

Interview with Sister Bernadine Bickler (BB)

Conducted by Michael M. Miller (MM)

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MM: It's the 10th of April, 1996 and I'm Michael Miller, the Germans from Russia Bibliographer at North Dakota State University Libraries in Fargo. It's a pleasure to visit with Sister Mary Bernardine Bickler at the Convent of St. Francis in Hankinson, North Dakota. Sister Bickler's original name was Elizabeth Bickler. Sister Bernardine, it's a real pleasure for me to be here today in Hankinson and quite a privilege especially to visit with Sister Bernardine because I have known her for many years and even knew some of her family members.

MM: Tell me your full name, when you were born and where you were born.

BB: My full name is Elizabeth Bickler and I was born on a farm at Orrin, North Dakota in Pierce County and the date is October 11, 1913.

MM: So, you were born October 11, 1913. What was your father's name?

BB: My father's name is Lewis Bickler.

MM: And where did your father come from?

BB: My father came from Russia. He was eleven years old when he came over with his parents.

MM: And do you remember where they lived in Russia?

BB: They came from Kandel [and Mannheim villages].

MM: Kandel was one of the Kutschurgan villages I mentioned earlier.

BB: You know, I have a certificate from Ellis Island and they say they came from Bessarabia, my grandparents. [My father, Lewis Bickler was born in Colätts, Bessarabia while his father Michael Buechler was working on construction projects in Bessarabia and Rumania. The family then returned to the Kutschurgan village of Mannheim, Russia before immigrating to the US in March, 1903].

MM: When and where did your father die?

BB: My father died in Balta, North Dakota and is buried in the cemetery in Balta.

MM: Do you remember about what year he died?

BB: He died on February 22, 1973.

MM: What was your mother's name and her maiden name?

BB: My mother's name was Kathryn Thomas. Now, I cannot tell you much about my mother because my mother died when I was barely over a year old. So, I really don't know too much about my mother.

- MM:** She was born in South Russia also?
- BB:** Evidently. We don't know for sure but I do have some information here that I just happen to look at the other day and it really doesn't say.
- MM:** Now, how many brothers and sisters did you have?
- BB:** I was the only one of my dad's first wife. Then my father married again and I had nine half brothers and sisters.
- MM:** And your stepmother?
- BB:** My stepmother was Barbara Bohl.
- MM:** Now, was she German Russian too?
- BB:** She was German Russian too.
- MM:** Did she come from the old country too?
- BB:** She came from the old country and I think she was only two years old or something like that when they came over. She was a baby. They settled in Fulda, North Dakota.
- MM:** When and where did she die?
- BB:** She died in 1983 on June 20th.
- MM:** Up in Pierce County also?
- BB:** She died at Rugby, ND in the nursing home.
- MM:** And she is buried...?
- BB:** She is buried at Balta next to dad. And my mother Kathryn Thomas is also buried in Balta. She was first buried at what they call the Kandel Cemetery [near Orrin, ND]. When Balta opened their cemetery, they transferred the body. She is the one that has the iron cross.
- MM:** So your father re-married and he had nine more children and those were your half-brothers and sisters? Then you were the only child from the first marriage? Very interesting. You don't remember your mother, but did your stepmother talk about the old country?
- BB:** Not very much. She was too young.
- MM:** What about your father?
- BB:** My father didn't talk much about it. This is what I feel bad all the time about. Because unless he did and it went in one ear and out the other one. Somebody said we weren't interested in those days. Furthermore, when we started school we could not speak English and we were disciplined because we were speaking German. We were not to speak German in school. I suppose in those days then everybody said, "Quiet."
- MM:** Was this in the country school?
- BB:** No, this was in Balta.

- MM:** Oh, you went to school in town?
- BB:** We went to Balta school in town.
- MM:** And how far did you live from Balta?
- BB:** Six miles.
- MM:** So, how did you get to school every day?
- BB:** On the bus with horse and buggy or one of those busses, those home made things. Picked up about three or four families.
- MM:** When you started the first grade, could you speak English?
- BB:** All I knew was my name. I asked my mother, "What shall I say when they ask my name?" Then she said, in those days Lizzie was suppose to be English for Elizabeth. I forgot all about it and so I said it in German, Elizabeth Bickler and it was the same in English at the same time. I always stayed Elizabeth.
- MM:** Were there many other students that didn't speak English?
- BB:** Oh, yes. There were only about..., I imagine three or four families that were not German in that school.
- MM:** And you had an English-speaking teacher?
- BB:** An English speaking teacher. But we must have picked it up very fast. My mother at time that couldn't speak English at all.
- MM:** Before we go on with life back in Pierce County, I am going to ask you a few questions about your religious life so we're fresh to ask those. What were some of the religious customs practiced in your home that were related, for example, to feast days? Was that important?
- BB:** Oh yes, that was very important, the feast days. In fact, I wrote an article on that sometime ago and one of the feast days was the Name Day. We didn't celebrate any birthdays but we celebrated Name Days, the father and the mother. Those were always big parties, German with some kind of dancing. Every church feast was very important to us. In our home, we had an altar in a corner and it was my godfather who made those altars. That was Father Joe Axtmann's father, which by marriage we were related. So we had this altar in this corner and that's where we prayed our night prayers and morning prayers. I remember there was a statue of the Blessed Mother and St. Joseph in there and candles. I remember as a little girl I'd go out in the pastures and pick wild flowers and kept flowers in there.
- MM:** So that was a very important part of the home?
- BB:** That was very important and of course, we had to say our grace before and after meals. My grandmother was a very religious woman, my paternal grandmother.
- MM:** What was her name?
- BB:** Margaret Buechler.
- MM:** What was her maiden name?
- BB:** Her maiden name was Reiter.

