

Interview with Leo Gross (LG)

Conducted by Michael M. Miller (MM)

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Transcription by Dorothy Denis

MM: I am Michael M. Miller from North Dakota State University and I am the Germans from Russia Bibliographer with the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection at North Dakota State University. We're trying to preserve the heritage of the Germans from Russia by interviewing people with the German-Russian ancestry. I am in Napoleon, ND, and it's the 11th of June, 1993, and I am in the home of Leo Gross. Leo, good morning! I want to thank you for your willingness to visit us. Tell me a little bit about yourself, your birth, your background and a little bit about when you were born and so forth.

LG: I was born July 5, 1916. In another 2 weeks, I will be 77 years old and my parents came from Russia, born in Russia. My father's name was Raphael. He was born in Mannheim, South Russia on August 29, 1878. My dad wasn't too far from Odessa. He came over to this country in 1896 when he was 18 years old. He [had] lost his parents. His father was from the village of Sakretarka [the Germans called it Georgenthal]. His father died when he was 10 years old and his mother died when he was 12. The mother got remarried and within 2 years she passed on. He had a very tough life. He was raised by uncles and some of them were pretty mean in those days. So, he went from uncle to uncle. When he was 18 years old, he and a cousin of his, they came over to this country together. It was in December and it was very cold and they were waiting at Eureka to be picked up. The roads were blocked for a while so they had to wait again another day. There was a layover at Eureka and then they finally came back to Logan County.

MM: Now, were there other relatives over here? You said somebody was going to pick him up?

LG: Yes, he had one uncle over here and a couple cousins.

MM: Could you tell me their names?

LG: John Gross. He was an uncle to him [dad] and he came with Matt Gross, his first cousin and another first cousin was Clements Gross. They were very helpful to him to get around.

MM: Yes, a young boy at 18 with another fellow coming [along]. It was not easy, a teenager coming to America like that. Do you remember what the name was of the village where he lived in Russia? I have a feeling it was probably a Catholic village north of Odessa.

LG: He came from Mannheim.

MM: Mannheim, yes. It was one [village] of the Kutschurgan district. Like many of the people here in Logan and Emmons County. Your father then came to Napoleon and I suspect he lived with some of those relatives to start out?

LG: For some time. For a couple of months. And then, well, there was no other place to go. And then his cousin with him went up to Fessenden, ND, in that area. They thought that there was probably some

work to be gotten. So he stayed there and was hired out to a farmer there. There was an elderly couple already at that time that offered him \$25.00 for the rest of the winter. Then he said to his cousin, "I haven't got any overshoes. Would he throw in, would he buy me a pair of overshoes?" Overshoes probably were about a \$1.00-1.50 at that time and I'll stay. So, he got \$25.00 out of them and he stayed there for the rest of the winter.

MM: He was a hired hand for this farm family?

LG: Yes.

MM: How long did he stay up in the Fessenden area?

LG: During the summer, I don't know how much he got. But I know during the winter he got those \$25.00. But he didn't know a word of English. That was the hardest thing, but he then stayed there. I think he was there almost a year until there was a job available down here. It was very lonely for him there alone. Then he got a job and it didn't take very long. This farmer was in with sheep and cattle in Emmons County by Kintyre, ND there. His name was Dugel Campbell. There was just so much hay to be made and so many cattle to be fed. They had a few hired men, so he stayed there and he worked there at that place for 4 years. He got married there then the last year and was asked to stay and they will give him a separate house when he got married to my mother. And so they stayed there until he homesteaded down in Logan County, which is the homestead yet today. I lived on that for all those years until a few years back when we moved to town.

MM: Now, your father married and what was her name?

LG: Mariann Feist. She was born on January 1, 1884 in Strassburg, South Russia. She came over all alone when she was 16 years old. Her parents were very poor, I think like all of them were. So, she was sent ahead. Relatives I think, probably took care of her. By having her come, maybe she could earn a little money so the rest of them could come later on.

MM: And she settled here in Napoleon also?

LG: In the Strasburg area.

MM: Oh, in the Strasburg area. Do you know what year she came?

LG: Well, it probably would have to be in 1902.

MM: A little bit later?

LG: Later. Oh, yah.

