

Bernhard Warkentin made Kansas the Breadbasket of the World

Bernhard Warkentin was born in the village of Altona of the Molotschna Mennonite settlement in the Ukraine, in 1847. His father, a prominent miller, was instrumental in making the Ukraine the Breadbasket of Russia. Bernhard Warkentin was instrumental in making Kansas the Breadbasket of the World.

In 1872, Bernhard Warkentin arrived in the United States to study this nation's agricultural, economic, and political climate. In the meantime, 100 years of exemption from military service—granted by Catherine the Great—was ending for the Mennonites in Russia. The Franco-Prussian War was in progress, and Russian Mennonites were seeking another land in which to pursue their religious and moral beliefs.

Realizing the benefit the Mennonite farmers would be to the development of the Great Plains states, American railroad companies touted the advantages of settling in the midwestern United States. Warkentin stayed in the United States, studied English at McKendree College in Illinois, and traveled to Canada, Colorado, Kansas, and Texas, looking for a new home for his family. He was attracted to Kansas, where the prairies most resembled the Steppes of the Russian homeland.

In 1873, Warkentin settled in Halstead, building the county's first grist mill on the Little Arkansas River. He became a leader in bringing other Russian Mennonites to Kansas, arranging passage and getting the immigrants



Wedding photos of Wilhelmina and Bernhard Warkentin taken in 1875

settled on good farms. With his help, 5,000 Mennonites were settled in Kansas between 1874 and 1884. The immigrants brought with them Turkey Red hard winter wheat.

Turkey Red wheat had been very successful in the Russian prairie climate, and Warkentin had urged immigrants to bring parcels of the seed in their belongings. In the Fall of 1874, the Kansas countryside was first sown with Turkey Red, the hardy, high-yield variety of wheat that gave Kansas its enormous productivity and made this region the grain capitol of the world. In 1900 the Kansas State Miller's Association and the Kansas State Dealers Association arranged through Warkentin and Mark Carlton of the U.S. Dept. of Agriculture, to import 15,000 bushels of Turkey Red wheat seed for planting throughout Kansas.

Bernhard Warkentin owned mills and elevators in Halstead, Newton, and Blackwell, Oklahoma. He was instrumental in founding the Halstead State Bank, Kansas State Bank (now Bank IV, Newton), Bethel Deaconess Hospital and Bethel College, both in Newton.

The Newton home of Bernhard Warkentin and Wilhelmina Eisenmayer Warkentin, built between 1886 and 1887, is a splendid example of the Victorian period in American architecture. This Victorian house offers the visitor a glimpse into the way the Warkentins lived, since many of its original furnishings remain. The house is listed on the National Register of Historic Places and the Kansas Register of Historic Places.

Things to See in the Warkentin House

THE VESTIBULE with its German Cross in the border of the tiled floor.

THE MAIN FOYER with its tall oak door containing a cut and etched glass panel imported from France. Fine oak woodwork and floors, ball and spindle fretwork, and Lincrusta-Walton wainscoting.

THE PARLOR with its cherry and cherry-finished walnut woods dominated by the crystal chandelier from Czechoslovakia. English box sofa with the oval design which is repeated in the cornice molding which is made of plaster reinforced with human hair. Empire chair inlaid with mother-of-pearl. Photographs include the portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Warkentin and a collage of family pictures.

THE MUSIC ROOM has a matching Czechoslovakian chandelier. The 1893 Steinway upright parlor piano belonged to the Warkentin's daughter, Edna.

THE DINING ROOM has walnut woodwork and contains a magnificent Italian tiled fireplace bracketed by two large jeweled and stained glass windows. The original oak furniture includes the dining table that seats 20 when extended.

THE UPPER FOYER includes more Lincrusta-Walton wainscoting and ball and spindle fretwork. Mrs. Warkentin's "box of memories" in which she placed family memorabilia, is found in the upper foyer.

THE NORTHWEST BEDROOM, above the Protocochere, contains an excellent example of Victorian wallpaper. The paper is an ivory-flocked pattern on a rust-red background. This room was occupied by the Warkentin's son, Carl.

THE NORTHEAST BEDROOM with its birds-eye maple furniture was occupied by the Warkentin's daughter, Edna. Imported dolls grace this room. The steamer trunk at the foot of the bed was used by the Warkentins on their trips to and from Europe. Just off the northeast bedroom to the left is a ladies wardrobe room. Built-in drawers and closet space are found in the wardrobe room.

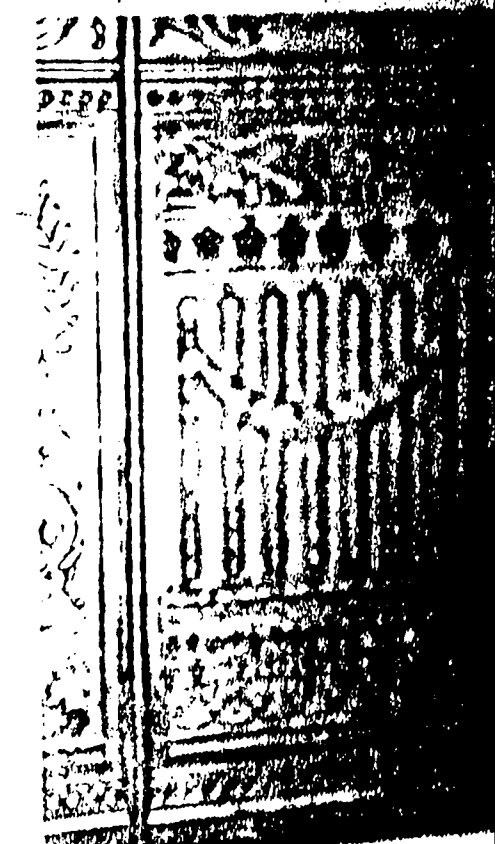
THE UPSTAIRS LIBRARY contains Mr. Warkentin's black leather upholstered armchair with its carved acanthus leaves, lion's heads, and claw feet.

THE MASTER SUITE boasts the original bedroom suite of Victorian walnut with Italian marble. The fireplace is faced with white tile from France. The rare, Russian, red carpets were brought from his homeland by Mr. Warkentin. They contain the design of the thistle, the Russian national flower. The armoire is an excellent copy of a John Belter armoire in the Victorian Rococo style.

THE BATHROOM originally held a tin bathtub until "indoor plumbing" was added to the house in 1889. The wainscoting is embossed tin.



The fireplace in the parlor has a mantelpiece and Robert Gray.



Many small items, including the family ship of the Warkentins, and the wainscoting in the music room, are stored in the wardrobe room.

Curating photo: J. Pepp