



Letters of a German American Farmer: Juernjakob Swehn Travels to America (Bur Oak Book)

Johannes Gillhoff

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Early in the twentieth century, drawing upon the hundreds of letters written to his father by students who had emigrated to northeastern Iowa from Mecklenburg, in northeastern Germany, Johannes Gillhoff created the composite character of Juernjakob Swehn: the archetype of the upright, honest mensch who personified the German immigrant, on his way to a better life through ambition and hard work. Gillhoff's farmer-hero, planting and harvesting his Iowa acres, joking with his neighbors during the snowy winters, building a church with his own hands, proved so popular with the German public that a million copies of *Juernjakob Swehn der Amerikafahrer* are in print. Now for the first time this wise and endearing book is available in English.

“First, let's talk about pigs,” Juernjakob Swehn writes from his farm in Iowa. “In America, pigs have a curly tail and talk in Low German so I can understand them.” Swehn builds a log house and makes a success of farming, marries a woman who's “a whole different nation that has its confidence from the inside,” raises a family, and becomes an elder in the Lutheran church. He recognizes his good fortune but acknowledges that memories of his village grow stronger every year, that “being homesick is the best thing that home can do for you ...no power on earth holds on to you like your homeland.” It is this sense of home, both in Iowa and in Mecklenburg, that makes Juernjakob Swehn appeal to today's readers as much as he appealed to readers in 1916.

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