MM: So your father was over here for a while before he met her?

LG: Yah.

MM: They were married in what year?

LG: They married in 1904.

MM: In 1904. They had a family of how many children?

- LG:** Ten children. Five boys and five girls.
- MM:** Oh my! The farm was how far from Napoleon?
- LG:** Ten miles south and one mile east.
- MM:** Is there still a member of the family on the farm?
- LG:** No, I was the last one there. It was the homestead and I stayed there until 1974. We moved to town and there is no more farm there.
- MM:** But the land is still in the family yet?
- LG:** Yes, I still own the land.
- MM:** Now, when your dad came over, he had to learn English and then you came along. Of course, you're one of the younger ones in the family and your father then lived in the Napoleon area on the farm. Did he talk much about his life? Was he willing to speak much? Not only your father, but your mother about life in Russia? I'm interested in what he had to say. First of all, let's talk about his youth.
- LG:** Well, his youth I don't know much about, but I'll just give you a little example here. I went through a tape not too long ago which I recorded about in 1960. Him and my father-in-law and they didn't know I had the tape on and that's why you can get the best tape and they were talking about how they worked in Russia. One thing in particular struck me so much when I heard that tape again was how they dug their wells over there. They had about 3 or 4 wells in what they called their dorf in German.
- MM:** The village?
- LG:** Right. The village, yes. How many would I say lived in a dorf? Let's say several hundred?
- MM:** Oh, I would say a village was usually about 300 to 500 [people]. I think the village of Mannheim was at least that or more.
- LG:** Ok! Now, they got to the point of how they dug the wells, which is unbelievable! They started digging. Oh, usually they went to a little bit lower place. Wherever they started, they had to dig by hand. They had to have it big enough so they could work it, and wells were from 100 to 130-140 feet deep. Now, this is quite a depth to be dug by hand. They had a pulley after they got down. Let's say they got down about 10 feet and here they had to have a pulley. They had to work down there and then had to pull it up with a pail. And then I said, "well, how come with a well that deep, weren't you afraid of it caving in?" Well, they told me that they used stones to line out the well. I said, "well, they had to keep on digging, didn't they? He said they did their lining from the top. They dropped about 5 feet and then they got stones. Those stones you could cut with a saw. Now, I don't know what they meant by what kind of saw they used, but they were flat rock and they could cut them. What they used for mortar, I don't know. That is what we call cement to make it stick. Well, they said, "we don't know either, but we did it." Then they mortared another 5 feet and dug. Then they had to do the same thing again. And that's how they went down and those wells, was it 100 feet or more, but they were all lined out to the bottom. And then they said they remembered one time when they had a cave in where 2 men got killed. They went a little too deep and they were killed down there by the cave in. Those wells were used even at night. They had to get water ready for their cattle and what not. Some of them were going all night long to carry water for the house.

- MM:** This was so important to him, remembering this?
- LG:** Oh, this was so important to him, yah.
- MM:** Yes. It was important for survival, for drinking water for the cattle, for everything.
- LG:** Sure, it was for the cattle. That's right. But now to this day yet, I just can't make myself believe how it's possible that you can make those stones hold them from the top, instead of from the bottom up. They had to keep on digging. They had to line the well with stones so it won't cave in.
- MM:** They had some good planning. Those people were smart. Common sense. They may not have been well-educated in school but they learned a lot at home. Did he talk about anything else? What are some highlights that he talked about that you recall about Russia? You talked about the well and building that. Did he ever talk about farm life?
- LG:** Well, another thing that struck me was when they mentioned about threshing. The farmland was out from the village, maybe some 10 to 15 miles out. When the harvest came, he worked with the uncle and he had 5 hired men. At harvest time, when harvest got going, three of them used the scythes. Everything was cut with the scythes and then the others would follow-up. And three would cut with the scythes and he and two other hired men would gather the cut wheat and put it into bundles. And then it had to be shocked after the whole field was cut, whatever they had. If they had any more than maybe 8 to 10 acres, I think that was probably a good crop for them. Or acres, some had more. Then it was hauled back to the village and there [was an area] they called a Dreschplatz. Then the machine had to be pulled in, the tractor, the steam engine rather, I would have to say. They didn't have no gears to move the machine itself. It had to be pulled with horses. The threshing machine was pulled with horses. They set the threshing machine right in with the Dreschplatz where the bundled stacks were piled. They had to be carried because they only had one setting and the threshing machines had to be put in solid. I don't know what means they had, but they said it had to be just solid. The steam engine that was pulled with horses and had to be lined [up] with the threshing machine only just so far and then the belt was put on. It had to be pulled with horses again to stretch the belt. So, that's another thing that really struck me. How convenient it is now and hoe they did it at that time and they threshed everything they had. Another thing, I got a little ahead of myself. There was a lot of [grain] heads that were scattered around the fields and they used rakes. They were wooden rakes and they pulled them themselves and they would gather most of it. But there was one thing, they called them those field mice they had. They [the mice] would gather the heads of the grain and in comparison to an ant pile of today that we see them out [in the fields] you know, that's how they [the mice] gathered those ear heads and had them in a pile. The mice did that at night and during the night they even covered it with dirt. They worked up ground so they were to save them if it was to rain or whatever. The farmers themselves would go out and open those "huuts" and gather those heads themselves. Took them home to be threshed. They looked for every wheat head and kernel they could gather. So, they took it away from the mice. That's on my recording.
- MM:** That's very interesting. I never knew that. Of course, agriculture survival was important. But it sounds like the horse was very important.

