

Interview with Ralph Dressler (RD)

Conducted by Michael M. Miller (MM)

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Bismarck, North Dakota

Transcription by Joyce Reinhardt Larson

MM: This is Michael M. Miller, Germans from Russia Bibliographer at North Dakota State University in Fargo. It is November 8, 1993 and I am in the home of Ralph Dressler. Ralph, I wonder if you could tell us when you were born?

RD: I was born on June 3, 1918 and I was born down in Raleigh, North Dakota.

MM: And Raleigh is located where?

RD: That is located about..., I would say about 75 miles south of Mandan and a little west.

MM: Mandan. Could you tell us what is the name of your father, first of all?

RD: My father was John Dressler.

MM: John Dressler?

RD: That's correct.

MM: And when was he born?

RD: He was born in 1892.

MM: And where was he born?

RD: He was born in Krasna, Bessarabia.

MM: So, he was born in Krasna Bessarabia. And the name of your mother?

RD: My mother was Matilda Kopp, K-o-p-p.

MM: And when was she born?

RD: She was born in 1896.

MM: And they both immigrated to North Dakota in what year?

RD: Yes, in 1908.

MM: So, your father was what age when he came?

RD: He was 16 years old.

MM: And your mother?

RD: My mother was 12.

- MM:** Your mother was 12. Did they have any brothers or sisters that also came with them?
- RD:** Yes, yes. In fact my father's side, the Dressler side, they all came together. Only the one brother, the oldest brother Tony, he was here. He was working over in the Strasburg area and I think through him is where the family came over. I think he was one of the sponsors with somebody else in Strasburg.
- MM:** Ah huh. So they all came together at the same time?
- RD:** Yah, except one of the boys, the oldest boy Tony.
- MM:** And he stayed over there in Bessarabia?
- RD:** No. He was here before they came over. He was in Strasburg. He came earlier, but I don't how he came or why he came first. But he was..., then he sponsored the family to come.
- MM:** And then the Dressler's came first to Flasher?
- RD:** No, they came over in the Strasburg area. They came into the Strasburg area and they had some relatives over there, but I don't recall their names. That's where they stayed because I remember my dad was working for Lawrence Welk's dad as a hired man when they were over there.
- MM:** He was working for Ludwig Welk, Lawrence Welk's father?
- RD:** Oh, that's what his name was.
- MM:** And did they resettle somewhere else, the Dressler family?
- RD:** Yes. They moved over into the Grant County and his father, named Christian Dressler which was his father's name, they homesteaded. They took up land and they homesteaded there. South, about 10 miles southwest of Raleigh.
- MM:** Do you still remember your grandparents?
- RD:** Yes, I do.
- MM:** What were their names again?
- RD:** The Dressler grandfather's name was Christian and the grandmother was Maria.
- MM:** So they came along?
- RD:** They came along with them.
- MM:** Um hum. And they settled in Grant County, but did they homestead this land?
- RD:** Yes, they homesteaded the land.
- MM:** Um hum. What about on the Kopp side? Did you remember the grandparents?
- RD:** Oh yes, but except my grandfather. He was Jakob Kopp and grandma was Rose Muller Kopp.
- MM:** Now, did they come and settle in Grant County right away?
- RD:** To my knowledge, yes, they did.

MM: And how many children were in your family?

RD: In my immediate family now? Well, there was five brothers of us and two sisters.

MM: A total of seven children?

RD: That's correct.

MM: So your father and mother were of course, married over here in Grant County.

RD: Yah, they were married in the St. Gertrude's Church. That's about ten miles south of Raleigh on Highway 31.

MM: When you were growing up Ralph, did you speak only German?

RD: Yes, never had any English. When we started school, I remember the first day yet. We..., our folks went to Selfridge to buy us little sheep skin coats. My brother and I, we both started at the same time. And we were 2-1/2 miles to Raleigh, which was the city then, and we lived out in the country on Highway 31. And when we got in there, we stood in the corners and we didn't know anything about English, nothing. We stood there, we didn't even know how to take our coats off I think, until they came over and then of course, they told us where to put our coats. So then, of course, we started out. We couldn't speak English at all.

MM: Well, was the teacher speaking in English?

RD: Yes.

MM: And so, how did...? You couldn't understand?

RD: Huh? Well, she also had some German in her, so she could understand us but we couldn't understand her.

MM: This was in the first grade?

RD: This was in the first grade, yes. There [was] no such thing as kindergarten.

MM: Were there other German-Russian children in the classroom?

RD: Oh, yes. Quite a few of 'em, most of 'em I would say. I would say seventy-five percent.

MM: And some of them could understand English?

RD: Yah, there was some Norwegians and Swedes.

MM: So, how long did it take you then to learn English?

RD: I would say it took quite a while. I think that we didn't start catching on for..., it took about 30 days or longer. And the bad part of that was.... See, my mother and father, my mother was a pretty well educated woman and my father wasn't. See, my father couldn't even write or read. All he could write when he died and he was the age of 76, was his name. And we had to teach him that, us boys. Us children, we taught him that. But he could not read. He couldn't even read German.