- MM:** What about New Years? Was there anything special on New Years Day?
- BB:** Well, not exactly. Christmas, of course, was very important because in those days when I was still home, we were very poor in the beginning. We had an orange or a couple pieces of candies and we thought we had the world for Christmas. Of course, there was the Christkindl that came and stopped and we had to say some prayers. They asked us what prayers we knew and we had to say some prayers in German before we'd get anything.
- MM:** What were the strong religious influences in your life? Were there some strong religious influences from your home that made your decision to join the convent?
- BB:** Well, that and also I had an uncle going to St. John's [Collegeville, MN] and we wrote quite a bit to each other. He was going to be a priest but he didn't make it. Also on my mother's side, on the Thomas side, there was also a nun I had corresponded with. But then before I was sixteen, all of us in those days did, my brother and I were shocking and we'd always shock so we'd have one row that we could rest. We always stayed behind the binder. I don't know, all of a sudden it was just like something told me that you should go to the convent, but I didn't think that was anything. Then we had retreat master, Father Theophilis, who was a saint. He spoke to the boys and the girls separate and when he spoke to us, I was then 15 years old, and when I came out of the church, my aunt was with me, my dad's sister, I said, "Well Aunt Margaret, I am going to go to the convent. I know what I am going to do." She turned to me and said, "You? I don't think you'd make a good nun" or something like that. I left it at that until I was past eighteen already but this urge was coming to me stronger and stronger. Then I finally wrote to my uncle and didn't tell my parents at all. Then at that time, the girls that were leaving from Orrin or Balta parish were going to Bella, New York. I thought that was an awful far way to go away. Then my uncle wrote back and said, "I have already talked to the sisters down here". At that time, the sisters cooked at St. Johns in Collegeville. They said you can come anytime to Hankinson. You have a mother house right in Hankinson, you don't have to go to New York. Well, what am I going to do now? What am I going to do with this letter? Then I showed the letter to my mother and she said, "Are you really serious?" I said, "Yes I am serious." Then she told me I would have to talk to dad. It took me a few days to get nerve enough to tell dad. He didn't say anything for a while, I just gave him the letter. Finally he said, "You know when you go, you can't come back anymore." In those days, the Sisters didn't go home anymore. I said, "I know that, but I still want to go if I may." "If that's what you want," he said, "then okay." That was it.
- MM:** So, you had some encouragement from the home?
- BB:** Yes, I had some encouragement from the home. They didn't say, "No, you can't go." I was quite a bit older than my siblings were and in those days, we were poor. We didn't have much so I thought if they don't let me go, I will just have to wait until I'm older. But in those days, the girls already got married at eighteen or nineteen years old. I was old enough now to go out on my own and do my own thing. I didn't want get married, I wanted to be a sister.
- MM:** And you were in a strong Catholic community, so you had some encouragement from other people too?
- BB:** So that's how I have been blessed.
- MM:** Now beyond prayer and worship, how was the family involved in the parish? Were they involved in the parish work?