- LG:** Yes. Yes, the horse was important. I'm sure they must have had their sulky plows and used to plow. And other than that, what else they used to get the sod chopped up, I don't know. Like now, we have disks. Did they have anything of that kind, I don't know.
- MM:** Now, did your mother talk much about her life in Russia?
- LG:** No, we didn't have [much about] the life of her. I couldn't say too much [about] what they went through because as soon as the girls grew up, they were hired out. They were out in the field like the men were.
- MM:** Even back in Russia? Even somewhat here too, they were hired out. Here they were more probably for housework.
- LG:** Oh, sure, that's right. She did more out in the field than she did over there. I know of her telling us how she raked hay and this and that in only the three years she was here before they got married. From one place to another. The last job she had she was a housekeeper for a priest.
- MM:** Here in Napoleon?
- LG:** No, in Strasburg.
- MM:** Your father, because he had such a difficult life going from family member to family member, uncle to uncle and so forth in that Black Sea colony of Mannheim, so he probably didn't talk too much about how Christmas was. Did he talk much about holidays and how they celebrated them in Russia?
- LG:** Well, no. I couldn't just go into that right now to make it actually important. You probably can get someone else that would know more about that than I could tell you.
- MM:** When he came over, you talked about agriculture and the machinery and so forth they used. Did he bring up anything else that you can remember? A high light he would like to talk about or reminisce on life in Russia? Or even what it was like those early days when he came over here as a young boy? What were some of the things he would like to repeat? Let's talk a little bit more about your father. You mentioned earlier about some incidences. Tell me the one you just talked about when your father was at a little gathering and what happened in the cold of winter.
- LG:** Oh. Well, they had a gathering and they went to his cousin's place and a first cousin of his came there too. His parents and him only lived a mile or something like that from the place where they were having a little names day party. A storm came up about 11 o'clock and he [had] come with the manure boat. Just one horse on there and stayed there. So when that storm came up, they wanted him to stay. He said, "aw, my horse, she'll find the way home, I'll go." He got on his heavy coat and said the horse will find the way. Well, probably nobody paid no more attention. He went home. The parents where he was supposed to go to thought he stayed overnight and where the party was, they thought he made it home. So, around ten-ten thirty the next morning, they found the horse. It was right close to the farm, right in with the hay fence. They found him and he couldn't move no more and the horse had traveled almost all night. They took him in the house and had to thaw him out. You would say it was just luck that the storm had let up a little during the day that they found him that early, or he would have froze to death right on the manure boat.
- MM:** Again, that's how important it was that the horse knew the way home.
- LG:** Yah, yah.

