

Hutmacher complex homestead with a history

No, it's not a dollhouse, although a glass-covered cutout on one side of the house reveals tiny furniture inside. It's a scale model of an actual farmstead built between 1928 and 1930 south of Killdeer, near the old ghost town of Fayette. The model is on display at the Dunn County Museum in Dunn Center.

The original home, built by Frank Hutmacher and his brothers, is an example of the ethnic architecture of the Germans from Russians who settled the Great Plains.

Unlike the usual sod homes of their fellow pioneers, the Hutmacher brothers used sandstone slabs, mortared with a mix of straw and clay. Stone for the walls and timber and branches for the rafters were gleaned from the surrounding hills and coulees.

The site is unique because the house and all five outbuildings are believed to be the largest complex of sandstone buildings still standing in the Upper Midwest.

Like the immigrants themselves, the home seems to have been transplanted directly from the Russian steppes. And if you listen carefully, the old place has a story to tell...

Taking root

There's a saying, attributed to Alexander Solzhenitsyn, that "the German is like a willow. No matter which way you bend him, he will always take root."

Two centuries ago, Anton Joseph

Hutmacher transplanted his roots from the Rhine-Palatinate region of Germany to the Russian steppes, 1,700 miles to the southeast.

Faced with hard times in Germany, Anton and thousands of his countrymen accepted the invitation of Czar Alexander I of Russia to settle in "New Russia," in what is now Ukraine. The czar's 1804 manifesto offered settlers free land, freedom of religion and exemption from taxation and military service.

The new German emigrants soon established the colony of Sulz, located on the left bank of the Beresan River about 80 miles northeast of the Black Sea port of Odessa.

They came in two waves: The first, arriving in the fall of 1809, "dug their homes out of the earth and made roofs of reeds and wood to survive the terrible winter months." Unprepared for the harsh Russian winters, many succumbed to cold, illness and hunger.

Between 1804 and 1850, about 80,000 Germans had settled in the Black Sea area. In 1812, Anton is listed on the Russian census for Sulz as having a wife, Katharina Weber. Married twice, Anton fathered nine children over the years.

For the next several generations, Hutmachers continued to reside in Russia. But beginning in the 1870s, the Russian government began making sweeping changes affecting the German colonies. Military-service exemption and other privileges were



PHOTO BY TOM ISEHN

Eleanor Hutmacher Urlacher, Dickinson, former occupant of the house, visits the site regularly to share her family stories – and her delicious bars!

revoked, and a gradual Russianization policy banned, among other things, the use of the German language in schools or commerce.

In response, thousands of German colonists emigrated from Russia to America.

In 1911, a century after Anton's arrival in Russia, his great-grandson, Valentine Hutmacher, and his wife, Franziska (Frances) Thomas, transplanted their roots from Russia to western North Dakota. Like his ancestor, Valentine was enticed by the offer of free land, this time via the U.S. Homestead Act. Choosing land in Dunn County, Valentine built a home using construction methods he had learned on the Russian steppes.



Dunn County Historical Society secretary Kathy Trampe points out the vorhausl (forehouse, or entryway) on a scale model of the Hutmacher complex in the Dunn County Museum. The model was made and donated by John Alheiser and Nick and Cecelia Alheiser.

PHOTO BY JO ANN WINISTORFER



PHOTO BY SUZANNE KELLEY

Students and volunteers repair the roof and walls of the old farmsite's crumbling buildings.

In 1928, his son, Frank, newly married, began building an earthen home on 300-plus acres just across the road from his parents. Using the Old World construction methods he learned from his father, Frank, with help from his siblings, gathered materials from the land, using them to craft a cozy home where he and Veronica (Nuss) would eventually raise five children – four daughters and one son.

Completed in 1930, the complex contained six structures – a house, cellar, barn/granary, summer kitchen/butchering shed, poultry barn and stable.

What began as a modest two-room house grew with the family. Over the years, Frank added a kitchen, another bedroom and a *vörhausl*, or entry vestibule. The home served as the Hutmakers' principal residence until 1963. The last occupant, their son, Alex, moved off the farm in 1979 – 10 years after his mother's death. Frank died in 1973.

Restoring history

The old house's story might never have been heard. The empty home and its surrounding buildings gradually fell victim to the wind, weather and time. The walls crumbled; parts of the ceilings caved in as the earth struggled to reclaim it.

Recognizing the site's historical importance, a neighbor, Arnold Burian, bought the acreage to preserve it. He gifted it to the Dunn County Historical Society, which soon found that "it was a larger project than they were prepared to take on," says Suzanne Kelley, president of Preservation North Dakota (PND), a nonprofit organization working to preserve historic places and landscapes in North Dakota.

In 1995, the Hutmacher site, listed on the National Register of Historic Places, was the subject of an architectural field research study directed by Prof. Steve Martens of the North Dakota State University (NDSU) department of architecture, with the help of his students. Also involved were the Dunn County Historical Society and the State Historical Society of North Dakota, which provided grant support, historic photo access and field assistance.

Later, the Burian family deeded the property over to PND. Restora-



PHOTO FROM PND ARCHIVES



PHOTO BY SUZZANNE KELLEY

The old house, before and after partial renovation.

tion efforts began in earnest that year after PND received a \$95,000 grant from Save America's Treasures, a private-public partnership between the National Park Service and the National Trust for Historic Preservation. Each year since, the site has undergone periodic restoration with the help of leaders and volunteers, including North Dakota State University students, Dunn County Museum members and the Burian family.

"State and national support have been phenomenal, and so has the cadre of volunteers who come out to work for the fun of it," Kelley says.

Again this summer, Prof. Tom Isern, history professor at NDSU, will lead a hands-on field school at the site called Prairie Earth, Prairie Homes. An advisory council member of PND, Isern will be assisted by his teaching partner, PND president Kelley, who just happens to be his wife! The field school, held annually, earns credits for students and teachers, and gives interested folks the opportunity to learn about northern plains earthen structures.

A bonus for students who sign up is the chance to visit with Eleanor Hutmacher Urlacher, who grew up in the house. "Eleanor and her husband, John, have attended almost all of our student workdays," Kelley says. "She bakes a batch of bars

to share and tells us stories of her childhood days on the farm."

How long will it take to complete the restoration? "This is an ongoing restoration, but then, that's how (the homestead) was designed," says Kelley, referring to the many repairs necessary when the high-maintenance buildings were still in use.

And what about the site's future? "Hopefully it can be used as a tourist location and a learning lab for students," Kelley says.

There are lots of expenses involved with upkeep of the site – electricity, insurance, mowing, hauling in scoria and flax – the list goes on. "Our wish list includes a large variety of tools, and the donation of a Bobcat would be much appreciated!" she says.

Kelley's fund-raising suggestions include organizing a "Friends of Hutmacher" for ongoing care of the site.

"Maybe such an arrangement could include a Hutmacher Days celebration," she says. Those taking part could have the chance to get "down and dirty," preparing and spreading "prairie plaster" – the manure and mud mix used to seal the walls of the old house. ■

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