

## Interview with Helen Biegler (HB)

Conducted by Brother Placid Gross (PG)

May 7, 2000

Transcription by Lena Paris

Edited and Proofread by Jay Gage

**PG:** Today is May 6, 2000 at Richardton, North Dakota. This is Brother Placid Gross your interviewer for the German-Russians. We will be interviewing Helen Biegler.

**HB:** My name is Helen Biegler.

**PG:** When were you born?

**HB:** I was born March 12, 1920 at 223 4th Ave NW, Aberdeen, South Dakota.

**PG:** What is your father's name?

**HB:** Bernard Joseph Biegler. But his father was deaf, so he always went by Joe. Very few people knew him as Bernard. Only when he went into World War I was he was called Bernard. Other times he was always Joe.

**PG:** Do you know when your father was born?

**HB:** March 8, 1893.

**PG:** Was he born in Russia?

**HB:** I can't remember the name of the little village. In this village there were thirteen Biegler families, and my grandpa was Joseph Dean Biegler.

**PG:** What was your grandma's name?

**HB:** My grandma's name was Odelia, but I can't remember her maiden name.

**PG:** Was your father's mother's name Odelia?

**HB:** They always called her Tillie.

**PG:** How old was your father when he came to America?

**HB:** He was 8 years old.

**PG:** So he came with his parents?

**HB:** He came with his father and mother, also a sister who was 3 years younger than he was, a brother who was 9 months old. His sister Mary and his brother Frank came to America: There were 3 children.

**PG:** Then they had more children over here in America.

**HB:** They had Katherine, Leo, Jake, Dave and Francis.

- PG:** Where is your father buried?
- HB:** Sunset Memorial in Aberdeen, SD.
- PG:** Do you know your mother's maiden name?
- HB:** My mother's maiden name was Usselmann. Her father's name was Sylvester Usselmann. And her mother's maiden name was Regina Dosch.
- PG:** And your mothers first name?
- HB:** Anna Marie who was born May 20, 1896.
- PG:** Where was she born?
- HB:** She was born in America.
- PG:** In the Aberdeen area?
- HB:** No, it's in Edmonds County, near Ipswich, South Dakota area.
- PG:** And where is she buried?
- HB:** In the Ipswich cemetery. Ipswich had a Catholic cemetery to the south, while the other half of the cemetery was for the Protestants.
- PG:** Now, that was your mother.
- HB:** Dad's folks are buried in Sacred Heart cemetery, Aberdeen, South Dakota. Mother's family come from around Ipswich.
- PG:** So where are your mothers parents buried?
- HB:** There is a rural church called "New Strasburg". I need to ask Paul about some people who lived in the Ipswich area during the late 1800s.
- PG:** How many brothers and sisters did you have?
- HB:** I was the oldest of four children: A sister named Eleanor Regina, a sister Rosella (590) and a younger brother who is Arthur Joseph.
- PG:** So there was only four children.
- HB:** Yes, we were four.
- PG:** You were never married, so you use your maiden name or your dad's family name.
- HB:** I went to parochial school for ten years. I had to repeat a class when I first started because I didn't speak English. Then I had yellow jaundice, lying on the davenport for an entire winter. My sickness is called hepatitis now.
- PG:** Did your dad remember anything about Russia?
- HB:** The only thing he remembered was his mother saying, "Joe take care of Mary." He was eight years and his little sister was six years. That was the only thing he remembered from the trip.

- PG:** Did your grandparents talk about Russia? Do you remember anything about your dad's or your mother's parents?
- HB:** No, not Mother's parents: the Doschs lived out there. My grandmother Usselmann had six sisters and three brothers. The entire settlement was practically relatives.
- PG:** Are those people still living in that area?
- HB:** No, they have all scattered.
- PG:** Are you related to the Doschs from Strasburg?
- HB:** I don't know, maybe. Grandma Usselmann's sister, whose name was Shock, married in North Dakota; but I don't remember anything more.
- PG:** Do you remember anything when your mother's parents talked about Russia?
- HB:** They did not talk about Russia. Grandma Biegler told us, after we were older, that they came to America because the Russians were against the Catholics. The German people were too ambitious. Out of thirteen families: Six families came to America and the other seven families were sent to Siberia.
- PG:** Were the Bieglers all relatives?
- HB:** They were or either intermarried. Dad's third cousin and dad's fourth cousin lived around Aberdeen. But I do not know now who the dad's names were.
- PG:** So what kind of work did your mother's parents do?
- HB:** They farmed.
- PG:** They were farmers, but your dad was not a farmer.
- HB:** No, he left our home daily at 11:00 am and worked for a Minneapolis Moline tractor factory. He left his parent's home from farming. Because with all his brothers, there wasn't enough work as they had just one homestead; so he delivered tractors and showed the people how to operate them.
- PG:** So your dad's parents originally were on the farm too?
- HB:** Yes.
- PB:** But when your dad grew up, he was not on the farm anymore.
- HB:** He was a engine mechanic all his life: Until the last few years when he worked for the State Highway Department on a road crew.
- PG:** So he worked for the Minneapolis Moline Tractor Company?
- HB:** I think that is what it was.
- PG:** When you were small, did you have a milk cow in town?
- HB:** No, we had an outdoor "biffy." We had to go outside, when needed to use the bathroom. We didn't have running water until we had a furnace in our house. We had just cold water. In the summer, we never had hot water.