- MM:** Couldn't read German either? Your mother, you said she was educated. Where did she get this education?
- RD:** Her father was an instructor and professor in German over in Krasna, Bessarabia.
- MM:** Oh.
- RD:** He was an instructor and then he also was quite a singer. She could sing real well because he was a band leader and stuff like that.
- MM:** What was his name again?
- RD:** Jakob Kopp, K-O-P-P.
- MM:** Ah huh. So she had her education over in Bessarabia?
- RD:** That's right, yah.
- MM:** Did you ever recall when you were young or did your mother receive any German newspapers? Anything like that?
- RD:** Yes. She read the *Der Staatsanzeiger* and that was printed here in Bismarck. And then later on I think, when the *Der Staatsanzeiger* went out [quit], I think then they ordered the *Herold*.
- MM:** *Nord Dakota Herold*?
- RD:** *Nord Dakota Herold*. That's what it was out of Dickinson. I think it was published there.
- MM:** Um Hum. As far as you know, when your mother and father came over to settle in North Dakota, all the relatives came along?
- RD:** Well, of the family, yes.
- MM:** Of the immediate family? But there may have been other brothers or sisters over there?
- RD:** That's right. That I don't know of.
- MM:** Ah huh. So when you would come home from school, you would speak German and then when you'd come to school, you'd have English classes?
- RD:** That's correct.
- MM:** What about on the playground?
- RD:** Well, we talked German until we got to catch on English and that took quite some time. I think the first year wasn't too hot, you know.
- MM:** Um hum. Did your parents ever learn English?
- RD:** Yes. My father could speak English. And my mother? Yah, she could speak English but not very much because she died young. She was only 36 years old when she died in 1933, on April 6th.
- MM:** Now, your father was a farmer?
- RD:** Yes, he was a farmer all his life. So was his folks, you know. His father and mother, they were [farmers].

- MM:** They were farmers in Bessarabia?
- RD:** Yes. And he had.... There were eight brothers with him and one sister only in that family. There were nine of 'em.
- MM:** Your father had nine? There were nine members in the family?
- RD:** That's correct, eight boys and one girl.
- MM:** And they all came to America?
- RD:** They all came to America.
- MM:** In Krasna, Bessarabia of course, this was a Catholic colony. But did your folks ever speak much about life in Krasna?
- RD:** Well, they did. But we were so young and of course, it didn't bother us because it didn't mean much to us when they were speaking. Today we speak more of it than we ever did because what has happened. In looking back and you like to know what they done and what their parents and uncles and grandfather [were] and all these names. But on the Dressler side there, we just couldn't get together because they didn't know. My father didn't know, never talked about his uncle, you know. In fact, just recently over here at the Germans for Russia, somebody looked up and they found that my grandfather Christian Dressler, he had a brother. This is the first time that I ever saw a name of his brother which was an uncle to my dad. That's the first time I ever [did]. We've had copies made and passed it out with this name on there and they are all surprised they had never heard of that.
- MM:** Hum, interesting.
- RD:** Yah.
- MM:** Your father of course, he came over and settled and homesteaded and so forth. What do you remember about...?
- RD:** My father didn't homestead. My grandfather, he homesteaded.
- MM:** Oh, your grandfather homesteaded.
- RD:** He homesteaded, yah.
- MM:** When you were growing up down there in Grant County, what was life like? Was it a pretty good life or a tough life?
- RD:** It was a very tough life. I mean, that was the World War I when I was born in '18. Then I've been told that I sat just once on my grandfather Kopp's lap because he died of dropsy that year, in 1918. He was only 58 years old when he died. And of course grandma, she lived way up into the first part of the 40's, I should say. She was a Muller, she wasn't a Miller. M-u-l-l-e-r. I met some of her relatives over in Germany back in.... See, we was over there in 1982, I think it was, and I met a born Dressler lady but we couldn't put ourselves together. But then I met the Kopps, they had a Verein there they called it. Was something like an organization like the "Knights of Columbus" and of course, they had a little doings for us and we got acquainted with some of the people. So, I had some of the Kopps I met and Halburgs. We

could put ourself together right away because he said his grandfather was Simon Kopp and my grandpa was Jakob Kopp and they were brothers. So his grandfather and my grandfather were brothers.

MM: So, then you found some relatives there?

RD: So then we saw more. Then we even run onto grandma Kopp, which was a Muller. See, we run onto some of her relatives over there but down a generation, you know.

MM: What do you remember about...? Going back to growing up on the farm. Do you remember like...? Did your folks celebrate any special holidays?

RD: Well my folks, they rented a farm 2-1/2 miles south of Raleigh right on Highway 31. We wasn't even a quarter mile off the highway. And of course, they rented the farm, there was two quarters at that time. They got married in 1915 and I was born in '18 and I have an older brother that was born in '17, March the 18th. Of course, as we grew up as kids there, we had to walk to school, 2-1/2 miles when the weather was good. Otherwise, why he would haul us when it got cold with the buggy. Then when we got bigger and older, why then we could drive ourself. He would get a single buggy and put a horse on it, put some hay in the back and that's the way we went to school in the winter time. With the buggy and then, sometimes you had..., what do you call it? Sleigh, a sled and two runners on it. Put a horse in it, one single horse and went to school. So, we unhitched it and put it in the barn and he had some hay for us on the sleigh or on the buggy, give him the hay and after school, we drove home again. Then we had to do all the chores when we were big enough. Had to get the cows in and start milking and clean the barns, manure the barns and stuff. So, that's the way we worked.

MM: So then, when you grew up the early years. there were no vehicles?