- BB:** Our parish was in Orrin. We went to school in Balta, but we went to the Orrin Parish because we were only four miles from Orrin. I always say the Germans from Russia were very strong in their religion. It meant a lot to them and it did and to us kids too because our parents were. In the beginning, the priests had a German and an English sermon, so we had to sit through the two sermons. We had only mass every other week because Blumenfeld was a mission to Orrin and so they always changed off. Then every time we went to church, we had to go to confession. I said to mother, "Well, why do we always have to go to confession when we go to church?" She said, "Don't you think you've got any sins in two weeks?"
- MM:** What were some of the religious training that you received after you left Pierce County?
- BB:** After I came here? Well, I was a postulante then for six months and I still had to go to school because I did not finish school. At the same time, I was finishing high school here. I didn't finish school at home because I had to stay home and work because I was the oldest. Years later, after I was a sister, I met my county school superintendent and she said, "I always felt so sorry for you because right at the time we were almost ready for the final exams in the 8th grade, you had to stay out and do the work and you didn't come back and finish." "Well," I said, "My dad needed me and I didn't think I needed it anyway." When you are kids, you don't think ahead. But I had a very good training here. I was here two year before I entered the Novitiate, but I finished my high school here.
- MM:** Once you came here, did you have to have financial support from home?
- BB:** At that time we didn't because of the fact in those days, it was during the depression years. We didn't have to. But we had to work here too. We worked.
- MM:** So once you came here to Hankinson, was there much contact with back home those early years?
- BB:** Only by letters. Although when I first came, one year I was still going home. The first time I came home was..., I came in April and this was in July and we were sent home until school started again. We first had to go to summer school and then we were sent home. When I got off the train and my dad said, "Are you home for good now?" I says, "No dad, only for two months and then I go back again." He thought I had enough already of the convent.
- MM:** When you came down here to Hankinson, were there quite a number of other German-Russian sisters?
- BB:** No, there weren't. After that though, there were a number of them that came later. In fact, I think I was the only German-Russian at that time.
- MM:** Really? This was in what year?
- BB:** That was in 1932.
- MM:** During the depression years, you were here in Hankinson? Now, did your family ever come down here to visit?
- BB:** On my reception, they came. When I was received into the Novitiate.
- MM:** What year was that?
- BB:** That was in 1935 when the family came. In those days, the roads were bad and it was quite a distance at that time.

MM: Now, did you ever get involved in your work with this Anti-Garb law? You weren't affected by that?

BB: No, because I went into nursing.

MM: And where did you do your nursing work?

BB: I graduated from St. Bernard's Hospital in Chicago. I was five years in Chicago. I graduated from the school of nursing and then from Loyola with a BS in nursing education in Loyola University in Chicago.

MM: And then you came back to North Dakota?

BB: Then I came back here to North Dakota. The last six months I was in Chicago, I also took a graduate course in obstetrics, maternity work. Then when I came back here, we did not have any hospitals yet and so I just worked here and was working for the Red Cross in Richland County. Cardinal Muench you know, he was in Germany. At one time the sisters from Germany thought that they needed somebody over there to direct their schools of nursing because the medical field was very low in Germany at that time, right after the war. Cardinal Muench happened to stop here and my superior talked to him. He said, "Oh no, an American could not work over there right now." Things were so bad that he would not recommend her going over there at this time, maybe in a few years, but not now. That was right after the war in 1945. Then in the fall of 1947, we got our first hospital. Then I was working in St. Johns in Fargo for four years. I was three years obstetrical supervisor and then one year as director of nurses. Then I came back here because I felt that I should come back to the community because I've been away from the community for so long. You know, you miss community when you are gone. This is home. They said, "Do you think you can get enough nursing around here?" I said, "Well, I don't know. I'll do whatever you want me to do." I made a vow of obedience. Therefore, I felt whatever they wanted me to do, I'll do. I taught the 5th and 6th grade for one year only. Then we got a hospital right here [in Hankinson] and that worked out fine.

MM: Then the rest of your years were in the hospitals?

BB: Always in the hospitals. We started our hospital then in Drayton, that was the first one. So, then they opened one after the other. I was hospital administrator for thirty years. Also beside that, I did obstetrical work. In a smaller hospital, you can do many things. You wear many hats.

MM: Let's go back to your early childhood years again. With your being the oldest in the family, you had to do a lot of supervising and a lot of chores?

BB: Oh, yes.

MM: What were some of those chores?

BB: Well, some of those chores was cooking and cleaning house and taking care of the babies, milking cows. I did everything.

MM: What about when someone in the family who didn't want to do their work? Was there much discipline?

BB: Oh yes, a lot of discipline. But my dad never had to use the strap. He just looked at you when he said something and you knew he meant it.

MM: When you first went to church in Pierce County, were the religious services in English or German?

- BB:** German and Latin.
- MM:** And Catechism too?
- BB:** Well, Catechism by that time was in English, but the sermons were all in German. Then they finally started German and English so you'd have two sermons.
- MM:** Do you remember when they started that in English?
- BB:** I can't, just can't. I was eight years old when I made my First Communion, so that must have started before that.
- MM:** When you spoke only German in the home, was there encouragement to learn English quickly?
- BB:** Oh yes, there was encouragement to learn English.
- MM:** There was reading material so that you learn English?
- BB:** Oh, yes. My father spoke English, but my mother didn't.
- MM:** Did she learn English?
- BB:** She did. She could help herself, basic English. But other than that, I don't think she ever....
- MM:** Did your folks encourage the family to go on for education?
- BB:** Oh, yes. Not in the beginning years so much. But later on, they did.
- MM:** What about Confirmation? Was that important?
- BB:** Oh yes, that was very important.
- MM:** Do you remember what all took place to be Confirmed?
- BB:** It was the church ceremony and Bishop Ryan confirmed me. He was the second Bishop in the Fargo diocese and we had a big celebration after that. Confirmation was very important to me.
- MM:** So, your family had a strong religious tone to it?
- BB:** Oh yes, they did. I think they got that from my grandmother who was very strong and religious. In fact, she used to tell me what they did when they first came to this country.
- MM:** Tell me a little about that.
- BB:** They didn't have any priests, didn't have any churches and so they would meet in each others home and it was mostly grandma's home. They would read from the scriptures or say the Rosary. They led their own services. Once a month, there was a priest that came where they could have mass in a home until they built a church. But, she always kept the family together and saw that you kept Sunday. Sunday was a holy day.
- MM:** Did your folk's talk much about the old country back in Russia?
- BB:** No, they didn't.
- MM:** Now everyone in your family, did they come to America as far as you know? Your uncles and aunts?