- MM:** He may not have survived if it had not been for the horse. Of course, at that time, there was no way to communicate. There was no telephone or anything to call and say he's coming home and all that. That's very interesting. So, your father went on then and had a good life and raised ten children and so forth and your mother had a hard life, but a good life raising ten children. Let's talk a little bit about your life Leo, growing up in a family of ten. First of all, I suspect you probably didn't speak much English growing up?
- LG:** As far as English, when we started school we didn't know hardly a word of English. I am going to go back a little further, our own children didn't know hardly a bit of English. We talked German. We thought that this was just the way to go. English was so hard to pick up for us and we just kept on talking German. And to this day, we still talk German when we are home here together.
- MM:** And your children can speak German?
- LG:** The youngest ones, they'll understand it, but they can't talk it. I know they understand it all.
- MM:** Now Leo, you have a family of how many children?
- LG:** We have five children.
- MM:** You have five children?
- LG:** We had six but one passed away.
- MM:** But they can all at least still understand German and some still speak it?
- LG:** Yes, yes. One of the toughest things I talk about a lot is when we started school, but maybe I should go back further.
- MM:** Let's go back. If you have a few memories of what it was like back home, even in school. What you remember about your ma and what she used to cook and the kind of chores you had and so forth.
- LG:** The cooking? That was easy. We had our own potatoes, we had chickens, and if you have chickens, you had eggs too. Flour was about one of the most important things they had to buy. Flour and sugar and coffee. The rest of it was home [grown].
- MM:** I suspect they had a root cellar?
- LG:** We didn't have to much of a root cellar. But our meat, you know, pork you always had. The Germans, they had pork. That was cured so that you could save it well up into the summer.
- MM:** What were your chores? Did you have special chores that you had to do?
- LG:** We all had our chores. We had to go out early in the morning, the barns had to be cleaned, the milking was done by hand. If you get back into the house, there was no electricity, there was no telephone, there was no running water. What about fuel? There was nothing. You know, it was made from manure. We made our own manure [fuel] for heating purposes. You know, it was packed with the horses and that was stacked. After it was good and dry, that's what we used in the wintertime.
- MM:** You helped make that?

- LG:** Oh, yes. We even did that when I was married yet. We had our own manure, but then we started buying coal too, already.
- MM:** About how long was it that you remember, until what year was it that you used manure for heat?
- LG:** I'd say about two or three years after we were married. We got married in 1940, and so I'd say until about 1943.
- MM:** You were still using manure. There was a certain method you used that was very important how you did this so it was real concrete, right?
- LG:** Yes, yes. They always said that sheep manure was the best. It was almost like lignite coal, you know. The sheep manure was packed solid.
- MM:** Did you ever run out of manure for heat?
- LG:** No, you had coal already in my days then. But if you go further back, I don't know how they got by. They might have burned hay, slough hay, whatever. Of course and I can't say. They gathered buffalo chips but they got by. But in the kitchen, how did they do their washing? Well, the water had to be carried in from outside. Sometimes the wells were away from the house, maybe 200 or 300 feet. Water had to be carried in there. The wash water had to be heated. What did they use to heat it with? There came the manure again. The same with the cooking and baking. Everything was always that manure. And they baked the best bread, I think. Just as good as they do today.
- MM:** And probably better.
- LG:** That's right.
- MM:** You, of course, went to a country school?
- LG:** Yes.
- MM:** How far away from home?
- LG:** We were lucky. It was only a little better than a quarter of a mile.
- MM:** How did they develop those country schools?
- LG:** Well, they went section by section. If there were only a few farmers together, why then they would sometimes started out with school in their house. In a house if they had a spare room, they would have a few days, you know, of school. Maybe a month, that's all. But later on, now I'm going back past my time. When they built the schools, they went to where... If there was about four or five farmers in the area, of course, they were scattered more. But anyway, where they thought was the best place, they would set the schoolhouse. Then if it was a section, they would put in four schools and I should call them townships. The section wouldn't be big enough. But in a township, then they would have them so it was convenient for everybody. But then, they had as high as 25 children in one school. But later on, and up in the 30's, I still remember the teachers we got. I am going back again to the older ones. We didn't hardly get a teacher there at that time, but there was some [teachers] that their English was a little better and the people would bring their kids there and have a few hours of that. You know, at least so that they could write their names.

