

A Visit to the Old Sod House

By Janet Haag, 2015

Imagining my husband Roger's thoughts while standing beside the family home outside Fredonia, North Dakota, built by his Bessarabian German grandfather, Johann Haag. Following a hastened departure from their homeland of Bessarabia, during Russia's reestablishment of aggressive control over Bessarabia, Johann, his wife, Maria, and their two sons, took a train to Hamburg, Germany, where they boarded a ship, "The Hungaria," en route to a new beginning in America. Following 18 difficult days at sea, they arrived on American soil on the 3rd day of May, 1889, after which they homesteaded and built a sod house which became their new home. More children were born, and eventually the family built another house, of clay bricks, crafted by hand, which encircled the sod house. The house is slowly being reclaimed by the earth from which it came. [Roger's family left North Dakota when he was eight years old. This was his first journey back home since their departure.]

Johann Haag was born in 1864 in Dennewitz, Bessarabia. The land on which he settled was just outside Fredonia, ND. He died, in Fredonia, in 1932. His wife Maria was born in 1865, in Neu Elft, Bessarabia, to Johann Tobler of Neu Elft, and Christine (Heidinger) Tobler, of Wittenberg, Bessarabia. Maria died in 1951, also in Fredonia. (They're both buried in St. Johannes Cemetery outside Fredonia.)

The old sod house, where my grandfather dwelled, is deserted; family, gone.

And here I stand, with heightened pride, on the ground he settled upon.

With courage, strength and fortitude, he built this house to last;

Its thick, strong walls, a barrier, to a winter's freezing blast.

It kept his children safe and warm, and cozy by the fire,

While tales were spun of long ago, to charm them, and inspire.

The lengthy journey from his homeland, far across the sea,

Had been far more difficult than he'd imagined it would be;

And when, at last, he reached his destination, he would find,

That the land on which he settled was barren and unkind.

But determined as he was to live where he could now be free,

He worked the land, he built his home, and he raised his family.

I never knew my grandfather; he died 'fore I was born;

I never had the chance to join the others, as they mourned.

But when I stand upon the land on which he chose to dwell,

I picture him beside me, and I feel I know him well.

I imagine rocky landscapes, how they'd fight him as he tilled,

And how the winter snowdrifts rose above his window sill,

And I thank this man beside me, this man I've come to know;

He had a dream, he saw it through, his wife and kids in tow.

His sacrifices were for me, and for all the family,

That we might live, as he desired ~ unoppressed and free.

The old sod house will soon be gone; it seems forlorn and wan,
 Perhaps it feels abandoned; for everyone has gone.
 But I like to think the old house isn't lonely, after all;
 Perhaps the ghosts of yesteryear still roam within its walls.
 Perhaps they gather round its hearth recalling hopes and dreams,
 And speak of old times, good and bad, of jokes on friends, and schemes.

Perhaps the children's laughter still rings on wintry nights,
 When the first snowflakes begin to fall, spurring hopes of snowball fights.
 Snowmen with their pipes and hats, might grace the ground outside,
 With arms of sticks, and a carrot nose, and rocks in place of eyes.
 The men might brag that their horse-drawn carts seldom let them down,
 On their 40-mile round-trip jaunts, into the heart of town,
 Where they'd sell their hay and produce, hoping for a decent price,
 And arrive back home, with bags of flour, for homemade, fruit-filled pies.

Sometimes I feel I've missed a lot; for I was born too late
 To wander with my grandpa through his land beyond the gate.
 But I know he watches over me, I sense it in the night;
 And someday we'll stroll together in a land beyond my sight.
 And we'll talk about the old sod house he built with grit and pride,
 And he'll share with me his lifetime tales, as I attempt his stride.
 And I'll thank him for his sacrifice, and strong determination,
 That all of his descendants would be born within this nation.



Johann Haag, 1903



Maria Tobler Schulz Haag, 1903



**Back row, L-R: Nathaniel, Rudolph Schulz (Johann's stepson), Maria (Jr.), and Johann, Jr. (called John).
Front row, L-R: Johann, Sr., David, Jacob, and Maria (Sr.)
The child in the chair is Edward (Two children, Gottlieb and Anna, not yet born)
1903**