- PG:** Did you have chickens in town?
- HB:** We would always go to one of our uncles, who would save a pig. Mom would buy ten or twenty old hens and would freeze them. Before that time, we canned them [in glass jars]. In the fall of the year when they [her uncle] cleaned out their hens, mom bought chickens and canned them. No, we always lived in town. One year she raised a few chickens.
- PG:** Did your mother work out of the home?
- HB:** Not until her sister lost her husband in 1942, then all three of the sisters went baby-sitting.
- PG:** She went to other people's homes.
- HB:** Yes, and stayed with their children.
- PG:** Your parents never said they wished they were back in Russia?
- HB:** I don't think so; they were so happy to come to America.
- PG:** Did you ever receive letters from Russia?
- HB:** I don't know. Grandma Biegler wrote and read. Grandpa Usselmann read, but grandma Usselmann I think was illiterate. I never saw Grandma Usselmann write a thing.
- PG:** Where did you go to school?
- HB:** Saint Mary's. We had Benedictine Sisters from Yankton, South Dakota.
- PG:** Did you then go to high school?
- HB:** I went to Central High School [in Aberdeen].
- PG:** What did you do after high school and where did you go?
- HB:** It was at the beginning of the World War II, and I was working at a candy counter at Woolworths. My former classmate at Saint Mary's came home to Aberdeen for the summer. She had a job in a shipyard in Richmond, California. She asked, "What are you getting for pay now?" I told her what I was paid. She said, "Oh you could come out to California and make \$2.30 an hour."
- PG:** You were working in Aberdeen for \$14.00 for two weeks. That would be almost \$1.50 a day.
- HB:** I worked for twenty-five cents. I went to work house-cleaning at a private music conservatory for a little old lady. Her son lived there also. They had a cow and a horse. I would start cleaning on third floor, make up the bed for their hired man, and dust down the floor and stair steps. I would make up two beds for the son and the mother, vacuum the front hall, dust down the back hall, and dust eleven chairs in this one music room. I would wipe around all the rugs on my hands and knees, going into the dining room where they ate. Then the kitchen floors, I would scrub every week on my hands and knees. I earned twenty-five cents for the entire day. I started at 7:30 in the morning and sometimes didn't get home until 9:30 at night. I was making money! After a while, she gave me fifty cents; I did that for three years.
- PG:** Were you still in school then?

- HB:** I was in high school. Every Saturday morning, I would spend my day at the music conservatory making this terribly "big" money. Can you imagine the children today!
- PG:** I can't imagine.
- HB:** Dad worked for a week for a dollar on the farm.
- PG:** What could you buy for a dollar?
- HB:** We were a family of six persons. Mom would give me a nickel and a dime and I'd go to the North Side Grocery to buy pork steak for fifteen cents. We had enough for our dinner. In those days we didn't have an ice box, so we went up there for every meal. A nice slice of meat off the shoulder costs fifteen cents. Mother always baked bread. She always bought flour in one hundred pound sacks, plus get two cents worth of yeast from the (737) bakery. In the winter, she would lay the yeast out on the windowsill. For this amount of yeast, she would bake twice.
- PG:** How old were you when you went out West?
- HB:** About twenty-one years old. I was twenty years before I left high school because I spent ten years in grade school. I worked two and a half years in Richmond in a pre-fab shipyard. I welded steel-plate bottoms. First I started out as a tacker. We put on "dogs" [clamps] to pull plates together before welded.
- PG:** Were you building ships?
- HB:** Yes, little liberty ships.
- PG:** How many people worked there?
- HB:** Oh, hundreds, hundreds.
- PG:** So then you made how much money there?
- HB:** We were getting \$2.30 an hour. I worked swing shift [at night]. I started at 3:30 pm and worked until midnight.
- PG:** What did you do with all your money?
- HB:** I bought bonds and sent them home to Mom. Afterwards, we started going to the movies three and four times per week: two different movies a night. There were no bonds bought anymore. We always got a double feature and a comedy in those days.
- PG:** Did you have movies in Aberdeen?
- HB:** No, this was out in Richmond [California]. We had three or four theaters in Aberdeen, where we went to movies for a nickel plus a bag of popcorn for a nickel.
- PG:** So they had popcorn then already?
- HB:** Oh yes.
- PG:** When you were going to high school, that was in the 1930's?
- HB:** I graduated in 1940.

