

THE INHERITANCE

The Epic Journeys of the German Russian Pioneers

This segment of "The Inheritance" concludes the German Russian odyssey of the Meidinger clan, a journey which covered many nations and spanned more than two centuries. The destination was the fertile plains of North Dakota, and the founding of a new civilization.



Part III

By Alma Baumann

MOST OF THE FIRST SETTLERS FROM RUSSIA WHO CAME TO THE DAKOTAS had houses which were all quite similar, the structures usually consisting of only one or two rooms. The houses were frequently long

and narrow, made of sod and plastered on the inside and outside by a native clay.

There usually was an entry in the middle of the house. Fuel was kept in it for cooking and heating. The ovens were fireplaces made with stone and sod bricks. Hay and cow chips were burned in them. They also made and used Russian lignite, or *mischt*, a mixture of manure, hay, and straw.

That was a lot of work, but it was cheap.

For a long time most houses had dirt floors, until the settlers could afford better conditions. Nevertheless, the German Russians are said to have had as clean and refined homes as anyone.

Another trait was that they loved their families better than anything in the world. Training and discipline began early in life.

Hospitality was an additional quality common among the German Russians. It was vital for survival on the the lonely prairie. Our

forefathers always had room for others. They helped people wherever they could.

The clothing of our pioneer ancestors was distinctly Russian in character. They might have looked like Russians, but in language, tradition, and customs they were Germans who had once lived in Russia.

The women wore their hair parted in the center, and then combed back and tightly braided into two braids. The braids were wound back and forth at the back of the head and tied with a piece of rag or string.

On their heads the women wore small, square-fringed shawls, called *tuchlas*. In winter, the *tuchlas* were made of dark wool with gay borders. In the summer, they were white with an edge of lace for good wear.

The women wore heavy woolen skirts in winter, and over the tight-fitted waist, they wore blouses or jackets. Their footwear consisted of heavy shoes, probably made of calfskin, and home-knit woolen stockings.

Instead of coats they wore heavy woolen shawls, called *gross tugh*. Those were in dark woolen colors with border design. The shawls were folded in a triangle and were wrapped around their shoulders and bodies. Most of the shawls were brought from Russia, but some of the women had to weave their own.

Little girls dressed much like their mothers.

Boys wore long pants and coats which were home made. In winter, the men wore high, round, black fur caps. Their coats were heavy *peltz* made from black curly fur on the inside and the tanned yellow hide on the outside. The coats were fitted at the waist and flared somewhat at the bottom. Brightly colored scarves, tied around the waist, were added.

Many such coats were brought from Russia.

The men also wore heavy cowhide boots and long woolen socks.

In summer, all of their clothing was much lighter. They didn't wear stockings, and many of their

**The clothing of the
Dakota pioneers was
similar to what they wore
in the Old Country, in
Russia.**



Wedding of Jacob A. Meidinger and Fredricka Neher in Ashley in 1904. This photograph, however, was taken in 1905.

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shoes were more like sandals.

The main food was bread and segora, a chicory drink. They made their own sauerkraut, pickles, and other staples. Salt pork was popular.

At first, when money was scarce, they picked up buffalo bones. In past years, many buffalo roamed the Dakota lands. The bones were hauled to Ellendale and sold for \$8 to \$10 per load. They were then shipped east, from which the base for glue was made.

For the money received, the pioneers bought flour and other necessary items. In all their simplicity, they must have had the right diets as they built up a hardy people.

All of the Meidinger clan were church-loving people. The church had been the center of their lives in Russia. The Lord's day was a holy day. This reverence for God was carried to the Dakota prairies. Each Sunday the Meidingers and their neighbors gathered for worship at Adam Jr.'s home, since his house was the largest. Adam Jr. was sort of their spiritual leader.

As the number of worshippers increased, the need for a church building became more acute. All of them took an active part in 1880 to build and organize the Berlin Baptist Church. It was located near their homes in Antelope Valley. (The church has since been rebuilt three times because its parishioners outgrew the building. The third church is still being used.)

