By Nicole Vorder Vorst

On Sept. 19 and 20, 13 fifth-year NDSU Architecture Students embarked on a journey they may not soon forget.

Their trip included the sites and sounds of historic places such as the Schwab Sod House, Welk Homestead and area churches and cemeteries. The hands-on tour was taken in order for the students to understand the history and way buildings were created when homesteaders first landed in the area.

Architecture students are taught how to produce construction documents in order to accurately communicate to the contractor; however, this experience revolves around vernacular architecture. Vernacular architecture depends on local materials and knowledge of building traditions.

The group, who is in their fifth year of college, was led by Michael M. Miller, Director, Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, NDSU Libraries, and their instructor Heather Fischer, lecturer, Department of Architecture and Landscape Architecture, NDSU.

The intent of visiting these Germans from Russia homesteads is to provide students with the opportunity to create field measured drawings for research and analyze the building methodology of the Germans from Russia,” Fischer said.

The students were divided into groups specializing in photography, measuring, droneing, drawing and interviews.

As they surveyed the buildings and land in awe, not only were they learning about architecture by hands on experience but they were also preserving history.

“The students learned of history, culture, folkways and the building construction of the German-Russians who settled the prairies of south central North Dakota,” Miller said.

The first of a two day trip started northeast of Strasburg at the Schwab Sod House. The house, made of balsa brick (molded earth including clay, straw, manure and water dried in the sun), was measured, drawn and photographed by the students.

Next, the students indulged in a homemade German meal of creamed chicken and strudel at Mitch’s Blue Room in Strasburg.

Most of the group summed up the taste of the food in one word, “delicious.”

“The students didn’t need to travel far to receive their next learning experience just north of Strasburg at the Welk Homestead.”

There, the students were provided with an informative tour by Elaine Wald who has given tours at the site since 1991 when the Welk Homestead opened.

They also learned about the history of the farm and family from Evelyn (Welk) Schwab, who grew up at the Welk Homestead.

“Some of the experiences included a family reunion first hand. Noah Meier, of Las Vegas, Nev., was surprised to see his great-aunt, Evelyn Schwab on the agenda along the tour. Evelyn was just as surprised to see her great-nephew. Evelyn remarked that she would be calling members of her family later on that evening to tell them about their encounter.”

While at the site, the students completed site drawings, interior and exterior measurements of each of the buildings, photographed and compiled droneing footage of the property.

State Historic Society Historical Sites Manager, Robert Hamma, said their drawings will be a welcome site for the State Historic Society.

“We have a floor plan of each Historic Site in North Dakota, except this one,” Hamma said. “This drawing is going to be a great resource for us to have! We really appreciate the work they are doing here.”

The next stop for the group was the Sts. Peter & Paul Catholic Church in Strasburg where John Baumgartner provided an informative historical review of the church.

Next, they visited the old St. Mary’s Catholic Cemetery (Friedhof), west of Hague, which is one of the oldest German-Russian cemeteries.

“I was the Sts. Peter & Paul Catholic Church where Father Leonard Eckroth informed the group of the history of the building.”

Saint John the Baptist Catholic Cemetery, north of Zeeland, is the oldest German-Russian cemetery in North Dakota.

The trip was funded by a generous anonymous private donation. For more information on the history of the Germans from Russia, you can visit the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection at NDSU in Fargo, or go to www.ndsu.edu/gerc.

The students looked through historic pictures of Schwab family members at the Schwab Sod House near Strasburg.

Evelyn Schwab was surprised to see her great-nephew, Noah Meier from Las Vegas, Nev. on the NDSU tour of the Welk Homestead.

Elaine and Anton Wald talked to students about growing up in the area, and their 61 year marriage experiences.

Elaine Wald, who has been giving tours at the Welk Homestead since it opened in 1991, showed the group around the farm.
Joyce (Rath) Scherr shared her knowledge of the Zeeland Arch with the NDSU students. The students also visited the Zeeland City Hall and Sportsman’s Den while in Zeeland.

Father Leonard Eckroth talked to the group about the history of St. Mary’s Catholic Church in Hague.

The group experienced the homemade tastes of German-Russian country at Mitch’s Blue Room, where they ate creamed chicken and strudels.

John Baumgartner provided an informative historical review of the Sts. Peter and Paul Catholic Church in Strasburg.

NDSU students visited the Lehr Tabernacle, which will celebrate its 100th Anniversary in June, 2022.

The students measured the Welk Homestead buildings to create architectural drawings of the structures.

Some of the students learned about the history of the Welk Homestead farm and family from Evelyn (Welk) Schwab, who grew up on the property.

The students will place their drawings into a computer program, to create a digital image of buildings which were surveyed.

NDSU student, Zoe Randazzo, tried out her musical skills with the accordion at the Welk Homestead.