The German-Russians comprise one of the larger ethnic groups in the Great Plains region today. Descended from German colonists who first settled in Russia during the 1760s at the invitation of Czarina Catherine the Great, the German-Russians are particularly numerous in the Dakotas, Nebraska, Kansas, eastern Colorado, and the Canadian prairie provinces.

When they settled in Russia, the German-Russians lived in closely knit, agrarian villages that were established along religious lines of affiliation (i.e., Lutheran, Evangelical Reformed, Roman Catholic, Mennonite, or Hutterite). For more than a century in Russia the German-Russians avoided intensive contact, not only with their Russian and Ukrainian hosts but also with German colonists living in neighboring villages. The major German enclaves in Russia included those of the Volga Germans (Volgadeutschen), established in 1764–67, and the Black Sea Germans (Schwarzentdeutschen), established in the late 1780s and early 1800s.¹

The German colonists in Russia enjoyed decades of self-imposed isolation, until the reforms and Russification measures of Czar Alexander II took place in the 1870s. These reforms caused thousands of German-Russian colonist families to uproot themselves and emigrate to the New World. Having prospered as grain farmers on the treeless Russian steppes, the German-Russian emigrants were attracted to the plains of North America and to the pampas of South America. The German emigration from Russia began in the mid-1870s and continued until World War I. As in Russia, the German-Russians who came to the New World tended to maintain regional and religious affiliations in their settlement patterns. Thus one primarily finds Volga German Protestants in Nebraska, Volga German Catholics in western Kansas, and Black Sea Germans in the Dakotas.²
There is no way of determining exactly how many Americans of German-Russian descent presently reside in the United States, due to recent census records that rarely distinguish German-Russians from other Americans of German ancestry. Yet, German-Russians have become a highly visible ethnic group in the Great Plains states, partially due to the success of two active, ethnic organizations that boast ever-increasing memberships: The American Historical Society of Germans from Russia (AHSGR), founded in Colorado in 1968, and the Germans from Russia Heritage Society (GRHS), established in North Dakota in 1971.

German emigration from the Black Sea region of South Russia coincided with the opening of United States homestead lands on the northern Great Plains. By 1920 some seventy thousand German-Russians of the first and second generation of immigration were living in the state of North Dakota alone. Today North Dakota may have twice as many citizens who are descendents of German-Russians as any other state in the union. When one considers that the entire state of North Dakota has a combined population of only 652,437 (1980 census), one can imagine how numerous the German-Russians seem in such a sparsely settled area.

While North Dakota attracted representative German groups from all of the major settlement areas in Russia, the vast majority came from the Black Sea region near the port city of Odessa. The first German-Russians immigrated to what was then “Dakota Territory” as homesteaders. Although they could not establish closed agrarian villages as they had done in Russia, German-Russians who shared the same religion and regional dialect did establish their homesteads in close proximity to one another. Since some of the better farmlands along the wooded river valleys already had been claimed by Scandinavian immigrants, the German-Russians settled in the southern, central, and north-central portions of the state. Their communities form what has been called the “German-Russian Triangle.” Most of the state’s German-Russians live within this triangular portion of the state in areas homesteaded by their immigrant forebears less than a century ago.

The town of Strasburg, North Dakota, lies seventy-five miles southeast of Bismarck, the state capital, and about a dozen miles north of the South Dakota line. German-Russian homesteaders established the community in the spring of 1889. They named the struggling pioneer settlement in
honor of Strasburg, their home colony in South Russia. With the building of a nearby railroad in 1902, Strasburg gradually grew in size until its inhabitants numbered 700 people in 1930. Yet, as in other small towns on the northern Great Plains, the paucity of farms and jobs prompted many of the local youth to find employment elsewhere. The population of Strasburg, North Dakota, is approximately 623 today (1980 census).

Located in the southern half of Emmons County, Strasburg is in an area densely populated by people of German-Russian ancestry. Neighboring communities, such as Hague and Linton, are well known to North Dakotans as towns where the “German brogue” remains a distinguishing characteristic. While the Strasburg area is primarily German-Russian and Roman Catholic, there is a small settlement of “Hollanders” (who belong to the Dutch Reformed Church) southwest of Strasburg. Large numbers of Protestant German-Russians are found only a few miles to the east, and the Standing Rock Sioux Indian Reservation is located due west, across Lake Oahe and the Missouri River.