RD: No. My father bought his first vehicle, was a 1925 Chevrolet Touring. There was no glass in the cars there at that time, it was all Touring. Yah, that he bought first in 1925. He bought a Chevrolet.

MM: And you would go to school how many months of the year?

RD: We go nine months.

MM: You were going nine months?

RD: Oh, yes. We go nine months.

MM: And you went to school up through the 8th grade at the farm school?

RD: That's correct. No, we never went the farm school, we went the city. Yah, we went to the city, town of Raleigh. That's where we graduated from.

MM: Did they have like state examinations?

RD: Oh, yes. We had state examinations and county superintendent. Do you remember them?

MM: Um hum. So after the 8th grade, what did you do?

RD: I went on to school, you know. I played basketball and....

MM: So, you had high school then already?

- RD:** Yah, we had high school even in Raleigh. We had high school. We had four years of high school, yes. And then, back in 1933 and 1934, why times were so tough and so I joined the CCC's.
- MM:** In what....[year], 1933?
- RD:** [In] 1933 and 1934.
- MM:** What was the CCC? The Civilian Conservation Corp?
- RD:** That's correct, the Civilian Conservation Corp.
- MM:** What was their purpose?
- RD:** Well, so that we have something to do. We got, if I recall, I think it wasn't very much. I think it was \$30, and \$25 went home to the folks because they had a tough time making a living. 'cause there was nothing and there was a depression on in the 30's. And of course, we could keep \$5 at the camp.
- MM:** So, you headed off from the farm to the CCC's and where did you go to?
- RD:** I went.... Well, I was inducted over here at the Fort Snelling, south of Bismarck. I stayed here about a month and then they transferred me out to Medora. That's where I spent the rest until I was discharged.
- MM:** What did you do out in Medora?
- RD:** We kind of built roads through the Badlands. We took the wheelbarrows, that's what we worked with and shovels. That's all we done trying to get by the hills. You know how there are built roads along the hills? Well, that's all there was. They just took a bunch of CCC's. And then, we planted trees. Well, we didn't plant so much in Medora like they did in other camps. Like in the south, Arkansas, Louisiana and those [states]. In fact, right here over in Bismarck, where the Governor Mansion is right there, all those trees were put in by the CCC boys.
- MM:** Oh, so that winding round through the Badlands was built by the CCC?
- RD:** That's correct, the first ones yes. There was no pavement then, it was all gravel. Yah, that took a long time to get a mile done.
- MM:** So, you would stay there and be in a camp?
- RD:** Right there, yah. We had the same regulations as they had in the army. Same thing, same clothes, everything. That's the way our barracks was. The same as the army, the same rules and regulations.
- MM:** So, they were pretty strict then?
- RD:** Oh yah, we learned something! It was good for us and that's what they should have today I think, for unemployed people. They learned discipline and keep them off the streets here and no dope and stuff. See?
- MM:** So after the CCC days, you went back to the farm?
- RD:** Yes, I went back to the farm.
- MM:** You were how old then?

RD: I was 18.

MM: Oh, you were pretty young when you went to the CCC's? What did you... ?

RD: I was also young when I got married. I got married then because we had no mother and everything. I thought well, the best thing is to get married. I got married in 1937. So that's what we did. We got married and started out on the farm. Those days, the custom was, the folks would give if they had anything. Like my wife, she's a Leintz and her folks in that area there by Brisbane where they lived and farmed, why they were considered a little more upper class people, wealthier and they were. Where they were, she was given five cows, twelve chickens and three hogs, all our bedding, all the household kitchenware, silverware, table, everything. That's how we started out. Then of course, we found our own farm. I used to work for 50 cents a day when we first moved to a little town of Brisbane where my wife was born. About three miles south of town, southeast. We rented a house for \$5 a month, a house. I worked for some people, their name was Woodbury, Walter Woodbury. I had to walk about two miles, maybe a little further in the morning, milk 7 cows and then I got my breakfast. Then I had to go out.... Those days, [there] were those what they called the Russian thistles. I had to haul two loads of Russian thistles, got my lunch, hauled two more [loads] and got the cows in, milked my seven cows, walked home. Then we had a barn about a quarter of a mile out of Brisbane and that's where we kept.... We rented that barn. That's where we kept the cows that Katie got and a couple of hogs. So I had to go out there and take care of them yet. I got 50 cents a day, so you see that wasn't very much. Got \$15 and \$5 went off [for rent]. But we took.... We didn't have a cream separator. We took the cream.... You know, when you set the milk, [the cream] kind of rises to the top of the milk. We took that off with a spoon, always [took it] out until we got about half a gallon or a gallon. We took it over to the store and that's the way we bought our groceries.

MM: So you bartered?

RD: So, that's the way we did. So, we sold our cream that way. Then we had milk and we had our own eggs and....

MM: A big garden?

RD: Had a garden, yes.

MM: Um hum.

RD: So that's the way we [lived]. Then we rented a big farm. It wasn't big. It was only a quarter, but there was at least a nice barn on there and a house. So, we rented that from the store keeper there that had a store in Brisbane, North Dakota. So then, we tried to farm but we weren't farmers. I wasn't a farmer.

MM: You weren't cut out to be a farmer?

