FROM RUSSIA TO AMERICA:

EMTER-THOMAS FAMILY HISTORY

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German Immigrants From Russia

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INTRODUCTION

Who are the Germans from Russia and how did they get to American? These are the questions that this paper will answer and give you some insight into these hardy people. Along the way you will follow a journey of the Math (Mathias) Emter and Gertie (Gertrude) Thomas family (my grandparents) and find out a little about their lives and their son’s, Richard (Dick) Emter, life growing up in Glen Ullin, North Dakota. I want to share this information I have gathered with family members and hope to entice them to ask more questions and maybe delve into the family history some more.

MOVING TO RUSSIA

During the 18th century, the people of the European countries, including where the now present Germany exists, were getting tired of the economic hardships they were suffering, the political chaos, and the religious persecution, and they were looking for ways to escape. (GHRC, History & Culture.) In 1762 a former German princess, Catherine the Great, came to the Russian throne, and offered many of these hard working people the opportunity to come to Russia to start a new life. She offered the foreigners land (about 160 acres), low interest loans if needed, tax breaks, the ability to form and govern their own communities, religious freedoms, and no military service. The people could keep their faith, culture, and language, and farm the land. The Russian people did not get privileges that were offered the foreign people. The German people jumped at this offer and began arriving in the Russian Steppes. (GHRC, “Out of Russia”.)

When they arrived in the Russian Steppes, they built villages where they lived together and then farmed the land outside of the villages. The people lived close to each other and helped each other with the work. The work to turn the land into good crop land was hard and times were tough for these immigrants. They had little fuel, working the land was not easy, and they had little food, but they were determined to make a living. (Diede, P. 7.) Going back to where they came from was not really an option; some could not afford to leave, so they continued to work and make progress.
Emter. Adam Emter was born in Speier, Russia, on September 10, 1844, to Michael and Barbara (Hinrich) Emter. Maria Eva was born at Katharinental, Russia, on June 20, 1848, to John and Margaretha (Klein) Zentner. They were married in Russia and all of their children were born in Speier. They had 7 children: Andrew, Helena, Joseph, Philamena, Valentine (born November 14, 1879, my Great Grandfather), Jacob, and Rose Mary. The children were born between the years 1868 to 1887. (Glen Ullin Yesteryears P. 203.)

Thomas. Adam Thomas was born November 2, 1885, at Sulz in the Ukraine to Joseph and Eva (Maichel) Thomas. His grandparents, George and Margaret (Blumenschein) Thomas, had emigrated to Sulz, South Russia, from Siegen, Alsace, Germany, in the early 1800’s and were co-founders of the colony. Melchina was born July 4, 1889, in the Hutor Lubljanka, to Ellis and Julia (Boeshart) Hoerner. According to my grandmother, Melchina’s father was well-to-do. Her mother died at an early age and her father remarried. Adam Thomas married Melchina Hoerner in 1911 at Blumenfeld, South Russia. They had 10 children born between the years 1912 and 1929: John, Marcus, Gertrude (my Grandmother, born April 7, 1916), Nick, Eva, Clementine, Eleanor, Joseph, Helen, and Irene. The oldest child, John, was born in Russia, the rest of the children were born in the United States. (Glen Ullin, Yesteryears, P. 415.)

JOURNEY TO AMERICA

The German people enjoyed the privileges granted to them by Catherine the Great until June, 1871. Alexander II issued a new decree which would require the people to serve in the military, many of their civil rights, and freedoms were also lost. (GHRC, “Out of Russia”.) They were required to learn Russian in school and abandon their religious practices. The German people were getting harassed and their animals were being stolen. They were having a hard time making a living in these conditions. The German people were not happy and began to look for new places to go and leave their Russian home.
Around this same time, America implemented the Homestead Act that gave immigrants 160 acres of land if they came and lived on the land and farmed it for at least 5 years. This seemed to be the opportunity some of the German people were looking for. The Germans had to board a train to Bremen or Hamburg in order to catch a boat to America. They left with very little possessions, some with just the clothes on their backs, and very little or no money. The boat rides were miserable and took anywhere from one to three weeks to reach America. In order to save money, they traveled by the cheapest fare, usually in the steerage area. These compartments were small, crowded, and filthy. The compartments were below deck where they had boxes and barrels, the air was stale, there was little light, and bugs and lice were prevalent. One of the biggest fears while being on the boat was the death of a loved one. A death usually meant that the body would be buried at sea and there would be no grave. The German people liked to visit their dead family members and bring flowers to decorate the graves, and remember their dead, so this was very hard for them. Some ship captains carried a box of dirt so that a handful could be sprinkled over the body. Some women carried dead children all the way across to America just so that they would not be buried at sea. Another problem the Germans from Russia faced was the possibility of being turned away once they arrived at Ellis Island. A family member who was sick would be turned away and would have to take the long boat ride back to where they came from. This was difficult because they had come to America with no money and were being sent back with no place to return. (Iseminger, P. 2-3.)