As one approaches the prairie community of Strasburg by car, one immediately notices two things: the immense size of its Catholic church, the spire of which can be seen high above the trees and surrounding structures, and the signs off Route 83 that proudly call attention to the fact that Strasburg is the hometown of music maestro Lawrence Welk. Born in a clay-brick pioneer home near Strasburg, Welk grew up practicing an old accordion brought from Russia by his father. Eventually, Lawrence Welk’s shy, reserved style, Emmons County “German brogue,” and champagne music became well-known trademarks in the entertainment world.

**Emmons Central High**

On the northwest edge of Strasburg, well within sight of Saints Peter and Paul Catholic Church, stands Emmons Central High School. The pale brick building is one of two high schools in the small community which are within easy walking distance of each other. Emmons Central is a parochial school that serves the Catholic youth of Emmons County, while the local school district administers Strasburg Public School. The casual observer who attempts to see Strasburg as a homogeneous ethnic community—united by a common religious and cultural heritage—will be hard
pressed to explain the existence of two high schools in such close proximity to one another.

Checking available published sources regarding the history of the two schools, I found that the first school in Strasburg was parochial, established in 1910 in the basement of the parish church by Ursuline nuns from Calvarienberg, Germany. In 1918 parishioners built St. Benedict’s Catholic School, but there were no high school graduates until 1927. Due to financial problems, the parish turned over administration of St. Benedict’s school to the Strasburg School District in 1931. The Catholic parish did not regain control of St. Benedict’s school until 1960, the same year in which the Strasburg Public School was established. In 1966 St. Benedict’s high school in Strasburg consolidated with St. Anthony’s high school in Linton (a neighboring town to the north) and Emmons Central High School resulted. At the time of this consolidation Emmons Central High School was “subsidized by all Catholic parishes in the county and … [providing] an opportunity for Catholic education to a student population from seven different parishes.”

The consolidation that occurred in 1966 has meant that Emmons Central High School is no longer a community-based parochial institution but a county-based religious school. Nonetheless, all of the students who attend are German-Russian. By comparison, the Strasburg Public School, while it serves many German-Russian students in the Strasburg area, also meets the needs of non-Catholic, non-German-Russian students. The 1982 graduating class at the Strasburg Public High School numbered twenty-five students. Several were of Hollander background (with family names such as Haan, Nieuwsma, and Van Beek). The 1982 graduating class at Emmons Central High School, on the other hand, numbered twenty-nine students, all of whom came from Catholic, German-Russian families (with surnames like Baumstarck, Silbernael, and Wikenheiser). In light of the above facts it is perhaps not surprising that Emmons Central High School offers German-Russian Ethnic Studies as an integral part of its curriculum.

**History of the German-Russian Ethnic Studies Class**

Although I was able to observe the German-Russian studies class at Emmons Central High School on three separate occasions, I had to conduct
extensive interviews with the instructor to obtain a better idea of the many topics covered. Mr. Les Kramer, principal of the high school and instructor of the German-Russian studies class, told me that he has been teaching the class since 1974. Before coming to Strasburg he taught high school in the neighboring prairie town of Hague, where he first offered the German-Russian studies class. Although the high school in Hague was extremely small (the 1982 graduating class numbered only seven students), Mr. Kramer considered it an “ideal school” because of the deep sense of community that existed there. He pointed out that all of the German-Russian students at the Hague High School “traced their heritage back to villages five, six miles from each other in Europe.” (ES82-TK-C4, Side 1, 62–69)

In 1977 Mr. Kramer and several other high school teachers in North Dakota received small stipends to develop or expand ethnic curriculum materials at their institution. Officials at the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks administered the awards, made possible by special funding from the Office of Education. According to Mr. Kramer, there has been no follow-up study or even any contact from the granting office for the past three or four years.