- MM:** They taught in the home, too?
- LG:** In the home. And then, later on in the schools, they would get some outsiders in that knew English. They would hire them for a teacher. Maybe only two months out of the year that they would have teachers there. When they built the schools, well, the teacher boarded someplace but she was supposed to be there at the schoolhouse by 9 o'clock. Sometimes, those stoves wouldn't work. Sometimes you sat in there until noon until the schoolhouse was warm. In those days, it got just as cold as it does now. Twenty below, that was just as cold then as it is now. We had nice days and we had bad ones. But I still feel sorry for what those teachers went through. We were supposed to learn English. The teacher didn't know a word of German and we didn't know no English and now, you put a teacher in with a bunch like that. It was very, very difficult.
- MM:** So, where did the teacher live? With the family?
- LH:** Yes. Somebody would always take care of the teacher. They probably didn't have as many children. But if they did have many children, they would always be kind enough to board the teacher.
- MM:** So, when you were in the first grade going to the country school, you spoke very little English?
- LG:** I don't think I could say a sentence in English just to keep a conversation going.
- MM:** So, maybe some of the older children might know a little bit and so they taught each other?
- LG:** That's how it was. They had all the grades, first grade up to the eighth. The younger ones, they learned by hearing in school what went on. It got a little bit easier later on with the teachers.
- MM:** And then some of the older children even had chores in school, I'll bet to help with the fuel and everything?
- LG:** Well, the chores started at home. We had to do our chores before we went to school. What did we have for clothing? We didn't have too far to go to school. But you take the rest of them. Some had to go mile and a half and some as far as 2 miles. They didn't have the clothing in those days. They didn't have those insulated suits and those goosedown coats and parkas over your head. What they went through, some had to walk to school, but they made it. Some came crying to school it was so cold.
- MM:** But they were determined also to learn. They wanted to learn so they learned together.
- LG:** Yes, yes. Probably, the kids themselves. I put myself in place. We thought learning wasn't so interesting, but we had to do it. We were raised a little different than they are now. Now, if you don't like this or you don't like why, you have a much easier chance for kids to get by. But we were sort of forced and we had to do what the teacher said. There was no going home and telling the parents what happened today and the teacher did this and did that. Now days, the teacher runs into trouble if they lay a hand on you.
- MM:** That was important that your parents encouraged and forced you to go to school.
- LG:** Yes. Many times we thought our parents were a little too rough with us, but now I think it is going too far the other way already. But we thought it was a little roughness there, but maybe it panned out alright.

- MM:** Now, remember Leo, as you grew a little older, of course you went to more months of school up the 8th grade, but going back to your youth, your teenage years and so forth, let's talk about some of the holidays. What was Christmas like for you growing up?
- LG:** Well, I'll tell yah, at Christmas time we got to get an orange. That was the only time we got to see oranges. We got a little present, you know, a little toy or something that you could wind up or whatever. Some of them didn't even get anything at all, they couldn't buy anything but the nuts, they was usually available and apples. But I still remember the extra orange we got and that was our Christmas. Another thing that was very important was the churches. A few farmers, after they settled, they had services in the house. There was no priest, no minister available. They did it themselves. I remember later on, we being Catholics, the closest priest was 25 miles away and they would get him once a month, you know, for our church. I don't remember that, but this was getting back to when my parents started out. But just as soon as there was a bunch of farmers together, then they built a church. And if it was only about 12 X 14 feet or 16 feet, but a church, that was a must.
- MM:** Christian life, yes.
- LG:** Catholic, Lutheran, or whatever it was. That's probably what persevered and made them as strong as they are even today. Summertime, they would come and some didn't have a buggy, they would come with a wagon. The family, they would come to church. That was a must and not just with Catholics, it was everybody.
- MM:** Of course, at Christmas time it was very important, the midnight service.
- LG:** Yes, the Midnight Mass. I remember going with the sled to Midnight Mass. We didn't have no car until 1920.
- MM:** What about Easter time? How do you remember Easter?
- LG:** Well, the Easter Monday was also celebrated. Easter, the Easter Monday, that was a holiday, so no work was done. Oh, Sunday there was no work. We felt that was something if you saw someone working on a Sunday, that was uncalled for. That's how the holidays were celebrated. Sure, they got together more, like during Christmas, the farmers. But there was no cars until later dates and then there was more and more.
- MM:** I remember a little even in my youth, celebrating Saint's Day for your namesdays. That was a very big event.
- LG:** Yes, there was John, and there was Anton, and there was Paul, and there was Nick. And they would gather and they would have a nice time there. They would do the singing, they would have a few drinks. They had some homemade beer there later on already. They would celebrate a little in their homes.
- MM:** Was there singing in German? Do you remember any of those songs?
- LG:** Oh, yes.
- MM:** What was one of your favorites?

