Introduction

Two years ago, I’d never even heard the term “Germans from Russia.” All I knew then was that I wanted to learn more about my father’s family of origin. My father was born in 1935 and grew up in a farming family from north central North Dakota. His father—my grandfather—Gottlieb Herber, died when my father and his sister were very young. Eventually their mother remarried and contact with their Herber relatives was lost.

As family histories often are, this one was complicated by a mystery. When Gottlieb died, his children were told that his death was a hunting accident. But as he grew older, my father began to suspect that Gottlieb’s death was no accident. Neither his sister nor his mother would ever speak about it and so Gottlieb became a tantalizing mystery to me, too. American historian Wallace Stegner says that there is a time somewhere between the ages of five and twelve when an impression lasting only a few seconds may be imprinted for life. ¹ Likewise, my need to know about my Herber ancestors had imprinted on me when I was young and impressionable. My grandmother knew I was interested and, over the years she shared a few photos of Gottlieb with me. She told me that the Herbers spoke German and had come to North Dakota from Russia when Gottlieb was young. From a sketchy Herber family tree created by an uncle in the early 1960s I discovered the names of Gottlieb’s parents and where in Russia he was born. ² For a long time, that was all I knew.

But Gottlieb was often on my mind. Knowing only the names of Gottlieb’s parents, and his grandfathers, and that the family originated from Schaefer, Russia, I started researching on the Internet. I soon discovered that Schaefer was a tiny located in south

eastern Russia on the Volga River. I found it very curious that Schaefer also had a Russian name, Lipovka, and that the founding of the village was documented as exactly August 1, 1866. Soon, the whole history and culture of the Germans from Russia and answers to my questions began to appear. Stegner also says that history is a pontoon bridge where everyone works at the building end after crossing over the pontoons laid by others he may never have heard of. If my Herber family history is like a pontoon bridge, I was eager to journey to the other side. I had no choice but to follow through. I began building a family tree and studying about the Volga Germans. I tapped many sources and through Ancestry, Google, and Facebook, I connected with Herbers in Wisconsin, Minnesota, and Washington. I even spoke with Hilda Herber Loewen, Gottlieb’s cousin who was born in North Dakota in 1922!

But the more bare facts I collected, the more I realized that I could never know my Herbers just by documenting life’s important milestones. When my Internet searching hit upon a class from North Dakota State University called “Dakota Germans from Russia,” I joined immediately. Over the past few months, the readings from this class have and my phone conversations with Hilda have begun to give me the fuller picture of how my Herbers lived. By using all these resources, this is what I know so far….

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3 The Roll Family website: [http://www.rollintl.com/roll/volga.htm](http://www.rollintl.com/roll/volga.htm)
4 Koch, Fred C. The Volga Germans in Russia and the Americas, from 1763 to the Present. The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1977, pg 301
6 Dakota Germans from Russia Class website: [http://historyrfd.net/isern/gfr/](http://historyrfd.net/isern/gfr/)
My ancestral Herber home was a village called Schlitz, in the Grand Duchy of Hessen. The first Herber I can definitely identity was Johann Adam Herber. All I know about him is that he was already deceased in when his son, Johann Conrad Herber, married Anna Maria Schmidt in the Schlitz Evangelisches (Lutheran) Kirche on July 22, 1766.

During the Thirty Year’s War of 1618-1648, the people of Schlitz, who were mainly Lutheran like my Herbers, had fought against their Calvinist Hessen neighbors. Considering the times, my Herbers’ religion was a life and death choice.

Schlitz was known for its production of textiles and my Herbers worked as weavers in the mills. But by 1760, the work my Herbers had done for generations was changing. The industrial revolution had begun and what had once been a valuable skilled trade was becoming a commodity. My Herbers’ livelihood was deteriorating.

When the German-born Russian Czarina Catherine II issued The Manifesto on July 22, 1763 I can only guess that it was a combination of economic and religious pressures that made my Herbers respond to her invitation to emigrate to Russia.