**Class Structure and Curriculum**

The German-Russian studies class at Emmons Central High School follows a general sociology class offered by Mr. Kramer during the first semester. He has designed the sociology course to sensitize students to cultural differences and human diversity. The main text used in the class is James D. Calderwood's *The Developing World: Poverty, Growth and Rising Expectations*. The book is the subject of some controversy with other educators, says Mr. Kramer, since “the United States does not come out of that book smelling like roses.” (ES82-TK-C3, Side 2, 331–344) In his mind the sociology class is a prerequisite to delving into German-Russian cultural studies. He often tells his students at the outset of his classes to ask themselves three basic questions:

“Who am I?” “Why am I?” “What do I intend to do about both?” Those are the questions we have to answer, in light of what others are doing around the world. Until you answer those three questions, I tell the kids, life is really not worth much. (ES82-TK-C3, Side 2, 390–398)
Mr. Kramer teaches German-Russian Ethnic Studies daily every second semester from 11:00 A.M. to 12:00 noon, under the official title “International Relations.” He justifies the broader course title by noting that he continues to work basic sociological and anthropological concepts into the German-Russian material (e.g., examples of ethnocentrism, nuclear vs. extended family patterns, etc.). While Mr. Kramer makes use of a number of published works in the German-Russian studies class, he focuses on three volumes in particular: Karl Stumpp’s *The German-Russians: Two Centuries of Pioneering*, the main text used by the students; Karl Stumpp’s *The Emigration from Germany to Russia in the Years 1763 to 1862*, a large volume for genealogical research; and Joseph S. Height’s *Paradise on the Steppe*, a cultural history of the Catholic Black Sea Germans in southern Russia. He also uses sometimes a slide-sound program entitled “At Home on the Prairies: The Germans from Russia,” produced by the Germans from the Russia Heritage Society, depending on its availability from the public library in the neighboring town of Linton. In addition, Mr. Kramer distributes approximately seventy pages of mimeographed handouts to the students, including maps of German-Russian settlements in the Old World and the New, illustrated essays on German-Russian material folk culture, life histories, and booklists.7

The German-Russian studies class at Emmons Central High School has various areas of inquiry:

1. **German-Russian Surnames.** The course begins with an examination of the family names of German-Russian students in the class. Mr. Kramer attempts to show the students how their German names derived from ancestral occupations, places of origin, physical traits, etc. According to Mr. Kramer, “[Sioux Indian names like] Red Bull and Chasing Hawk aren’t really any different than their names.” (ES82-TK-C3, Side 2, 15–40).

2. **Map-making and Study.** The students study the areas in Central Europe where their forefathers originated; the migration route from Germany to Russia; major German settlement areas in Russia; German-Russian immigrant settlements in the New World; and the location of German-Russian settlements in North Dakota, specifically in Emmons County.

3. **Study of Living Conditions of German Colonists in Russia.** About this section Mr. Kramer explained: “We really try to bring home the living conditions ... [by considering the question] What was it like to be a European peasant?” (ES82-TK-C3, Side 2, 68–73).

4. **German Language and Traditional Songs.** Discusses German-Russian dialects and folksongs. Sometimes Mr. Kramer teaches the students a German song that is later sung at a German-Russian dinner prepared for the parents. A
typical song might include the German-Russian funeral hymn "Das Schicksal [wird keinen verschonen]" ("The Fate That Spares No One"). Mr. Kramer noted that since fewer and fewer students speak or even understand German, the language section is becoming increasingly difficult to teach.

5. Material Folk Culture. Studies German-Russian folk architecture and the making of Brennmist (a fuel made from dried animal manure, used by early German-Russian settlers in both Old Russia and the Dakotas). In the past the students have built models of a Semelanka (German-Russian earthen house), Backofen (bake oven), Ulmer Schachtel (boat used by the German emigrants who went to Russia via the Danube), and a horse-drawn wagon.

6. Homesteading "Game". This is an exercise that Mr. Kramer adapted from a similar one used in some schools in Nebraska. It is basically a "farming game" set in North Dakota between 1885 and 1887. "Students attempt to run a farm at a profit over a three-year period." The object of the game is "to provide the students with some insight into the problems faced by homesteaders in the 1880s and to involve them in the decision-making process." Students receive a scoring sheet. They attempt to farm and invest successfully in the face of unpredictable factors, such as droughts, severe winters, grasshopper infestations, poor markets, and so on.

7. Discussion of Cultural and Personality Traits of the German-Russians. In this unit Mr. Kramer asks the students to identify some of the dominant attributes of the German-Russians. A discussion often follows regarding the contributed responses. The traits invariably include such descriptive characteristics as conservative, closed off or ethnocentric, religious, stubborn, and "crazy-clean" (an obsession with cleanliness). Mr. Kramer admits that he often plays the devil's advocate, regardless of whether the suggested trait is a positive or a negative one.

8. The German-Russian Dinner. Toward the end of the semester the students prepare a German-Russian dinner for parents and other invited guests from the surrounding communities. All the foods are homemade, including such table items as butter and ketchup. Students prepare most of the dishes in the home economics room of the high school on the day of the dinner.