**Emter.** Adam and Maria Emter came to America with their children in 1893, and were homesteaded on Twp. 137-87 in the St. Joseph area in North Dakota. In 1918, they moved into the town of Glen Ullin and lived in a two-room apartment until Maria passed away on February 20, 1931. Adam lived with his children until he passed away on November 5, 1934. They were both buried at St. Joseph’s cemetery. (Glen Ullin Yesteryears P. 203.)
Thomas. In 1913, Adam Thomas received notice that he was going to be drafted into the Russia army, so Adam and Melchina, along with baby John (about 6 months old), packed up what they could and left Russia on foot in the middle of the night to catch a train to get to America. It was raining that night, so by the time they got on a ship for America, baby John had gotten sick. John was taken away from Adam and Melchina and put in the bottom of the ship. They could not see him except one time in three days. When they saw him, he was covered with lice, had a high fever, and they could not do much for him. Melchina was afraid he would die before they reached New York. John survived, and they stayed in New York for about 4 weeks because John was so sick. They finally boarded a train for Richardton, North Dakota, where they could stay with relatives. They remained in Richardton for about 2 years where Adam worked for the railroads. Adam and Melchina later found out that Melchina’s brother and sister ended up being exiled to Siberia where they had hard labor (working from early morning to late at night), very little to eat or drink, and their children were taken away from them. (Gertrude Emter Letter).

Adam and Melchina later moved about 9 miles south of Glen Ullin, North Dakota, where they rented a full section of land. They farmed and ranched this land for over 31 years. They retired in August 1946, and moved into the town of Glen Ullin. Adam died on November 2, 1959, of colon cancer. Melchina remained in her home until she entered St. Benedict’s Home for the Aged, in Dickinson, North Dakota, in 1967. Melchina died of liver cancer on September 15, 1969. (Thomas Family History).

LIFE AND TIMES OF VAL AND MARY (SCHAAF) EMTER FAMILY

Valentine (Val), the son of Adam and Maria Eva Emter, was born in South Russia on November 14, 1879. He came to America with his parents in 1884 to settle in the St. Joseph area. Mary Anna Schaaf was born in South Russia on December 27, 1886, to Mathias (born February 24, 1856) and Anna Mary (Gustin) Schaaf (born August 20, 1864). She came to America with her parents and grew up on farm southwest of Glen Ullin, North Dakota. Val and Mary were married on November 14, 1904. To this
union, 11 children were born: Rose, Eva, Mathias (my Grandfather), Ana, Adam, Val, Edward, Raymond, Lena, Frank, and Anton. They farmed west of St. Joseph until 1942. Mary passed away April 6, 1942; Val on July 23, 1964. Both were buried at St. Joseph’s cemetery.

The family lived in a two-room rock house (two rooms at first). Later one more room was built on, which was also made of rock (sandstone). This new room was used as a kitchen. With all 11 children and parents, it was a tight squeeze. They raised grain and cattle on their farm. At first they had to haul drinking water and chase the cattle two miles down to the old St. Joseph’s place for water. Around 1908, Mary and Val hired two men to dig a well by hand. It was almost done when it started to rain and the hole was washed full of dirt and they lost all their tools, so they had to start over again. Later they hired a man to drill the well that went 250 feet down and they found the clearest and softest water they had ever had.

During the flu epidemic, Val and all the children were sick. Mary did not get sick, so she ended up doing all the work inside and outside the house—there was no one else to do the work, she did it all. It just shows how determined they can be, doing whatever needs to be done to keep the family going. Math Emter (Val’s son, my Grandfather) was taken out of school at about the 5th grade (about 12 years old) because his father had broken his leg and could not work. Since Math was the oldest boy, Math had to be at home on the farm to do the work that needed to be done. He never went back to school.

