

## Interview with Reuben Dammel (RD)

Conducted by Brother Placid Gross (PG)

September 20, 2000, Medina, North Dakota

Transcription by Jayne Whiteford

Edited and Proofread by Lena Paris, Jay Gage, and Beverly Wigley

**PG:** This is Brother Placid Gross, volunteer interviewer for the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, for North Dakota State University Libraries in Fargo, North Dakota. It is a pleasure to visit with Reuben Dammel in rural Medina, North Dakota. Today is September 20, 2000. What is your name and when were you born?

**RD:** Reuben Dammel; April 18th, 1917.

**PG:** Where was your father born?

**RD:** Well, Teplitz, I think that it is South Russia.

**PG:** That is Bessarabia, South Russia. But right off hand you don't know when he was born. We are going to look that up and put that in the paper. Where is your dad buried?

**RD:** In Medina cemetery.

**PG:** What is your mother's maiden name?

**RD:** It was Kathryn Leitenger.

**PG:** And she is also buried up in Medina?

**RD:** Yes.

**PG:** Did your dad's parents come over to this country?

**RD:** Oh, yes.

**PG:** How old was your dad when he came over here?

**RD:** Sixteen years old.

**PG:** Did all of his brothers and sisters come over here too? They must have.

**RD:** I don't even know if they were all born here. His brother (my uncle) Israel, was only four or five years old when they came here.

**PG:** What is this name?

**RD:** Israel.

**PG:** And your mother, was how old when she came over here?

**RD:** She was five years old.

- PG:** So her parents came over here too.
- RD:** Yeah.
- PG:** Where are her parents buried, do you know?
- RD:** They would be buried in Eureka cemetery in South Dakota.
- PG:** How many children did your parents have?
- RD:** Eight.
- PG:** Can you give the names of your brothers and sisters starting from the oldest one?
- RD:** The oldest one was Emma; then there was a set of twins, Erna and Theopolis; then there was Bertha, Pauline, Martha, Reuben and Gerhard.
- PG:** Did your mother remember anything from the old country?
- RD:** Not very much, she never talked about it.
- PG:** Because she was only five years old. How about your dad? Did he talk about the old country?
- RD:** Yeah, he knew much about it, because he said his dad had a blacksmith shop and made wagons. Then he said that he must pull the air bellows [hilltop] with a big handle to heat the iron. Then he talked about how they farmed too. They went down from the village and drove out and farmed not many acres. Then he talked about when they harvested with the scythe and they loaded it up [in field wagons] and brought it into the village. They had shoots where they slid that grain down, and then they had the horses tromp it out for thrashing it. Then they had to raise it up [separated grain kernels by tossing], so that the wind would blowout [the chaff]. He never said how clean it got.
- PG:** He took the fork and tossed the grain into the air.
- RD:** Yeah, well, shovels I suppose because it was fine stuff. I imagine that was a pretty slow process.
- PG:** Did they grow grapes and make wine?
- RD:** Yeah, my dad's uncle lived next door, and he had a vineyard. He had a wine cellar with big barrels. He hired many widows from the village to harvest the grapes and bring them to the winepress. Then how they made the wine, I don't know. I think that they had something to crush the grapes, and then they put that juice into the barrels. I just faintly remember when he talked about it.
- PG:** Do you know anything in German? Do you know any poems, prayers, stories, or anything like that?
- RD:** No, I'm not very good at that.
- PG:** Did your dad ever wish that he were back in Russia?
- RD:** Yeah, he talked about it. He said that in Russia it was better because you got done with your work. Lady speaking: And you didn't have to pick rocks; they had grapes.
- RD:** They picked grapes instead of rocks.
- PG:** Oh, really. It would be easier to pick grapes.