For the dinner that I attended students prepared and served the following foods: Kuchen (cake), Knepflesupp (dumpling soup), Fleischkieschla (a deep-fried dough and meat dish), Bratwurst (homemade sausage), Sauerkraut un' Nurola (sauerkraut and noodles), and homemade ice cream. On the day of the dinner, maps and exhibits made by the students were placed on display in the room where the dinner was held. In years past German-Russian singers and musicians have provided entertainment at this event. Parents of the students donated all of the German-Russian food brought to and prepared at the school.

9. Field Trip to German-Russian Sites in Emmons County. After the students have examined the German-Russian history of their immediate area, Mr. Kramer takes them on a field trip to see some of the sites they have read about. The emphasis of the field trip is early German-Russian settlements in the southern half of Emmons County: Tiraspol, Elsass, Odessa, Katzbach, Krassna, and Rosental. At many of these locations nothing but a lonely cemetery remains. Mr.
Kramer invariably directs the students’ attention to the wrought-iron cemetery crosses made by early German-Russian blacksmiths. The crosses are an important ethnic symbol and are readily identified as such even by non-German-Russians who travel through south-central North Dakota. Mr. Kramer and the students also visit the few remaining examples of German-Russian folk architecture in the area, including a number of clay-brick houses built by early German-Russian homesteaders.

10. Genealogy and Family History Research. Depending on the amount of time available and student interest, Mr. Kramer encourages the students to research their individual family backgrounds. He recommends books and other sources that can aid in the individual's search for German-Russian genealogical data. He also distributes a general reading list for those students who want to continue reading about the German-Russians at their own leisure.

The amount of time spent on these subjects depends primarily on the enthusiasm shown by students. Mr. Kramer explained that, since every group of students is different, each German-Russian studies class is somewhat different in its format and emphasis. In addition, he schedules events such as the German-Russian dinner and the field trip bearing in mind a number of other considerations, such as the agricultural cycle, weather, and student availability.

I was able to observe the German-Russian studies class at Emmons Central High on three separate occasions. On April 13 I observed the class while the students made maps and planned the menu for the upcoming German-Russian dinner, on April 28 I participated in the dinner, and on May 6 I accompanied Mr. Kramer and the students on their field trip. One of the things that I found most surprising about the class was the emphasis on active participation rather than mere listening or note-taking. When I questioned Mr. Kramer about this, he admitted: “I’m real big on ‘doing,’ if at all possible.” (ES82-TK-C3, Side 2, 28–31).

A strong, cold wind was blowing across the prairie on the day of the field trip, sending tumbleweeds flying high above some distant rock piles erected by the early German-Russian settlers. While I thought such weather might force Mr. Kramer and his students to postpone the trip, I soon found out that nothing could be further from Mr. Kramer’s line of thinking. Following the field trip, as we talked in the welcome warmth of his office back at the high school, Mr. Kramer explained to me that a basic purpose of the field trip was to give the students:
a feel for the wind, and the rocks, and the psychological barrier they [the early German-Russian pioneers] ran into when they got here. And on a day like today ... we can get a feel for that ... [when] there was nothing out there but prairie, rocks, and wind. (ES82-TK-C32, Side 1, 228–240)

**Teacher**

A description of German-Russian Ethnic Studies at Emmons Central High School would be inadequate without further discussion of the instructor, Mr. Les Kramer. A native son of Emmons County, Mr. Kramer is thirty-six years old. In addition to his responsibilities as principal of the Emmons County High School, he farms southwest of Strasburg in the Krassna settlement area. He and his wife, Colleen (née Schmaltz), have two small children. The fact that he and his family refurbished the old Strasburg train depot, transforming it into a comfortable rural home, suggests Mr. Kramer's appreciation for the past.

Both Mr. Kramer and his wife are former graduates of Emmons Central High School. Their oldest child, Nathan, is in grade school at St. Benedict's, which adjoins the Catholic high school in Strasburg.

