

## A Salute to Leona Wasinger Pfeifer

By Sam Brungardt

I was asked to write something about Leona Wasinger Pfeifer, who was one of my high school teachers in the early 1960s. Leona, one of Ellis County, Kansas', last old-time folklorists, died at the age of 89 on Jan. 28, 2019 at a nursing home in Fort Smith, Ark.

About my background: I was born in 1945 in Hays, the county seat of Ellis County, Kansas, to first-generation Volga German parents. I never considered my background anything special, because almost everyone I knew was Catholic Volga German. We enjoyed most of the foods that had nourished our forebears in Russia; called watermelon "*Arbus*," feasted and danced the "*Hochzeit*" at all-day weddings, wished our parents, grandparents and godparents Happy New Year in German; and used archaic dialect German expressions, like "Gella?" when we wondered whether someone agreed with us. When someone died, we attended the wake a day or two before the funeral, sometimes in the home of the deceased, reciting the rosary every hour and visiting with family and friends in between.



From 1874 up to 1921, many Germans from both sides of the Volga River emigrated to Kansas. Those who were Catholic settled in Topeka or established colonies farther west, in Rush and Ellis counties. Volga Germans who were Lutheran or Reformed did likewise in neighboring counties. The Catholic Volga German colonies were given the same names they had in Russia: Liebenthal, Katharinenstadt (now Catherine), Herzog (now Victoria), Schoenchen, Pfeifer, Munjor. But living in colonies as they had in Russia did not work well in Kansas, where homesteaders had to live on their claims and farms were often miles from the villages where the churches were. So, the parishes established daughter parishes, such as Severin and Emmeram, so the Volga Germans living nearby could more easily practice their faith.

I attended an elementary school at Emmeram, near our farm, that had two classrooms, four grades in each. No indoor plumbing, just two "*Nushnik*" and a cistern from which we drew water to fill the Red Wing water cooler. While I studied at Emmeram, enrollment probably never exceeded 25. Almost all the students were Catholic Volga German. And the small enrollment

meant that the older students looked out for the younger ones and sometimes sought their participation if we were to put together a decent game of softball or Fox and Geese. We spoke some German during recess; in fact, that was the only language some of my schoolmates spoke at home. The teacher's word was law. If we got in trouble at school, the punishment there was nothing compared to what awaited us at home.

I credit Leona Wasinger Pfeifer, with helping me to put my Volga German background in perspective. Although we did not live in the district, my parents allowed me to enroll at Hays High School, which offered courses in foreign languages, art and vocational agriculture. Taking the courses that interested me most in my early years, I found myself having to take German and world history as a senior. There were some younger students in these classes. What some of those "town kids" had been taught about behaving and showing their teacher respect, was not what I'd learned and definitely not what Mrs. Pfeifer demanded. Leona was a short lady, with fairly thick eyeglasses, not a hair out of place, every button buttoned. But when she walked – no, almost marched – down the hall, it was clear she was a woman on a mission. Any messing or clowning around in class, and the miscreant was quickly escorted to the principal's office.

I learned a lot from Mrs. Pfeifer – she demanded it – and she helped me understand my Volga German background, explaining in world history how Germans came to live in self-governed colonies along the Volga River and why they emigrated to the New World when the czarist government decided to Russify them. In German class, we discussed how our local Volga German dialects came to have Russian words, and the ways they differed from modern-day German.

Years later, I attended a class reunion where our disk jockey played a recording of a *Hochzeit*. I asked Leona to dance and we tore up the floor, ending out of breath and surprised by the rousing applause from my classmates and her former students.

Still later, I remember Leona swapping seeds of a heritage Striped Cushaw squash she still raised for a generous amount of mom's garden bounty.

As I went away to university and later into the Navy and then my career, I seldom had occasion to interact with Leona. So, I asked my friend Kevin Rupp, president of the Sunflower Chapter of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia (AHSGR) in Ellis County, to tell me more about her dedication to preserving Volga German culture.

He said, "She was one of those people, like Lawrence Weigel, Francis Schippers, Rupert Pfannenstiel and others, who were involved in many activities in Ellis County to preserve the heritage of the Volga Germans."

Leona, the second child of Fidelis and Theckla Wasinger, was born in 1929. She was related to Anton Wasinger, one of the five scouts who came to Kansas in 1874, looking for land where Catholic Volga Germans could establish colonies.

Leona graduated from Schoenchen High School and received her Bachelor and Master degrees from Fort Hays State University. She taught at Hays High School and then was a German Language Professor at Fort Hays State for many years. After she retired from the university, she taught German for several years at Thomas More Prep-Marian High School in Hays.

In 1960, she married Edward W. Pfeifer at St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church in Munjor. He preceded her in death in 2012. Leona enjoyed genealogy, gardening, bowling, spending time with her grandchildren, and traveling.

Kevin said Leona was involved in many projects that highlighted local heritage. In the 1960s, she helped organize the annual Hays Oktoberfest. She was a charter member of the AHSGR Sunflower Chapter, helping to start it with Irene Rupp Leiker and a few others in 1979.

Leona was co-director of a 3-hour-long pageant that was presented in Hays in 1976, as one of the events for the 100th anniversary of the arrival of Catholic Volga Germans in Ellis and Rush counties.

She organized the *Hochzeitpielers* in the 1980s, at first to play for her wedding anniversary. Eventually, the band developed into the Ed Pfeifer Band. Its specialty was old-time Volga German music.

Leona was instrumental in organizing the Ellis County Volga German Men's Choir, which sang the old folk songs and hymns brought from the old country at many wedding, anniversary, and funeral Masses. The choir made one recording: "14 Favorites of the Volga German Men's Choir." It eventually disbanded after many members were no longer able to participate because of advanced age.

Leona served on the AHSGR Board of Directors for many years, giving presentations at the annual convention and local Kansas Round-Up. One of her lectures turned into a video, "*Eine Hochzeit in Ellis County, 1881.*" A detailed account of a couple becoming betrothed and getting married with all the customs of the Volga Germans, including the dialect that was used in Ellis County at the time. These customs are preserved for all time, thanks to Leona, who had the wedding skit recorded, still available for sale through AHSGR.

Kevin said Leona continued to help people with their questions about the Volga Germans and translated letters for people who were trying to reconnect with relatives in the old country. She

gave many presentations to the Sunflower Chapter and remained active until moving to Oklahoma to be close to her only child, Carol.

Leona was instrumental in having Hays sculptor Pete Felten make a copy of his statue, "The Immigrant German Family," which sits catercorner from St. Fidelis Basilica in Victoria. She contacted the Al Hertel family and made arrangements to have the copy shipped to Lincoln, Nebraska, and installed at AHSGR headquarters.

Kevin recalled, "For those who didn't know Leona, she was a short woman who could hold her own with anyone. She spoke the old dialect fluently with the accent of our people. Through her, our history will be passed on to the next generation. With her death we lose another person who was a direct link to the many immigrants who came here and shared their personal stories, stories of the old country with all the customs not filtered through another generation, but directly from the source."

Kevin concluded: "As in the words of John F. Kennedy, '...the torch has been passed to a new generatio....' "Let our generation continue to pass down our heritage so those who came before us will never be forgotten -- the history, the folklore, the music, the cooking, the customs of *Unser Leute*."