

The Story

of

Ernst Friedrich Schmidt

1827 - 1913

Soldier—

Gold Prospector—

Pioneer Farmer

Erna von Seggern's
Grand parents

PREFACE

Dime novels, movies, and television have pictured a glamorous, rowdy, exciting, and unrealistic West. What is often forgotten is that these were real people; people with their own drives and desires. Some were noble, some were evil, some were weak, some were strong. From them grew the only native folklore we have in our country.

Thousands of stories have been told about the Wild West, many of them purporting to be history or biography. All but a very few are fiction but this is true history as told to the children of Ernst and Augusta Schmidt. Some of the grandchildren have requested these stories be put in print and this history has been written by Katie Schmidt Treptow and Ernest Schmidt.

"Then he led forth his people like sheep,
and guided them in the wilderness like a flock.
He led them in safety, so that they were
not afraid; . . .
And he brought them to his holyland . . .

Psalms 78: 52-55

THE STORY
of
ERNST FRIEDRICH SCHMIDT

Soldier — Gold Prospector — Pioneer Farmer

As long as men love adventure and thrill to daring deeds requiring courage and integrity, the story of the settling of the West will be told and re-told again and again. Emerging from this story and standing in bold outline against a clear sky are the pioneers of the West. Affectionately their fellow country-men regard them as heroes whose personalities have enriched the American heritage and whose vigor has helped shape a great nation.

Ernst Friedrich Schmidt was born in Mentzinger, Germany, on November 11, 1827. After having served a three-year term of military training in his native country, he migrated to the United States. In the new world he carved a remarkable career as soldier, gold prospector, and pioneer farmer.

Like many an adventuresome European youth Ernst was stirred by reports of America. He was encouraged by an American friend to migrate to New Orleans. According to this friend a lucrative venture would be to catch wild horses to sell to the government. The friend invited Ernst to become his business partner.

The trip to the new country, which was made during 1851, proved to be exciting and even dangerous. It took sixty-four days for the old sail boat on which Ernst was a passenger to cross the Atlantic ocean. The boat was caught in a storm, the Captain lost his direction, and the food and water supplies dwindled to dangerously low levels. Finally, the boat docked in the New Orleans harbor.

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Disappointment awaited Ernst upon his arrival in America. The friend who had enticed him with glowing promises was somewhat of a scoundrel. The assets of the friend's "business" consisted of a chicken coop with a few chickens and several runty pigs.

After a fruitless search for work, the young immigrant enlisted in the United States Army. Historically, this was the period following the United States-Mexican War. The peace treaty had been signed during 1848. Troops, however, were still stationed in this part of the country. Shortly after having enlisted, Ernst became seriously ill with yellow fever. He was so ill, in fact, that the hospital settled the matter by listing him deceased. Ernst encountered difficulty after having recovered. He was informed that a dead man could not officially be released. This decision necessitated re-enlistment into the army. Later when Ernst asked for government pension, he was informed that Ernst Schmidt had been reported dead. The pension, for this reason, was not granted.

While in the Army, Ernst worked part time as a blacksmith. One job was to make an iron ring and weld it together around an Elm tree. This ring was used instead of a jail-the prisoners were chained to the ring.

During their free time American soldiers relieved their boredom by staging cock fights with Mexicans across the border. Cock fights invariably turned into soldier-Mexican fights which enhanced the enjoyment of the sport and provided additional thrills. Young Schmidt became expert in making spurs for cocks fighting for the Americans. He was adamant, however, in his refusal to produce spurs for cocks fighting on the Mexican side. After all, he was an American.

From Sunny Albuquerque, the company of men headed north toward Salt Lake City, Utah. The journey was marked with cold weather, poor rations, and even

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a blizzard which caused the death of several soldiers who had not had the foresight to seek shelter in mountain caves. In Salt Lake City the soldiers assisted in efforts to apprehend outlaws who had massacred and robbed a band of pioneers traveling west. No clues were discovered. The lone survivor was convinced that the outrage had been committed by white men dressed as Indians. The mystery remains unsolved.

After his discharge from the army, the restless spirit of Ernst Schmidt beckoned him on, to seek his fortune as a gold prospector. He traveled north alone. His only possessions were a cart he had made himself, two ponies, and a mule. His skill as a blacksmith won him many friends among the Indians.

En route Ernst met another lone traveler. There was something suspicious about this man. He had no possessions; no food-only a horse. Schmidt was forced to accept the company of his uninvited companion who, after he had extracted similar information from Ernst, stated that he, too, was on his way to Denver. One day a barrage of shots greeted the two men. The traveling companion was captured by the band of men who had opened fire. The leader of the pursuers looked Ernst over and advised him in the future to use greater discretion in selecting his companions since the man captured was being sought for murder. This leader turned out to be Kit Carson, famous scout and hero of American history. For a time Young Schmidt joined Kit Carson and his men.