In my interviews with Mr. Kramer I discovered that his thesis that one can appreciate an ethnic heritage only after one “steps away from it” reflects personal experience. Following military service and some long periods of inner reflection in Southeast Asia, he returned to North Dakota and attended the state university in Fargo. By the time he enrolled in college, he admits: “I had reassessed all my values ... my thinking.” (ES82-TK-C3, Side 2, 273–285). Since that time he has read and studied the history and culture of the German-Russians extensively. Despite his deep appreciation of his ethnic heritage, he has tried to maintain “balance” while instructing his students about their German-Russian culture. He indicated on several occasions that he wants his students to consider many different aspects of their heritage—both positive and negative—and how they continue to influence their lives today.

When we're through with this whole process, then the thinking process hopefully takes over with [the students], and they begin to realize that much of the tradition that we've just studied from the past is still very much a part of them. (ES82-TK-C3, Side 1, 388–393).
In regard to the feedback that he receives from his students concerning the German-Russian class, Mr. Kramer noted that there is seldom much immediate response. As one who has studied the cultural dynamics of his own ethnic group, he realizes that compliments among the German-Russians are rare, particularly for those of the teaching profession.

At the high school level the rewards aren't that great ... there aren't as many as you would like. But with teaching that's just the way it is. It's not like medicine; you don't get daily feedback on what a great job you're doing. You may never hear it for twenty years, and then only a comment in passing that you had some influence on a person's life. (ES82-TK-C3, Side 1, 262–268).

**Students**

There were ten students ranging in age from sixteen to eighteen in Mr. Kramer's most recent German-Russian Ethnic Studies class. They included Sam Gross, a senior from St. Michael's parish, northeast of Linton;
Gerald Holzer and Dale Horner, seniors from St. Anthony’s parish in Linton; Sheila Nagel, a senior from Strasburg; Annette Roehrich, a junior from Strasburg; Josephine Vetter, a senior from St. Michael’s parish; Rose Vetter a junior from St. Michael’s parish; Mark Volk, a senior from Hague; and Katherine Wikenheiser, a junior from Strasburg.

As I mentioned previously, I was able to observe Mr. Kramer and the students interacting on three separate occasions. The first time was during the April 13 class session when the German-Russian dinner menu was being discussed and planned by the students. At one point in the class there was an interesting discussion about faithfulness to “German-Russian tradition.” Mr. Kramer had encouraged the students to plan the German-Russian menu with authenticity in mind. Taking this as a cue, a female student asked in a serious tone of voice if “red-eye” (a homemade grain alcohol beverage popular among many German-Russians) could be served at the school during the ethnic dinner. When Mr. Kramer answered negatively, another student drew laughter when she stated, “If we’d stick to tradition, we’d all be getting drunk.” (ES82-TK-C1, Side 2, 48–55).

On April 28, the day of the German-Russian dinner at Emmons Central High School, I watched and photographed the students as they prepared a four-course menu. There were no German-Russian cookbooks present. At times the students argued among themselves about how to prepare certain foods “the right way.” It became obvious that the real problem was not the usual recipe variations found among German-Russian families, but some major differences arising from the fact that a number of the students came from outlying parishes many miles away. The preparation of Fleischkiechla, for example, met with mixed reactions, since this particular dish is not shared by all German-Russian families. Originally of Tatar origin, the deep-fried Fleischkiechla are most popular among those German-Russians who trace their ancestry to colonies in the Crimean portion of South Russia.

On May 6, the day of the field trip, a number of the students rode with me as we visited German-Russian sites in Emmons County. I was amazed that a few of the students indicated they were seeing the sites for the first time, even though they had spent their entire lives in the county. My amazement lessened as I realized that, for some students, the sites we were visiting were well outside of “their” settlement area.
While I was able to interview only two students from the German-Russian studies class, their impressions proved to be of interest. Both students (interviewed separately) indicated they were uncertain whether they had learned anything in the class that would be of value to them in later life. Both felt that the more satisfying segments of the class dealt with the study of German family names, the map work, the "homesteading game," and the discussion of German-Russian traits. They agreed with most of the traits listed in class, but felt it was an exaggeration to characterize German-Russians as being "crazy clean." One student even commented, "I didn't believe that too much. . . . I don't think we're cleaner than anybody else. I would think we're dirtier, really." (ES82-TK-C5, Side 1, 118–124). For both students the German-Russian studies class helped answer questions about their ancestors and their past, particularly as it related to the old country.