- LG:** Well, when it comes to church, Großer Gott, that was one of my favorite songs. But then, we as Catholics, we had a lot of our own songs. Songs in honor to the Blessed Virgin Mary and songs like that, and we sang them at home. My dad made us sing. My dad was a good singer.
- MM:** Are you a good singer?
- LG:** I would call myself maybe a little bit above average. We do a lot of entertaining yet with German singing and English both, now. But we sing the old songs now, just the in last few years. I sing in other churches too, just for funerals where they want some of the songs they sang maybe over a hundred years ago and there is nobody around here that sings them. I had a pretty good helper here in town by the name of Peter Frank. He's going to be 92 years old and he is very good to this day.
- MM:** Wonderful!
- LG:** We sing songs which they want sung in the Lutheran churches. I had him already at a Catholic church wedding. If they want this particular song that was sometimes sung at the grave site or at church and we sing it for them.
- MM:** Of course, a wedding day was important too, even your wedding day also. Do you remember how they celebrated a wedding?
- LG:** You mean the old time weddings?
- MM:** Yes.
- LG:** Okay, Schnapps, that had to be. That was number one.
- MM:** How did they make the Schnapps?
- LG:** They had their own brew. I don't know what you call this now, but you could brew their own whiskey at home and it was powerful stuff.
- MM:** Did you ever brew your own?
- LG:** Oh, yes. Oh, yes.
- MM:** How did you make yours?
- LG:** Well, you had to have some kind of a batch. You used yeast, you used barley and I don't know what else you used, and it had to sit around for I don't know for how long, maybe 2 - 3 weeks. And they just knew when it was time for it to run it through the distiller or whatever it was called, and you got the nice 190 stuff out of that, you know. And that went big for the wedding. We usually had this all year around. You weren't supposed to do it, you know. It was Prohibition days at that time, but I think just about everybody did it.
- MM:** Then how was the wedding celebrated? Just one day?
- LG:** Yah. Some of them went two days, but in my days that I recall, it never went over one day.
- MM:** It was a big, all day affair?

- LG:** Oh, sure. You were already in church at ten o'clock. You never had an afternoon Mass for our weddings. So, you had dinner at home and then dancing started. We had to clean out a room and if it was only about 12 by 12 or 14, something like that. They were going all day long. Some would even just use a harmonica, but that's all they needed to keep them moving. Schnapps and a harmonica, that way you could have a good old time. And the singing that went with it.
- MM:** The German Catholics, of course, did a lot of dancing. But what about the Lutherans?
- LG:** Well, I don't think the Lutherans did celebrate so much when it came to dancing at home, not that I can recall. But I know the Catholics did, they went all day.
- MM:** Do you remember who played at these dances? What orchestra?
- LG:** Who? Getting back, one of my relatives was one of the early ones.
- MM:** His name?
- LG:** Was Anton Wangler. He played. And then there was a John Schwab from Strasburg. Lawrence Welk in that area.
- MM:** Do you remember going to Lawrence Welk?
- LG:** No, no. I was too young at that time yet. Even my Dad played for a wedding one time with the harmonica.
- MM:** Did you play an instrument?
- LG:** Yah, I play an accordion now, but not for dancing. But we use it if we go out for entertaining, when we go out in retirement homes or wherever we go with senior citizens and then I use the accordion. I started late with it.
- MM:** Do you remember your Holy Communion or your Confirmation?
- LG:** Oh, yah. We had about five to six weeks where we went for Holy Communion. We had to go to a German school. That was at where our church was. They had a good sized hall at that time. So, I have to go back to about 1924-25 and we had what they call the Schulmeister. He was organist in the church and always an instructor for Holy Communion. Altogether, we had about 80 [children] going to school. But then, there was the other grades. But every year, it started out with the First Communions, so the older ones probably went to school there until they were probably 12-13 or 15 years old. I have a picture, I'll show it to you before you go. Well, the instructor, he had all those classes. There was the first, the second, and then it went to 4th and then 6th grade. Some classes were skipped, they didn't have the books for it. He was instructor for those 80 children and it was quieter in that room than today when there is ten of them and I can prove that.
- MM:** Good discipline. Of course, they were very attentive. But this Christian schooling was in German?
- LG:** German, yes. Everything in German. That was German until in the 1930's when it kind of slowed down.
- MM:** Then of course, you had Confirmation and that probably was in German too?