But the lure of gold was tantalizing. The trek north was resumed. One day Ernst was stopped by an Indian wearing a belt decorated with dangling scalps. From a dirty bag the Indian produced a handful of human finger and toe nails. Through the use of sign language, the Indian conveyed to Ernst that his scalp, finger and toe nails would be added to the

collection next. Resourceful Ernst began to bargain with the Indian. Previously, friendly Indians whom Ernst had assisted with blacksmithing had given him a brightly beaded shirt. Ernst negotiated successfully; the Indian took the beaded shirt; and Ernst retained the parts of his anatomy in question.

Finally Ernst arrived in Cripple Creek, Colorado, and staked his claim. After several unsuccessful months he abandoned his search for gold and began his journey east. Still traveling with his cart, mule, and ponies, he followed the trail of the Platte River. At Kearney, Nebraska, one pony was stolen by Indians. At Columbus, the mule died and Ernst sold his cart. He rode his pony on to Fremont, Nebraska, his future home.

Ernst Schmidt began his career as a farmer shortly after he arrived in Fremont. He began working on a farm for \$7.00 a month.

An indication of Mr. Schmidt's desire to be independent and his love for freedom is reflected in the fact that although he could have homesteaded a farm, he preferred to purchase one instead. Ernst Schmidt did not want to be "tied" to a farm received without cost from the government. During 1862 he bought a farm southeast of Fremont for \$5.00 per acre. This farm has been in the Schmidt family for a century and is still known as the Schmidt Place.

In order to pay for the farm, Mr. Schmidt launched upon freighting between Fremont and Denver, using a wagon train drawn by oxen. Altogether four trips were made to Denver, shorter ones were made to Fort Kearney and other army camps in Nebraska.

The freighters withstood vicissitudes of weather typical of the uncultivated mid-western prairies. There were no bridges over rivers and streams. Frequently it

took several days for the forty or fifty wagons to cross a swollen river. Rafts upon which the wagons floated needed to be built. Other times the freighters met with good fortune, such as frozen rivers. But winter also brought snow. They broke camp one morning during a storm and started for Denver, but before noon they were back at the morning campsite — they started again, and by late afternoon they had again circled back to this same campsite. They then gave up and waited for the snow storm to stop. Adding to the hazard of driving a wagon train were uprisings of unfriendly Indians. Nights were spent sleeping under wagons. Boots were used as pillows. It was not uncommon for the men to wake up in the morning covered with snow. The breakfast fare sometimes consisted only of frozen biscuits. Mr. Schmidt was able to pay his debts with money made on a load of corn which he had shelled entirely by hand and sold for 15 cents a pound in Denver. Freightling, however, was not always this profitable.

Peeling potatoes in the kitchen of a restaurant in an Omaha hotel and weeping tears of homesickness sat a young immigrant woman. This was the first meeting of the hotel owner's uncle, Ernst Schmidt, and Augusta Muller. In Marlenwilde-Province of Brandenburg, Germany, Augusta Muller was born on August 4, 1849. She came to the United States in 1869, at the age of twenty, with her aunt, Mrs. Fred (Augusta) Keller. Ernst and Augusta were married on May 24, 1870, in Fremont, Nebraska, by a Presbyterian minister. The bride was twenty-one years younger than the groom. The occasion was celebrated by neighbors and Fremont store-keepers charivaring the couple at their farm home. The charivaring consisted of singing hymns.



The couple moved into a one-room frame house on the farm southeast of Fremont. Ten children were born to this union. Three of these children died in infancy and were buried in graves near the Schmidt home. Their wooden coffins were fashioned by hand. The surviving six daughters and one son grew to adulthood. Augusta Muller Schmidt was a devoted wife and mother. Because of her youth, she was frequently mistaken for a sister rather than mother of her children. Times were hard and money scarce, but the family never lacked food. She was a good cook and managed on what was available from the garden and farm. She raised a good garden with many varieties of food. Each summer during roasting ear season she

would cut the corn off of the cob and dry it for winter use. If sweet corn was not available, she used field corn. Green beans, other vegetables, and fruits were dried also. Corn meal mush and fried mush were common dishes on the table. Coffee was purchased in the green stage and was roasted at home. At times, corn or wheat was roasted, ground, and used for coffee.

Augusta Muller Schmidt died August 16, 1913, at the age of 64 years 12 days.

Life was difficult, even hazardous for the early settlers. Farm implements were crude and inefficient. There were the years of the grass-hopper plagues. Grass-hoppers swooped down upon the land, darkened the sun, and stopped all of man's activities, even trains. Within thirty minutes, entire crops would be devoured by these insects. There were years of drought during which little was produced. During these years the ingenuity and thrift of the housewife were challenged. These early farmers also fought prairie fires in their efforts against a stubborn nature. A spectacular natural catastrophe was the blizzard of 1888, later related by those present with something of awe and wonder.