I knew beforehand that we [our ancestors] went to Russia, but I didn't know we were that far south. I thought we were in northern Russia. Then I learned that some of the climate [in south Russia] was like California. I didn't know that—thought it was cold [in southern Russia], just like North Dakota. (ES82-TK-C5, Side 1, 146–160)

Parents and Grandparents

I met the parents and grandparents of some of the students for the first time on the day of the German-Russian ethnic dinner at Emmons Central High. Following the meal and program we talked informally about the German-Russian studies class. The parents seemed pleased with the efforts of their sons and daughters in hosting the dinner, although this pride was never articulated. When I asked about the delicious foods we had just eaten, there was only discussion among those present regarding culinary differences among the German-Russians.

The most talkative and enthusiastic adult at the dinner proved to be none other than Wendelin Wikenheiser, the eighty-six-year-old grandfather of one of the students. Mr. Wikenheiser, whom I interviewed at length a few days later, was born in southern Russia and emigrated to North Dakota with his parents in 1903, when he was eight years old. Today he is one of the few surviving Russian-born elders in the Strasburg community. On the day of the German-Russian dinner Mr. Wikenheiser studied the maps and other materials that were on display at the high school with keen interest. Later, while interviewing him, he spoke of the German-Russian class at
the Catholic high school as being “a pretty good idea.” He lamented, however, that the students at the high school were not studying the German language more intensely. He confided that he felt it unfair to have to translate everything into English for his “educated” grandchildren. (ES82-TK-C6, Side 1, 123-146).

Talking with Mr. Wikenheiser further I found him to be somewhat ambivalent toward formal education, an attitude shared by many other German-Russians of his generation. Mr. Wikenheiser's pride in the success of his old friend, Lawrence Welk, was evident and he obviously enjoyed talking about the popular bandleader's early days in Strasburg. As Mr. Wikenheiser was quick to point out, Strasburg's wealthiest and most famous native son “didn't have much education.” (ES82-TK-C6, Side 1, 462-475).

Conclusions

Although I had done fieldwork among German-Russians prior to my research at Emmons Central High School, never before had I studied the actual process of conscious cultural transmission in so clearly delineated a setting. After years of observing German-Russian people interacting at informal gatherings, church services, wedding dances, funeral dinners, and agricultural tasks, it was exciting to actually watch a German-Russian adult instruct young members of his group about their ethnic heritage. Many of the cultural values, attitudes, and perceptions shared by German-Russians—which I had tried so hard and so long to pinpoint in my early observations—were being identified, discussed, and scrutinized by the peripients themselves!

An analysis of the data I collected during my fieldwork at Emmons Central High School is difficult since I only scratched the surface of what I quickly discovered was a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon. A score of related questions and lines of inquiry would emerge with each bit of information that I uncovered. While I realize that this is always the case in any scholarly endeavor, I did not think studying one ethnic school would pose the kind of challenge that it did.

In analyzing the format and the materials for German-Russian Ethnic Studies at Emmons Central High School, I found that the class was basically an honest, balanced attempt to convey some of the more prominent aspects of German-Russian ethnicity to the students. It was refreshing to see German-Russian culture being presented in the kind of down-to-earth,
nuts-and-bolts fashion many Black Sea German Americans of the Dakotas pride themselves in exemplifying. There were no colorful posters of mist-covered castles in Germany in the school room where the German-Russian class was taught, no tall, Bavarian beer steins, or solemn-faced busts of Wagner. At the German-Russian dinner prepared and served by the students the foods were typically German-Russian and the music playing in the background was a tape recording of a group of local German-Russian farmers singing traditional old country favorites, like “Zu Strassburg” and “Wir sitzen so froehlich beisammen.” Most reassuring of all was the fact that not one dirndl or even a pair of lederhosen was anywhere in sight.

The class directs a great deal of attention toward the making of models and artifacts that would mean little to most other Americans of German ancestry (e.g., the German-Russian Semelanka or earthen house, the Ulmer Schachtel-Ulm emigrant boat, and Brennmist or manure fuel). The production of such handcrafts underscores the fact that the instructor of the German-Russian studies class at Emmons Central is encouraging the students to focus on specific aspects of their Slavic-influenced heritage—rather than those of their “German” ancestry.

