In the past six years, the captivating story of one of the region’s most distinct ethnic groups has been shared with a national audience, thanks to the successful collaboration between a group dedicated to the heritage of the Germans from Russia and North Dakota’s public television station.

A Soulful Sound: Music of the Germans from Russia premiered in April on Prairie Public Television. This fourth documentary is expected to be broadcast on some 40 public television stations across the country this Christmas season.

The program blends commentary with performances of traditional music. It shares the musical traditions of the thousands of German-speaking people who established settlements in Russia, first along the Volga River in the north, and then along the Black Sea in South Russia and nearby Bessarabia in the 18th and early 19th centuries. They then migrated to North and South America, while maintaining their traditional vocal and instrumental religious music, lullabies and folks songs.

Regional talent performing in the show includes the Jamestown College Concert Choir and James Valley Singers, Jamestown; St. Andrew’s Lutheran Centennial Choir, Zeeland; the Alive Choir, Kulm; Centennial Men’s Choir, Harvey; the University of Mary Concert Choir, Bismarck; area folk singers from Napoleon, and the Young People’s Hutterite Singers, Glyndon, Minnesota. Also performing are Marv Zander of Mandan and Victor Schwahn, Bismarck, and their accordion groups; and soloists Rosalinda Appelhans Kloberdanz, Fargo; John Gross, Napoleon; Tony Wangler, Kintyre; Robert Erbele, Lehr; Ron Volk, Harvey; and Maria Appelhans, Fort Collins, Colorado.

The other three documentaries are:

- The Germans from Russia: Children of the Steppe, Children of the Prairie shares the story of the Germans from Rus-
sia as agricultural pioneers on several continents.

*Schmeckfest: Food Traditions of the Germans from Russia* tells of the tasteful culture of the German-Russians. It and two earlier food shows, *Recipes from Grandma’s Kitchen, Volumes I and II*, have been combined into one new DVD that is now available. Called *Germans from Russia Food Pantry*, the DVD also offers bonus footage of chefs at work, and complete recipes for some of the meals.

*Prairie Crosses, Prairie Voices: Iron Crosses of the Great Plains* tells of the iron art form used for making cemetery crosses that was brought overseas.

Each of these documentaries has received a national Telly Award, as well as other national recognition. *Children of the Steppe, Children of the Prairie and Prairie Crosses* each received Regional Emmy nominations and Aurora Awards, and *Children of the Steppe, Children of the Prairie* also was the only American documentary to receive the International Award at Poland’s Ethnic Film Festival in 1999.

The driving forces behind these programs are Michael Miller, the bibliographer of the Germans From Russia Heritage Collection (GRHC), housed at the North Dakota State University (NDSU) Library, and Bob Dambach, director of television and a producer at Prairie Public Broadcasting. Their efforts have been supported, financially and otherwise, by many other individuals, organizations and foundations, including the Germans from Russia Cultural Preservation Foundation.

Their collaboration began a decade ago when Miller asked Dambach and Public Broadcasting cameraman Dave Geck if they would join the first GRHC-sponsored tour to Odessa and the Ukraine. They did, and also went on subsequent tours. “We shot a lot of film and weren’t sure what would come out of it,” recalls Dambach. “The idea for a historical documentary eventually evolved.”

The first documentary was a financial challenge to launch. “It took three years to raise the money, and a majority of it came from Michael and me personally contacting individuals for $1,000 donations. That’s how we raised the first $96,000, and the larger contributions from foundations and businesses then followed.”

The first documentary was a critical and financial success. It was broadcast on public television stations throughout North America, reaching 80 percent of the U.S. market. A videotape of the show has sold 12,000 copies, far exceeding the 600 copies that are usually sold for other state projects, and the 2,000 copies that can be expected to be sold in an average national release.

Because the food segment of the first program was so popular, doing a second documentary on food seemed natural, Miller says. The same is true for the interest in the prairie crosses, which spawned the third program. He says *Soulful Sounds* provided production challenges because it was done on location at so many places, and with a “cast of hundreds.”

Both men concur that future programs are likely to be produced, although none are yet scheduled. “Prairie Public Broadcasting will work with any group that has a good idea for a documentary, but these programs have been so successful because of Michael’s support, persistence and help,” Dambach says. “He overcame a tremendous amount of obstacles to get these produced. At the time we did the first one, I could not have envisioned that we would do this many. Now, nothing would surprise me at what else we do.”

Miller, a native of Strasburg who grew up speaking both English and German, has devoted much of his professional

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**Victor Schwahn plays the accordion for newlyweds Judy Wald Herauf and Alan Bullinger, on the porch of Rocky and Cheryl Hulm Eberle’s home in Hague.**

**The 2002 Journey to the Homeland Tour group stands by the Glückstal Memorial at the village of Glinoye, Moldova. Miller is at the far right.**

**Tours still going strong after 10 years**

For 10 years, the GRHC has sponsored Journey to the Homeland tours, and the 2006 trip from May 23–June 2 will bring participants to Budapest, Hungary; Odessa, Ukraine; the former Bessarabian, Black Sea and Crimean German villages, as well as Stuttgart, Germany and Alsace, France. They are led by Miller, and are limited to about 20 people.

The initial tour took more than 90 people to Odessa and the Ukraine, and subsequent tours have also been centered in the Southern Ukraine and Crimea.

“Many older parents have taken their children and grandchildren on these tours,” says Miller. “It’s been a real eye-opener for the young people. They have become much more appreciative of living in America.”
career to the preservation and documentation of the heritage of the German-Russian community in North America. He has headed the GRHC since it began in 1978. In addition to the documentaries, it has drawn attention across North Dakota, the nation, and overseas to the Germans from Russia through publishing books and music, facilitating online discussion groups and a website, and sponsoring overseas tours.

In addition to the Dakotas, Miller says other locations with heavy populations of Germans from Russia include central California, especially the Lodi area, where many people from the region settled during the Depression. Northern Idaho, Washington State and Oregon are key areas as well, where families and individuals emigrated for work during World War II. He says many German-Russians in these areas and across the country have linked into the GRHC network through its website. “The services we offer are much more academic than others in the country,” Miller says.

The GRHC has developed partnerships with other organizations promoting the history of the Germans from Russia, including the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia in Lincoln, Nebraska, the Germans from Russia Heritage Society in Bismarck, which primarily provides genealogical resources, and the State Historical Society of North Dakota.

“There also come to us wanting to know what to do with their historical materials. We take a lot of it, and work with the State Historical Society of North Dakota in preserving culturally treasured possessions,” says Miller.

Letters are often a meaningful source of sharing this history, since Dakota homesteaders often wrote back and forth overseas with their family in the homeland. GRHC has published books of these letters and other stories through partnering with families and authors. “They’re coming to us because there’s nowhere else to go to help get these published,” says Miller. “If we don’t, certainly no one else will. Other Germans from Russia organizations have more focus on genealogies and lineage, so we provide different information and work together.”

One of the books published this year is Graf-Buck Family Heritage, Family Photographs and Memories of Streeter, North Dakota. In it, letters, photos, recipes, birth and marriage certificates are printed. The letters are written to North Dakota from German-Russian homeland areas then under the Soviet Union and tell of family members, faith, weather, work and the effects of Communist rule.

A new endeavor is the Dakota Memories Oral History Project that is collecting interviews throughout the region. Miller also expects GRHC to launch an online college course offered through NDSU on the history of Germans from Russia.