RD: No. Then my brother, he had a grocery store in Raleigh and he wasn't a grocery man either. So I sold out and went and took over the grocery store 'cause my dad had some shares in it. We stayed there and didn't make any money. In fact, we went broke. So then, we decided we move to Bismarck and I got a job the second day we moved up here and I haven't been out of work since.

MM: And you've done quite well for yourself up here?

RD: Yah, yah.

- MM:** Let's go back to the farm when you were growing up, Ralph. What were some of the memories you have? Like for example, of holidays upcoming now?
- RD:** Well, the holidays...? Well, the most important one is always Christmas. And of course, we didn't get the goodies that they do today. Like you have Christmas pert near every day now. When we got an orange for Christmas, that was a treat. We had apples once in a while. Dad would buy a box of apples and brought them home, these 20 pounders and we would have an apple to go in the school bucket. And when we went to school, mostly it was syrup and peanut butter. He would buy a gallon of peanut butter and a gallon of syrup and they mixed it together and stirred it up and that was mostly put on bread. Then when you opened the [lunch] by noon, it was all soaked through but we had to eat it. So, that's what we done those days. And then for Christmas? Why, your sponsors, your godfather and godmother, why the custom was they come around church with a sack. In there a little peanuts and an orange and probably an apple and candy. That was quite a treat. And everybody run around, pass out these sacks right around the church. Everybody, whoever was a sponsor would get a sack.
- MM:** This was on Christmas Eve?
- RD:** That was at Christmas, yah. The Christmas Day mostly. Not so much on Christmas Eve because always had a Midnight Mass.
- MM:** Now in the church there in Raleigh, were the services in German?
- RD:** Yes. Well, the service was in Latin.
- MM:** Latin. But the singing?
- RD:** The singing was German, oh yes.
- MM:** Oh, yes. They sang all German at that time yet?
- RD:** All German, yah.
- MM:** When did that end about, the German tradition?
- RD:** I think it ended about in the middle 40's, going into the early 50's I think, in most of the time. Well, the Latin didn't end. The Latin only ended when the Vatican II.
- MM:** What were the reasons for this ending of German you think, like around Flasher?
- RD:** Well, I don't think.... I don't know. It was all the change of the church, that's why it ended. Because the Vatican II and then you followed the church orders. Because lot a people didn't like it. There is a lot of old timers that don't like it today, but there is nothing you can do. You had to follow up. And when did the Vatican II, when did they change?
- MM:** Oh, I think this was in the 60's.
- RD:** Was it the 60's? So then, I was altar boy for 12 years. The namesdays, yah. That was a great feast for the one that had a names day, yah. Like my father was John. They called it Johannes Tag, St. Johns Day. Oh, we had to get the granary ready if there was corn in, get the granary ready. Then we would go to town, get some lumber. The lumber yards would lend them planks and some kegs of nails to make the bench around. Then they would have a guy play with the accordion and a drummer and then they celebrated.

Yah, that quite a feast in those days. Even my wife with this name Katherine. When we first came to town or when we first were [here], the 25th of November, oh, that was big. That was big deals. We had always the house full of [people] until the last..., I would say the last 10 years it has kind of fallen off.

MM: Those names days have changed?

RD: Oh, yes.

MM: What about Easter? Was there much of Easter?

RD: Oh, yah. That was strict there through Lent. You had to follow the rules there, the church rules. And I'm telling you, that was strict orders that you got there when you couldn't do anything out of place.

MM: So you grew up in a strict religious family?

RD: Oh yah, very strict. Especially my mother was very religious because that's how she was brought up in her family.

MM: Were there a lot of prayers in the home too?

RD: Oh, yes. I tell you in those days, like my mother and dad, well, they still didn't understand the English set-up in schools. Then when we brought our homework home, the first thing, we had to be out when it was nice, either go out and help in the field or in the winter time, we had to get the cows in, clean the barns if they weren't cleaned in the morning. Then we'd do our chores and carry coal in, pails after pails full of water for the evening. Everything had to be carried in. Then after [we finished], then we had dinner and you would always have to say your prayers. You never went to eat dinner without prayers and after you were done too. Well, the first thing then, you had to go on the Bible and you would always have to learn a verse before you could go to bed. Well, we couldn't go to bed until after mother came out and we had to read it to them until we knew it. If we didn't know it, we had to stay there again another half an hour. Then, she would make us read that until we knew what was going on. And then came the catechism when we got older. If we want to go to First Communion, we had to know that Catechism. And of course, there lays our homework. So therefore, we couldn't do much homework because it got later and later and they couldn't understand why we got this work from school, homework.

MM: Interesting. You didn't always get your homework done then?

RD: No! No.

MM: And the teacher didn't like that?

RD: No. 'course, they never had those conference that they have today with the teachers either.

MM: What about the life on the farm? Did you have much chance to have some play time?

RD: Well, there was no such thing as play toys much. We would make up our own things to play, because we were farming with horses and stuff. You know, two bottom plows. One bulka plow we called [it], that's a one bottom plow. A disk, about a 8 footer or 6 footer, and then a hayrack and grass mower and all that was done with horses. We had no tractor and in fact, we had no tractor until the last year that I was home. My dad bought a 1530 McCormick Deering from his brother for \$100 and then he couldn't pay for that, it was so tough. That's the only time, so I didn't have much chance to run a tractor on the farm, but

its all horses. They would have five, six horses on the two bottom and sometimes three on the one bottom plow and header. Then we had to go out, there was a lot of rock we had to pick. And they had a stone boat that we hitched two horses up to and then we had to put them on the stone boat, the rocks, and haul them out on the prairie someplace, pile em up. We had to work hard. It's tough.