- BB:** Yes, they all came to America and no one stayed behind.
- MM:** Now when there was a death in the family, how was that taken place? Was there quite a grieving experience?
- BB:** Yes, it was. We never had any except.... The only one I can really remember was my aunt and this was my stepmother's sister. They had all night wakes in those days. I remember I liked Aunt Amelia so much that my mother gave me permission to go along for this night wake. They would stop and pray and visit. But all night they sat there in the home.
- MM:** They still had the bodies in the home then?
- BB:** Oh, yes. They had the bodies in the home.
- MM:** Was there some singing too?
- BB:** No, I don't remember them singing.
- MM:** A lot of prayer?
- BB:** Prayer. But that was kind of a sad situation. I think they were married only a year and she was pregnant. She got a ruptured appendix and they were going to abort the baby and she wouldn't let them and they both died.
- MM:** Now your mother and your father in their home, they must have some family heirlooms, some keepsakes.
- BB:** Yes they did, but I don't know what happened to them. I always feel bad about that because when they moved and then after mother went to the nursing home, they had a sale. You're so far away from everything so I really don't know what happened. Once I did ask my brother, "Well, what happened to this and this picture that they used to have in the home?" They had a beautiful picture of Mary and Jesus, those old, old pictures. Well, he didn't know what happened to them. I felt kinda bad about it but there was nothing I could do.
- MM:** There is really no one in the family who is keeping those family treasures?
- BB:** Not that I know of.
- MM:** Who is still living in your family?
- BB:** Oh, they are all living except one.
- MM:** Are they mostly in North Dakota?
- BB:** Well, my four brothers are all in North Dakota and one sister is still in North Dakota.
- MM:** Have you had a family reunion recently?
- BB:** No, we haven't.
- MM:** How was Christmas celebrated in the family? Was there a Belzenickel?
- BB:** Oh, yes. The Belzenickel and Christkindl.

- MM:** You remember those distinctly?
- BB:** I remember those. I had to make [be] the Christkindl one year before I went to the convent.
- MM:** But as a child, do you remember them coming?
- BB:** Oh yes, I remember them coming. I remember the first time I looked at somebody's Christkindel shoes. Afterwards, I said to mother, "Oh, that was Aunt Margaret." She said, "Don't say anything!"
- MM:** That's cute. You were smart enough to know that already. At the time, you didn't tell her that?
- BB:** No, I didn't tell her that at the time.
- MM:** What about Easter? We just recently celebrated Easter.
- BB:** Yes, Easter was a great celebration in the home too. We had to make all the Good Friday, Holy Saturday and all those Holy Thursday [services]. Some of the customs we had on Easter morning? We kids used to make nests and we made those nests in the dirt outside. Then we put a little straw in it. Then we would take a board and put it on top because we were afraid that it was going to snow or something during the night. Now, "Who is going to take the board off?" Then we said, "The first one to wake up in the morning better get down early and take those boards off." One time, I went down to take the board off and that was fine. But then after we got up, there was nothing in our nest. My dad hid everything all over the yard. I think he was out before I was because the board was still on the nest.
- MM:** That's where they had their Easter baskets, was out in the yard?
- BB:** Out in the yard. Not inside.
- MM:** Did they have special food at Easter time? What did they usually make?
- BB:** Usually ham and what you have now days.
- MM:** Was there a lot of cooking?
- BB:** Oh yes, lot of cooking. A lot of kuchen and all those German [foods] and good chicken noodle soup.
- MM:** Do you remember some of those German-Russian weddings?
- BB:** You know, I think I only attended one of those German Russian weddings, and that was after I was a sister. That was one of my nephews and it was a three day affair.
- MM:** So because you were at the convent, you didn't get back home to attend a lot of those weddings?
- BB:** No. You see in the early days in the convent, we didn't go home at all, except if there was a death in the family. But then that was changed, it was after eleven years. Well, eleven years is a long time. When I first came home after eleven years, when I walked into that house, I thought the ceiling was going to fall on me. Well, because here you've got everything so high and in a home, it's lower. Then it was changed to five years. But now, we can go home every year. Or if we do have anything going on in the family, we are allowed to go. Like a year ago, I was at my nephew's wedding.
- MM:** In your house back home, was there much music or entertainment?

