HENRY VOGEL: "NOT ONE OF THOSE EMIGRANTS THAT WOUND UP MILLIONAIRES"

BRAD AGNEW

A FLOOD tide of immigration brought 25 million people to the United States between 1865 and 1914. Their labor, skills, and industry constituted an indispensable factor in the industrial growth that transformed America from an agrarian nation to one of the world's foremost powers. The contributions of Andrew Carnegie, Alexander Graham Bell, Joseph Pulitzer, and other immigrants who earned fame or fortune in America have been well documented, but the stories of countless others who also found a better life in the United States were told only to family and friends.

In 1951 an Oklahoman named Henry Vogel seemed to have realized that his memories of emigration from Switzerland and quest for economic opportunity in America might not survive him. On January 25, 1951, just three months before his death, Vogel began recording his autobiography. Written in longhand with spelling that betrays the author's German-speaking youth, the narrative reveals the drive and determination that spurred many who adopted the United States as their mother country.

Vogel's account begins with his birth on December 24, 1863, in Dachsen, a village on the Rhine river in the canton of Zurich in northern Switzerland. After describing his early education, Vogel discussed the economic hardships confronting many Europeans.

---

Henry Vogel emigrated with his family to the United States from Switzerland in 1874 when he was 10 years old. His father, Isaac, had gone ahead and established himself in New Jersey before sending for his wife and seven children. Henry, wanting his memories of his emigration and of the better life he found in America to survive him, began writing an autobiography in January, 1951, just three months before his death. In it he recalls economic hardships in Europe which caused his father to leave there, and describes the family's quest for a new life in this country including the years 1881-1888 when they were in Kansas. The photograph, opposite, is of the first page of Vogel's manuscript.

---

"Now I shall tell about my first contact with America. At that time [1873] all Europe was short of meat, and the U.S. of America had advanced to be a great meat producer just like today. Our village was on a railroad that ran to the little city of Schaffhausen about five miles from Dachsen; and when I was eight or nine years old, mother would give me enough money to get on the train and back and one franc to buy American salt pork; and I would get maybe five pounds of it at about five cents a pound American money; and that would be all the meat we would have except maybe once a month we would have a beef soup bone."

Depressed economic conditions and the failure of a business venture persuaded Isaac Vogel, Henry's father, that prospects would be brighter in America. Traveling alone, Henry's father established himself in New Jersey before sending for his wife and children. Frau Margarettta Vogel and her seven children left Switzerland on July 20, 1874.

"We went through Basel and then through Paris ... and arrived at the French port of La Havre. We had to wait two days for our ship. The name of the ship was Erin. She was quite a large ship for those days, and we were nine days getting across, but us children enjoyed every day. Of course we traveled in steerage, and the passengers were fed off a long wooden table; [it] must have been one hundred feet long. I do not remember what they fed, but do remember two things, all the black coffee we could drink sweetened with cube sugar, and us kid[s] sure went for the sugar. The sugar bowls were never removed from the tables, and we kid[s] would fill our pockets with the cubes and eat them all the time. You see we hardly knew what sugar was till then, and I can taste the black coffee and sugar yet."

New York made a lasting impression on most of the immigrants who landed there, and Henry Vogel was no exception. His senses were assaulted by new sensations, but one stood out above the rest.

"On the way to the train, there came along a
pie peddler; and mother (she must have gotten some American money) bought an apple pie from the peddler; and as there were seven children, she cut it in seven pieces and gave us each a piece; and as that was the first I or any of us had ever eaten, I thought it was the best thing I had ever tasted. The pie cost a dime."

Isaac Vogel, who met his family in New York, took them to Chatham, N.J. Henry's father had been able to secure work on a farm near the town despite high unemployment throughout the East caused by the depression following the panic of 1873.

"Now we landed in America in August, 1874, right in the middle of what I learned after I was grown was called the Jay Cooke Panic. All business in the East was at a standstill, and all large cities had soup kitchens where they tried to feed the hundred of thousand; and then they, the cities like New York and Newark, sent all the men and women to farmers that they could place to work for their eatings. My father was lucky to get acquainted with a man by the name of Romar who hired him to work on his farm for $100.00 a year."

LIFE IN the New Jersey countryside offered many new experiences for the Vogel family. Seventy-five years later Henry still had vivid recollections of one encounter that he would have rather foregone.