MM: And there was no electricity on the farm?

RD: No electricity, no way. No, there was no electricity. It all had to be done by hand and these kerosene lamps that have the chimney on. Oh, they got 'em today now. They are coming back a little bit.

MM: The farm life and then you went through the years of the depression of course and then you went off to CCC. You came back and your folks stayed on the farm?

RD: Yes, my folks stayed on. Of course, my mother was dead already by that time, so my dad stayed there until 1935. That's another experience that we had. It's on 4th of July, in 1939. My grandfather stayed with us. We went to a barn dance, Lawrence Leib's barn dance. He had a big barn and they always would have dances there. This was 4th of July and so we went to the dance in the evening and I was married then already. And there was a cloud came up and a storm and start lightning and stuff. But we were all gone, except grandpa was home. We were there awhile, why they said that lightning had struck John Dressler's home up there. So, we all rushed home, a lot of people up there. When we came home, he was sitting. It was a steel...? Legs on it like a couch and he was sitting. We had a pretty nice house in the living room. And the neighbor, which was Emmanuel Ternes, he thought he was in his sleeping room which was on the south side of the house off the kitchen. And he saw when the lightning struck. He said he looked right over and said lightning must have struck someplace. He looked over, he saw the flame coming out of our house. It was only a quarter of mile and then he run over. He thought grandpa was in [the house]. He knew we were at dance, the family. My dad was there too at the dance and couldn't get in. He [grandpa] wasn't in his room. So then, when we came home, the flame was all in there and he was sitting there with his prayer book, praying evidently. We had a water tank [that] wasn't too far. Would say, oh, I don't know, maybe 150 feet from the house. We run over there, four of us boys and we got the long pipe that the water.... You know how they hooked on the pump and then the water run through? They got that pipe and four of us reached in where the hook was on the end of the pipe and we pulled him out. And the minute we pulled him out, he collapsed. Was nothing but ashes.

MM: Um hum.

RD: So, that happened on the 4th of July in 1939.

MM: You'll never forget that 4th of July?

RD: No. Then my dad, why then he had no house, but he had a brand new barn he had built two years before that. But he lost the land to the Federal Land Bank and our neighbor bought it, the whole section. We had nice land. He bought it, I think for \$3000, 'cause I talked to him lately here before he died. He was 97 years, the neighbor. He was one of the Sein boys, Raymond Sein. There was some Sein's over there by Strasburg and Linton too. Well, they were brothers. When I got up in life and was in business when I met him one day over at the wife's uncle on a Sunday afternoon. He was a widower. I said, "Say, I like to buy that land back that you bought for \$3000. I would like to invest some money." I said, "I'll give you \$200 an acre." And he says, "No, it's not for sale. I am not gonna sell it, I'm gonna give it to the grandchildren." And that's what they got, too. They got it today.

- MM:** Interesting. When you look back Ralph, to those early years and think about.... You know, your folks came over as immigrants and settled there in this part of North Dakota and speaking no English and then raising a family, what do you think of their life?
- RD:** Well, I think it was tough. I think it was really tough. I just sometimes think to myself, how in the world did they do it? How they do it? The way we live today, our life style and the way they had to go through. We got a good touch of it there in our early days, when we were young. And then, the way we live today and how they lived and they were happy people too. They were happy people. And then you can imagine when a man loses his wife and has seven children all under the age of 15, that was pretty darn tough. The girls were only nine and seven. There was no cooking. We sometimes..., oh, we suffered. We had nothing in the house to eat, nothing.
- MM:** So, who took over as the mother?
- RD:** Well, we had.... When it came to baking bread, they all baked their own bread those days. We just put the flour in and then our neighbor, you take like Mr. Elias Volk, his wife, she baked bread for us and they had nine children. And then another, my aunt, she washed for us. So, they were quite.... They helped each other those days. They worked together in the fall, worked together [when] anybody needed help. Or when the butcher time came in November, Saint's Day and All Soul's Day, after that, they started butchering and they helped each other. And they didn't butcher two pigs, they all had 'em set up to do about nine, ten. And for one reason I don't know to this day, why they didn't butcher beef? We had beef. We had cattle, but they didn't butcher any beef. Then finally, the store keeper in Raleigh, Mr. Reihl, he came out and start peddling meat in the morning. On Saturday morning, when real cool before the sun came up and they would buy 5-10 pounds then for Sundays. That's what they bought, but that's the way it was.
- MM:** So, your father never remarried then?
- RD:** No, my father never remarried. I think one reason.... We sometimes, us kids thought that..., we wished he would have remarried. But when we think it now and talk about it, why we could see why he didn't. Because he couldn't read or write. Things were getting more..., had to know something. Then of course, he started living with us as we got married off. Then he lived with this guy, he lived with me nine years. Then my sister Rose, her husband died young in '51, then he lived with her.
- MM:** Yah, that life there in Grant County had some tough times, but you always have to think of the good times too.
- RD:** Yah. Well, there wasn't too many good times in those years. In the 30's, there was no such thing. Then in 1941, we lived up here then. I had a job and things went pretty good. They started going, going, and [got] way better than we did on the farm. Well, I wasn't a farmer so....
- MM:** Do you still read and write German?
- RD:** Well, I can. It depends on how it's written. I can't read it in writing. I can read it, but it takes me about an hour to go over it and over it and then I pick out the words. But in typing, I can read some of it.
- MM:** Did you learn the old German script too?