- RD:** They drank a lot of wine. His uncle said he never drank better water. He always had his wine jug and his glass, which he carried that right with him. He never did any work, and he was rich. He got the help for little or nothing, you know, and the widows they were glad to get a few pennies and that is how he got his grapes cut and the wine made.
- PG:** Did you have relatives that stayed in Russia? Did your dad or grandparents have any brothers or sisters or do you know of any relatives that they talked about?
- RD:** Well, his uncle stayed in Russia.
- PG:** Do you know what happened to him?
- RD:** I don't know, but they said that he died. There was a lot of money, but they could never get any. They would have inherited it, but being Russia had such a strict ruling, they didn't let any of the money come over here. So, it just stayed there.
- PG:** That would be your dad's uncle.
- RD:** Yes, that was my dad's uncle.
- PG:** Did he have children? Did that man have children?
- RD:** No, they didn't have any children.
- PG:** He didn't have any children, so the money should have come over here.
- RD:** It [the estate inheritance] would have come over here; but none of them knew how to go about it to get it.
- PG:** When you were growing up, you spoke German all of the time, right?
- RD:** Right.
- PG:** When did you learn to talk English?
- RD:** When we went to school, then we didn't dare talk German anymore. But at home we had to talk German. We didn't dare talk English.
- PG:** So at home you had to talk German and in school you had to talk English.
- RD:** Yes.
- PG:** I know. What kind of schooling did you have? Did you have good teachers or were they mean?
- RD:** One of them was particularly mean. It was a man teacher and that was his first experience of teaching school and he was so mean. I just dreaded to go to school because he picked on me all the time. I didn't think I was a bad boy. But it was just the idea that he liked to pick on somebody, and he picked me.
- PG:** If you talked German, did you get punished in school?
- RD:** Right. If they caught us talking German in school then we had to take our seats and stay after school.
- PG:** Did you have to write "I will not talk German anymore" or something like that?

- RD:** Not really that we had to write that much, but we got punished by staying after school. Sometimes 15 minutes, sometimes a half an hour.
- PG:** Did you have to walk to school?
- RD:** Oh, yes, all the time. We walked- it was a mile to school.
- PG:** A mile, that's not too bad. How many years did you go to school?
- RD:** Well, it must have been eight years, because I went through the eighth grade. When I passed the eighth grade, then I had to stay home and work.
- PG:** Do you know how much you went in one year? Was it nine months or seven months?
- RD:** To begin with it was seven months and then later on they changed it to eight months. But that was it. They didn't go any higher than eight months.
- PG:** Did you have a picnic at the end of the year?
- RD:** Yes, we always had some kind of a party .It wasn't anything big but sometimes we roasted marshmallows; had other stuff to eat.
- PG:** What kind of playground equipment did you have?
- RD:** Well, I am rather ashamed to say it, but we didn't have anything. We just had the bare prairie.
- PG:** Did you even have a ball and a bat?
- RD:** Well, no, we never had a ball or a bat. We had to come up with "hide and go seek" or playing sticks and stuff like that. We had to make our own recreation.
- PG:** Where did the teachers come from? Were the teachers English or German? Could they talk German?
- RD:** They mostly came from Jamestown. I imagine they graduated in Jamestown. There was not very many of them that I can remember, they weren't really German. They were mostly English people.
- PG:** So, they did not understand the German.
- RD:** Well, some of them. Well, they didn't admit it if they did. We had some good, real nice, teachers that came from Jamestown.
- PG:** How did you celebrate Christmas when you were small?
- RD:** Well, we had programs in school, Christmas programs, and then we had church programs.
- PG:** At the Christmas program at school, were the parents invited?
- RD:** They were usually invited, but not all came. My dad never came, I don't know why.
- PG:** He thought it was not important.
- RD:** No.
- PG:** Did you get any gifts at home at Christmas? Did they have any money to buy you any gifts?

