Local historian remembered through his writing

BY KATHY TANDBERG

Mercer County historian Malvin Miller died unexpectedly Sunday, Jan. 4 in his Golden Valley home. He was 70.

Malvin was born April 17, 1938 at Zaporozhe, the son of early Mercer County blacksmith Samuel Miller Sr. and his wife, Louise (Horsch). The family moved to Golden Valley in 1948 and except for a 20-year career with the United States Air Force from late 1956– early 1977, it remained home until his death.

Malvin left behind a multitude of friends who remember him for his dedication to Mercer County history and the strong German from Russian heritage of the area. As a descendant of Germans from Russia early immigrants, this was a history that ran deep in his veins and led him to a quest for more knowledge of it.

It was because of this quest that he created an everlasting legacy that will be remembered for years to come in his life’s work, a history book entitled “Golden Valley, One of America’s Great Little Towns.” The 609-page book, printed in 1999, includes a 90-year history that begins when the town was founded in 1899 to modern day. It includes stories of families, businesses and numerous photos.

In his forward, Malvin said the main reason he spent the years working on the book was because many modern day residents had either forgotten or were unaware of the many businesses and activities that had taken place in the community of Golden Valley.

He once said that many don’t realize what a thriving little berg the town had once been, with a newspaper, three banks, several doctors and dentists, a drug store, department store and even an opera house. He wanted to make sure that this historical information could be found in one place, one book, for future generations.

Malvin’s cousin, Wilbert Horsch, Pick City, spent a great deal of time with Malvin as the two were involved together in the Stenthagler Chapter of the Mercer County from Russians Heritage Society.

“Malvin was dedicated to everything he did. He didn’t know how to say no. It was everybody else first before himself and he enjoyed helping others,” Wilbert said.

Malvin’s cousin, Myron Horsch, Stanton, said he thinks Malvin’s love for history took serious roots when he returned home to Golden Valley in 1977 to take care of his mother.

That love extended to all of Mercer County and was shown in his many volunteer hours for numerous organizations. He served as a board member for the Mercer County Historical Society. His work as a board member included volunteer time at the Mercer County Museum.

Historical society president Stanley Miller said Malvin will be greatly missed not only as a volunteer but as a friend. Malvin was currently working on cataloging the lifetime writings of local historian Larry Joos who donated his writings to the museum upon his own death.

“I enjoyed Mal because he was willing to get involved. He took on tasks with the historical society. He told me one time that when he got involved in things he got all into it and that’s what he did for us. He was a joy to work with and to have on our team,” Stan said.

Friend and fellow historical society board member Hilda Backfish, Beulah, formerly of Golden Valley, said Malvin was a valued member of the community who did many things, including taking care of the St. James Lutheran Church in Golden Valley for where for many years he served as secretary/treasurer.

“He did the bulletins, mowed the grass, shoveled the snow and on Sunday mornings was the first one there to clear the walks, open up and turn up the thermostat.” Hilda said.

Malvin was so dedicated, in fact, that it was the still snowy walks and cold church that led fellow parishioners to his home that Sunday morning in search of their friend. It was then it was discovered, with the help of law enforcement, that he had passed away while sitting in his chair.

Malvin was also very involved with local Chapter of the Germans from Russia Historical Society. Malvin served as treasurer for many years for this chapter that served Mercer County and the surrounding area.

Fellow Germans from Russia member and state representative Vi Schielke, Beulah, said Malvin’s loss will be felt by many. His presence will be greatly noticed as the chapter holds their 39th annual Musikfest in Beulah the first weekend in June.

“We’ve really lost a good friend,” Vi said of the mutual feelings she and her husband, Ervin, share. “He went the extra mile for everybody.”

Vi and Malvin shared not only a connection as close, longtime friends, but also had a genealogical connection through shared ancestors on his mother’s side.

“I think Mercer County lost a very civic minded friend. If there was something he could help you with, he was there. The community of Golden Valley will especially feel his loss. He did so much there,” Vi said.

In Golden Valley, Malvin was involved in the community blood drive, the Golden Valley Community Club, the bookmobile. He was also the Golden Valley board member for the Mercer-Mclean-Oliver Library board in earlier years. In addition he was active in the Aid Association of Lutherans, now known as Thrivent Financial for Lutherans.

“Volunteering became his family,” Vi said.

Malvin’s most recent projects included compiling a lifetime history of the iron cross blacksmith work of his father, Sam, one of the early Mercer County blacksmiths who ran his own shop for many years.

Born in Kronenthal, Crimea, Russia, Sam learned his trade after a four-year apprenticeship under Sam Stern while still in Russia. When he immigrated to America in 1910, he brought his bride of three years, Maria, and his trade.

He began working for another blacksmith in 1911 at Kasmer, north of Beulah. He set up his own shop on his homestead. He continued his work there until Maria’s early death in 1917. He later married Louise and the couple had four children, of which Malvin is the youngest.

Sam operated blacksmith shops in Dodge, Isabel, S.D., and then in 1926 returned to Mercer County where he operated a shop in Zap until it burned down in 1949.

There may be exhibits of Sam’s work throughout the county. But the work that held a place in Malvin’s heart were the most meaningful, the iron crosses that mark the graves of seven family members and one family friend.

The designs of his father’s iron crosses tell the story of heritage for the many Germans from Russia immigrants who have since been laid to rest in prairie cemeteries across the state. There are nine special iron crosses forged by Sam’s own hands in his own design. Each bears a similarity to the others, yet display individuality.

There is one final marker, the 10th iron marker. This one was not created by the old blacksmith but for Sam. It is the iron cross that marks Sam’s grave, made by Robert Greenishields, S.D. His grave was first marked by stone, but Malvin knew that the proper way to honor his father, would be by iron and had the work commissioned later.

Sam lies to rest next to his wife Louise at the St. James Cemetery and there his grave will remain marked forever with the talents of his own trade created by the hands of a blacksmith. Robert Greenishields also made the cross that will one day mark the final resting place in memory of Malvin.

Malvin is survived by one brother, Hugo, of New Mexico, and several cousins. A memorial service for Malvin will be held later this summer.