

History and Mystery: Students Investigate History of a German Settlement in Manitoba

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Uncategorized

During a spring blizzard in March 1927, ninety-eight men, women, and children from Germany's Southwest arrived at the deserted train station "Little Britain," north of Winnipeg, Manitoba, to start a new life. They moved their belongings across a snow covered field to the one community house standing on the land. They were ready to overcome hardships in Canada's prairie west, a place that seemed to promise more stability than the [Weimar Republic](#), Germany's first, shaky attempt at democracy. All settlers were Catholics and most were young and single.

The group leader, lawyer and businessman Fritz Schneider, said that "Little Britain," as the settlement came to be known, was neither an ethno-religious colony nor a utopian commune. Instead, so he claimed, he just helped people pool their resources so that everyone could become a successful settler. Yet, within a few years, disagreements about finances, a revolt against the leader, and perhaps the onset of the Great Depression had left the settlement in shambles. The group was divided, and many settlers had either returned to Germany or moved elsewhere in North America. No one really knows what happened, although some of the original settlers are still alive.

There were other unsolved mysteries: The black smith's house and workshop burned down and he returned with his family to Nazi Germany. Was it an accident, arson, or insurance fraud? By 1940, some of the male settlers had been interned as "enemy aliens"; were they spies and saboteurs or were they wrongfully imprisoned?

This fall, history students at the University of Winnipeg will dig through boxes full of old files and photographs and listen to interviews with Fritz Schneider and other settlers to find some answers. In the third-year seminar "German-Canadian Identity: Historical Perspectives," they will learn about the history of European and German immigration to Canada in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; they will also learn some of the tricks of the trade that historians use to solve some of our past's unsolved mysteries. Next to books and computers, white cotton gloves, safety glasses, and face masks will be their research tools.

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