- RD:** Yah, the real old German. Yah, I get some letters from Germany since we've been over there and I can make out what they say. Then some people call on me too, like they can't read it. Like she has an uncle, he called me, he got a letter. I go over to try to. I can make it out what they are meaning or what they are writing.
- MM:** So, you have correspondence then from family in Germany?
- RD:** Oh, yah. Yes, every Christmas.
- MM:** Has anyone come over here to visit?
- RD:** Yah. Well in fact, that's what made us go over there. My wife's mother's cousin, Volk is their name and he was here. Zachias Volk, they came over and then they kind of talked, we to come over and visit them. So, we did go over there. We flew over there and....
- MM:** And you raised how many children, Ralph?
- RD:** My own?
- MM:** Your own family.
- RD:** Four, three girls and one boy.
- MM:** And they are living here in Bismarck-Mandan?
- RD:** No. My boy died. He died, he was 41 years old. He was quite an athlete's man here in St. Mary's. And in all sports. He was very good.
- MM:** What was his name?
- RD:** John.
- MM:** John Dressler?
- RD:** Yah, John Dressler was his name. He died, it's gonna be seven years in July now that he died. He died of cancer in the pancreas.
- MM:** Hum.
- RD:** And he had a business. He had a parts warehouse out in Rancho Godova, but he grew up with me in the parts business.
- MM:** And what's the name of your other children?
- RD:** We have Tillie, Betty and Bonnie.
- MM:** And how many of your family members, brothers and sisters are still living?
- RD:** All of us.
- MM:** All still living? And there is how many again?
- RD:** Seven of us, two girls and five boys. We were blessed and we are lucky. We have really been. And everyone had a good job. Everybody has a nice home and most of the children are....

MM: Who is the oldest in the family?

RD: Lambert, my brother in Flasher.

MM: And how old is he?

RD: He is 77.

MM: He's 77. And then whose next?

RD: I am. I'm 75.

MM: And then what are the other members of the family?

RD: The other one is Peggy, she is out west. She lives in Richmondton, California. She lost her husband two years ago. She was married to a Leintz, but we never got to know him until he got married 'cause my wife's name is Leintz and he comes from Hague, North Dakota. He was the son of Lawrence Leintz. You know anybody down there? And then comes Rosie, she was married to Ternes, D. Ternes. He died in 1951 as a young man and then she got remarried to a Bob Frueh. So then comes Louie. He married a Kronick from Elgin. They live and they retired over in Rancho Godova. And then comes Al, he lives in Rogonda Beach in L.A. He's retired. And then E.J., which is Engelhardt. He had the Buy Rite store here for 26 years in Bismarck. And we are all retired. All except my sister, she still paints. Rosie, she is 71. She goes out and paints.

MM: That tells you something. That the Dressler family, even though they grew up in such hard times and losing a mother so young, that they certainly had a wonderful work ethic.

RD: Oh, yes. And we've been kind of lucky, I would say. I think the good Lord has blessed us really.

MM: Yes.

RD: And we have a lot of friends. Lot of..., kinda mixed family went together. No divorce in our family either.

MM: Wonderful.

RD: No divorce yet. Better not forget that.

MM: Do you still make any of the old German foods?

RD: Oh yes, oh yes. We make knepfla and they call them noodla. Then we make cheese buttons and that's käseknepfle. And then we make fry bread küchla, you know. Oh yah, we make dumplings, make all of [that] German [food]. Even our children and grandchildren just love that German food.

MM: What about...? Do you make any sausages or anything yet?

RD: No, not ourself. We buy it, but we buy it from the country. Home-made sausage, it's good sausage.

MM: But you remember of course when you were younger, they used to make sausage.

RD: Oh, yes. We had to turn those by hand, those grinders. And I remember Elias Volk, he came from Strasburg over in there. He was married to a Brown.

MM: What was his name?