The economic status of the settlers is of interest to modern twentieth century Americans. Eggs sold for 5 cents a dozen. Corn sold for 10 cents a bushel and sometimes for less. On one occasion Mr. Schmidt asked for a \$100.00 loan to meet expenses. The stipulation was that 40% interest must be paid, and this must be paid in advance. The loan did not materialize.

Frequent visitors to the Schmidt home were Indians seeking food. One day, the eldest daughter was in charge of the home during the parents' absence. Hearing a noise at the window, she looked and found herself staring into the faces of several Indians. The Indians were carrying large sacks and

explained they wanted food. The frightened children were still filling the sacks with grain when, to the great relief of the youngsters, their parents returned home.

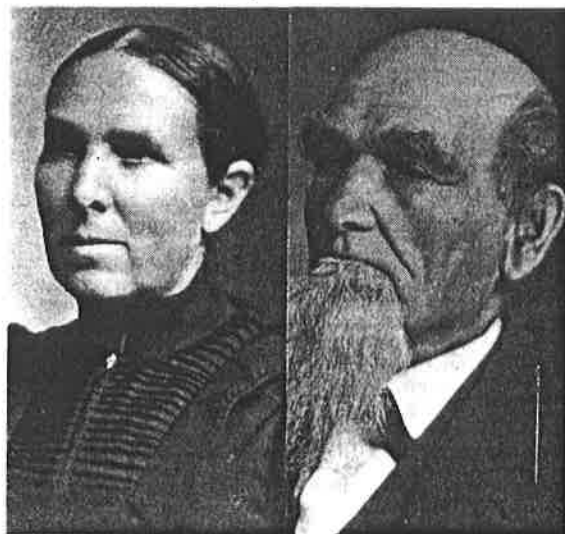
Dead livestock and chickens which had been discarded by the farmers were salvaged and eaten by hungry Indians. Although such fare was repugnant to the white settlers, the Indians seemed not to have been adversely affected; in fact, they were reported to have referred to the food as "Heap Good".

Ernst Schmidt was a deeply spiritual man and had strong religious convictions. As a youth in Germany he had adhered to the Pietist movement. He believed that religion is more than a matter of intellect; it is also an affair of the heart and the life. True religion to him was an experience which needed the inspiration of constant Bible reading, and the experience must then reach out through the individual to the lives of others. Twice daily the family worshipped together:

"At evening before we went to bed
Father took down the Bible and read
A portion of the Scriptures true
To refresh our lives anew
Then all would kneel
And we would pray,
To thank God for the blessed day
That with His protecting arm
He kept us from danger and harm.
Then after breakfast Mother would proceed
And from the Bible she would read
To gain strength for every deed.
Then all would kneel
And we would pray
And for protection would ask
And well to perform each task."

(Original) Katie Schmidt Treptow,
second oldest daughter, written at
87 years.

The tenets of the Evangelical Church appealed to Mr. Schmidt. Missionaries of the Iowa Conference of the Evangelical Church began preaching in Fremont. These traveling missionaries frequently stayed at the Schmidt home. There was no extra bed, but the hospitality was never questioned. Missionaries slept comfortably upon quilts which had been piled upon tables. During the month of April, 1873, the impetus to build an Evangelical Church in Fremont gained momentum. The Church was built and dedicated on January 18, 1874. Augusta and Ernst Schmidt were charter members and supported the church faithfully the rest of their lives.



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Although a home loving man, Ernst did not neglect his civic duties. He encouraged the development of the public school in the community and served as a member of the school board. The school teacher boarded with the Schmidt family on more than one occasion. Ernst was respected by his neighbors. He was a strong advocate of peace; peace among nations and peaceful relationships within the community. He also worked on the original grade for the Union Pacific Railroad and one winter cut ties along the Platte River only to see them carried away by a spring flood. He loved nature and, even after his eightieth birthday, quite often took a two or three mile walk.

On January 7, 1913, Ernst Friedrich Schmidt, age 85 years 1 month 27 days, died at the Schmidt Place near Fremont, Nebraska. He had believed in and loved progress. He saw the original sod huts of the early settlers give way to frame houses. He saw man gradually overcome nature's obstacles and the farm land become more and more productive. He saw his beloved city, Fremont, Nebraska, grow and prosper. He had a strong, constant faith in the destiny of America.

"Enlisted as a pioneer to do what he could do.

To the United States he was loyal, kind, and true.

He has set an example for me and for you.

There are yet untrapped resources of every kind,

May we struggle diligently and have an open mind,

Some work for pioneering we can always find."

(Original) Katie Schmidt Treptow