- BB:** There wasn't much music in our house, not as long as I was home at least. In the summer time, we would get out and play and in the wintertime, we all had lessons and homework to do.
- MM:** When they had people getting together at your house, were the children allowed to participate?
- BB:** Oh, no. They had to be in another room.
- MM:** What did the kids do then?
- BB:** The kids did their lessons and then went to bed.
- MM:** So, there wasn't much playing around?
- BB:** No, there wasn't much playing around.
- MM:** Was it quite strict?
- BB:** Oh, yes. My dad was strict that way.
- MM:** Did your mother have much to say on family decisions?
- BB:** Oh, yes. She participated in the decisions, like to buy something. There was a partnership.
- MM:** What about those dance halls? There must have been dances, wasn't there? Did you get to many dances?
- BB:** Yes there were, but I never went there.
- MM:** Because of too much work at home?
- BB:** Well, I just didn't care to go.
- MM:** So, you just weren't into dancing?
- BB:** No, I wasn't into dancing. Well, at the age of sixteen, I already wanted to go the convent. But I knew I couldn't because I was needed at home.
- MM:** Right? Your interests were different than social?
- BB:** Yes.
- MM:** What kind of games did you children play at the time?
- BB:** We used to play tag or anti-over. You know what that is? I can't think of that other one. Just slipped my mind now.
- MM:** Were there many books in your house?
- BB:** My father was a very avid reader. In fact, I think he went to the library once a week in Orrin.
- MM:** Oh, really? Was it a public library?
- BB:** Well, evidently there must have been a public library. I just can't remember. But I know my mother used to get so mad at him because he'd start a book and she'd wake up at night and he was still reading.

MM: Now, were these in German or English?

BB: No, English.

MM: By then, he was reading English? So, he was an avid reader?

BB: I am too and several sisters are avid readers also.

MM: Oh, wonderful. So it developed into family and the children which is very important. Then it developed into self-education?

BB: Well, my father was a self-educated man because he only made the fourth grade. So, he was a self-educated man and he was county commissioner for many years.

MM: What was his profession?

BB: Farmer. But he was county commissioner and also on the school board.

MM: Did he get active in politics?

BB: Well, I don't know. He must have because one time I said to him when I was already in the convent and it was shortly before an election and I said, "Dad, what are you, a Republican or a Democrat?" "How can you ask such a question? In North Dakota, we are all Republicans," he said.

MM: That's changed, hasn't it? In North Dakota, we have both Democrats and Republicans.

BB: He said, "What are you?" I said, "I don't know, but I vote for the man that I like."

MM: Now, let's go back again to some of those home experiences. Were there any healing techniques when somebody got sick?

BB: Oh, yes. Those were very important because my grandmother was a midwife. So, when anybody was sick in the neighborhood, they would call grandma. I've got a lot of her things, from my grandmother and I used to go out with her to pick herbs. I didn't know what they were at that time and now I feel bad because I don't. But the one thing was the Camomile Tea. Of course, that grew in our yard in those days. I always said she used the Camomile Tea almost like an antiseptic. I remember my brother, the parents were gone and my aunt was suppose to be babysitting. My brother fell against a milk pail or something and he cut his cheek. Of course, my aunt was suppose to take care of it, but she didn't want to take any responsibility on that. So I got some hot Camomile Tea and washed it out and cleaned it and put a tape over it. I saw him a couple weeks ago and I still don't see a scar there. Then he was only a kid. I know my grandmother, when somebody was sick and my mother would say, "What should I give him for a stomach ache or something?" and she said, "Just make some chicken soup." She had great faith in chicken soup and so do I. I think my love for nursing came from my grandmother and I went into obstetrics too, you know.

MM: Was there any Brauche? Remember that? Was like folk medicine. Was that practiced at all around your home?

BB: I can't remember that.

MM: You can't remember anyone going to a lady who would pray for someone?

