

Some Sources for Northwest History

THE WRITINGS OF ALBERT WOLFF

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AMONG THE BOOKS in the library of the Minnesota Historical Society is a small volume entitled *Literarischer Nachlass* ("Literary Legacy") by Albert Wolff (St. Paul, 1894). In this unpretentious book, published a year after the author's death, are to be found selected poems, speeches, and a novel by a man who was probably the first German-American poet and novelist of Minnesota.

As a student of theology, Wolff participated in the revolution of 1848 in Germany, was captured, sentenced to death, had his sentence commuted, and finally was allowed to go into exile. After arriving in St. Paul in November, 1852, he found employment in the confectionery shop of Renz and Karcher. On November 19, 1855, Friedrich Orthwein began the publication of the *Minnesota Deutsche Zeitung*, the first German newspaper in Minnesota, and Wolff became associated with the venture. Just when and in what capacity he served has not been ascertained, since unfortunately none of the early issues of the paper have come down to us. When Orthwein severed his connections with the paper, Wolff joined him in publishing the *Thalbote* at Chaska and the *National Demokrat* in St. Paul. In 1864 Wolff was for a short time the editor of the *New Ulm Post*, successor to the ill-fated *New Ulm Pionier*, but he soon relinquished this post to join the staff of the *Minnesota Staatszeitung* of St. Paul, with which he remained until his death in 1893.

In the early years of Wolff's connection with the *Staatszeitung*, almost every issue contained one of his poems. Some were merely bits of doggerel concerned with local political affairs, or expressing gratitude for the donation of a keg of beer by a local brewer, or commemorating the raising of the roof on a friend's new dwelling. Frequently, as the selection published in his *Nachlass* attests, the

poems were more pretentious in character. The section headings in the volume are, in translation, "Freedom and Fatherland," featuring principally the Civil War and Minnesota's part in it, "Love and Marriage," their joys and sorrows, "Ballads," "Varied Poems," "Translations from the Low German of Klaus Groth," "Travel Pictures," and "Epigrams." Typical of the poems dealing with Minnesota during the Civil War period is the "Marching Song of the Minnesota German Squadron," composed on November 2, 1861, and intended to be sung to the tune of "Zu Mantua in Banden."

Since Wolff was not only a poet, but an orator much in demand at German celebrations and ceremonies, it is fitting that five of his orations are printed in the *Nachlass*. Among them is one delivered at the dedication of the flag of the St. Paul Turnverein on May 26, 1860, and another given at the laying of the foundation for the statue of Hermann in New Ulm, on June 24, 1888. The volume includes also a brief history of Minnesota in German, dated 1859; and an article on the opening of the new stock exchange in Bremen, Germany, on July 10, 1870—an event that Wolff witnessed while serving in the seaport as immigration commissioner from Minnesota.

The remainder of the volume is given over to "Otakte, der Viel-tödter" ("Otakte, the Killer of Many"), a novel about the Sioux Outbreak of 1862. The story is that of a mulatto who was harshly treated by slaveowners in New Orleans. He vows vengeance on the whites, flees northward, and joins a Sioux tribe in Minnesota, marrying the daughter of the chief. With the aid of an English agent, who supplies money and arms, and of a Confederate spy, he instigates and leads the uprising of 1862. The scene of this improbable story ranges from New Orleans to Fort Garry in the Canadian Red River Valley. Historical personages, such as General Sibley, Little Crow, and Other Day, are introduced, and such actual places as Fort Ridgley, the International House in St. Paul, and the Dakota House in New Ulm tend to add verisimilitude to the intricate plot, but the story remains fantastic and improbable. Wolff liked to display his knowledge of Indian customs and lore, supplementing the references in the text with copious footnotes. The novel first appeared in Kohlmann's

Literaturblätter, a short-lived literary journal published in Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

It is known that some of Wolff's works were published in book form during his lifetime. When the Athenaeum, the German theater of St. Paul, was dedicated on November 11, 1859, the centennial of Schiller's birth, Wolff was the orator of the day. His speech was printed and the Germans of Minnesota were urged to purchase copies as souvenirs of the occasion. In 1867 a volume of poems, *Vermischte Gedichte* ("Assorted Poems") is said to have appeared. Thus far neither of these publications has been found by the writer. Any information concerning them or any other early German literary publications in Minnesota will be greatly appreciated.

It is not to be inferred that Wolff's works set a high literary standard, or that they are important contributions to German-American literature. They do, however, throw light on a phase of Minnesota history which needs further exploration — the cultural life of the state's pioneer Germans.



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