- PG:** That was during the "dirty thirties" when you were in school.
- HB:** That's when my mother went to her brothers and got some meat, so we had meat. Then she salted meat in the winter. Then we went to Uncle Paul Williams's house. Usually there were two big hams left. When spring came, we ate off pork shoulders, just salty meat. When spring come, the meat was in salt brine would be dried, take it to the farm for smoking. Then we hung the hams up in our house attic. When Mom wanted meat, she would go to the attic and cut off a slice of smoked ham until completely eaten.
- PG:** After the salt ham was smoked, you could keep it from spoiling.
- HB:** Yes, we'd go out to the farm after noon lunch and smoked the hams all day. They seemed to know when smoking meat was done.
- PG:** Did they have a smokehouse?
- HB:** No, the smoke fire was in a barrel. The smoke went through the barrel of hung meat.
- PG:** The fire was in one barrel, and the smoke was in the other barrel.
- HB:** Well, he had a chimney from the firebox over to the smoke barrel of hung meat, with the smoke going upwards. My uncle always used wet wood after the fire was hot, so was really smoky.
- PG:** How long were you in Richmond doing welding?
- HB:** I was out there two and a half years.
- PG:** Then what did you do?
- HB:** I come home to Aberdeen to work for S & L stores for two years. I quit S & L and went to work for Singer's for six years.
- PG:** What is Singers?
- HB:** It was a sewing machine place, selling sewing machines and vacuum cleaners. I was there eleven years. I couldn't stand the new manager so I quit. I worked for Doctor Kelley for about one and a half years and quit. I went to work at the hospital as a nurse's aide for six months. Then I was baby-sitting for Dr. Barber, while he had some surgery done. He said, "Do you want to be a dental assistant?" I said, "No." "I never did anything right all the while I worked for him, I'll never make it as a dental assistant: I'm to slow." He said, "Why don't you try it." I talked to a sister at St. Luke's Presentation Sisters, who advised, "You try it if you want." Well, Dr. Barber offered me \$150.00 as I was making \$125.00 at the hospital per month. The sister said, "If you don't like the dental job, you come back and I'll meet his price." But I went back and worked for Dr. Barber for eleven years, before he moved to Arizona. Then I started to work for Dr. Bauer. I worked for him fourteen years. When I was sixty-two years old I retired.
- PG:** Dr. Bauer and the other doctor?
- HB:** Dr. Bauer was the third dentist I worked for, then I worked for Dr. Kelley, an older man. I worked for Dr. Barber who was four years older than I was.
- PG:** What kind of work did you do then?

- HB:** I was a chair-side aide for the dentists. I did all the housekeeping by sterilizing instruments.
- PG:** So you know all about teeth? You know what to do to keep your teeth healthy?
- HB:** I had lost many teeth before I ever went to Dr. Barber. He [Dr. Kelley?] never talked about a filling. When there's a cavity, we'll take the tooth out.
- PG:** So they pulled them out instead of filling them. You didn't have any special training?
- HB:** I took and passed the certification. In 1960, I was certified.
- PG:** Did you need schooling for that?
- HB:** The dentists had a training program. We met once a week and reviewed procedures. Then we went to Sioux Falls and took their certification. I took another certification later, so I was a certified dental assistant.
- PG:** Can you still talk German?
- HB:** Very little. All I know in German is the "Hail Mary."
- PG:** Do you want to say it for us?
- HB:** I can (870)
- PG:** Very good. When you lived in Aberdeen, did you have an area where just German-Russians lived?
- HB:** We lived with the (881 naming of neighbors)
- PG:** Was there an area in Aberdeen where there was only Germans?
- HB:** We lived on the northwest. On the east side were the Germans from Russia, because we had a parish of Sacred Heart in Aberdeen, where grandma and grandpa belonged. They were Irish and did not particularly like all the German-Russians. So the parish bought some property and built a wooden Catholic church. When we had Father Horner, we built a nice brick church.
- PG:** What's the name of that church?
- HB:** Saint Mary's is German; and Sacred Heart is the Irish church.
- PG:** So Saint Mary's was mostly the Germans.
- HB:** There are very few Germans left now, but originally it was all German.
- PG:** Was that parish called "Little Odessa?"
- HB:** No, I don't think so. They were just "Russians" on the other side of the tracks on 1<sup>st</sup> Avenue.
- PG:** Did they say anything like, "the dirty Russians?"
- HB:** I think the Germans were a lot cleaner than the Irish, because the German-Russians washed off their front porches all the time, and swept their walks all the way out to the street.
- PG:** Did they have concrete sidewalks?

