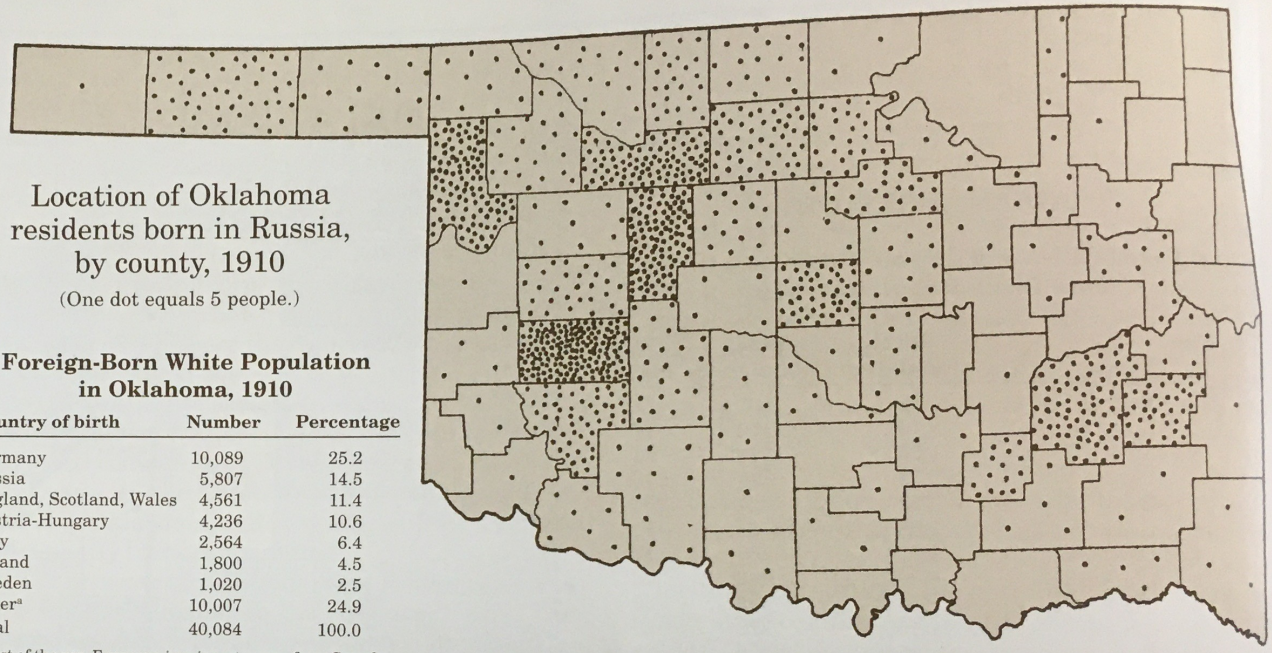
66. ETHNIC SETTLEMENTS

Essay by *Danney Goble*

Rarely have Oklahomans appreciated the fact that the state's post-Indian settlement coincided with the high tides of immigration into America. The nineteenth century's irregular but steady trickle of the foreign-born swelled to flood stage in the final two decades of that century and reached tidal proportions in the first two decades of the twentieth. It may have been coincidence that 1907 marked both Oklahoma's entry to the union and the one-year record for immigration, but the convergence was anything but irrelevant. After all, roughly one in twelve of the Oklahomans who greeted statehood in 1907 were foreign-born or the children of foreign-born immigrants. That ratio is similar to that of people claiming African American ancestry within the new state's population. Moreover, the total of first- and second-generation immigrants (130,430) was nearly twice that of the state's American Indian population (75,012).

Two historical circumstances multiplied the impact of those numbers. First, only a few nations were disproportionate contributors of their sons and daughters. (The great bulk came from seven nations, all European, and two neighboring countries—each the birthplace of a thousand or more statehood-era Oklahomans.) Second, upon reaching Oklahoma, the foreign-born tended to concentrate in a relatively few and identifiable regions. One effect of this settlement pattern is that the most meaningful way to discuss this subject—and to present it cartographically—is at the county and area levels, rather than statewide.

The case of the largest group is illustrative of this pattern. Oklahoma's first decennial federal census—that of 1910—enumerated 10,089 Oklahomans who had been born in Germany. The German-born thus accounted for just over a quarter of the new state's entire foreign-born white population, and most were found in a handful of north-central counties. One in ten lived in Oklahoma County. Neighboring Canadian County had a smaller number but did have the state's highest percentage of German birth. Garfield and Kingfisher counties also had significant numbers of Germans. Like most of the foreign-born (and of the American-born, for that matter), Germans scattered anywhere and everywhere that the siren call of fertile soil beckoned, but a surprising num-