- RD:** Well, they didn't splurge too much, I mean, but you got a little bit something.
- PG:** Did you have a Christmas tree?
- RD:** No, that's one thing we never had. We never had a Christmas tree. We had it in school; we had it in church, but not at home. Never had a Christmas tree.
- PG:** I am sure you didn't get a lot of gifts either.
- RD:** No, we didn't get to town to buy [gifts]; we wouldn't have had the money anyway to buy a lot of gifts.
- PG:** How did you celebrate Easter? Did you make Easter eggs?
- RD:** That's usually what happened, I mean, they always colored eggs, you know, for Easter.
- PG:** Did your mother hide the Easter eggs, and then you had to go look for the Easter eggs?
- RD:** They always made Easter baskets. We had to make then the basket and then when we were sleeping, then they'd put some stuff in the basket. Then we'd have to find it, you know.
- PG:** Do you remember when there were gypsies -when the gypsies came around?
- RD:** Well, right. They'd come to town, but they never came out here to the farm. We were too far off of the main road for the gypsies. They'd stay more or less to the better roads, you know. But I did see them when we hauled .grain to town; then there was gypsies parked on the street, you know. You could tell they were gypsies.
- PG:** How did they travel? Did they have cars?
- RD:** They had big cars.
- PG:** They had cars already?
- RD:** Yeah, they had good cars. Some farmers complained that they'd come to their yards and that they had to watch """" them because they'd take stuff, you know. But we were fortunate we were off of the main road, so they never came here.
- PG:** In the '30s, did you get relief? Did they bring any relief by food [commodities]?
- RD:** Not for us. We were fortunate. My dad had all his stuff paid for, owned the land and everything. We milked cows, and had chickens and pigs. We and another family in the township were the only ones that didn't get it [government relief]; the rest of them all got the food and relief.
- PG:** Oh, so if you worked hard and had some money, then you did not get it.
- RD:** No, that's right -and were conservative, you know.
- PG:** Let's talk about how you made the manure blocks. You picked up cow chips for [fuel] burning, huh?
- RD:** We had to do that quite a bit. Take a basket or a sack, and go out and pick dry cow chips, and bring them home. They used that for the day when they ironed [laundry], you know. Then they'd have that stove going and then they used them cow chips, you know, to make the stove hot and the irons hot.
- PG:** How about the manure blocks? You made manure blocks too?

- RD:** Yeah, we made them.
- PG:** How did you do that? How did you spread the manure or what did you do?
- RD:** We always had our cows in a little fence, what they call a corral-type. And that's where the cows were in, you know, and they had to stay in there overnight. And that's how that manure accumulated and then that got real hard. Then they would take a spade and make square blocks, and get it so that you could handle it. They were about 12 inches square, them blocks.
- PG:** And how thick?
- RD:** They would be, I would say, they could've been about five inches thick.
- PG:** If the cows were in there all the time and for overnight, didn't the cows get too dirty? Wasn't it too wet for the cows?
- RD:** It didn't seem like it. During the day it [the manure] dried; that was dry, you know. It was a pretty good-sized corral, you know, where they had room. All I had to do was help when we put that manure on a stack with a round top on there. I mean it had to be stacked so it was round like a haystack. And then we had to carry it over there and then the older ones they stacked it.
- PG:** How high did that stack get, as high as a person? Did they stand on a chair to get it up there?
- RD:** Well, I think they made it about five and a half feet tall, and then it could have been -wide, I don't know - it was probably about five foot wide. And long -the stack could have been about 12 feet long. That was used as a substitute for coal.
- PG:** The manure had to be dried real good before you stacked it then?
- RD:** Well, first it was put in squares, I mean like shocks. Then it was really hard and dry, and then it was stacked. I didn't do it anymore; I mean, then the coal came in and then the trucks. They brought the coal and coal was cheap. You'd get coal for three and a half to four dollars a ton. And they'd bring sometimes as high as eight tons on a big truck.
- PG:** Do you remember when you had no coal? When you did not have any coal at all, do you remember that?
- RD:** No, that I don't remember.
- PG:** You always had some coal. I mean, you had some manure but you always had some coal.
- RD:** They might have had some coal, but the manure was the substitute to make the coal go further.
- PG:** Oh, okay. When you were growing up, what work did you NOT like to do? I suppose when you were a teenager or a young teenager, what work did you not like to do?
- RD:** Well, I didn't like to cut grain with a header; that was hard work. I did a lot of that. Then pick rocks. That was another thing I didn't like, but we had to do it.
- PG:** You did it because you had to do it. Did you header with two header boxes?