"We moved into a vacant house with an old apple orchard behind it, and us children had lots of good ripe apples to eat. The house was nice to live in, and there was an old barn across the road from it. It was vacant too, and next winter some man who made trapping his business set a trap under it. . . . Next morning I got up early to look at it. Sure enough there was the black animal with a white stripe down its back and the brightest eyes. I learned afterward what it was. I looked at it a few minutes and it just sat there and didn't move. So I reached down and pulled the chain, and well, you know what happened and I did too. I ran in the house, and everyone wanted to run out of the house, but mother made me change clothes and bury the others out in the ground and I knew what skunk[s] looked like from then on."

Shortly after their arrival all the Vogel children who were old enough were enrolled in school.

"There were forty or forty-five pupils. Of course, we were quite an addition; and not able to talk English, we attracted a good deal of attention and were called Dutch, all in fun; and the larger boys really were good to us. [They] tried to learn myself and Brother Albert to play their games, . . . baseball and football, but the best thing was dividing their lunch with us. Our own lunch wasn't much. About all we had was bread. They had meat, chicken, and cake and pie; and believe me they tasted good to us who had never had anything like that. We all started in to learn English, reading [and] writing. We went there about two years and sometime in [winter] we would have to wade snow twelve to fifteen inches deep, but we were used to snow as we had lots of it in Switzerland."

Within two years, Isaac Vogel had saved enough to buy two acres of wooded land near Chatham on which he built a house. About the same time, in 1876, the United States celebrated the centennial of its Declaration of Independence. Like millions of other Americans, Henry Vogel never forgot that festive occasion.

"One of our neighbor[s] by the name of Hess took me along with his folk to Morristown on the first 4th of July, 1876. They were celebrating the 100th anniversary in the U. States, and they had the finest and largest fireworks I ever saw. George Washington and Lafayette on horseback and the ship Constitution and many others, and there was sure a big crowd. We walked there and back; got home about twelve o'clock. I was then past twelve years old."

The Vogels had little time for celebration; reestablishing themselves demanded most of their time. Isaac Vogel found a variety of part-time work for his boys.

"Father got to know a baker in Newark and apprenticed me to him to learn the baker's trade. . . . The baker made me (he did too) get up at three o'clock every morning and start a fire under the oven and help mixing dough and go [to] the stable to feed and harness the delivery horse, and by five I would be out delivering hot rolls and bread to customers, and then he would have me work until four o'clock, and then I would go to bed. I stood this six month[s]; then I broke down and went home."

"By now, times were better in the East, and father was getting good wages at his trade; but by this time he had got in communication with a man he knew in the old country who lived in
Illinois; and as his object in coming to America was to get free land and his friend told him to come to Illinois, father sold his house in N. Jersey; and we moved to Fairsburg, Ill."

ISAAC VOGEL, a stonemason by profession, found little work immediately after he moved to Illinois; but as prosperity returned to the Midwest, the demand for his services increased. Henry worked full time for a lumber yard delivering orders until he hired out as a farm hand for $100 a year. For three years he worked for a couple named Thomas who owned the farm. Each winter he was able to attend school for three months.

"It was the best place I ever had. They owned 160 acres of that good Illinois land, and they were prosperous, had no children of their own, and it was with them and the three-month school that I really learned English. They would help me with my homework. The crops we raised were corn and oats and timothy hay. They kept ten or twelve cows, and I sure learned to milk. Mrs. Thomas made butter and also about 200 pounds of cheese during the summer, and did I drink milk; and then we ate clabber milk with the cream and sugar and was it good. They had one span of good mules with whom we done all the plowing, and they had a riding plow which made that work easy. Farming is hard work, but I did get quite a lot of pleasure on the farm. It was the custom then, and it was one of the rare days for the farmers to help one another, with the thrashing. The power used was horses, and it took fifteen or twenty men to run an outfit; and all the women would come to help with the cooking, and did they cook, fried chicken, chicken with dumplings, cakes and pies, and all kinds of vegetables with coffee, tea, or milk. I can't eat those feasts yet."

Memory of those hearty meals remained as vivid as Vogel's recollection of the dusty job of historic work that the dusty job of tying and stacking bundles of straw and the bone-chilling cold he experienced tending a primitive corn-planting machine in the early spring.

"[Another] job was husking corn. It was done mostly after frost because the more frost or freezing the easier the corn would husk and snap off the stock. The wagon was drawn by horses and the offside of the bed was built up about three feet with boards to throw the corn against. They were called throwboards. They were there to keep you from throwing the corn across the wagon. On a frosty morning one could hear the corn hitting the board a mile. We always used husking pegs, and when it was cold, we used tarred gloves. Some men could husk over a hundred bushel[s] a day, but (me being only a boy, I was probably 16) [I] never did husk more than fifty to sixty bushel[s] a day.