While Mr. Kramer and his students have chosen to focus on distinctive aspects of their German-Russian heritage, I believe something is gradually taking place in the class that may not be readily apparent to the participants. At times “German-Russian culture” is discussed and viewed as if it were a truly homogeneous phenomenon. Since Emmons Central High School is no longer a one-parish, community institution, it now draws German-Russian students from settlement areas well outside of Strasburg. While many of the Strasburg students trace their ancestry to the Kutel-kurchan Black Sea German colonies, a number of other students from the outlying parishes are descendents of emigrants who came from the Bessarabian and Crimean German-Russian colonies. Regional differences (as manifested in dialects, foodways, farming patterns, and so on) may lead to confusion on the part of those German-Russian students whose community or family traditions do not always run parallel to the material presented in the class. At any rate, one outcome of the German-Russian studies class at the high school may be a heightened awareness of German-Russian identity in its broadest sense, rather than a vague feeling for one’s traditions at the purely local level.
In regard to the articulation of cultural values, the seventh unit covered in the class deals directly with German-Russian cultural and personality traits. This section of the course always provides a forum for much student discussion about German-Russian values and attitudes. In my interviews with two students, both pointed out that, while this subject was interesting, it posed some problems, since the students were unable to see themselves as compared to "outsiders." They admitted that their contacts with people who are not German-Russian were quite limited. Nonetheless, they agreed with most of the German-Russian values and attributes discussed in class: industriousness, a love of the land and of farming, religiosity, conservatism, frugality, and stubbornness. They disagreed with the instructor that German-Russians were "crazy clean," feeling it to be an exaggeration. They did not list other attributes, such as affability, generosity, and sobriety, as characteristic of the German-Russians.

A large circular poster with illustrations of a German-Russian earthen home, windmill, and plow graced the front of the room on the day of the German-Russian dinner at the high school. Two neatly lettered German expressions appeared on the poster "Arbeit macht das Leben suess" ("Work makes life sweet") and "In Amerika durch Gottes Gnade!" ("In America through the Grace of God!"). A smaller poster, bearing numerous pictures of agricultural scenes, bore the legend: "LANDSLEUTE—Part of our German-Russian Heritage as Farmers."

Another characteristic of the German-Russians, repeatedly pointed out by Mr. Kramer, is their ambivalence toward formal education. He explained this attitude as stemming from the past history of the German-Russians, since they viewed schools in Russia and later in the United States as threats to their cultural and religious integrity. This fear was compounded by the German-Russian belief that education was not essential for those engaged in agricultural pursuits. According to Mr. Kramer, such attitudes persist and are contributing factors to the unstable financial situation of the Catholic high school in Strasburg today. Mr. Kramer pointed out that many German-Russians tend to be tight fisted and, consequently, dislike making pledges; but at the same time they want to see Emmons Central—"their school"—remain open. Thus the future of the German-Russian studies class, and indeed that of the very high school which offers it, remains uncertain. (ES82-TK-C8, Side 2, 73-95).
Perhaps the most important thing that I learned while studying the German-Russian class at Emmons Central is that high school educators can offer both a well-balanced curriculum and an ethnic heritage component without sacrificing program quality. The students at Emmons Central High School are free to choose whether to enroll in the German-Russian studies course. If they decide to do so, they are able to attend the class during regular school hours. Furthermore, since the course includes basic anthropological and sociological concepts, it serves the students in two important ways: by providing a formal opportunity to explore various facets of the German-Russian culture and by encouraging the students to view their heritage against the larger backdrop of human experience.

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Postscript

On May 21, 1985, the doors of Emmons Central High School were locked following final commencement ceremonies. This time, however, a simple spring ritual symbolizing another school year's end had profound and deeply troubling significance to many German-Russian families—the doors of Emmons Central were to remain permanently closed.

Rising education costs and declining student enrollment were cited as two of the major reasons for the parochial school's shutdown. Newspaper reporter Lucille Hendrickson described the emotion-charged event in an article entitled "Goodbye, Emmons Central, Goodbye Forever" (The Bismarck Tribune, May 26, 1985). Hendrickson perhaps summed up the feelings of many people in the Strasburg, North Dakota, area with the words "the death of a school is a grievous thing for a small community."

Notes

1. An excellent background study on the German-Russians is Adam Giesinger's volume From Catherine to Khrushchev: The Story of Russia's Germans (Battleford, Sask., Canada: Marian Press, 1974).
4. This estimate is based on a number of comparative sources, especially William C. Sherman, Prairie Mosaic: An Ethnic Atlas of Rural North Dakota (Fargo, N.D.: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1983).
7. Copies of all available handouts used in Mr. Kramer's class are deposited at the American Folklife Center, Library of Congress.
8. Emmons Central High School has a level II accreditation, placing it among the top 25 percent of the schools in North Dakota.