedersächsische Auswanderung in die USA" at the University of Oldenburg, Germany; the Society for German-American Studies; the Indiana German Heritage Society; the German Studies Association; the National Historic Communal Societies Association; the Center for Communal Studies, University of Southern Indiana; and the German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C.

In the past decades, research into the causes of European emigration to North America and into the problems and phases of assimilation of immigrants has been directed mainly toward the role of individuals. Researchers looked at individuals who decided to leave their home somewhere in Europe; they interpreted the motives of individuals who held such a high opinion of America that they decided to go there and nowhere else; they followed the routes of individuals who had to overcome the hardship of travel; they analyzed the problems of individuals, who, the researchers believed, had to struggle with all kinds of obstacles in the land of their choice and who disappeared, together with their cultural heritage, sooner or later into the melting-pot. Of course, scholars knew all along that much of the eighteenth and some of the nineteenth century emigration occurred in groups: groups with a leader, who decided when to leave and where to go; groups whose members stuck together during the trip; groups which settled in one place, in a suburb or a village. So far, however, not nearly enough is known about the special effects group emigration has had on settlement patterns and acculturation.

The main aim of the conference at New Harmony was to bring together those who have done, or are doing, research on Germans who emigrated in groups to the United States: historians, political scientists, and sociologists as well as students of literature, music, and culture. The conveners were able to assemble thirty scholars, about half from the United States and Canada, two from the Netherlands, and twelve from the Federal Republic of Germany. They discussed the theme in three
sessions which dealt respectively with settlements by religious groups, settlements by secular groups, and with the problems of the persistence of ethnic culture. The principal speakers at the conference were Günther Moltmann from the University of Hamburg, who gave an analysis of recent research on "Immigration and Settlements"; Donald Pitzer from the Center for Communal Studies at the University of Southern Indiana, who sketched the wider range of "German Communities in North America"; and Eberhard Reichmann from the Department of Germanic Studies at Indiana University in Bloomington, who described how the achievements of the founder of New Harmony, Johann Georg Rapp, are seen differently by the people at Iptingen in Württemberg where he came from and by the inhabitants of New Harmony which he established.

In evaluating the results of the conference, moderators and speakers agreed that much work remains to be done and that it is necessary to take a closer look at specific problems such as the role of churches or the economic and cultural role of special centers of concentration of German settlers. Needless to say, New Harmony, with its many beautifully restored early nineteenth-century buildings, formed a congenial setting for the meeting, which was attended by about 150–200 participants (archivists, librarians, teachers, local historians), mainly from Indiana, Iowa, Illinois, Kentucky, Wisconsin, and Pennsylvania.

On one evening the conference participants were entertained by the Golden Raintree Singers and the Harmonist Chorale, who performed religious and secular songs from the Harmonist and Owenite tradition, thus commemorating 175 years of the founding of New Harmony. The day before and the day after the conference, speakers from overseas enjoyed tours to German settlements in Indiana. By bringing together American and European researchers who have been working on aspects of group emigration and group settlements, the conference promoted interest in German-American studies, provided an excellent opportunity to share research, and encouraged closer cooperation of those involved in the study of religious and secular settlements in the future.

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