



Book of the Month

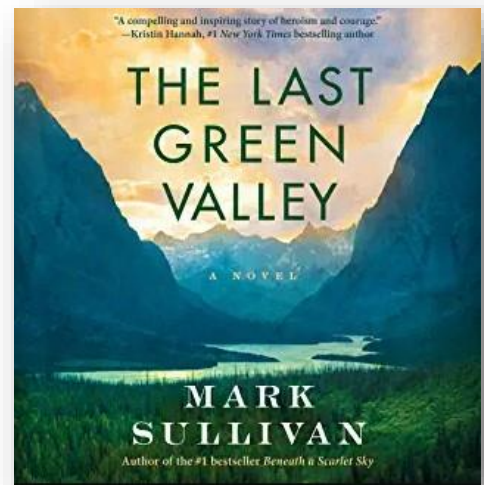
The Last Green Valley by Mark Sullivan

Book Review by Lynn Reinschmiedt, Friends of the Starkville Library Board Member

The early part of this review of *The Last Green Valley* describes another aspect of the so-called ethnic Germans described in this book. I had not been familiar with Mark Sullivan's writing until I had read *The Last Green Valley*. I read it primarily for personal reasons described in this overview, as the hereditary roots on the paternal side of my family are basically descendants of the ethnic Germans living in what is now the Ukraine. These date back to Catherine the Great's Manifesto in the mid-1700s. Catherine the Great's purpose was to seek out German tradesmen, particularly farmers, to train backward Russians with new skills. By 1767 some seven thousand families, 25,000 to 27,000 individuals had left Germany and settled primarily along the Volga River and in the Black Sea area of what is now the Ukraine in response to Catherine's Manifesto.

However, by the late 1800s many of these ethnic Germans had begun to migrate to Canada and the U.S. often packing up whole villages in mass. They were doing this because the Soviets were conscripting young men into the Russian military, and they had started taxing them all of which went against earlier promises to not do so under Catherine's original Manifesto.

My paternal grandfather and grandmother were a part of these earlier ethnic German immigrants whose families immigrated to the U.S. in the mid-1890s. My grandmother's family moved to North Dakota and my grandfather's to western Oklahoma which was still Indian territory. As such, they avoided the turmoil associated with the Russian revolution, Stalin's 1932-33 Holodomor, the man-made famine which killed 3.5 to 5.0 million Ukrainians, and then all the WWII events depicted in *The Last Green Valley*. I have always wondered what would have happened to my family if they had remained in the Ukraine and not migrated in the mid-1890s. Today there are many pockets of communities with agrarian roots throughout the Great Plains populated by ethnic Germans from the Ukraine who migrated during the latter part of the 1800s. I'm sure many who are reading this review are not aware of these events. An interesting sidebar is this group of migrants brought with them seeds of hard winter



wheat to the so-called Great American Desert to be cultivated. Also, by accident thistle (tumbleweed) seeds were accidentally introduced.

The Last Green Valley is a historical fiction book about an ethnic German family, Emil and Adeline Martel and their sons, Will and Walt, who are Ukrainian descendants of Katherine the Great's Manifesto. It centers on their efforts to immigrate to the west as the WWII draws to a close. *The Last Green Valley* like many books in its class concentrates on a personal story rather than generalized WWII events. The book is probably informative to many who are not aware of the ethnic Germans who moved to Russia in the 1700-1800s to strengthen farming practices in the Ukraine. This book obviously predates Putin's recent invasion of the Ukraine, but it shows that such atrocities committed by the Russians on the Ukrainian peoples are not new. The story told in *The Last Green Valley* depicts a people caught between Stalin's brutal regime and Hitler's annihilation of the Jews as it follows the Martel family's quest to immigrate west. The Martels hook up with a team of Nazi SS officers who are retreating to German territory as the European part of the WWII conflict is approaching its end.

Emil's past with an SS officer who does recognize him initially catches up with him as their journey west progresses.

The Martels end up in a camp in Poland for a brief time before Emil is separated from the rest of his family and relocated to a Russian labor camp in the east. Before Emil is separated from family, he commands them to go as far west as they can, and he would find them. The rest of the book recounts his quest to survive in the labor camp and his ultimate escape from the camp and his reuniting with his family and ultimate relocation to Bozeman, Montana.

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