"They used to get up husking matches for the experts; and most all farmers would cut and shock a few acres of corn; and it would have to be husked; and they would have husking bees for the boys and girls; and all corn fields would, once in a while, have a red ear; and when a boy found one, he could kiss any girl he chose (I never was lucky); and so they all had lots of fun."

Henry, who was 14 years old when he began working for the Thomases, had to win the respect of his peers on the schoolground.

"Some of the boys, of course, wanted to find out about me. They were good to me, and so was the teacher; but one day at noon one boy, he was a little heavier than I, jumped on me
The Indian Panic.

It is unnecessary and impossible to give a full account of the panic as it appeared in this and adjoining counties, but we are happy to say this much, that it is all gone so far as Harper is concerned. As the Sentinel said at first, and all the time, there was not an Indian within a hundred miles of Harper, nor do we believe there is one yet in the state of Kansas, capable of or disposed to do harm. The reason for the faith in us is soon given. We have dispatches and news every day from Ft. Reno and other points where Indians are located. From the time the news leaves these points to the time the Daily is issued, is usually less than twenty-four hours. It is simply impossible for the Indians to travel over a hundred miles in twenty-four hours, without obstruction, and we all know they could not, practically speaking, get into this or adjoining counties, were they to try, under three or four days.

In addition to this their course is, west to the Texas Panhandle, then, if into Kansas, through the southwest corner. They would not attempt to cross the Cherokee strip with its wire fences and well armed cowboys. They never seek a square, open fight, which they know they would have in such an event. Some have gone west to the Panhandle, others may follow, and they may get into Kansas, but as we have said before, so we reiterate, they will not come within a hundred miles of Harper.

But the damage done by this idle rumor, started and circulated in malice by those who have at heart the injury of our city and country is most deplorable. Its effects will last for months. The check to immigration already made will not be recovered this year. The floods, the winds, the cyclones, the crop failures alleged, all these things combined, have not hurt this section half as much as this Indian business, and it had not a shadow of foundation.

As an instance, reputable citizens were quoted as authority for terrible reports. Interviewed, they deny every word of it. Brooks was burned. Investigated, Brooks is as always was. Kiowa was destroyed. A man direct from there reports Kiowa all right and not thinking of talking of Indians. And thus it goes. Now for days and weeks eastern papers will tell terrible stories of the Indian raid here, and immigrants, already timid, will stay far away. Local sheets will be quoted as authority for the reports, and no one will doubt their accuracy, knowing nothing of their characterless character. It behooves all true friends of Harper and the southwest to do what they can to repair the damage. The Sentinel, as ever, will do what it can, yet knowing that the harm has been too great to be entirely undone.

and tried to throw me; but somehow I threw him; and after the[n] I was one of them. You see I was the only one in the school that could not talk good English.

"All in all the Thomases was up to then the best place I ever lived at, and they wanted to adopt me, but my folks did not want me to. By that time I was about seventeen, and I went to work with father and learned his trade, and I became a stonemason. Times had by now gotten good in Illinois, and father bought and paid for a home. Father also took out his naturalization paper. That made us all citizens. At that time all he had to do [was to] go before a county judge. Now one has to go before a U.S. judge. I have his naturalization paper in my possession now.

"About this time the government had opened what was called the Osage Tract land, a strip of land that ran from about where Coffeyville, Kansas, is west to the Colorado line. The strip was sixty or seventy miles north and south, and to get land one would file for 160 acres and agree to pay $2.50 per acre and also to settle on the land and improve it. Well, some of father's friends got interested and investigated; and as it looked good to them (the land, all prairie, was and is good, most of it), father had a friend pick and file 160 acres for him. By this time I was eighteen. Anyway, that fall, in October, father sent me to Kansas (the land was in Harper County, and Harper was the nearest town) to look at the land. The whole country was prairie, no trees as far as one could see. Well, I went and saw the land, and it looked all right to me. So I reported to father and they sold out in Illinois and came to Kansas by Christmas (so father got what he came to the U.S. for, land).

