Project preserves oral histories of Germans from Russia

Growing up on a farm near Leht, N.D., in the 1950s, Adam Gordon Boschee remembers his family curing colds and illnesses with home remedies instead of prescribed medication. “If you had a stomachache,” Adam recalls, his father “would take a thread, just a sewing thread, and an egg. He would tie that around you, and then would take that (egg and string) and throw it into the stove. Then the stomachache went away.” Stunned by his own memory, Adam continues, “Wow, when I think back, it worked. At that time, we just felt better when it happened.” On April 17, 2005, Adam preserved this precious memory and many more in the digital archives of the Dakota Memories Oral History Project (DMOHP).

Director Michael M. Miller, coordinator Jessica Clark and adviser Tom Isern created this landmark project in 2005—a project sponsored by the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, NDSU Library. Through innovative interview techniques and archival methods, they are preserving the childhood memories of second- and third-generation Germans from Russia. (The narrators range in age from 60 to 98.)

As part of the oral history project, Alice (Miller) Buck (above) and (below center, standing at far left) shared her memories of becoming ill from eating ergot kernels as a child.

“All of a sudden we broke out with sores on our legs, sores on our arms and sores around our mouths.”

From Alice (Miller) Buck’s oral history

Clark, a doctoral student in the Department of History, is using these oral histories for her dissertation on growing up German Russian on the Northern Plains. Thus far, her teams have collected more than 150 oral histories in North Dakota and Saskatchewan.

The interview teams tailor every oral history to the interest and needs of the narrators. Most participate in a traditional sit-down conversation, but some prefer a tape recorder or phone interview.

Buck’s memory of eating ergot kernels—a memory she shared with Clark in 2005.

On a farm near Streeter, N.D., in the 1930s, Alice was a little girl—too young to help with the field chores. She remembers wandering and exploring the fields as her parents worked them. Alice recalls her mother telling her “different things we could eat if we ever were lost, to survive.” One day Alice asked her mother if it was OK to eat an ergot kernel from the rye they were shocking. “Oh, I’m sure you could,” Alice remembers her mother replying. Soon after Alice and her older sister, Leona, tried the ergot kernel they became sick. “All of a sudden,” Alice exclaims, “we broke out with sores on our legs, sores on our arms and sores around our mouths.” As Alice remembers it, her mother immediately took the girls to a woman who practiced Brauch, a folk remedy. According to Alice, “she made us a salve. She cut some hair out of the middle of her hair, and she burnt this hair. Then she used ... goose fat, unsalted goose fat, and she mixed this with it. What else she put in it, I don’t know. She said, ‘you put this salve on, and wrap ... up real good!’ And, you know, that healed those sores.”

The DMOHP organizers will continue this project throughout the summer. Clark and her husband, Will, a doctoral student in biology, will be in the Edgeley/Fredonia and Bismarck/Mandan areas. Cassie Ptacek, a master’s student in history, and Tyler Simonson, an undergraduate in management information systems, will be in the Rugby/Devils Lake and Richlandton/Dickinson areas.
Adam Gordon Boschee (above) also shared childhood memories for the project.

For more information on the project, contact Jessica Clark at 701-231-8419 or Jessica.Clark@ndsu.edu, or visit www.ndsu.edu/grhc.