Searching for One’s Roots

It is amazing what one finds when tracing his ancestors! And so often the research becomes much more voluminous than originally planned. But that’s what makes it all fun, interesting, agree Luella Ritz and Carol Halverson. They compiled a family history of their ancestors, Christoff and Barbara Just, who emigrated to the U.S. from South Russia, probably in 1888.

The research turned out to be so interesting that the two women eventually published their material, and, this summer, 40 descendants from 20 states gathered in Wishek, North Dakota for a grand family reunion.

For the two amateur genealogists, the search into their past turned out to be quite an adventure. Little did they know at the outset that their present-day family involved more than 1,000 people covering all walks of life: teachers, politicians, pastors, factory employees, musicians, and others.

Here are some of the interesting items the researchers discovered about the Just family:

- About the same time German were migrating to Pennsylvania, Virginia and other colonies in North America (from 1763 to 1800), thousands boarded eastward, to the virgin lands along the Black Sea which the Russians had recently wrested from the Turks. The earliest ancestors the researchers could trace were Michael Just, who emigrated to South Russia from Poland, and Jacob Frey, who left Wurtemberg in Germany. Their migration to Russia was probably between 1804 and 1825.

- According to a report made about Kassel, one of the colonies where the Jests settled, the community raised winter and spring wheat, rye, barley, flax, potatoes, and melon. The soil was productive, but they had to fight against livestock epidemics, total crop failures, and cholera and smallpox.

- Their houses in the Black Sea region were generally one-story, constructed of lime-cork, sandstone or brick. It was successful on the outside, whitewashed on the inside.

- The German immigrants gradually acquired great economic power in the Black Sea region. Because of their success, they often believed themselves superior to their Russian neighbors. The Germans in the Black Sea region eventually owned more than 3 million acres of land.

In a Russian census in 1897, it was discovered that 74% of Russian citizens were illiterate. The majority of Germans there, however, could read and write.

- Probably because of the Germans’ land-holdings and educational superiority, Russian authorities revoked its 100-year-old policy granting privileges to German communities. The Russian language became compulsory in the schools, men were drafted into the Russian army, and German colonies received Russian names. This resulted in a mass exodus to other countries, mainly the U.S., Canada, Brazil and Argentina.

- Christoff Just was born at Kassel, South Russia on May 19, 1800. He married Barbara Frey, also of Kassel, in 1825, when Christoff was 35 years old. In 1854, his wife migrated to the U.S. Two of their sons, Christoff C. and George, had moved here earlier, in 1856. Their other children had migrated to the U.S. in 1894. For all people who intended to homestead in the Dakota Territory, it was necessary to appear before a judge to declare one’s intention of becoming a U.S. citizen. Christoff Just never homesteaded, probably because of his age, but he became a U.S. citizen anyway. On April 22, 1903, Christoff Just, 84, appeared before W.L. Lauder, district court judge of the 4th Judicial District, McIntosh County, North Dakota, and took the oath of citizenship. His character witnesses were Christ Becker and Gottfried A. Beitz.

- The homesteaders often had many children. George Just was the father of 23 children, nine from his first wife, Christina, and 14 from his second wife, Mary. They farmed near rural Zeeland. George was one of the founders of a small rural church, St. Andrew’s Lutheran Church, built in 1897 and which is still standing. They raised a total of 385, and each member donated 10 days of labor. The church was built of sandstone and clay.

- Illness and disease could often decimate a family within a short time. Karl Just, for example, farmed near Zeeland, North Dakota. In February 1932, he died because of complications arising from influenza and heart problems. One week later, his three daughters died from diphtheria.