

ABSTRACT

Often in social historical research immigrants are presented in a monolithic fashion that suggests all persons sharing an ethnicity, heritage, or language act in similar ways in response to social situations and to the forces of assimilation. With the Colony at Hermann, Missouri being established as a true German community, there is the implication that there was some “true” identity that could be captured and reproduced. I argue that that the identity embraced by the German immigrants in that region was the result of a complex intersection of narratives that helped the immigrants locate themselves within their new homeland. This position is a direct challenge to conceptions that there are some innate and immutable characteristics that come to shape identity.

Drawing upon the conception of narrative identity as put forth by Margaret Somers (1998, 1994) and Margaret Somers and Gloria Gibson (1998) I utilize historical data from the early years of Hermann, Missouri to outline the narratives that were instrumental in shaping a German identity. I show that the narratives of Yankeedom, Old Prejudice, and Authentic Germans call into question the possibility of there being a “true” identity for the immigrants. I conclude that the processes of blending various narratives indicates that the Germans in the Hermann area took an active role in defining what beliefs and behaviors constituted being a proper German. As a result of this process, the boundaries established to separate the true German from the rest of the population were not based upon innate qualities within individuals but rather those behaviors and values that could be expressed in a “proper” fashion.