PRAIRIE PHILOSOPHER SEZ...

Life in Southern Russia
(As Hearsay Has It)

By L.E. Buchholz

I suppose if I were to tell you the whole story about our people in the process of leaving Russia, I would have to take you back 85 to 100 years. Three to four of my grandparents’ former generations lived in Trudina, Bessarabia, South Russia, before coming to America to become farmers here in North Dakota.

While I know that the streets in the dorf that they then lived in were very wide, I do not know if an acre there was the same amount of land that it is here, or if a mile there was the same length that it is here. But I will say that there were no farmers or ranchers then, as everyone lived in town yards, governed by laws, rules, and the word of the state, which was final.

They did not leave Russia because the climate was too forbidding, or the land unproductive, or the terrain unsightly. Actually, their location was a garden spot, a dream land.

My grandparents had a huge producing walnut tree in their yard in Trudina, and storks came there to build nests on roof tops and rear their broods. Men worked in the vineyards, tending grapes, and then harvesting them by half box wagon loads. The grapes were hauled to presses where the juice was poured into wooden 50 gallon barrels.

People also left countries other than Russia for the shores of America to sink roots here. I will name a few: Germany, Finland, China, Sweden, Denmark, Poland, Norway, and I suppose about every nation, race, and tongue. It also happened that some only stopped over here and went on up into Canada. It is rather difficult to pinpoint on these matters and reasons.

Grandfather Buchholz had a 40-mile horse-drawn freight and passenger route, driving in all manner of weather and road conditions, five days per week. A mile in Russia was called a “worst” and a dollar a ruble. The village of Trudina held an interesting market day each week where just about anything could be bought or sold. Jewish people had a slaughter house there, killing cattle, sheep, goats, and poultry for the kosher trade. The story goes that, in

the event of a reject animal or fowl, said reject was then offered to the Gentile trade!

Livestock and poultry were kept in the people’s dorf yards overnight. In the morning, herdmen herded the stock out onto the steppes, to return them in the evening. Cattle herders usually had a strong handle with three or four iron rings bolted on one end. He would rattle it to inform cows of their limits. If they chose not to heed the rattling warning, he would throw the handle at them, hitting the cows so that it pained them until they learned what the sound of the rattle meant. Forage was said to be the best on the open terrain.

Before the sheep were shorn in the spring, they were taken to the bough and washed. Only dry, clean wool was used to spin yarn. The yarn was used in the hand-weaving of socks, caps, mittens, and scarfs. Before marriage, young women were supposed to have learned the handmaking of such items, and men were likewise expected to be able to plow and dress out a hog without assistance.

Geese were held in high regard, due to their meat, feathers (down), as well as for the reputed healing and curing values of geese land. The parent geese and their young were taken out to the lake and stream regions for the summer. There they lived in near wild conditions until late in fall when they were herded home.

The geese as a family never intermixed with other geese, and so each owner knew his flock easily. A windstill day was selected to lure the geese ashore, and then to begin to quietly herd them home. The geese were easily alarmed. If headed into the wind, they would almost certainly take to flight. And so the watchwords were always "cool" and "calmness," until they were safely home and yarded for the autumn slaughter.

Some of the landlords then and there had high egos. They were sometimes referred to as strutting cocks of the walks, wearing cracking sole shoes, double vest pocket chains, and keeping dangerous guard dogs. Schoolmasters ruled with iron hands. Men of the cloth demanded and received high respect; the clergy was a high office. But all of that often created ill will, and all too often, low regard.

Those were some of the things that people wanted to get away from in Russia.