- BB:** No, I can't remember that. The only thing that I remember is when my grandmother was going to the neighbors. When somebody was sick in the neighborhood and my grandmother would go there. One time, the neighbors had diphtheria and of course, they called her. My father put all the kids in the car and we were going down to grandmas. My grandfather came running out of the house and said, "Lewis, you take those children right home!" Don't let them get out of the car because we are quarantined Because mother being up with the Fritel's and they have diphtheria." When the health inspector used to come, she would go out and hide herself in the barn because they needed her. They couldn't take care of this child. The child did die of diphtheria, he was about my age. So everywhere she was called, they knew Mrs. Buechler knew how to take care of them. I met the doctor one time, was years after, even when I was a sister and he was still alive. I said, "You know, my grandmother was a midwife years, years ago and I know you used to work with her." And I said, "I wonder, didn't she ever worry about it?" He said, "I never had to worry about her because she always knew if there was going to be a problem, she would let me know. I never worried about her."
- MM:** Very interesting. Did you ever write some of those folk medicines down?
- BB:** The only place that I wrote it down was this article that I had written in this one book we were talking about last time.
- MM:** Did you ever hear any other languages spoken back at home?
- BB:** No, I don't think of any. Just German and English.
- MM:** Like any special phrases?
- BB:** I can't even think of any now. I know they had some old phrases but some you can't even translate into English.
- MM:** Did you learn the German language so that you could read and write it?
- BB:** Well, after I came to school here I took two years of German. I think I could write it if I put my mind to it. But I can read anything in German language unless it's in the German script, then I have a hard time.
- MM:** In your home, did the family subscribe to any German newspapers?
- BB:** Oh, yes. *The Staatsanzeiger* was always there and the *Dakota Farmer*. Those were always the two papers that came.
- MM:** So, they did receive a German newspaper and that was read cover to cover?
- BB:** Oh, yes. Then there was also another one, *The Nord Dakota Herald* and *The Dakota Wanderer*.
- MM:** Where there some religious or Catholic publications you received in German?
- BB:** That I don't remember. I don't think so.
- MM:** What kind of information did the family get from those newspapers?
- BB:** I can't remember, I was quite young. In the *Dakota Farmer*, I was always looking for the recipes because I loved to cook.

- MM:** Now, let's go back to the time when you were on the farm. Do you remember the days when there was no electricity?
- BB:** When I left, there was no electricity in 1932. We didn't have it then.
- MM:** Do you remember the kerosene lamps?
- BB:** Oh, yes. The kerosene lamp and the gas lamp and the coal and no running water.
- MM:** Do you remember anyone living in a sod house?
- BB:** Yes. My sister Mary lived there in a sod house after she got married.
- MM:** What was her name?
- BB:** Magdalene Hager and they lived near Selz, [ND]. And before they moved to Montana, they lived in a sod house.
- MM:** They did? Did you visit that sod house?
- BB:** Yes. I did visit that sod house and it was quite something.
- MM:** Do you still remember and what do you remember about it?
- BB:** Those big walls. I think it must have been in the summertime and it was so cool in there. I said, "My, that cool!" She said, "Look at those walls, how thick they are. They keep all the heat out." Of course, they had remodeled inside.
- MM:** Do you remember the first telephone or were you already in the convent?
- BB:** I was already gone by then.
- MM:** That was true for the radio too?
- BB:** We had no radio.
- MM:** But you remember the radio in the convent?
- BB:** In the convent, yes. The first radio.
- MM:** Were you allowed to listen to the radio?
- BB:** Well, in those days we weren't allowed unless it was as a community. But then in 1936, when I went to Chicago to school there, we had more access to it.
- MM:** Do you remember any of those old programs?
- BB:** Oh, yes.
- MM:** What were some of those old ones that you remember?
- BB:** Bing Crosby. But there was another one way, way back.... Abbot and Costello. And then in Chicago every Saturday, we were a group of three sisters boarding at this convent. One of those sisters who was in nurses training used to be a drama teacher. She would tell us about these operas that were coming on

Saturday and we listened to the operas. And there I got to really appreciate the operas. To this day, I still turn my radio on Saturdays and listen to the opera.

MM: Watching TV by then, you were here in Hankinson? You remember the first TV program?

BB: I can't remember that.

MM: Do you remember those early days watching the Lawrence Welk Show?

BB: Oh, yes. The Lawrence Welk Show was important and I think probably was the only program we were allowed to watch for a long time.

MM: Was that important to the convent to watch it? Did a lot of people watch it?

BB: Oh, yes. They still do, the elderly sisters. Every Sunday night, one of the groups that is not playing cards is in there watching Lawrence Welk.

MM: You probably saw us in December then?

BB: Oh yes, we did they all made a point to look at it. You did okay.

MM: Which family member do you remember best? Who had the most influence in your life?

BB: In my immediate family? Well, of course my parents, those would be the first ones. Especially my dad. I was close to my dad and probably it was of the fact of my stepmother, although she was very good to me. I can't complain about her, she was very good to me.

MM: But your father was your real father and you were his only child [from his first marriage] and he felt a certain kinship?

BB: In fact, sometimes I would hear my mother say to somebody, "Yah, he always kinda dotes on her."

MM: Oh, she was a favorite? Did your grandparent's come along over from the old country?

BB: Well, my grandparents came with the children.

MM: Do you remember your grandparents?

BB: Oh, yes. I remember my grandparents very well.

MM: Did they talk about the old country?

BB: My grandfather used to, but he always called them the "Bolsheviks."

MM: I guess we have to pick up the pieces and do our best now.

