Iron Crosses by Chris Hansen

I’ve read this book, Iron Spirits, a couple of times. It is interesting and informative. One of my first conclusions was that this was the original scrap iron art. The book states that old wagon rims and whatever the blacksmith had on hand was used to make the crosses. You need to remember that in those days nothing went to waste. The story of the crosses goes much deeper than that. It was a tradition brought to this country from Russia. They were a symbol of their faith in God. Jesus was there with them in those crosses and reminded them he died on one for them. It was part of their lives and connected them to their ancestors who lay beneath the crosses. The crosses reminded them of their German Russian Catholic heritage.

Each cross was a work of art and every blacksmith had his own style. Once you knew the style, you could tell who made a particular cross. When he had an order for one, he would sit down and sketch his idea on a piece of paper. Often they were built between other jobs that needed to be done right away. Sometimes he would make them when repair work was slow and maybe have a couple on hand. One blacksmith they told about made a cross for his own grave. All this work was done by hand: cutting, welding, riveting and shaping, without the benefit of all the equipment we have now. One can’t help but admire the skill and ingenuity that went into the making of them. Some have a casting with a name or date. The casting was done in a packed sand form using molten lead or babbit, then hand sanded and polished. Maria Kreiser, in her book, Though My Soul More Bent: Memoir of a Soviet German, noted that during the famine of 1933, many of these name plates were pilfered and used to make shot to hunt with.

Another interesting thing I learned was that at the burial everyone stayed at the site until the grave was filled in. It didn’t make any difference if it was cold or hot - you stayed. I visited the other day with a Catholic friend and he remembered doing that, so it wasn’t that long ago. Gradually stone markers came into vogue, and the iron crosses are no longer used. It’s sad to see a tradition pass.

If you haven’t seen any of these, I suggest a Sunday afternoon drive to look for them. Emmons, Logan and McIntosh counties are a good place to start. There are two on display at the Logan County Museum. While there you can look up locations of cemeteries in Logan and McIntosh counties. If you want a longer drive and like to see other areas, check out Oliver, Morton and Sioux counties. Be prepared to drive on gravel roads. I do wish that the book would have given the location of some these cemeteries.

This book is available in our church library and the school library. Take a copy home and read it in the evenings, or read it at the church. It is an easy read and not very long with lots of pictures. Much better than TV.

The photos at left and below are from the web-site: https://www.flickr.com/photos/ndsu-libraries-grhc/sets/72157645347719484/ Photos taken at St. Mary’s Cemetery near Hague.
More Iron Crosses by Connie Olson and Brother Placid Gross

At left: It is possible one set of parents grieved two little boys who died days apart. Cross on left notes, “Here rests in peace Nick Scharosch Born 5 May 1920. Died 26 April 1921.” Cross on the right reads, “Here rests in peace Frank Scharosch Born 5 June 1915. Died 1 May 1921.” There is an angel face with wings below Jesus’ feet and at the base are angels with one in prayer, the other on one knee.

Editor’s Note: These crosses are side-by-side and were in one photo. I’ve cropped them closer together to show detail.

Above Left: “Here rests in God Johann Harle born 13 April 1887 died 6 February 1914 27 years old.”

Above Right States “Here rests in God Valentine Kuntz born 22 August 1855 died 2 November 1916 Last line is “Rest Gently.”

Below Left: This cross was in another section of the huge, but almost empty cemetery. It’s similar to another pictured, but slightly different. There are more iron crosses in the cemetery.

Below Right: Here rests Paulina Kuntz, maiden name Geiger Born 1 March 1888 Died 28 May 1913

Considering this is over 100 years old, the letters are still very legible.

This winter, Connie Olson stopped by St. Stephen’s rural cemetery between Richardton and Mott to take photographs of some of the beautiful memorial iron crosses there. After comparing to some crosses known to be made by blacksmiths, she found that some iron crosses were mass produced by firms in Bismarck, Chicago, St. Louis and Cincinnati.

Brother Placid Gross of Assumption Abbey in Richardton was contacted for more information. He confirmed that the cross at left was done by a blacksmith using scrap iron. The other crosses pictured were made with cast iron which was poured into molds. He added that St. Philip’s Cemetery in Napoleon has some homemade crosses, but maybe only two. They are toward the east, not too far from the large crucifix. He indicated St. Anthony has a few, but St. Boniface has more. The cemetery west of Hague has many hand-crafted crosses.