- RD:** When my sisters and brothers were home, they had two boxes and they headered with two boxes. Later on then I was practically the only one at home, so I had to drive the header box and also stack the header box. I had to wrap the lines around the post, let the horses walk, then quick stack the box. Then when it got to the end [the line reached the end for the tether], I had to turn the horses around, take the lines off at the post and then do the same thing going down straight, you know. And then when the box was full, you had to drive over to the stack and pitch that box, that full box of grain, on to the stack. That was hard work.
- PG:** Especially sometimes if it was green [straw], was a little bit green.
- RD:** That [green straw] was heavy .The stuff was heavy and it was hard to pitch. I don't know, a person always managed to do it.
- PG:** Do you know how big those header stacks were about; approximately the size?
- RD:** I would say they were about eight feet wide, and they could have been about 15-16 feet long. As far as high, you had to pitch it as high as you could pitch it up, you know, and get it up there. Then they closed the stack up.
- PG:** Made it round on top; tried to make it round. Do you remember any accidents that happened with the horses?
- RD:** No, we were fortunate that our horses were not spooked [easily]. They were so used to so much. They didn't get spooky, you know, and they didn't run away. We didn't really have any [runaways]. Oh, my brother he had - when he was farming, he had runaways all the time. But he was kind of careless. I know one time he had five horses run away with the gang plow [and] tear the fences down.
- PG:** With the plow? The plow was not in the ground was it?
- RD:** I think that kind of jumped out, because them horses they went as fast as they could go. Then they went up to the yard, and then they got up to a post and that stopped them. They couldn't go any further.
- PG:** Then they stand there shivering or shaking.
- RD:** Yes, he was rather careless.
- PG:** He fell off, I mean, he was off the plow, right?
- RD:** He was going to kill a gopher with the whip. When the horses heard that whip crack they took off, and he couldn't catch them anymore. That's why I say he was careless.
- PG:** What work did you LIKE to do?
- RD:** Well, I kind of liked to pick corn in the fall. That was a job, but fall was nice weather, like now you know. We'd go out [to the cornfield] with a wagon, box and team, and pick corn. We used to have about 15 acres of picking corn. I had to cultivate corn a lot. That was a chore. I was only about nine, ten years old when I had to cultivate corn all the time.
- PG:** With the horses?

- RD:** Yes, two horses and a one row [cultivator]. When you were through it [completed weeding a field], then you had to start all over in front again.
- PG:** What did you do with matured corn when you picked it?
- RD:** Well, we had a -what you call a corncrib and we had to shovel it in there. That would hold just about 800 bushels. We shoveled in it there and then it was used for hog feed.
- PG:** You always had some pigs.
- RD:** We always had pigs, and they always got to be fed up to about 210 pounds. That was the average [weight] that they wanted, and then they sold.
- PG:** Did you take the husks off of the corn right away?
- RD:** Oh yes, out in the fields.
- PG:** Out in the field already you took the husks off.
- RD:** Yah, that [corn] was clean then. Then you could take a shovel and shovel it [the corn on cobs] into the corncrib.
- PG:** Did you use the cobs for burning in the house too?
- RD:** Oh yes, a lot of it. When it was dry, we had to pick them up and put them in the shed someplace, so they would stay dry. It was really good fuel, them corncobs, but it didn't last long.
- PG:** Easy to make fire, but the fire would go out.
- RD:** Right.
- PG:** When you plowed with the horses, how many hours a day could you keep the horses going?
- RD:** Well, it was usually from seven in the morning till twelve at noon. Then we had a two-hour feeding for the horses, then we'd go out and we'd plow until just before dark. Then we'd go home. There would be about- oh, about 11-12 hours.
- PG:** That's a lot of hours.
- RD:** It was a lot of hours! You had to put in hours, because you didn't accomplish much, like with tractors.
- PG:** You did not walk behind the plows did you?
- RD:** No, we had a gang plow and a sod plow. We usually plowed with both, so we had three bottoms.
- PG:** Sod plow, that was always the one bottom. Did you harrow the fields or not?
- RD:** Oh, yes. I walked behind that harrow a lot. We had a five-section harrow and then four horses on there, and then you couldn't use the cart. And then when we had enough horses, then we'd have six horses on that drag and then we could use the cart.
- PG:** Oh, then you rode on the cart.
- RD:** Then we could ride on that little cart. I still got the cart.