BB: I remember one time, you knew my Uncle Pete, he is dead now. I thought, there was my dad, then there was Uncle John and then Uncle Pete. I thought surely he would know something about my mother, but he couldn't remember anything about my mother.

MM: Because I remember as a child in Strasburg that my parents were very close to the Bicklers, to Pete and Rose. Rose was my mother's first cousin, she was a Baumgartner. And once in a while I remember your family, someone must have either went up to Rugby or to Pierce County or they would come down. I

remember when I got interested in all this, Pete would always say that you should have talked to my brother. He did a lot of reading. That would have been your father?

BB: I bet that was my father.

MM: Yes, I think so. Because little did I know that I would be interviewing you today, but I think that came out quite clearly that he said it's too bad that we couldn't have him involved with all of the German Russian activities. That's true in many cases.

BB: Well, this is what I have been thinking. If only somebody could have talked to my dad.

MM: Because there aren't too many that were willing to do that and not so many that were readers. Especially when you said they subscribed to those German newspapers. That was very important to them.

BB: No, not too many were readers.

MM: Did you grow up in a family where there was much sewing, kept textiles, did weaving or bobbin lace or something like that?

BB: Well, my grandmother did a lot of crocheting, beautiful crocheting. I don't think she had patterns because I never remember her using a pattern when she would crochet some of these laces for the albs and for the church and tablecloths. I've kinda taken this up now that I am semi-retired, I do a lot of crocheting. My mother made all our clothes and just before I left for the convent, she taught me how to sew. After I got to the convent, I didn't sew anymore. Oh, I suppose I could put something together. One time, I wanted a certain dress and I showed it to her in the catalog. "Well, we don't have any money to send for this, but I will make it for you." And she did just by looking at it.

MM: Where did she get the material to make it?

BB: She bought that in a store in Rugby. Every so often, we'd get to Rugby to do some shopping after we had a car.

MM: Was that a big deal, going to Rugby?

BB: Oh, my yes! I was allowed to go to Rugby once with my Uncle Wendelin and my father gave me an eight-gallon can of cream. So, my uncle kinda took care of this and gave me the money. I think \$8.00 and some cents and I bought myself a dress for the 4th of July. I paid \$5.00 for the dress and then I.... I always loved plants and I went to greenhouse and bought myself a little fern for 10 cents. I brought the rest of the money back and I said, "Here dad is the rest of this money. I got so much and this is all that I spent." He said, "If I would have known that you don't need anything else, I would have told you to bring me a white shirt." I will never forget that. Then I think to myself, who would bring the rest of the money back these days and give it to their father?

MM: I think that was you're up bringing.

BB: Yes, honesty and I knew we were poor.

MM: Was that certainly a sense in the family that the children knew they were poor and they had to make the best of it?

- BB:** Yes. But my father always said, "As long as we had meat and potatoes, we won't starve." When my father was a County Commissioner, he told me that one time that they wanted him to take welfare out for our big family. Everybody was taking welfare. He said, "Oh, no. As long as we have potatoes and meat, my family is not going to starve. I'll never take out welfare. Even if we have to cut down on some things but that, I will not do." My father was a man, if he didn't have the money, he didn't buy it.
- MM:** It had to be paid in cash? Not much credit?
- BB:** It had to be paid in cash. They didn't believe in credit. In those days, they didn't have any to put in. Later he did, but not then.
- MM:** The house that you lived in, was it a small house?
- BB:** They tell me that at first when my father got married, they lived in a chicken coop renovated into a house and that is where I lived. My mother died at my grandmothers, my grandmother took care of her. But then in 1916 after he got married the second time, he built the house. It is still standing there, but nobody is living in it.
- MM:** And is the farm homestead still in the Bickler family?
- BB:** Part of it is and part of it is rented out and is still in the family.
- MM:** Do you have any brothers that are farmers?
- BB:** I have two brothers that are farmers in Pierce County.
- MM:** So, they stayed around home?
- BB:** They stayed around home. In fact, this one brother is having surgery today for cancer. I haven't heard anything yet.
- MM:** Did your family express interest in their German Russian roots?
- BB:** Yes they have, especially my sister Rose.
- MM:** What is her full name?
- BB:** It's Rose Sperry from Coos Bay, Oregon. I'll have to give you her address because I am sure she has been wanting some of this and I have sent her some materials out there that you sent to me. And Margaret I guess, at one time was very interested. But now both her son and daughter are kinda working on a family tree too.
- MM:** On what side?
- BB:** I think it's on the Axtman side. Although Mary Lynn has sent me some on the Thomas side that she has found.
- MM:** So, your mother and then you learned to make your own clothes? Did she prepare the clothes when you left for the convent?
- BB:** Yes. At first, it was special clothes. But then as I said, we were very poor at that time so sometimes we'd get clothes from here.