- HB:** Oh yes, I have an aunt who always said, "Those Russians, all they do is keep their porches washed."
- PG:** When you went to school you had no problem learning the English?
- HB:** I think I was a lazy student.
- PG:** Then you started talking English.
- HB:** We had an Irish sister as English teacher. Sister Valentine had twenty-two of us students who had not spoken a word English. She had forty other students that spoke some English.
- PG:** How many students were there in one room?
- HB:** There were sixty-two in a class.
- PG:** Sixty-two in one class with one teacher.
- HB:** They were all first graders.
- PG:** Sister Valentine was the teacher.
- HB:** She was a dear little woman.
- PG:** You were suppose to talk English, but was not punished if you talked German?
- HB:** No, we were encouraged to talk. It's going to be easier for you. If you don't learn English, you would have a hard time for other people to understand you. This was encouraging to us to do better in English. Because she kept stressing that when we kept on talking German-Russian, many people wouldn't understand us.
- PG:** How about your Polish neighbors, when you played with the Polish children? What language did they speak?
- HB:** They all spoke English. The adults amongst themselves talked Polish. Everybody felt they were doing better when they talked English.
- PG:** So you had all "sister" teachers. Do you remember anything special about the nuns?
- HB:** They were strict. When we were learning during class session, should a student be leaning on the table, you might have a ruler tap you to attention.
- PG:** Tap the ruler on your wrist or were you to lay the wrist on the table?
- HB:** Oh yes, you held this pen very nicely and made a graceful Palmer penmanship script. Didn't you have Palmer penmanship in your school?
- PG:** Not very much.
- HB:** I earned a pin as reward. You could never tell it when you look at my writing now.
- PG:** You were always able to walk to school? You lived close enough?



- HB:** Only fifteen blocks. We had an aunt who lived two blocks away. We never directly went from home to school. We always went to Aunt Katherine's house and picked up my other cousins. Then we went to school. We did that until we were in the fifth grade. We never got to school by ourselves.
- PG:** That's quite a walk of more than a mile.
- HB:** We went home for noon lunch unless, it was winter. I didn't like to carry a packed lunch. Mom made my sandwich and placed it in a bag by the door when we left for school. Because my dad would fill hoppers when he worked for the grain elevator with some screenings. He would get up at 4 am and go to different houses and fill those hoppers in the morning and at night. These little screenings would be blown into the furnace. As we had to walk to school, we were to take our lunch when weather was cold. I would leave mine under the kitchen sink.
- PG:** You forgot it?
- HB:** Purposely. When dad came home for lunch, he would come to school with my lunch; and I would have to eat it too. I still walked that distance, when I needed to move my mother closer to church, so dad moved us a whole block over into another house.
- PG:** One block closer.
- HB:** And I don't drive a car, so I am still walking to Saint Mary's Church. We always went to 8 am Mass. After we started to take Communion, we took a piece of bread along and ate it going from church to school and took a drink of water. When it was time for lunch, we went home and came back to school. But, today's children don't attend Mass anymore every day. You walk that direction anyway, to go to Mass.
- PG:** Did you have German sermons in church?
- HB:** No, Father (019) didn't talk German at all. We had Father (020) when I was at Saint Mary's church.
- PG:** He preached in English.
- HB:** Yes, he never talked German at all.
- PG:** How did you celebrate Christmas when you were a child?
- HB:** Mom always baked raisin bread. We were poor. Dad didn't make any big money.
- PG:** On Christmas Eve did you have a Belzenickel or Christkindel?
- HB:** Yes, but you never received gifts in the morning, until you returned home from church. We woke up and went to 6 am Mass every day. Any child too young for Communion stayed in bed with the angels. My mom always said, "The angel will care for them." The kids that were old enough went to Communion.
- PG:** When you returned home, there were gifts waiting for you.
- HB:** There were always nuts poured on the floor. We had Saint John's bread. You had a few of those in your...
- PG:** Did somebody come and bring those gifts?
- HB:** No, we never knew. Santa Claus just put them in the porch. We had shoeboxes.