**PG:** Oh. Otherwise you had five horses?

**RD:** Four.

**PG:** Four horses on the five-section harrow. How wide was the harrow?

**RD:** Well, I think it was about 27 feet, I think -26 [feet]. It was five sections.

**PG:** Five sections and four horses. If you had a cart, then you needed another horse.

**RD:** Then you needed six horses.

**PG:** Six horses. Was the cart that hard to pull?

**RD:** Not really, but the way that drag was set up, each side -you had two horses here and two horses here. There was no "evener" that you could put five horses on. So you had three horses and then three horses. That's the way that worked.

**PG:** Either two or three on one side. The same number on one side as on the other side.

**RD:** One guy told me one time you could rig it up five horses too, if you had the right kind of eveners but we didn't have.

**PG:** How did you pick rocks? Did you use the wagon?

**RD:** Used the wagon, loaded them up, picked them up in the field and put them on the wagon. And then when the wagon was full, then we had to drive over to the rock pile and unload them one by one.

**PG:** Oh, unload them one by one. What about the big ones that you couldn't lift? Sometimes you lifted too much?

**RD:** Well, you would have to have a piece of plank and then you'd roll it up on the plank. Kind of slanted, then you'd roll it up there. That was the only way you could get them up there. Then if you had a lot of big ones, then you'd have to take the skid out and roll them on there and take them over to the rock pile. I know we used to do that a lot when the rocks were so big then you couldn't lift them onto the wagon. You'd take the skid and take two horses and then you could. When you had that many on, then you had to go to the rock pile.

**PG:** Do you remember any "*Brauche*" [folk healing] when somebody was sick?

**RD:** I heard them talk about it a lot, but we never had any thing that we had to do. I don't know, I just never believed in it really.

**Lady Speaking:** I think the Catholics did that.

**RD:** Well, I don't know. I mean, to me it just seemed like it was kind of something you could get by without. But a lot of people did that.

**PG:** Did you have home remedies? Did your mother have any of her own home remedies?

**RD:** Well, it was usually camphor salve.

**PG:** How about goose fat; did you use goose fat for something?

- RD:** Not that I can remember. I never used that goose fat; I don't know why not.
- PG:** But you raised geese?
- RD:** Oh yah. We raised geese, and then every so often you had to drive them into the barn and then they'd pick them, you know, pick the feathers.
- PG:** Pick the feathers from the live geese.
- RD:** From the live geese. Now I still can't understand, I was pretty young yet then. They'd pick the feathers and put them in a flour sack, you know, and make pillows out of them. And then what we didn't use, it was tied up and hung up high in the granary, you know, so that nothing could get at it. There were some [feathers stored] in that granary for a long, long time. I don't know what happened to them but it was really something.
- PG:** I guess I was going to ask, do you remember using the cornhusks for mattresses or pillows?
- RD:** Oh yes. I even slept on one of them.
- PG:** Did you?
- RD:** Yah, but that was hard. I mean they weren't -wasn't soft.
- PG:** Oh, was it lumpy?
- RD:** Not so lumpy, but it's just more or less like the table. It didn't "sponge". I know we had one bed. And then I had a guy staying here; I didn't want to sleep with him, you know, so he slept in the bed. We had, I don't know what they called it, you could make a bed out of it but it had no spring in it; and then cornhusks in there for a mattress. That's where I slept. I had blankets, you know, just because I didn't like to sleep with the guy.
- PG:** Sure. Did you have any ghost stories or superstitions?
- RD:** Quite a few. When we bought that land down south, then they always said that there were ghosts down there. They said they'd set their shoes down and in the morning the shoes were moved, you know. Then they said that they'd come along with a team of horses driving, and there was somebody in front, all white, you know, and they claimed it was ghosts. But when we bought that land, I was down there a lot, you know, at night, and I never saw one. But that was just imagination, you know. I don't know where it ever originated.
- PG:** Tell me again about their shoes?
- RD:** Yah, they set their shoes down in the evening where they took them off, and in the mornings they would be moved to a different place.
- PG:** Oh, the shoes would be moved, okay. Our tape is getting full so we are going to end this side of the tape. So, thank you, Reuben. My pleasure visiting with you about this old time stuff. It is very interesting.
- RD:** Yah, I know many things about old times. About thrashing and everything, but that is way too much.
- PG:** If we have time, maybe we can continue another time, and fill up the other side of the tape.