When Henry Vogel was 18, his family moved to Harper county, Kansas, where his father filed a claim on 160 acres of good prairie land. Henry, who had learned his father's trade as a stonemason, went to work for a contractor in the growing community of Harper. Though the town was a shipping point for cattle, it was a nice quiet place, he recalled in his autobiography later. There was "no shooting and killing like in Dodge City," but he did remember one exciting incident, an Indian scare in 1885. "The Indian Panic," an account of the rumor and how, according to the editor, it would hurt immigration to Kansas was in the Harper Sentinel, July 11, 1885.
“He bought a yoke of oxen and wagon also material for a house and stable and hauled it out to the land. It took all winter to build the house. In the meantime as Harper was building fast, I had gone to work for a contractor at, for that time, good wages. Father went to work too as soon as the family was settled. And a younger brother, when spring came, broke some land and planted corn and potatoes. They also bought a cow and chickens and so made a start on the farm.

“To get water father, like all settlers, drilled wells, had to go over 100 feet, but did get soft water. Then, coal was very expensive, and the settlers soon learned to burn what was called Buffalo Chips after the buffalo that used to roam over all that grass country. And they gathered the chips by wagon load and when dry burned like wood, good to cook with and for heat. There were also considerable buffalo bones and horns for which there was a market in Harper, but life was sometimes quite hard on the first settlers.

“Now for a description of the town of Harper. It was at the end of the only railroad north to Hutchison, and west I do not know where, and south across the Indian Territory to somewhere in Texas. It was really a little shipping town. The stock yards covered at least twenty acres; and as there were large cattle ranches in the I. Territory and also to the west in Kansas, there were many cattle shipped; and there were also a good many cowboys. But they were well behaved and there were no shooting and killing like in Dodge City. It really was a nice town. Myself and father helped build stone buildings that are there yet in 1951.

“We did have one exciting incident about two years after we moved there. At that time father and I were building a stone livery barn, and about nine o’clock one morning a rumor spread over town that the Cheyenne Indians had broken out of their reservation in the I. Territory into Kansas about fifty miles west of Harper and were coming east killing settlers and burning all houses. Father commenced to worry about the folks on the farm; it was about sixteen miles northwest and right in the path of the way the Indians were said to come. Well, the rumors kept getting worse and father more worried, so I suggested that we hire a team and buggy and drive out home.

“Now, I want to say here that I did not believe there was a raid for this reason: all the rumors came from about fifty miles northwest of us, and Harper was twenty miles north of the Territory line. I argued that the Indians could not have gotten that far north without some cowboy getting away and ride east with confirmation of the raid; but father, of course, was worried about the family out at home; so we hired a team and buggy and started.

“Now, I did own a 32 pistol; and I bought a box of 32’s. That was the only pistol I ever owned. It would have been lots of help if we had met the Indians. We started about one o’clock. By that time excited people were coming into Harper, and as we had to go northwest on the main road we met lots of folks going to Harper; and believe me, they were all excited and scared. We learned afterwards that the same thing was taking place at Kingman, county seat of Kingman county, and Pratt Center of Pratt county; and we heard afterward that several men and women died from fright. Some we met on the way out were scared enough to die. In Harper they stretched barbwire around the town, and they done the same thing in Kingman and Pratt Center.

“We arrived at the farm by four o’clock, and they knew about the raid. My younger brother

Henry Vogel married in 1886 and in 1888 moved his family to Indian territory. After working at a number of temporary jobs in construction, he settled in Muskogee in 1899. This photograph was taken in 1899 in Muskogee.
Albert had tried to induce mother to load the children in the wagon and go to Harper; but as she was rather a strong-minded woman not easily scared, she told my brother that she would not run away and leave all the stock and house. Well, father tried to talk her into going but she would not, and then I told her that I would stay if she would go. So after more talk she consented (and I became a hero). . . . They left me a pony and made me promise to ride to a neighbor to get a .32 single shot rifle after they left. . . . To get the .32 rifle I had to ride a mile north, and I saddled the pony and started.

"Well, I got to the main road running west when I saw two men riding towards me riding west. Well, I waited for them, and I knew both of them. One rode a horse; the other a mule; one of them had a muzzle-loading shotgun; the other one an old Kentucky squirrel rifle. I asked them where they were going; they said to hunt Indians. Well, I forgot about the .32 rifle and told them I was going with them. So we started, myself with the .32 pistol, they with the shotgun and rifle, going to hunt Indians armed with Winchesters (were we not brave). Well, we had ridden about one and a half miles, and going down a slope towards a creek . . . there was a wagon to which were hitched a yoke of oxen. The folks were a man and wife. We told them what we were up to, and they laughed and said it was all a hoax. It had started the day before where they lived. So for us that was the end of the whole awful business, and I went back to the farm, and the next day the folks came, and I went back to Harper the next day after the folks came back."

