

# In Touch with Prairie Living

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Germans from Russia Heritage Collection  
North Dakota State University Libraries, Fargo



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA  
**GRHC**  
HERITAGE COLLECTION

Leona (Woezner) Neu of Ashley, N.D., celebrates her 99th birthday on May 8th. Leona is well known as Ashley's local historian, seamstress and cake decorator. Leona has many scrapbooks, obituaries and documents sharing the important history of Ashley, which was primarily settled by Germans from Russia. In 2013, Leona was named Queen at Ashley's 125th Celebration.

Leona's artistic needlework has produced many award-winning projects. The altar cloth at Zion Lutheran Church in Ashley was designed and embroidered by her. Leona was coordinator of both the McIntosh County and State Centennial quilts. Leona made her first wedding cake in 1960 and has since made 160 wedding cakes.

Leona was born to Jacob J. and Marie (Sachmann) Woezner in 1925. They lived on a farm just east of Ashley, N.D. Her father Jacob was born in Beresina, Bessarabia. Her mother was born in eastern South Dakota. In October 1944, Leona married Herbert J. Neu (died April 3, 2004), son of Andrew and Louisa (Weber) Neu, at Zion Lutheran Church in Ashley. Leona and Herbert had two children: Jarrold and Rachel.

The GRHC Archive includes the Leona (Woezner) Neu Collection which consists mostly German hymnals and theology she acquired from the Zion Lutheran Church in Ashley and from people in the McIntosh County area. Some books include a signature of the past owner, short notes and even handwritten songs.

Ralph Neu, writes, "For many years, Aunt Leona preserved area happenings from newspaper articles and clippings with many scrapbooks. Many people contacted Leona for historical references and family connections, she was like a talking library. Leona compiled extensive history scrapbooks of the Neu and Woezner families as well as a recipe booklet of her mother's handwritten recipes titled 'Grandma Marie's Recipes.' Leona made Christmas fruitcake from scratch.

I presently live on the homestead that Leona's grandparents homesteaded. Leona was born in the house that is still on the farm. Leona and her sister, Estella, my mother, are the 3rd generation, and I am the 4th generation and my sons are the 5th generation to live on the homestead."

Marvel Gross, President of the McIntosh County Museum, writes, "My first involvement with Leona was in the 1970s through McIntosh County Extension Homemakers. Leona was a good teacher for homemaking projects. During our Ashley Centennial in 1988, many of the local ladies had their dresses designed and sewn by Leona. If she didn't have a pattern, she designed one. For many years, Leona prepared scrapbooks and recorded stories from the Ashley Tribune. A wonderful German-Russian legendary woman who lived a full-filled life."

Dr. Ann Braaten, retired associate professor in Apparel, Retail Merchandising and Design, and Curator of the Emily P. Reynolds Historic Collection at NDSU, writes, "Leona helped me gather evidence for my doctoral work through the University of Minnesota studying textile heirlooms of immigrant women to learn more about their roles in Germans from Russia culture.

On May 25, 2004, Leona arranged for 30-plus people to gather at the Ashley Senior Center to participate in a culture exchange with a goal of sharing the traditions, memories, and customs reflected through their families' heirloom textiles. Leona titled the event, "Memories and Traditions of German-Russian Shawls, Head Scarves and Coverings." Thirty textiles cared for by the women from fourteen families were shown and photographed that day. The women included Leona Neu, Alvina Schlenkler, Ann Walker, Estella Neu, Esther Eszlinger, Esther Klipfel, Esther Kruger, Eunice Helfenstein, Rose Mayer, Janet Dalke, Joan Boschee, LaVilla Dollinger, Majorie Martz, and Viola Strobel.

Leona is an important part of the fabric of the Ashley community. Her leadership, interest in her family's history, and relation with families in the greater community helped to make the 2004 event in Ashley possible. Through Leona's efforts, I was able to gather evidence of German-Russian women's history and their textiles. Textiles provide tangible reminders of people who impacted their lives and of the family and community left behind in Russia.

Leona shared that she attended her first year of school not knowing any English, saying, "I still can't understand how I got

along." From age seven to thirteen she attended the country school near her family, completing the seventh and eighth grade tests when she was 13. Leona acquired her love of sewing prior to attending school by hand-stitching quilts for her dolls. While other students went out for recess to play, Leona stayed in to embroider. She began sewing her own clothes by trial and error at age 13 with the help of her mother, Marie. Occasionally she purchased patterns through the Dakota Farmer magazine. After Leona's children were grown, she began sewing for clients. She made 53 wedding gowns, including her own in 1944."

For more information about donating family histories and photographs, or how to financially support the GRHC, contact Jeremy Kopp, at [jeremy.kopp@ndsu.edu](mailto:jeremy.kopp@ndsu.edu) or 701-231-6596; mail to: NDSU Libraries, Dept. 2080, PO Box 6050, Fargo, N.D. 58108-6050; or go to [www.ndsu.edu/grhc](http://www.ndsu.edu/grhc) or email [michael.miller@ndsu.edu](mailto:michael.miller@ndsu.edu).

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