- MM:** What about quilts? Did they have these quilting parties?
- BB:** No, not at that time. But when my mother got older, she made quilts.
- MM:** So, she did make quilts?
- BB:** Oh, yes.
- MM:** She kept it up as long as she could? Of course, you were gone to the convent, but you heard about all those quilting parties?
- BB:** Oh, yes. But she made those feather beds.
- MM:** Oh, she did?
- BB:** Oh, yes. I brought a feather bed with me when I came to the convent.
- MM:** Do you have any of your mother's fine work?
- BB:** No, I don't have any of her fine work.
- MM:** And *Dakota Farmer*, as you mentioned earlier, was important in your family. That was like..., you could hardly wait until you got the *Dakota Farmer*?
- BB:** Yes, that was in English!
- MM:** Yes, you were glad of that. So, there was no English newspaper in your house?
- BB:** *The Dakota Farmer* and *The Pierce County Tribune*, I remember. Yes, that was English.
- MM:** Here at the Convent of St. Francis, have they encouraged the nuns to take time and study their roots?
- BB:** Yes, they have. They are interested. I think as you said, you wanted a copy of this book that's in the chapel. While you were talking there today, I said, "I never thought of this, but years down when the younger ones are coming, they are not going to know anything about these sisters, the pioneers."
- MM:** It's very important to place this in other locations where there is a lot of research going on. But I think you can help us in letting us know who in the family is interested in this so that we can inform them from the University. Because I think, as I mentioned at lunch, it takes it to another step when they see a University getting involved. Because it's rare in America that a University got involved with it's ethnic people in this state as the University is in Fargo.
- MM:** I have a few last questions and comments. First of all, I would like to ask how you feel about the importance of this family history and culture being passed down to other generations?
- BB:** Well, I feel that it is very, very important and the older I get, the more important I feel that it is. When we are young, we don't think about this. But as we get older we think, now, who were my relatives? We lose touch of them. I think the young generation is the one that are really starting this up.
- MM:** Right, and they have the advantage because of the computer technology. For example, if you could get on the World Wide Web, you would see many pictures of when I was in those villages in Odessa in December. So, there is all this technology and we have Bishop Werth's publication with pictures on there. So they have access to connections and we have electronic mail and all of this and so it provides a

wonderful opportunity. And I think there are some young people interested. But again, we need to identify who they are in some way.

BB: When I saw this one picture you had in the newsletter, a relative of Welk's, Antonia Welk Ivonowa. Reminded me of my Grandmother Buechler.

MM: Is that right? She could just step right into North Dakota and speaks just like our people in Rugby or Strasburg, the same dialect which she kept up.

BB: Isn't that wonderful.

MM: Quite a story. And this summer in June when we are in Odessa, we are going to bring her to the hotel to interview her in detail because she knows a lot about it. Is there anything else that you would like to say that you think is important for future generations?

BB: I really don't think so. For the future generation that they shouldn't sit back and don't forget to ask their elders about their heritage. That's what was missing in our generation. I don't know, we must not have been interested in it. And of course, we had some disadvantages because there was such a rift between the Catholics and the Protestants. And when you didn't know both languages, you were punished because you didn't speak English. That kinda prevented us from really going out on this and even learning it at home, because we didn't want to be punished when we came to school.

MM: Was there ever friction between Protestants and Catholics?

BB: Oh yes, there was friction. And even in that little town of Balta, where there were only about three or four Protestant families. There was friction there especially when the Holy Days came around and we were suppose to go to church instead of school. They didn't like that when you missed school.

MM: Do you know anyone else in your family that should be interviewed?

BB: Well, Rose is very interested but she is almost the youngest in our family. Margaret and I have talked a lot about it. Mary Lynn, Margaret's daughter, has been working on this. I don't know how much she can work because of her condition. But she has sent me some material which I appreciate.

MM: We've had a wonderful discussion and we will probably think of many more things when we are done talking. But if you think of anything else, write it down. You have the questions. Remember that there is a second set of questions I am going to leave with you. The second set goes into more personal, detailed questions. Things that our German Russians didn't always want to talk about, marriage, divorce and alcoholism. I gave you those because it would be nice if we came sometime, you would be good to talk about the second series. To this point, we have done very few interviews with that second set. Most people don't want to talk about it.

BB: I believe it.

MM: It wasn't all roses amongst the German Russian families and it wasn't all roses for the mother at times, as you know. There were many good families, but they pretty much had to take a back seat in some cases.

BB: Oh yes, they did.

MM: I think we are going to finish our interview with Sister Mary Bernardine Bickler. It was a real pleasure. This is Michael Miller, Germans from Russia Bibliographer at North Dakota State University, Fargo and I want to wish Sister Bernardine a wonderful spring with many roses and many flowers. It's kind of a late spring but today, it's a beautiful day. Especially because I am here at the convent at St. Francis. Thank you.