

# BACKGROUNDS

## Searching for One's Roots

It is amazing what one finds when tracing his ancestry. And so often the research becomes much more voluminous than originally planned. But that's what makes it all fun—and interesting, agree Lorin Bilz and Carol Halverson. They compiled a history of their ancestors, Christof and Barbara Just, who emigrated to the U.S. from South Russia, probably in 1896.

The research turned out to be so interesting that the two women eventually published their material, and, this summer, 406 descendants from 30 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 Germans were migrating to Pennsylvania, Virginia and other colonies in North America (from 1821 to 1891), thousands headed 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 Wuerttemberg in Germany. This migration to Russia was probably between 1804 and 1825.

■ According to a report made about Kassel, one of the colonies where the Justs settled, the community raised winter and spring wheat, rye, barley, maize, potatoes, and melons. The soil was productive, but they had their problems—locusts, livestock epidemics, local crop failures, and cholera and smallpox epidemics.

Their houses in the Black Sea region were generally one-story, constructed of limestone, sandstone or brick. It was stuccoed on the outside, whitewashed in 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 11 million acres of land.

In a Russian census in 1897, it was discovered that 73% of Russian citizens were illiterate. The majority of Germans there, however, could read and write.

Probably because of the Germans' landings and great educational superiority, the Russian government reversed its 100-year-old policy granting privileges to German colonists. The Russian language became compulsory in the schools, men were inducted 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.



Old family photographs were collected from various relatives, and then displayed.



Checking information.

■ Christof Just was born at Kassel, South Russia on May 19, 1838. He married Barbara Frey, also of Kassel. In 1896, when Christof was 57 years old, he and his wife migrated to the U.S. Two of their sons, Christof C. and George had moved here earlier, in 1894. 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. Christof Just never homesteaded, probably because of his age, but he became a U.S. citizen anyway. On April 25, 1903, Christof Just, 65, 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 Gottfrey A.

Bilz.

■ 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 Zealand. George was one of the founders of a small rural church, St. Andrew's Lutheran Church, built in 1902 and which is still standing. They raised a total of \$385, and each member donated 15 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 Zealand, North Dakota. In February 1923, he died because of complications arising from influenza and heart problems. One week later, his three daughters died from diphtheria. □