- RD:** Elias Volk. Have you ever heard of John Volk over there? They was brothers and Shortie. Then Shortie came over, that was Anselm. We called him Shortie and came over to buy cream in our town. And my oldest brother was married to one of his daughters. And so Elias, his wife died the same year as mine did. That's Father Volk, Father Ed Volk, he was in Beulah now, his mother. And she used to bake bread for us and here she pops up and dies the same year in the fall that my mother died in the spring of.
- MM:** In 1936?
- RD:** Yah. There was three young ladies that died that year out of our parish there in St. Gertrude's. Oh yes, we make that German stuff, borscht and all that kinda stuff.
- MM:** Did you do a lot of card playing in your life?
- RD:** Oh, yes. Yah, we still do. We just played yesterday from two o'clock until last night, pinochle.
- MM:** Uh huh. And who did you play with?
- RD:** I played with George Seifert and his wife and Freddie Kleids and his wife.
- MM:** All German-Russian people?
- RD:** Yah.
- MM:** What we need to do. We'll do our interviews and then we place them in the archives and then we pull off key statements that you made and possibly use for other things, including on the radio.
- RD:** Oh, is that right?
- MM:** Oh, yes. You'd be surprised what we're working on. But of course, as you were in business, it's interesting for me Ralph, because you did some traveling then evidently when you got in your own business?
- RD:** Well, when we moved up, we decided to get rid of the grocery store because we went broke. We didn't know anything about groceries. We had no experience whatsoever and those tough times. There were stamps, blue and orange stamps that you had to have when you sold meat and stuff like that. Well, we just couldn't hack it. So, we decided we gonna have an auction sale and sell out. And then lot of people would charge and there are still people today that owe us from that and that was back in 1939. And so we decided, I go up and find myself a job in Bismarck. We got up here, we found a little apartment. We had two children at that time, Tillie and Betty. And it was on Broadway over there and we rented an apartment for \$15. So I went up the next day and looked for a job. I got one with Piggly Wiggly in Mandan.
- MM:** Piggly Wiggly?
- RD:** At that time yah, and I worked in the meat department. Well, then we moved back to Mandan because it was too.... We didn't think we should drive back and forth. We couldn't afford it either. So we moved there and rented an apartment. Then I had applications in at different places. I had one in when the National Tea Store opened up and here they called me and they gave me more money and they gave me the produce, to be manager over the produce. Well, what did I know in produce? Not very much. They said they'll teach me and which they did. When I took that job, we moved back to Bismarck again. So then the grocery warehouse people called on us. I could buy groceries in the morning and come around.

I always wanted to be a salesman, all my life I had that in my mind. So I tried to get in with the warehouse to become a salesman. Well, one day he says, "Say, you wouldn't want to drive a truck would you?" I said, "Yah." He said, "We'll give you 45 cents an hour." So by golly, I went to work for Nash Finch and then I got 45 cents and I drove a big semi-truck and that was hard work. Oh my golly, we had those big 16 gallon beer barrels and those 55 gallon vinegar and all that stuff. I had to, when I came to a town and backed up, well, like Strasburg there, that John Ternes had a grocery store and the beer for John, the other Ternes. There was two John's there. I had to get some tires to throw those 55 gallon barrels down on and those 16 kegs. That was hard work. And I was out, left at 8 o'clock in the morning, came in sometimes at 2 at night. And in the morning at 8, out again. The night crew would load me up and I go out. Oh, I tell you that was hard work! And now, they got all..., everything hydraulic. Push a button and just....

MM: So when you'd go out to those towns, where did you travel to?

RD: I traveled down as far as Zeeland, Ashley and on this side of the river, I traveled down to Carson, Mott, Dickinson.

MM: So, this was in the 1940's?

RD: That was in the 1940's, yah.

MM: You must remember all those towns then in the '40's. All those German-Russian towns?

RD: Yah. Then I had a neighbor where we lived on 13th Street, 320. My father-in-law says, "I don't understand why you kids want to rent? Why don't you buy a house?" And I said, "Well, we haven't got no money." Well, the doors of.... Those days, you could walk over, you could see nice homes that were open. You could walk on Sundays. The wife, we walked around and looked at houses. Doors weren't locked, were unlocked. We could walk in and look at 'em, but they were always up in the three, four, five thousand dollars. Nice big homes. They are selling today for \$80,000. Then we run into one that was \$2,100. Then I told my father-in-law and he said, "I'll give you the money." And he did. Give me the money and he says, "I tell you, I'll charge you five percent interest." Well, I got a job with Nash Finch then. I was making a little money, not much to talk about. At 45 cents an hour, you don't make much, but that was still great money. So by golly, I could pay that house in two years. I gave him the money back and he said, "Well, you've been a good boy." You know how them old Germans was. "You've been a good boy, I won't charge you no interest." So, that's what he did. Then one night, we were invited for the United Commercial Travelers. Did you see all the plaques around here...?

MM: Ah huh. I'm interested in knowing Ralph, is when you would go out and visit those towns where those German-Russian people were...? Was there only German spoken?

RD: No, no.

MM: By then, they were already in the 40's?

RD: Yah, there were some of 'em that spoke English. And then, what I was gonna tell you. Then we were invited to a banquet up at the Capitol, in the Sky Room one evening and this was the United Commercial Travelers, UCT in short. So there was a guy sitting beside me and we got acquainted. In fact, he was my neighbor right up the street a little bit on 13th Street. His name was Christ Ziegler. He was born and raised in Zeeland, North Dakota.

MM: Ziegler?

RD: Ziegler. Yah, that's who it was. Then he asked me what I was doing and I told him I was working for Nash Finch. And he said, "How would you like to become a salesman?" I says, "Well, I've been always looking for a salesman job." He said, "We are going to open a store in Bismarck and Mr. Sussland was his name, my boss from Minot and he's coming down Sunday and I'm suppose to find him a salesman to have Bismarck and the southwest-southeast corner. Well, if you are interested in it, why I'll give you a ring Sunday when he comes." I said, "Well, what do they pay and how do they work it?" "Well, they furnish you a car," he said. "They pay all the expenses and you get so much a month, about \$325 they start you, plus commission." Well, that sounded darn good. So sure enough, why he called me on a Sunday and I went down and they hired me and that's where I stayed until I retired. Well, then I became a owner of a..., built my own store in 1957 and I still have stock in Western Auto Parts which he owned. But he set me up. He set me up in the United Auto Parts, Mr. Sussland did. And then he died on his birthday, he was 72 years old. That's about 24 years ago and then of course, we bought all the stores. Me and ten other guys, so we still own.... Not the business, I sold out my stock in 1981. So that's where I became.... Those years were pretty good. We had a pretty good business. Lucky and worked hard at it day and night you might say when we started.