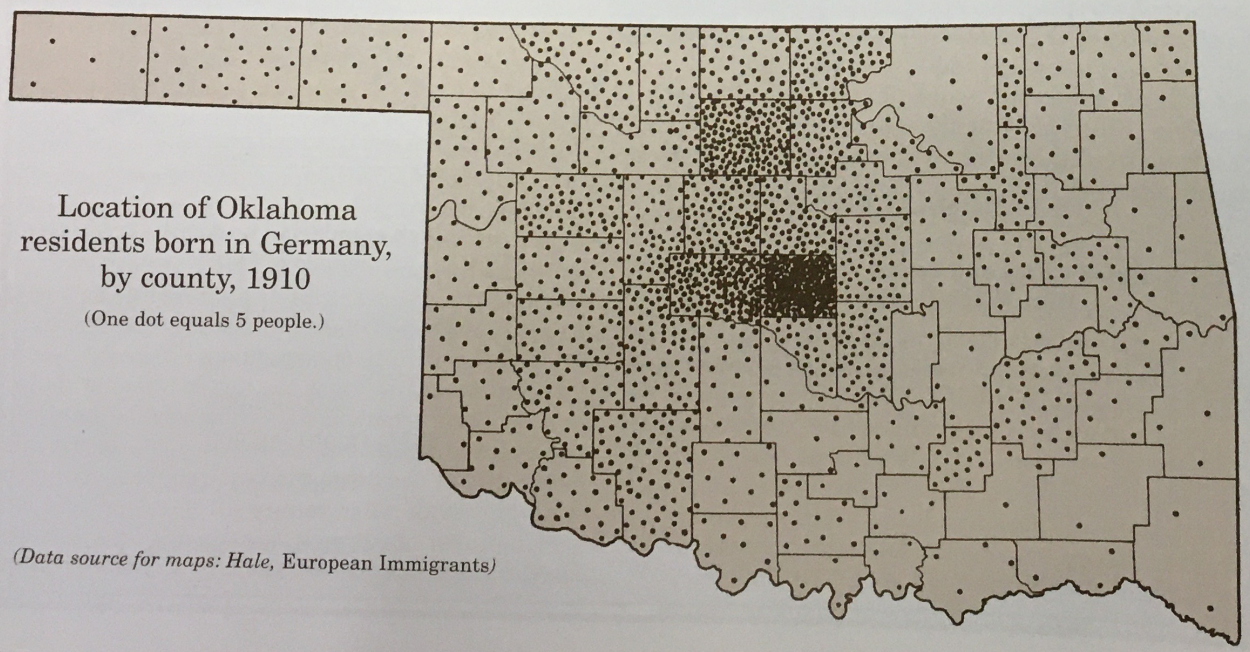
Location of Oklahoma residents born in Russia, by county, 1910

(One dot equals 5 people.)

Foreign-Born White Population in Oklahoma, 1910

Country of birth	Number	Percentage
Germany	10,089	25.2
Russia	5,807	14.5
England, Scotland, Wales	4,561	11.4
Austria-Hungary	4,236	10.6
Italy	2,564	6.4
Ireland	1,800	4.5
Sweden	1,020	2.5
Other[a]	10,007	24.9
Total	40,084	100.0

[a] Most of the non-European immigrants came from Canada (2,831) and Mexico (2,645).



Location of Oklahoma residents born in Germany, by county, 1910

(One dot equals 5 people.)

(Data source for maps: Hale, European Immigrants*)*

ber ignored that summons in favor of urban life. Indeed, three cities (Oklahoma City, El Reno, and Enid) provided homes for nearly a tenth—960—of Oklahoma's German-born Oklahomans in 1910.