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7 A Land Called Hessen. [http://members.cox.net/hessen/hesse.htm](http://members.cox.net/hessen/hesse.htm)
8 Mai, Brent Alan and Reeves-Marquardt, Donna. German Migration to the Russian Volga (1764-1767): Origins and Destinations. American Historical Society of Germans from Russia 2003 pg 101
9 Calendar of Events in the Life of the German Colonists, NDSU German Russian Heritage Collection. [http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/history_culture/history/calendar.html](http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/history_culture/history/calendar.html)
Herber in Russia

When I started my Herber research, one of the first artifacts I found was a map of all the Volga colonies, including Schaefer. Soon a neighboring village called Nieder-Monjou also became important to my Herber research.

In 1767, 1,400 families left Germany for Russia. My Herbers must have been among this group because on August 3, 1767, they arrived in the meadow eastern Volga village of Nieder-Monjou. The village had been established on June 7, 1767. In the First Statistical Report on the Volga Colonies, presented to Empress Catherine II in February of 1769 and, all but three families in the village were suited to farming. Of the skilled trades, there were a shoemaker, a blacksmith, and two weavers. I believe one of the weavers in Nieder Monjou was Johann Conrad Herber from Schlitz. Shortly after the Herbers arrived on the Volga, Anna Marie died. Mortality was very high in the first years of the villages, especially for women and children.

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11 Calendar of Events in the Life of the German Colonists, NDSU German Russian Heritage Collection. http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/history_culture/history/calendar.html
12 Pleve, Dr. Igor. Einwanderung in da Wolgagebiet, 1764-1767 (Vol 3) Kolonien Laub, Preuss, pg 201
13 Nieder Monjou Village webpage http://volga.niedermonjou.org:8000/history.html
14 Ibid.
Nieder Monjou was a typical Volga village laid out in a checkerboard pattern, with one main street and several parallel and cross streets. The houses were mostly one-storied and often built of wood, as were the churches. Village housing consisted of huts with porches, barns, granaries and stables. Houses are enclosed with wattle fences. There were gardens behind every house, where families planted all sorts of vegetables and tobacco. There were also several orchards.\(^{16}\)

By 1798, Johann Konrad had died and his second wife, Cecilia, who he had married in 1880, had moved to the nearby village of Schaefer with their three children: Barbara, Christina Louisa, and Johannes. In Schaefer, Cecilia married Johannes Herman, a widower with five children.\(^{17}\)

My ancestral line continued from Johannes who was born in 1789.\(^{18}\) I don’t know the name of Johannes’ wife but I do know that their son, Heinrich Jacob, was born in Schaefer in 1830.\(^{19}\) Around 1853, Heinrich Jacob married Charlotta Diehl and they had at least two children, Phillip born 1854 and Jacob born 1856.\(^{20}\) My ancestral line continued from Phillip. Phillip fathered at least two children, Phillip Jr., born 1877 and Gottlieb, born 1879. It would be these two brothers, Phillip and Gottlieb, who gambled again and moved their families to America.

My ancestral line continued from Gottlieb. In 1898, Gottlieb married Anna Brach. Gottlieb and Anna welcomed Katharina Marie, on December 19, 1899 and Gottlieb Jr. on January 22, 1903.

I don’t know what it was that spurred the Herber brothers, Phillip and Gottlieb, to venture to America. Their reasons may have been the same three put forth by University of North Dakota History professor Gordon Iseminger--to: 1) acquire land, 2)

\(^{15}\) Ibid
\(^{16}\) Ibid
\(^{17}\) 1798 Schaefer Census, Family 21, page 6
\(^{18}\) Ibid
\(^{19}\) 1850 Schaefer Census (in Russian)
\(^{20}\) 1857 Schaefer Census (in Russian)
avoid being "Russianized," and 3) enjoy freedom and opportunity. 21 What I do know is that in 1907 the Gottlieb Herver family sailed from the Baltic seaport of Libau, Russia to Liverpool, England and Halifax, Nova Scotia and on to Winnipeg, Canada where they lived for a time. According to Professor Georg Rath, many Volga Germans made the trip to America as part of a religious group.22 It appears that my Lutheran Herbers traveled alone. On August 12, 1909, Gottlieb age 30, Anna age 29, Katharina age 8 and Gottlieb Jr. age 4 crossed the border at Neche, North Dakota. They arrived in the United States with $50 and a promise of employment for Gottlieb from farmer Aaron Walls of Munich, North Dakota, a fellow former resident of Schaefer. 23

In late 1911, Phillip Herber and his wife Sophie Fellinger also left Schaefer for America. Sophie’s sister had also hoped the make the journey but because her son was deaf and could not speak, they were turned away and had to return to Schaefer. The Herbers traveled in steerage and the journey took two weeks. Sophie later recalled that when everyone was crawling with lice.24 They docked in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania on January 25, 1912 and soon joined Gottlieb and his family in North Dakota.