Vogel attributed the rumor of a Cheyenne uprising to cattlemen west of Harper. He related that "there had not been a single Indian off their reservation, but the hubbub made caused the government to send a company of cavalry to Kiowa, fifty miles west of us, and they were kept there three or four months."
While the reports of renegade Cheyenne war parties laying waste to western Kansas were not true, most Kansans were prepared to believe them. In the 1870's Cheyenne warriors had raided western Kansas, and in 1885 persistent reports of discontent from the tribe's agency at Darlington in Indian territory had alarmed officials in Washington. Stories dated July 8, 1885, from Wichita and Topeka in the Harper Sentinel reported that the Cheyennes had broken out of their reservation and were "burning and devastating on every hand" in western Kansas. By July 11, however, the newspaper dismissed the panic as an "idle rumor" and asserted that "there was not an Indian within a hundred miles of Harper."

RUNAWAY Indians were not the only thing on Vogel's mind during his sojourn on the Kansas frontier.

"Well, time rolled on and I really got interested in Idella M. Brown. She lived only about one-fourth of a mile from our home, and she lived, like lots of folks in that new country [in] a half dug and half sod house. That kind of house was good to live in, warm in winter and cool in summer. To make a long story short, with the consent of her parents we were married on September 9th, 1887 [Vogel seems to be in error here; the family Bible indicates that he was married on September 9, 1886].

"Just at that time father and myself contracted to build a stone barn on a ranch about six mile north of us in Kingman county. There happened to be a small dugout—it even had a sod roof—not far from the barn, and with the consent of Mr. Manning, the owner of the ranch, we moved into it and so started housekeeping in a dugout. We lived there three or four month[s] and we were very happy.

"Now to go on with my story. At that time Kansas commenced to boom. The Santa Fe Railroad and other railroads commenced to build new roads all over the state, but the Santa Fe beat them all. . . . At that time they started a line west of Mulvane, and it came by about a mile east of where we were building the barn, and they started a division town there and started a stone roundhouse there.

"Well, about that time we finished the barn, and as the contractor on the roundhouse needed stonemasons, . . . he put us to work (I was 24 years old by then). Well, we went to work and helped to finish the roundhouse, and they put me on a repair gang and sent father up to Salina, Kansas, to wall up a waterwell one hundred feet deep. I was sent to Wichita to do some work on a roundhouse there. So I and Della, my wife, moved there.

"When we were married, my wife's folks sold their place and started to move back to their old home in Arkansas where they could get wood to burn, but they only got back as far as Siloam Springs in Arkansas. . . . By the time myself and wife go to Wichita, we were expecting an addition to the family, and the wife wanted to go to her mother which was all right with me too. So I put her on a train and she arrived there safely. After I was through in Wichita, I was sent to Mulvane, Kansas, to join another gang.

"By this time it was August [1887] and [the] crops looked good. There was a field of corn in [the] bottom land along the railroad where we worked. It looked like it would make a hundred bushels to the acre; but the hot winds commenced to blow; and inside forty-eight hours that corn was burned up so the leaves just blew away; and the same thing happened all over Kansas; and the Santa Fe Railroad went broke; and what had been called the Kansas boom busted. Well, we were all discharged, and the railroad company could not even pay us. They owed me about $200.00 at the time, but they promised to pay as soon as they could and did. I got a check about two month after I got to Arkansas in Siloam where, of course, I went to be with my wife."

The torrid summer of 1887 remained a predominant meteorological benchmark for two generations of residents of the Great Plains.

VOGEL remained in Siloam Springs until the spring of 1888 when he crossed the Arkansas border to find employment in Indian territory. After working at a number of temporary jobs in construction, Vogel settled in Muskogee in 1889. By the time of his retirement in 1945, he had supervised the construction of hundreds of homes and public and commercial buildings in Muskogee and eastern Oklahoma.

Seventy-seven years after his arrival in America Vogel wrote, "I will close this story of my life with a few comments. . . . I was fortunate to be brought to this great country. Of course, I am not one of those emigrant[s]
that wound up millionaires, but I have had a very pleasant life, always in good health.”

The rags-to-riches stories of the millionaires mentioned by Vogel have fascinated the public and have become a part of American mythology, but the hopes, struggles, and accomplishments of Henry Vogel and millions of others like him constitute the real story of those who immigrated to the United States in the decades after the Civil War.