- LG:** Yes. But I still remember when our Bishop stressed the English. When he started asking questions in our parish and then one of the nuns, they were the instructors there at that time, and the Bishop started out in English and the kids couldn't answer. Then the nun said, "you have to ask them in German."
- MM:** And the Bishop could speak in German?
- LG:** Well, yah, but not too good. But when he was done, he said, "parents, you have to try harder to get the English into your children."
- MM:** This was in the 1920's?
- LG:** Oh, no! This was in the 1930's. Later thirties. Just everything was in German.
- MM:** It is still important that we learn good English, but it doesn't hurt to be bilingual. That children learn another language, even today. Especially with our German-Russian heritage, [it is good] to learn both. Of course your teenage years were important. Do you remember the kind of games you used to play?
- LG:** Well, we had a little bit of baseball and it was mostly just games where you would run around and catch each other and this and that. But there wasn't too much time for that.
- MM:** Yes, there wasn't much time for that as everyone had their chores.
- LG:** Yes, we had our chores and in the evenings by 9 o'clock, why the lights were out. You went to bed.
- MM:** You had to get up early?
- LG:** Sure.
- MM:** What were some of the favorite foods your ma made?
- LG:** Well, I suppose the baked stuff. Actually, there was nothing too special you know. If you went elsewhere, everybody cooked the same. If you went to the neighbor's house, the cooking was always the same. A lot of pork.
- MM:** A lot of noodles?
- LG:** Noodles, yes.
- MM:** What kind of noodles? Do you remember?
- LG:** We just called them noodles from dough. They made their own dough and made noodles out of it. They still do this today here in Napoleon. My wife makes them.
- MM:** What kind of noodles does she make?
- LG:** She uses the store bought dough, but it's still the noodle like it used to be.

End of side one - Beginning of side two

- MM:** How about school? You finished through the 8th grade?

LG: I made the 8th grade, yah.

MM: And by then, you could speak pretty good English already?

LG: Well, no. The English wasn't too good. I'm sure you noticed now that it is still holding back a little. You know, it doesn't come out like the German. I wish I could talk German with you.

MM: Right.

LG: That comes out so much better!

MM: And after you finished the 8th grade, did you stay on the farm and work?

LG: Yes. My older brothers, there were three of us at home that were older than I was, and that was during the time when the Depression started. So my folk's thought that maybe one of us should start going to high school. I made the 8th grade. I didn't have no problems making the 8th grade, but nowadays, when you are out of the 8th grade, you never even think of not going to high school because the buses will pick you up and so it's a continuous deal going to school. Very few in my days started going to high school. We had about three or four in our district that went to high school. So my dad and the older ones they thought I should go. So, after I said, "I didn't want to go." Of course, we were kind of.... When did we get to town? See, the town kids, they were even looking down at the farmers as kind of dirty farmers. Sometimes, I can see why. When we got to school you know, we were with the teachers. We left the barn sometimes and went right to school. When did we change clothes? We only changed clothes once a week 'cause the washing facilities weren't like they are now that you can just throw it into the washer and dryer and everything takes care of it by itself. Underwear was changed, when we went to school, probably once a week in the winter time. You never took your underwear off when you went to bed because usually the bedrooms were cold. You didn't have the heating in the house like we have today. But way back when I started high school then, I did commit after two weeks and then the English was bad. The first or second night already, they took me to town and they would pick me up on a Friday evening. Was [in] a boarding place [with a] strange family. And here I was, homesickness started the first night. The second night I said, "I can't take this." The little bundle I had, I don't know if I unpacked it because I knew I'm not going to stay! But when that Friday evening came, I was just all done. When they got me, "that was it!" My dad never said one word to force me to go. I found out later on, he said, "I know what homesickness is." He had lost his father when he was ten and he lost his mother when he was twelve. He said, "nobody can tell me what homesickness is because I know what it is." So, they didn't push me no more. Well, I think I came out alright this way too. We made a good living on the farm. I could see when I was in high school, our English was so bad and got laughed at and we weren't dressed like the town kids even though they were poor town kids too. But we just didn't fit quite right into that bunch. So, stayed on the farm and went through the Depression. We were all young yet. In 1936 and 1937, we went out west. I just told you, I'll make it short, because there was nothing going on back home. No crops at all for two years. In 1934/36, we never had a binder or a header out to harvest a crop. So, I went out to Oregon with someone else. He hooked a two-wheel open trailer behind the car and that's how we went out. By the fourth day, we were out in Salem, Oregon with an open two-wheel trailer. The hottest day ever recorded in the state, that's the day we left on, July 6, 1936. There was eight or nine of us in a coupe car and a two wheel trailer pulled behind. Nowadays, they wouldn't let you travel like that, but that's how we went. We got 20 cents an hour, sometimes 25 cents an hour.