Val and his sons also started to uncover coal by hand. They had to clear off 14 to 16 feet of dirt before they could find the coal that was 10 to 12 feet thick. They sold the coal to area farmers, and took some to the church, and schools. They had to load the coal by hand and hauled it with horses and wagons. They sold it for 10 cents an inch, so the price depended on how high it was loaded. (Glen Ullin Yesteryears P. 206.)

Val was a mean father (according to his grandson, my father, Richard Emter). He worked his children very hard. Math never had much use for his father, he was abused by him. In later years when
Math was older, he would take his family to town and stop by his parent’s house, but he never had much to do with his father.

**LIFE AND TIMES OF ADAM AND MELCHINA (HOERNER) THOMAS FAMILY**

Adam and Melchina had a two room sod house for themselves and their 10 children. The roof was made of boards smeared with mud and when it would rain, the mud would drip into the house. The kitchen had a coal cook stove and one bed for the five boys. The living room had two beds in it, one for the parents to sleep in and one for the five girls to share. They had kerosene lamps for lights in the house.

In the mornings the girls would help milk and feed the cows, pigs, and chickens. They had to hand pump water from the well outside and bring it into the house for the day. After breakfast, the children had to walk 1 mile to a one room school house. In the winter Adam took the children to school in a bobsled pulled by one of their horses. The school was heated by a coal stove. There was no high school, so my grandma Gertrude only finished the 8th grade.

After school the children would walk back home and start on the chores that needed to be completed. The children fed all the animals and gathered the eggs. The children did not have any toys to speak of; their toys were vegetable cans and old boxes. At Christmas time, the children did not receive toys; they would each get an orange (which was a treat to them), some peanuts, and maybe some candy. The children would play behind the house with each other and use their imagination. On Sundays the neighbors would come over and the adults would visit and the children would all play together. Once a week they would take a horse and buggy to town to buy supplies they needed. All their farm equipment was pulled by horses. The farms were small and they had very little land.

The children took baths about once a month in a wash tub. Babies would get baths about once a week. They had to wash clothes in tubs with a washboard and then hang the clothes outside to dry. For supper they usually had bread and milk and not much more. They did not have much for food. They
would keep the cream from milking the cows under the floor in a little space in the ground to keep it cool.

LIFE AND TIMES OF MATH AND GETRUDE (THOMAS) EMTER FAMILY

On May 21, 1934, Mathias Emter (son of Val and Mary (Schaaf) Emter) married Gertrude Thomas (daughter of Adam and Melchina (Hoerner) Thomas). They lived on a farm south of Glen Ullin, North Dakota, until their retirement in 1969. This marriage produced five children: Elaine, Darlene, Richard (Dick, my father), Carol, and Dennis. Math Emter died on June 30, 1993, from a brain aneurism. Gertrude (Gertie) Emter is currently a resident of Marion Manor in Glen Ullin, North Dakota.

Math and Gertie had a wooden farm house with a front porch. It had a kitchen, little living room, another living room, and 2 bedrooms on the main floor, and the attic was used as bedrooms. My dad thought his house was big growing up. Once he left and went to college and then came back home, he realized that the house was not really that big. The house did not have electricity while my dad was growing up. REA came through after my dad was gone, in probably the late 50’s or early 60’s. The house did not have indoor plumbing or running water. It had water from a well and an outhouse. It was this way even when I was a little girl. I remember getting water from the well with Grandma and drinking from the tin ladle on top of the well pump. They moved into town in 1969 were they had indoor plumbing and a bathroom.

Math had 640 acres of land that was paid for. (That land has since been divided as 320 acres to Richard Emter and 320 acres went to his brother Dennis and now to Dennis’s daughter, Dawn Schantz.) Math never acquired more than that because he would not mortgage what he had in order to get more land. He saw too many people lose their land and he was not about to do that. He may not have had much of an education, but he was a smart man and knew his limits. Some of the land was farm land and some was pasture for the cattle. Math also rented some land during his farming years. Math did not splurge on anything. Math and Gertie barely scraped by with very little. They received some kind of
government check. My dad, Richard, remembers his dad walking down the long driveway to the mailbox to get the government check. That was all they had to live on besides what they had on the farm. Math worked the farm from daylight to dark, working with horses, plowing and raking. As a little kid, Richard remembers his dad coming home at night dead tired.