- PG:** Did you decorate them?
- HB:** No, they were just little bitty shoeboxes from our shoes.
- PG:** You didn't decorate the boxes?
- HB:** No. Not every year we had a tree. In later years when we were older, we had a decorated tree. Our mom always made homemade bread that was sweet, rolled it out, and spread on egg yolk which was really delicious. Then she usually fixed a goose for Christmas.
- PG:** Did you have candles on the Christmas tree or did you have lights?
- HB:** We had electrical lights. They were bulbs of blue and red.
- PG:** How did you celebrate Easter? Did you have an Easter rabbit? Did the Easter rabbit bring the eggs?
- HB:** Oh yes, we always had baskets. But we never saw the Easter rabbit. We had a front porch, where we put our baskets. We weren't allowed to go out there until after Mass.
- PG:** Did the Easter rabbit fill the baskets? And the Easter rabbit brought the eggs too?
- HB:** Yes.
- PG:** Do you remember the old time weddings?
- HB:** I lived in a neighborhood that everybody tipped in a quarter until they had enough for a beer keg. I don't remember how big the keg was when they had a dance. Mother had a sister whose husband played an accordion, his brother-in-law played the violin and his younger brother played the accordion. Those three guys sometimes played for two dances a week. They always danced on Saturday night.
- PG:** Where did they dance?
- HB:** They danced in neighbors' houses. Our house was never big enough. I don't remember that we danced at our house. Mom would put us to bed, before my folks would go to a dance in our neighborhood. They danced until the beer run out, then everybody went home.
- PG:** Do you think they danced in Russia?
- HB:** I think they were much more social. They were more sociable than they are in our lives. We had a Mr. (113) in the neighborhood who showed us how they sit on their hunches, kick their feet up [Kossack dance]. If the music record would please him, he would dance for us.
- PG:** Really, so he didn't want to do the Kossack dance. That would be interesting.
- HB:** You didn't appreciate the difficult dancing feats then.
- PG:** He was a German-Russian?
- HB:** Yes.
- PG:** Did you have music in your house? Was anybody in your family musical?
- HB:** No. We didn't have a radio until probably 1930-31.

- PG:** Then the radio was a big cabinet with a battery in it, and a big stand.
- HB:** The radio was electric. We had a gramophone with many records. An English and a German one, and we had a stack of records.
- PG:** What did you call it, gramophone?
- HB:** It's like a phonograph.
- PG:** Do you remember any old time weddings?
- HB:** Everybody had a wedding. When Aunt Barbara was married, we sat on a tipped-over rain barrel, as the house was too crowded. We sat on the rain barrel and watched them from there from outdoors.
- PG:** Did they all have white wedding dresses?
- HB:** Most of them. The wedding wasn't as elaborate, not fourteen bridesmaids as they do today. You were lucky if you had one attendant. The wedding dresses didn't have any trains on them. My mother had an 18 inch waist when she got married.
- PG:** Pretty small, huh!
- HB:** She was a big woman in later life. None of us girls could wear her wedding dress, but none of us wore corsets either.
- PG:** Do you have a nice wedding picture of your parents?
- HB:** Yes, I have a whole bunch of them.
- PG:** Did they have a studio portrait?
- HB:** Oh, yes.
- PG:** So they had photographic studios already.
- HB:** Yes.
- PG:** Do you remember Brauche?
- HB:** My grandmother did Brauche.
- PG:** Grandmother Biegler? Do you remember any sickness she healed?
- HB:** No, I don't; but I know she prayed. She went to somebody's house and prayed. The first child of every family got the honor to be the...
- PG:** Your mother didn't take you to somebody for healing?
- HB:** None of us were really sick. I had an abscessed ear when I was three years old, and I went to Dr. Wilson. It happened on Christmas Day, but that's the only time I even went near a doctor.
- PG:** He tapped it. Did he open it up?
- HB:** Yes, so my ear drained.

- PG:** What kind of children's games did you play? Do you remember any special games?
- HB:** We all had "ball and jacks" and jumping ropes. We jumped, jumped and jumped! I never was able to get a collection of marbles; the boys would beat me. I lost my first batch of marbles in the first week.
- PG:** Do you know any ghost stories?
- HB:** No, we never told ghost stories.
- PG:** Do you remember any "foretelling" when they knew something would happen? Such as a crucifix would fall off the wall or when somebody died.
- HB:** In the olden days they always had three deaths or three events happened together at the same time.