MM: But I think again, that all goes back to maybe on the farm, that hard work on the farm.

RD: We was used to it and we knew we had to work to make a living.

MM: And you want to be educated at the same time?

RD: That's right, we did.

MM: That's very important, too.

RD: That's very important. Then after I sold out, why then I became a member of the United Commercial Travelers just through this man, Christ Ziegler. And well, then I run for the supreme office. At first, I went through the local offices, run for the supreme officer and I made it. I made her, then I traveled for them now 12 years.

MM: Oh.

RD: Yah, United States and Canada. I go out and speak on banquets, yah.

MM: How long have you been doing that now, Ralph?

RD: Twelve years.

MM: Really. So how far do you travel then?

RD: Well, see my term expired as a support governor office. I was on the supreme board and I worked with all these guys. There's doctors and there's bankers and this is a principal of a school and this is Dr. [? name]. All these guys are different..., they are from different states because we travel United States and Canada. So I would go out and speak on banquets and stuff like that. So this year, well my first trip was into Columbus, Ohio and I came home. Then I was in charge of the convention here in Bismarck. Then I left for Birmingham, Alabama and then I came home. Then I went to Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Then I came home and I went to Kalamazoo, Michigan. Then I came home and then I went to Gooding, Idaho.

- MM:** Oh my, wonderful.
- RD:** But there is nothing I am giving up. They said, "Well, if you don't want to go out, your term has expired. But if you like to go out, a lot of people would like to have you come to speak at their banquets." And I said, "Okay, if the wife can go along and they pay all the expenses." So, there I am.
- MM:** Wonderful.
- RD:** Yah, its great.
- MM:** Well, you have an important message to tell about hard work. I am sure the work ethic.
- RD:** Well, yes. And also about the order. They write everything down and then it's very easy. They got your everything....
- MM:** Let's close our conversation Ralph, and just reflect a little bit about any other memories that you have about those early years.
- RD:** Well, memories I have of it...? Was hard and I can't for the life of my thinking, I just can't understand how the folk's and those people made it in those years. How they could live the way they lived. They worked hard, even washing by hand, the mothers. How they done it and how they could do it and look at today what we have. And then sometimes, when the kids grew up, you had to back and forth that wash machine and it wasn't easy, I tell you. You wonder many times, you think of your parents. Well, I think of mine every day. Then my dad couldn't write or read. That was still tough on us. I got so it was easy for me when I started school, once I got the hang of it. I mean, I caught on very easy.
- MM:** Do you have a chance to speak German today?
- RD:** Today? Yah sure, I can speak....
- MM:** Some conversation in German going on here in Mandan and Bismarck? When you get together, do you speak German?
- RD:** Oh, yah. Once in a while, we speak German.
- MM:** Can your children understand German?
- RD:** Just the oldest one. The oldest one and then Betty..., well, she understands but can't talk it. But Tillie can talk a little bit, not too much. But they..., yah.
- MM:** One thing I am going to ask you also, Ralph. We will visit about this later, but do you have photographs of your grandparents or your parents?
- RD:** Well, no I don't. No, I don't have anything at all. That is if you are talking about.... No, I don't have nothing that I know of. I had, let's see. I thought I had one here, the last one, when they were born. But I got lot's of it from the Kopp's. See, if you read something like this....
- MM:** Yes, I see that. We'll have to eventually get copies of some of those things.
- RD:** And that's what I was just wondering. What I done with that...? I got just the other day that they found out over here in Russia, Germans from Russia. In fact, I am suppose to send a copy to Dickinson to my

aunt. I have a aunt over there that's in the nursing home. She's 92 years old. Mrs. Dressler, that's the only one that's left.

MM: Um. How is her memory?

RD: Very, very good. She's got a pace maker and....

MM: What is her name?

RD: Her name is Lena Dressler, but she was the wife of my father's brother Phillip. His wife. The Dressler's are all dead, my father's side. They all had diabetes mostly.

MM: The family had diabetes?

RD: Yah. This one is blind for 18 years. This one lost both of her legs and then of course, she had diabetes. She died in her sleep. The day before, she was at this aunt's funeral and I was sitting right beside her, had lunch with her. The next morning, I got a call at 7:30 that she died through the night. This guy died of a heart attack in his sleep and this guy died in sleep and this guy died in sleep and my grandmother died in sleep. So I'm a good candidate, I might just sleep and you guys won't know it.

MM: Right. That's why we have to get this on tape before hand, right?

RD: You haven't got it on [the recorder], have you ?

MM: Oh, yes. I have it on.

RD: Oh, have you?

MM: Oh, yes. Anything else you'd like to say, Ralph? And then we'll visit after we have had our interview.

RD: Well, that's about all I can say. I mean as far as I know. I mean, I have lot's of family trees here, the folks and stuff like that. When they were married and all that....

MM: We'll have to take a look at that and visit with you further about our German-Russian Heritage. It's November 8, 1993 and I am in the Dressler home in Bismarck and we are going to close our conversation. Thanks so much Ralph, for the visit today.

RD: It was a pleasure talking to you.