

An Unforgettable Man

By Florence Newsom

As my dog chased a deer out of the frozen, snow-covered garden—a few yards from my house—I thought of how Russian Mike once caught a deer in a gopher trap! Some day maybe I would have to do the same, especially since hunters around here seem to have little luck in getting them by the conventional bang-bang method.

It was during the 30s. Times were hard. And the snow was deep that winter. To make matters worse, deer would often come and eat the haystacks—and this hay was needed for the few head of stock the farmers had been able to keep that winter.

Russian Mike was trying "to stay off relief," as he called it, and so sometimes he resorted to desperate means to stay alive. Some people said Russian Mike even shared the warmth of a big, old, white sow and his old white horse, all huddling together in order to keep warm in the feeble shack he had "constructed" out of scrap lumber, tin and flaxstraw roof.

It was under those rather forlorn

conditions that Russian Mike knew a certain big buck was coming every night to his small stack of hay. Like the other farmers, Mike needed that hay. Before going to sleep one night, he put a gopher trap on a pole with a wisp of hay as bait. This he hung high enough so the deer had to reach up. Before long, Russian Mike heard a frantic baa-a of the deer. As he later told it in his broken English: "Mike go out with butcher knife. Deer have tongue caught in trap. Mike cut throat. Have much meat for winter." And that's what Mike had feasted on for Christmas that year—venison.

Russian Mike was a character! When he had come from Russia and how he had landed in central North Dakota remained a mystery. He possessed little education, just an ox-like body and a simple mind. He had served in the Russian army and, when released, immigrated to America.

He had a small farm but worked it



Sketch by Barbara B. Overlie

well. Neighbors occasionally helped him, but Mike and his horse did most of the work. With his cow, a hog, and some chickens, he managed O.K. If another horse was ever needed to get a certain project completed, Mike would simply hitch himself up along with his single horse—and down the field they'd go, a strange team, man and beast together. "Too hard for Dobbie alone," he muttered in a gruff explanation.

Mike drove a Model T, but his car looked mighty different than all of his neighbors. He had stripped it down. Way down! The car had no hood, no

body. To drive it, he sat on the gas tank! Rain or shine!

One day we were going to the county fair. As usual, we had a flat tire. Suddenly, Mike came barreling down the road, a strange car and a strange sight himself with his cap on backwards, dirty white shirt, and striped overalls and rubbers. (He was so flat-footed he couldn't wear common shoes.) The unpredictable Mike waved exuberantly — didn't stop—and went merrily on his way in a cloud of dust to have a good time at the fair.

Yes, Russian Mike—with his unpronounceable surname—was a picturesque fellow, one of the most colorful persons I've ever known in the Dakotas.