The German Russians, with almost two centuries of wandering, didn't look for gold, but a place where they could have a permanent homestead and land for their sons. They were anxious to teach their children the values of honesty, self-reliance, and thrift. They believed in earning a living by the "sweat of your brow."

In Russia, they lived in dorfs near family and friends. But in America each family lived several miles apart.

That often brought about much loneliness, especially in winter when it was cold and snow drifts frequently covered the pioneers'



This was how the German Russian pioneers used to make sausage. First, the man (at left) blows air into the sausage casing. The second man ties it; the third holds the headcheese; and the fourth man measures the sausage around the head. (People used to say, "The sausage was ear to ear.")
 The men in the photo are (left to right) Andrew Buyer, John Wolf, Jacob Buyer, and Adam Buyer. In about 1909, John Wolf moved from Antelope Valley to Carbon, Alberta, Canada. The Buyers moved to Carbon in 1918. This photo was taken at the Buyer farmhome near Carbon in about 1925.

low buildings so that many times one could only see the chimney!
 Winter did have its advantages, however, as that was the time for family togetherness. The parents were the teachers. They taught the children how to card wool, knit, weave, and do other important skills.

For a few years, their lifestyle was much like it had been in Russia. The early German Russians tended to live apart from other Americans. Finally, with public schools opening up in rural areas, the break in tradition slowly came to the German Russian pioneers. They began to be Americanized, leaving some of the old customs and taking on the new.

The Meidinger family played an active part in community and county affairs. In 1902, Adam Jr. and his son, Jacob A., purchased the Hellwig Store in Ashley, North

Dakota, from John Hellwig. They operated it for four years, including the post office for some of those years.

It was then sold to Adam Jr.'s brother, Gottlieb, who also served as postmaster while conducting his store business. Adam moved to Ashley in 1906 where he and his son bought the Dockter Mercantile business, which they operated under the name of "Meidinger & Son" until 1920.

The brothers Gottlieb and Adam Jr. were elected as county commissioners from their district. From 1903 to 1907, Adam Jr. was elected as a representative to the North Dakota Legislature. Brother John was the sheriff of McIntosh County for eight years, and from 1910 to 1918 he served as a county commissioner.

With faith in God and the hope for better things, more acres were cleared of brush and rocks, and



Henry and Helen Kautz unload hay the hard way—by hand. The photo of the Kautzes was taken in 1927.

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then seeded to more grain. The Meidingers raised more cattle and were able to sell cream and eggs.

Finally, the old sod buildings were replaced with frame buildings. The families were growing up, and again the older folks began to move. They either left their property to their sons or sold to someone else. Each of the sons of Adam Meidinger Sr. had large families. Christoph had seven children; Adam Jr., eight; Jacob, nine; Gottlieb, 15; and John, 11.

Christoph moved to Medina, North Dakota, where he bought land and later retired and moved into town. He died at Gackle, North Dakota, while living with his daughter. He was buried at Medina.

Adam Jr. moved to Ashley in 1906; in 1919, he moved to Walla Walla, Washington. He died in 1934 at his son Andrew's home in Ashley where he had gone the day before because he wanted to die in Ashley. He was buried in the Ashley cemetery.

Jacob moved to Walla Walla in 1919, dying in 1934.

Gottlieb moved to Montana in 1910 and died in 1936.

John moved to Fredonia, North Dakota; he died in 1921 and was buried at the Berlin Baptist Cemetery.

The daughter, Christina Rott, was also buried at the Berlin Baptist Cemetery.

Hardships and discouragements faced those early settlers. They had to fight prairie fires, droughts, and hot winds. Then, in the winters, they endured the cold and terrible snowstorms with poor protection and shabby buildings. They lived through depressions, poor prices, and hard times.

Those terrible times and experiences are long gone. They are a part of the past.

Our forefathers have entered a far better land.

Long ago, they came to the Dakotas and took possession of it. They left it as a good heritage to us. We can truly say of our people: "They have kept the faith; they have fought the good fight; and they have finished the race."

And with that faith they have left their descendants a priceless inheritance. □