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## 'Trip to a Forgotten Utopia'

By: Karen Cernich

**America has always been known as the land of opportunity, but back in 1834, one particular group of Germans envisioned the young democracy as a place to establish a utopia. The Giessen Emigration Society, as they called themselves, left Germany for America to create "an ideal German republic in the state of Missouri." Last week, a German documentary crew arrived to learn more about what had come of their ancestors' plans.**

It was German interest in this part of Missouri that flooded the area with immigrants in the early 1800s, and it seems that in 175 years German interest hasn't waned.

Two waves of 500 Germans settled here back in 1834 with plans for establishing a utopian community - "an ideal German republic in the state of Missouri" - and last week a modern German documentary crew followed in their footsteps.

The 1834 Germans, who arrived in two groups led by Paul Follenius and Friedrich Muench, called themselves the Giessen Emigration Society. The modern day Germans - producer Peter Roloff of Maxim Films, photographer Folker Winklemann, author Rolf Schmidt, and researcher Monika Kiesewetter - are members of the Traveling Summer Republic, a group of joint artists, filmmakers, performers, photographers, writers, designers, city planners . . . based primarily in the city of Bremer, Germany.

For the last five years, the Traveling Summer Republic has been researching the Giessen Emigration Society and staging conferences, film screenings, theater plays, readings, debates . . . on their findings.

"We are fascinated by the utopian aim of the Giessen Emigration Society," Roloff notes.

The documentary crew came to Missouri last week to visit the places where Follenius and Muench settled and lived out their lives. The twofold purpose of the trip was to locate original locations and documents related to Muench and to interview historians, descendants and residents of the area today for a greater understanding of how that history relates to their lives today.

They also wanted to uncover utopian thoughts of today. "What are our dreams and visions for a better and peaceful society today?" Roloff asked.

### Settle in Dutzow Area

The Republic's initial interest in the Giessen Society began about nine years ago and stems from local accounts of the struggles of Muench's contingent of nearly 250 adults and children when they spent five weeks "rehearsing" the foundation of creating a new utopia in America by living on a small uninhabited river island, Harriersand, located in the Weser River between Bremen and Bremerhaven.

It was a way to test their plans, said Roloff. "If they fail on the small island, how could they build a new state in America?"

Follenius' group had already left for America, and Muench's group was waiting for a ship to bring them, Roloff explained.

The test run of creating a mini utopia on the Harriersand did not go well, he said. Neither did their arrival in America.

Many of Follenius' group, which came to America through New Orleans, suffered and died due to disease. The group broke up and scattered, but many were drawn to the area of Dutzow, which they had read about in accounts written by Gottfried Duden, a German who in the 1820s wrote "A Report on a Journey to the North American States," advising his countrymen on the prospects for settlement.

Duden owned a farm along Lake Creek, and Follenius came to the area to do the same.

When Muench's group arrived in St. Louis, they heard from other Germans in the area what had happened to Follenius' group and followed suit to settle in Dutzow.

"The early Germans here had a fascinating network system," said Dorris Keeven-Franke, a local historian who was contacted by the crew to provide assistance in setting up interviews and location shoots because she has been writing about Dutzow and the Lake Creek area for nearly 30 years. "Everybody knew everybody."

Muench and Follenius purchased farms neighboring Duden's farm along Lake Creek.

Utopia Failed, Other Efforts Succeed

Their plans for creating a utopia failed, said Roloff, but their efforts were not all lost.

"We wondered, individually, what happened to them?" he asked. "Could they keep to their ideals? Were there some that had success?"

"Muench said, 'Yes, the idea of liberty succeeded,' " said Roloff.

"Utopian ideas can never succeed, but they can be a driving force to bring you forward," as in the American Revolution, he remarked.

When the Giessen Emigration Society was first organized in Germany, interest in it was very strong, said Roloff. More than 2,000 Germans applied to be part of the group, but only 500 were accepted.

Individually, members of the Giessen Society found success in America. Muench, for example, was a prolific writer, writing for a local German newspaper, letters and keeping a journal. He went on to be a senator for Missouri, and also ran a farm and vineyard.

"It's hard to understand how he did it all in 24 hours," said Roloff. "It's said he worked 20 to 21 hours a day. "For me, he's a little like a genius."

Retracing Steps

The four-person documentary crew of the Traveling Summer Republic stayed in the Washington area from Oct. 7-10 touring property once owned by the German emigrants, interviewing their descendants and local historians, and researching historical archives.

Their plans are to incorporate their findings from this "Trip to a Forgotten Utopia" into their series of performances and exhibits.

Much of the crew's filming here took place at the former Muench and Follenius farms, both located along Lake Creek on the north side of Highway TT, and other locations in that area, said Keeven-Franke.

Mark Blumenberg hosted a lunch at Blumenhof Winery where the crew met with Dutzow residents, local historians and descendants of the Giessen Emigration Society. Among them were Ralph Gregory, Urban "Chic" Ruether and Gerd Petermann.

Gregory treated some of the crew to a tour of the Augustus Grabs house in Marthasville, an example of housing from the 1830s. There Roloff interviewed Gregory about his knowledge of local history and Muench, as well as his philosophical views on life.

They toured and filmed at the Deutschheim State Historic Site in Hermann, where the German newspaper *Der Lichtfreund* (which Muench often wrote for) was published, the Missouri Historical Society Archives in St. Louis, which has a large collection of Muench's personal papers, and the circa 1860s Pelster housebarn located south of New Haven.

"It was exciting to see it (the housebarn)," said Roloff. "It gives us a very good picture of the living conditions here in the 1830s, when the Giessen Society came here."

The documentary crew said they were impressed with the number of Muench's papers that had been archived and preserved.

"It was exciting to see the original documents, the private letters, the journals he kept from 1834 until just a few days before he died," said Roloff.

There was so much information, he said, that the crew couldn't possibly go through it all, "just get a first glimpse." Complicating the situation was the fact that much of the writing was in a special German style called *sttlerin*.

The crew spent their last day in the area at the old Muench and Follenius farms.

Although at Muench's property, the original buildings are all gone, new ones done in the style have been erected. The crew filmed the barn, wine cellar, the smokehouse, the original sites, where the vineyard was and the landscape, before

ascending the hillside behind the home and visiting the cemetery where Muench is buried. Ê

Looking back on their four days here, the Traveling Summer Republic declared the trip a success that exceeded their expectations.

"Our plans are to link this historical story with current thinking," said Roloff. "What will our lives be like in the future? How would we like to live in the future? What would we like to change?"

"Muench and his group tried to find their answers with the Giessen Emigration Society. We are not trying to do the same thing, but we are inspired by it."

The work of the Traveling Summer Republic is partially funded by the Ministry of Science and Arts/Culture of the State of Lower Saxony and by the Center for the Arts in the State of Bremen.

For more information, people can visit [www.sommer-republik.de](http://www.sommer-republik.de), although the site is currently only offered in German.

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