They had work horses growing up—about 6-8 of them were needed. Two horses were needed to pull wagons, but to do field work such as dragging or plowing, they needed at least a 4 horse team to do that work. They had one Welch pony growing up that was used for riding, which they did not ride much. My dad rode some, but was not really that interested in riding horses.

The first tractor was bought in 1945, and was a 44 Massey Harris, a very small 2 bottom plow tractor. Harvesting came and crops had to be cut and raked. They used a binder to make bundles, shocked the bundles by hand then stood them up, and hand loaded them in the thrasher to get the grain. One person had the thrasher, and he would go around to all the neighbors to help get all the fields harvested. Uncles, cousins, and neighbors all pitched in to help each other on all their farms. When Richard was 8-9 years old he was out driving a tractor on the farm plowing fields. When he was 12-13 years old he ran the hay rake with a team of horses—loaded and unloaded bundles with the horses.

Math and Gertie grew potatoes, raised hogs, cattle, and chickens; which provided milk, cream, eggs, and meat. When the time came to butcher any of the animals, the aunts, uncles, cousins, and neighbors would come and help out. The favor was returned when the aunts, uncles, and neighbors had to butcher their own meat. Everyone helped out each other. Math and Gertie had their own smoke house to smoke their meat, so they had sausage for meals. In the fall after the harvest, Math and Gertie would go to town and buy flour for the winter so Gertie could bake.

Everyone in the family helped out shocking and milking—Father, Mother, sons and daughters—all available would be out working. The only thing the girls did not do was tractor work. The children
had to get up before school and milk the cows (about 12-16 cows) and feed the hogs. This took a couple of hours in the morning, and then had to do it again at night. They milked by hand until they had electricity for automatic milkers, which is what I remember seeing when we visited my grandparents in the 60’s. They would separate the milk and cream and sell the cream they did not need. Any milk they could not consume was fed to the hogs. A good cow would produce a good pail of milk at each milking (about 2 gallons?). They had barn cats that they would feed some milk too. They also had farm dogs growing up. They grew their own food to feed the livestock. The hogs were fed grain: barley or oats. Oats were the cheapest, so that is what they mostly used for feed.

Gardens—rows and rows of potatoes—were grown. Gertie took care of the garden for the most part, but the kids would help hoe the potatoes. Gertie planted watermelons, cantaloupes, onions, peas, beans, carrots, beets, cucumbers (for pickles), and dill (for pickling). They grew all the food they needed. They butchered the animals on the farm when they needed meat. They also canned sausage—canning it was an easy way to store it and keep it for a longer time. About the only things they had to buy were flour, sugar, salt and pepper.

Richard remembers when he was little, they had to go to Uncle Marcus’ place (Gertie’s brother) and mine coal on his land. Neighbors and relatives got together to mine the coal. They used dynamite, scraped it up, and loaded it into wagons by hand to bring home. They filled the basement to the top so that they had enough fuel for the winter to keep warm. They loaded the coal by hand and it was in big chunks. They used axes and picks to break it into chunks to fit into the stove.

Church was important. They would go every Sunday and the Catholic mass would last about 2 hours every week. The church was about 8 miles away from the farm. My dad remembers having either a Model T or Model A car that they would use to go to church. There was a big hill on the way to church. If they did not get enough speed up to make it up the hill, they would have to turn the car around and go up the hill backwards in order to have enough power to get up the hill. My dad also
remembers during the winters when there was snow, his dad and he would have to go out on Saturday nights and shovel a path through the snow so that they would have a path to get to church on Sunday morning. They would shovel paths through fields, making their own roads. They did not have road graders to clear the roads of snow. Sometimes his mom would help, but for the most part it was my dad and his father doing the shoveling.

They bought some of their clothes for their children and others Gertie made. When school started they would get 2 pairs of Levi’s, 2 shirts, and a pair of shoes. Both of his sisters knew how to sew and they made their own dresses. Their clothes were nothing fancy, just practical.