21 Iseminger, Gordon. “Are We Germans, or Russians, or American’s? The McIntosh County German-Russians During World War I”, North Dakota History Journal 59, no. 2 (Spring 1992): 2-16
23 Herber Family Documentation
24 Interview with Hilda Loewen, 2009
Herbers in America

In the spring of 1910, the Gottlieb & Anna and their two children were living in Munich, Cavalier County, North Dakota where Gottlieb was a foreman in the farming industry. Elisabeth became the first Herber born in America when she arrived on November 18, 1910.

I have no idea what type of education Gottlieb and Anna had received in Schaefer. It’s quite likely they experienced the same type of Russian public education that Teeuwen describes as “primitive even in comparison with that of the one-room elementary school of the United States frontier tradition.”

I don’t know if my Herbers spoke Russian but the majority of Volga Germans had refused to learn the Russian language. Now, as their children became school aged in America, they again confronted with question of adopting another language. Katy and young Gottlieb Jr. spoke German at home and were first introduced to English when they started school.

On December 7, 1915 Gottlieb Sr., Anna, Katharina, and Gottlieb Jr. all became naturalized citizens of the United States. The census that year shows the family, including second son David, who was born on January 10, 1915, still living and farming in Alsen. Despite Germans from Russia scholar Dr. Timothy Kloberdanz’s assertion that the Germans from Russia were “hungry for land,” I don’t believe my Herbers ever owned the land they farmed in America.

25 Map of northern North Dakota and Southern Manitoba. Google Maps
27 Ibid
28 Herber family documentation
In early 1917, the United States declared war on Germany. When the World War I draft was instituted, all men born between 1872 and 1900 were required to register. Non-citizens were required to register too, but were exempt from induction. The Herber boys were far too young but Gottlieb Sr. and Phillip both registered. For people who had worked so hard and scarified so much to avoid the prospect of military service, signing those papers to potentially fight against their ancestral homeland must have been very difficult. Fortunately, Gottlieb, the only citizen in the family, was never called to serve.

Another young man from Alsen who registered for the draft was Henry Hermann. Henry was born in Schaefer on June 28, 1884. He came to America in 1913 and was employed as a farm laborer by G. Herber of Alsen, North Dakota. While Henry listed himself as single, that status was probably not entirely correct because a scant four months later, on October 17, 1917, he married Maria Katharina “Katy” Herber in the Swiss Mennonite Church in Alsen.

World War I was a savage time for the Germans from Russia still living on the Volga. The Sheboygan, Wisconsin, newspaper ran a story about John Hermann, a former Schaefer resident who had lived in Sheboygan for several years. Mr. Hermann had the misfortune of returning to the village in 1914. He’d gone back to Russia for a quick trip to settle some family business. Instead, he found himself trapped there by the brutal Bolsheviks for the next seven years. 30 Another story that reached the Herbers was that of Sophie Fellinger’s sister, the woman with the deaf son who had been forbidden to leave Russia with them. Mother and son were sent by train to Siberia and the mother died in route. When the Russians discovered the boy alone and unable to communicate, they threw him from the moving train. 31

In the census of 1920, the Herber family of Alsen owned their home and both Gottlieb Sr. and Gottlieb Jr. were employed as farmers. Anna was busy with a new baby, Edwin, who was born May 15, 1920. Lizzie and David were both in school. Katy and Henry Hermann were living in Sheboygan, Wisconsin but it wasn’t long before they returned to North Dakota.

31 Interview with Hilda Loewen, 2010
Throughout the 1920s, the Herber family of Alsen continued to grow. Katy and Henry had three children, Hilda, John and Esther. On August 12, 1926, 16-year-old Lizzie married Ralph "Roxy" Orris, an Iowan many years her senior. On December 20, 1926, Gottlieb Jr. also took a wife, Lorina Wipf, a 17-year old Mennonite from Alsen. Unfortunately, their time together was brief as Lorina died on September 29, 1929. One of the Herber history tidbits my grandmother had shared with me that she was Gottlieb second wife, and that his first wife had died young, “of a weak heart.” Lorina is buried in the cemetery at Alsen.

