Tell me a story

German-Russian oral histories being collected

By KAREN HERZOG
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It's the way of things: Kids close their ears when their parents start talking about their own childhood, rolling their eyes at those embarrassing and uncool stories about how tough they had it.

Only later, with adolescent contrariness outgrown, do they begin to pick up their ears and listen when someone starts a sentence with, "I remember..."

Only, sometimes, by then it's too late. By the time it dawns on grown children that those once-unwieldy old stories are their own history, their family legacy, the tellers have gone, taking their stories with them.

For the descendants of the Germans from Russia, North Dakota's most populous ethnic group, it might have been the passing of the first-generation immigrants that turned on the light bulb. Watching history recede too quickly in the rearview mirror, the realization hit that those stories, all those stories tucked inside grandparents and great-grandparents, were being taken to the grave, untold and unknown.

That realization seemed to come about 20 or 25 years ago, said Dr. Calvin Fercho, of Fargo, a retired ophthalmologist and a descendant of the Germans from Russia. The success of Alex Haley's novel, "Roots," seemed to strike a chord across the country, he said, sending people, including German-Russians, in search of their genealogy.

Whereas those descended from North Dakota's most populous immigrant group once felt almost ashamed of their background, Fercho said, now a new curiosity, even a little flower of — not pride, but appreciation — seemed to emerge.

So some began a scramble to ask the questions of elders who remembered the early days. What was life like then? Do you remember living in Russia?

Dr. Calvin Fercho, of Fargo, addresses a crowd of about 75 people at St. Luke's Lutheran Church in Wishek regarding his German-Russian heritage.

Why did you come here?
For some, it was too late, leaving those descendants of the German-Russians to regret not asking the questions, not asking for the stories, while their parents, grandparents and great-grandparents were still alive, said Tom Issen, professor of history at North Dakota State University, at a public forum Oct. 30 in Wishek, explaining the Dakota Memories Oral History Project, under way at NDSU's Germans from Russia Collection.

In January, Jessica Clark, NDSU doctoral student and the Theresa Mack Germans from Russia History Fellow, started collecting video interviews for the Dakota Memories Project. The footage of Clark's interviews with people on their experiences of growing up German-Russian on the Northern Plains, will eventually become a documentary in cooperation with Prairie Public Television. Designed to document the heritage and culture of German-Russians, with a primary focus on childhood memories and family relationships, the interviews will be added to the Mississippi River Valley Library.

See Story, Page 10A
Story: Regrets about not asking previous generations

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to others already completed depicting aspects of the German-Russian life, such as cemeteries and iron crosses, food, folkways and music.

At the Wishek forum, Clark summarized her experience with those interviewed: People described their German-Russian families as thrifty, hardworking and persistent; they talked about endless hard work, about canning, about trying times. They talked about town kids, about Saturday night dances, about helping each other, about church and confirmation, about playing, about loss.

The most surprising thing about the interviewing so far, Clark said, was how accepted she felt and how welcoming people were.

"It felt like I became part of the family and community. I have these friends out in south central North Dakota," she said.

Those interviewed had one uniform regret: Not asking previous generations for their stories.

"Ithaca would have liked, for instance, to know more about how his family traveled to America."

But in those days, "People were sort of in a forgetful mood, rather than a remembering mood," he said.

"In life, we tend to want to remember pleasant things. And those were not good times to remember, living in a sod house and walking in the snow. And the next generation never likes to hear how you lived as a child," said Fercho, who spent the first 11 years of his life near Lehi, in south central North Dakota, where the German-Russians settled so thickly that the region is nicknamed "The Sauerkraut Triangle."

Brief clips were shown at the forum of seven of the interviews, people in their 50s and 60s and older, mostly from south central North Dakota communities such as Gackle, Streeter, Wishek and Berin.

Some stories are touching, some funny, Clark said.

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"Delores" Zimmerman, of Wishek, who had been interviewed with her husband. Delores, remembered that you had to be 16 to go to the community dances and that girls weren't allowed to wear makeup. So on the way to the dance, girls would rub their cheeks as a makeshift kind of roux.

Christine Long, of Berlin, agreed to be interviewed because she thought it was a good chance to tell the story of growing up Catholic and German-Russian. Like many in the area, Long started school speaking not a word of English. Others at the Wishek forum said that even in the late 1950s some children from that area started school speaking German.

It seems like education was not a priority among Catholics of that group, she said. "It was work," so she sees this project as their chance to preserve the stories.

"I've always been sorry that I didn't ask questions when my grandma and grandpa were alive," Long said. "They didn't say much, and I was too young to ask that to be important. What I'd like to know, I guess, mostly what they went through that made them decide to come to America and about the trip over."

She tries to carry forward in her own family the important things from her heritage.

"Religion was such an important part of life; in Lent, we said the rosary every night in German," she said. "And I wish people wouldn't be so busy, and do more family things together."

The next phase of the Dakota Memories project has been applying for funding to interview people in Saskatchewan this summer and then in South Dakota.

The wish list for the next phase of interviewing would also include a cooperative effort with Northern State University in Aberdeen, S.D., said Michael M. Miller, librarian who has worked with the Germans from Russia Collection at NDSU, as well as with private funding.

Stern closed out the forum by talking about the importance of these stories.

"Can all the stories be saved?" Stern asked.

"No," he said, "but we have to start somewhere."

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