

PRIMARY SOURCE READING*Adjusting to a New
Life in the
United States*

Many of the immigrants who came to the United States in the 1830s and 1840s seeking political freedom had a difficult time adjusting to the American way of life. Gustave Koerner, a university graduate who became a local politician, describes the conflict between old European habits and new American customs.

*A German Family Settles
in Illinois*

Mr. Engelmann, Sophie, Ruppelius, myself, and Doctor Engelmann, started for the upper farm. A farmwagon drawn by two yoke of oxen had been hired to move our goods from St. Louis . . . and [it] held nearly all our things. . . . [O]nce over the river, we seated ourselves comfortably on some of the mattresses. It was terribly hot and the dust at many places was six inches deep. . . .

About two o'clock in the afternoon we reached Belleville [Illinois]. On Main Street, our caravan, which had excited the curiosity of the few people there, halted at a tavern, the Virginia House. No wonder that we excited astonishment. The doctor was on a very fine horse. Mr. Engelmann, of imposing stature and wearing a mustache and a chin beard . . . looked like a military officer of high rank; Sophie appeared as a young lady, while Ruppelius and I carried double-barreled shot-guns. Beards at that time were not worn by Americans. . . . The fashion of wearing beards did not arise till after the Mexican War in 1848, when our citizen soldiers mostly returned

bearded. And this decidedly reputable, but very foreign-looking party, came in an ox wagon! A year or two afterwards, when emigration was pouring into this region of the country, our appearance would not have been particularly noticed.

When we alighted a tall, lean, white-haired man, as straight as a pole . . . showed us into a small room, serving as a general hall and parlor at the same time. It was Major Doyle . . . who now . . . [kept] an inn at Belleville. . . .

After we had washed, we bethought ourselves of having [decided to have] something to eat. I asked the Major very innocently for some lunch. He seemed very much surprised. "Sir," said he to me, "supper will be ready at six o'clock. We have nothing in the house to eat between meals." Mr. Engelmann grew somewhat angry. "What—is this a tavern and we can get no kind of refreshment? . . ." Mrs. Doyle, a small, round, but very kindly looking lady, entered the room. Finding out what was going on, she remarked . . . that she could make us a cup of coffee. She had no bread: they made their bread for each meal; but she would send down to the baker's shop and get us some. Butter she had.

About four o'clock we resumed our journey. It was a beautiful road; nearly all the way fine, tall, beautiful timber, whiteoak, walnut, hickory, wild cherry, maple and sycamore; now and then there were openings, where wild roses, blackberry and hawthorne bushes grew. We passed also some fine farms. At last, about six miles from Belleville . . . we saw before us the old farmhouse. . . .

Our life on the upper farm was really a romantic one. American and German neighbors called frequently. As Doctor George and I spoke English "pretty plain," as the Americans said, we soon got acquainted with our

American neighbors. . . . Some were great hunters and good for nothing else, but clever fellows after all.

From *The American Reader: From Columbus to Today* by Paul M. Angle. Rand McNally & Company, 1958.

UNDERSTANDING WHAT YOU READ After you have finished reading the selection, answer the following questions in the space provided.

1. Where have the author and his family been living? To what state are they moving?

2. Why do the author and his party attract so much attention in Belleville?

3. Why are the travelers confused about mealtimes?

4. Based on what he says about the people he encounters on his journey and his new neighbors, what personal qualities do you think are important to the writer?

5. What do you think Koerner means by his last sentence, “Some were great hunters and good for nothing else, but clever fellows after all”?

6. Many German immigrants became skilled bakers, brewers, or butchers. Based on this selection, why do you think this was true?

ACTIVITY

Imagine that you are a European who wants to emigrate to the United States during the 1830s and 1840s. Write a letter to relatives in another country, persuading them to join you. In your letter, explain in which region of the country you have chosen to settle, and argue the benefits of that particular setting.