Life was hard and medical care scarce for the farm families of North Dakota in the 1920s and 1930s. Likely the Herbers used some of the kinds of folk cures, traditions and self-help treatments described by Dr. Jonathan Wagner, a specialist in German immigration to America. Perhaps they did so out of ignorance but more likely it was because such home remedies and herbal medicines were the best they could manage out on the prairie, far from more modern medical methods.

On June 10, 1930, less than a year after Lorina’s death, Gottlieb Jr. married again. His bride was Alberta May Bassingthwaite, of nearby Byron, North Dakota.

On February 8, 1931, the Herber family suffered another unexpected loss when Katy Hermann died very suddenly. Katy had suffered from kidney troubles and been on a restricted diet for years. Her death was attributed to eating something that didn’t agree with her. Like other farm families, the Herbers grew most of their own food. The Germans from Russian were known for their large vegetable gardens filled with watermelons, tomatoes, potatoes and sweet corn. Dill pickles were a stable and so gardens always had plenty of cucumbers and a large patch of dill. Who knows what Katy might have eaten… She was laid to rest in the Alsen cemetery, near her sister-in-law. Henry, suddenly a widower with three youngsters, moved his family to Milwaukee,

32 Herber family documentation
33 As told by May Bassingthwaite Grieve
34 Herber family documentation
37 Marilyn Sauer, “Homegrown: German Russian Farm Kids Remember” Audio CD
Wisconsin. 38 While Gottlieb and Anna had a strong belief in God, it must have shaken their faith to lose their first born at such a young age. I like to think their grief was off-set a bit by the birth of Gottlieb and May’s daughter Patricia Ann on October 10, 1931.

The “Dirty Thirties” were a very difficult time for North Dakota farm families. After the stock market collapsed in 1929, wheat prices dropped to historic lows. Weather too turned against the farmers and for most of the decade a severe drought combined and disease limited crop production. Businesses and farms were in ruins; work was hard to find. 39 Gottlieb Sr. supplemented the family income by working a dray operator. 40 Gottlieb Jr. and May moved to Stanton, North Dakota, where he was the supervisor of the grain elevator. Lizzie and Roxy remained in Alsen where Roxy worked as a housepainter. They had three children, Earl, Billy, and another baby who died young. 41 I imagine that the younger Herber boys, David and Edwin, did everything that farm kids typically did: milk cows and tend the other live stock, work the fields with equipment driven by horses, and, as time allowed, attended school 42.

On August 26, 1935, Gottlieb and May’s son David John was born in Stanton. The child would never know his father because Gottlieb died scarcely a year later on October 12, 1936. His young children were told his death was a result of a hunting accident—Gottlieb loved to hunt and was also the Stanton village marshal. But a story in the local newspaper published a graphic description of his suicide 43. His body was returned to Alsen, where his bereaved family gathered. Because of the nature of his death, he could not be buried in the Lutheran cemetery. 44 Suicide was considered a sin by most Germans from Russia 45 and so Gottlieb was interred in the Alsen cemetery with Lorina and Katy.

38 Interview with Hilda Loewen, 2010
39 Bassingthwaite, David G. A Century on the Land, Lulu Press 2007 pg 81
40 As told by May Bassingthwaite Herber Grieve
41 Interview with Hilda Loewen, 2010
42 Marilyn Sauer, “Homegrown: German Russian Farm Kids Remember” Audio CD
43 Mercer County Farmer, October 16, 1936, pg 1, Col. 7.
44 Interview with Hilda Loewen, 2010
As I learned about the iron crosses that often mark German from Russian graves, I couldn’t help but think of Lorina, and Gottlieb Jr. and Katy. I have no idea when I will visit North Dakota again but I know that when I go, I will make a visit to that prairie cemetery in Alsen and honor their memory. Whether they are there or not, I’ll see iron crosses on my Herber graves.

End of story. Family mystery solved.

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46 Ibid