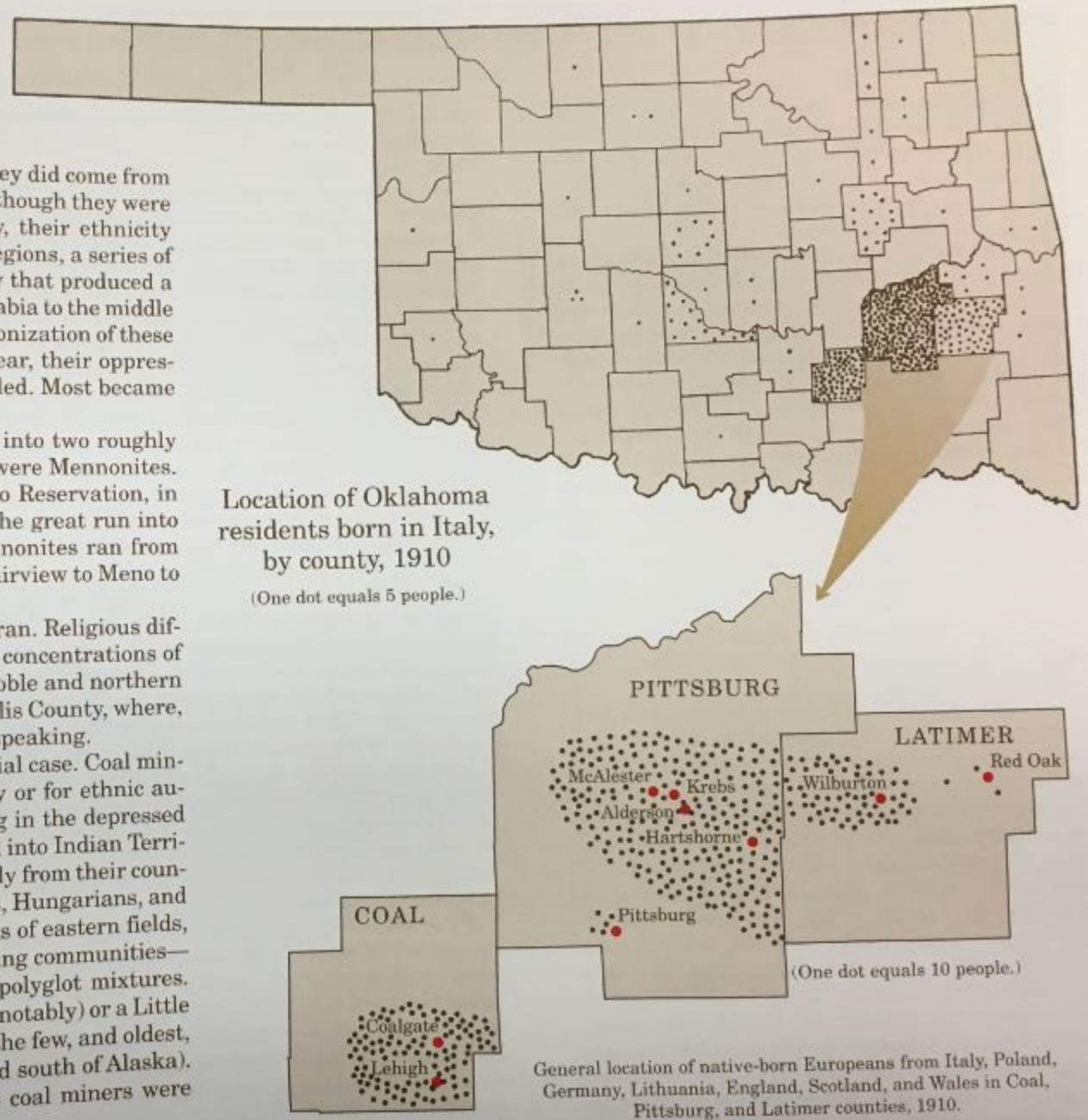
Much the same was true of another group considered German, if not by the census takers, by everyone else—themselves included. The census designated them as Russian-born, and they did come from at least six nationalities within the vast Russian empire even though they were German in culture and language. For more than a century, their ethnicity scarcely had mattered. Anxious to colonize vast, underused regions, a series of Russian czars had lured them with promises of the autonomy that produced a string of self-contained German-speaking colonies from Bessarabia to the middle Volga. That changed in 1871, when absorption rather than colonization of these German communities became the imperial ukase. Year by year, their oppression increased. Year by year, more of these ethnic Germans fled. Most became farmers on America's Great Plains.

Those who settled Oklahoma's plains fell almost entirely into two roughly equal groups. About half of the 4,300 Germans from Russia were Mennonites. The first arrived with the opening of the Cheyenne-Arapaho Reservation, in 1891. Two years later, others crowded the starting line for the great run into the Cherokee Outlet. As a result, one concentration of Mennonites ran from Gotebo, Bessie, and Corn to Geary; another extended from Fairview to Meno to Enid, past Medford, and beyond.

Almost as many of these immigrant Germans were Lutheran. Religious differences aside, the demographic consequences were similar: concentrations of Lutheran settlements near Okeene as well as in southern Noble and northern Payne counties. Densest was the area around Shattuck, in Ellis County, where, in 1910, one resident in six was Russian born and German speaking.

The coal fields of southeastern Oklahoma were a very special case. Coal mining communities were known alternately for ethnic diversity or for ethnic autonomy, depending upon how and where one looked. Starting in the depressed 1870s, Welsh-, Scots-, Irish-, and English-born miners poured into Indian Territory, more by way of declining Pennsylvania fields than directly from their countries of origin. Similarly, Italians, Lithuanians, Slovaks, Poles, Hungarians, and Russians came to the mines in the 1880s; some were veterans of eastern fields, while others were newcomers recruited by agents. Some mining communities—McAlester, Wilburton, and Alderson among them—became polyglot mixtures. Others amounted to equivalents of a Little Italy (Krebs, most notably) or a Little Russia (one being Hartshorne—which still maintains one of the few, and oldest, Russian Orthodox churches found west of the Mississippi and south of Alaska). Even as late as 1930, 5,116 of Oklahoma's estimated 5,465 coal miners were European immigrants or their children.

By then, the former tide of European immigration was less than a flood—indeed, barely a trickle—for World War I temporarily shut it down. Peace brought both Harding-era "normalcy" as well as the nation's first, and tightly restrictive, quota system, beginning in 1921 and worsening thereafter, with the worst coming in 1924. The Great Depression then nailed the coffin shut on immigration.



Location of Oklahoma residents born in Italy, by county, 1910

(One dot equals 5 people.)

General location of native-born Europeans from Italy, Poland, Germany, Lithuania, England, Scotland, and Wales in Coal, Pittsburg, and Latimer counties, 1910.

Many of these immigrants, especially Italians (who began arriving in this area as early as 1875), found work in the mining industry. After their arrival, Italians constituted the largest foreign-born workforce in the mines. In 1910, half of the population of the mining town of Krebs was Italian.