Elaine and Darlene finished only grade school. They then moved out of the house and went to work in town and eventually went to Dickinson to work. Richard (my father) was the first to go to high school. The grade school was a one-room country school about ½ mile from the farm. High School was in town. Richard, Carol, and Dennis all went to high school. About the only sport Richard ever played was softball in grade school during recess. They never had a lot of time to play, they had lots of farm work to keep them busy most of the time. All he ever knew was hard work, he did not know any other way of life until he went to high school and then to college. Richard had never seen basketball or football until he had gone to high school, so he had no idea how to play those sports. He learned to play in high school, but never really had a chance to play these in high school as a sport. He had to haul kids back home after school. In high school he got a car so that he could drive to school. Also during his high school years the family built a barn with a hay loft on the farm. My dad put up 2 basketball courts in the hay loft and played up there.

In high school during some of the bad winter months, Richard had to stay in town with his sisters so he could go to school. It was too bad to go home so he had to stay for long periods of time, sometimes for a couple of months. His parents did the chores and ran the farm. His sisters had a very small upstairs apartment in Glen Ullin. They had to climb up a little ladder and crawl through a little
opening in order to get into the small apartment. Once the weather got better, he would drive back to
the farm.

On the farm they had a creek running through it. My dad would sometimes go swimming there,
usually on a Sunday. Sunday was the day for having fun and relaxing. His uncle Adam (who lived about
6 miles away) had a creek that was a bit deeper and had a sandy beach, so it was better to go swimming
there when he had the chance. Sometimes he would ride a horse or later, when he got older, he had a
bicycle he could ride over there. Uncle Adam had 12-13 kids, so there were plenty of children to play
with. My dad said he can’t remember when he got the bicycle. He said sometimes if you worked hard
enough, you got rewarded with things when they could be afforded.

They celebrated birthdays. His mom would bake a birthday cake and they would have candles.
He can’t really remember getting presents for his birthday. They did not have much for extra money.

Christmas was spent with the family attending midnight mass which was about 2 hours long or
so. After church they would have a meal his mom made. They would usually have ham, baked goods,
jelly bread (with chokecherry jelly which had a syrup consistency) and other goodies. The only thing my
dad remembers is Santa Claus. He remembers one time he got a small truck as a Christmas gift.
Sometimes they would get food, maybe cap gun and holster. At times they would celebrate with Uncle
Joe, Uncle Marcus, or Uncle Adam’s families. They all had kids about the same age as my dad’s family.

They had 4th of July celebrations. The neighbors and relatives would ride the 10 miles to town
and have a picnic together at the park. When he got older and if they had some money, my dad said
they would get some small fireworks to shoot off.

My dad was not interested in farming after he finished high school. He said it tied a person
down 7 days a week. His dad was not interested in getting any more land and what they had would not
support two families. Richard would come home and help combine sometimes after he had left home.
After graduating from high school, Richard went to Fargo to school, attending Interstate Business
College (closed now). His friend, Jim Kueffler went to the same school, and had finished before my dad. Jim went to work in Grand Forks, North Dakota, for Chief Pontiac (later changed to Kielty Motors). Jim told my dad when he finished school they had an opening. My dad did the bookkeeping and credit financing for Kielty Motors. He had found a career path he was interested in.

CONCLUSION

The experience, knowledge, and interest in a part of my family history this class has given me has been a wonderful journey. I have talked to relatives I may have not met before, and if I have, I don’t remember. Reconnecting with these relatives and finding out what they know about our history and what they are doing now has been exciting. I have also found that I have some relatives in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, (only about 70 miles from me) that I have never met. I plan on making some introductions in the near future to see what I can find out from them. Obtaining some of the information I used has been a challenge. My Grandmother never really wanted to talk about the “old days”. All she would really say was that they were “hard times”. My dad never really talked much about growing up either until I took this class and started asking more pointed questions. I obtained a lot of information about his life growing up during the course of this class. I plan on sharing this paper and other information I have uncovered with my parents, sister and brothers, my children, and anyone else who would be interested. I hope they will gain a new respect for our German-Russian heritage that I have.
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Germans from Russia Heritage Collection (GHRC). History and Culture. “Who are the Germans from Russia?” http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/history_culture/index.html


**Various information for this class was also obtained from talks with my Grandmother, Gertrude Emter, that I needed for a report in 1993 for a class I was taking and from my Father, Richard Emter in recent conversations in which I wrote down what he was telling me.**