- MM:** Out there in Salem?
- LG:** In Salem, Oregon.
- MM:** What did you do out there?
- LG:** We picked hops, pears, peaches, apples, whatever came along. We were working all the time, cemented barns, shingled barns, you know. Whatever came along, we did. Picked watermelons and cantaloupes. We were busy all the time.
- MM:** How long did you stay out there?
- LG:** Three months. Then the following year, I went again and stayed for six months.
- MM:** Came back home and went out again?
- LG:** Yah, we came back home and went out. I paid for the trip out and then had a few dollars left over. I think I kept a few dollars and the rest of it went back to my parents. I was 20 years old and gave to the parents just what I had left over.
- MM:** And this was in 1936? And then from 1936 to 1940?
- LG:** Well, in 1937, I went out again, but things started getting better then. It got better in 1938 and 1939 better and in 1940 we got married. And then my folks moved into town and we stayed on the farm and continued there until 1974.
- MM:** But when you stayed on the farm in 1940, were other members of your family living with you yet?
- LG:** No, no.
- MM:** They had all moved out?
- LG:** They all moved out and my parents moved to town. And then we stayed on the farm and continued farming. I still have the land to this day. Built a new home in 1974 and we're getting along quite well now.
- MM:** I am happy to hear that you have spread the word or that you have been invited to come to the school and talk about your German-Russian heritage. I think that is very important. Let me ask you, do the students ask questions?
- LG:** Yes, yes.
- MM:** Are they responsive?
- LG:** One time I was there, they said, "oh, if you are there about a half an hour, that will be enough time to talk." But I was there for over an hour and they still kept on talking and asking questions. It was mostly how the kids were dressed to go to school, if it was the same as today. [Today] they have everything. What else can they ask for? They've got everything.
- MM:** Right. But going back to when you were growing up, by chance, did your parents or anyone you remember subscribe to any German newspapers?
- LG:** Yes. My dad always had the Nord Dakota Herold. It used to be the Rundschau.

- MM:** The Nord Dakota Herold came out of Dickinson.
- LG:** For a while, they had that Staatsanzeiger.
- MM:** Der Staatsanzeiger. Then the children, I think would read that?
- LG:** Well, I don't know. I still remember reading letters myself out of the Nord Dakota Herold because I can write German yet and can read German. I can read the German writing; it has to be written kinda plain, like the way we learned it.
- MM:** That was good that they kept informed of what was happening over in Russia. About other families and so forth.
- LG:** There was a lot of letters in there that would make my folks sit and cry, reading a letter like that. See, their relatives, most of them were over there [in Russia] on my wife's side. Her parents got married over there and they are the only ones that are over here now, but they have both passed away. She doesn't know a first cousin on either side of her parents. There was never any communication.
- MM:** No correspondence? Not going into depth of our conversation here, when we are finished, we should talk about that because as you probably heard when I was visiting this morning, there is possibly a way to help find people and/or relatives and we have found a number of families in North Dakota. I am so glad that you are telling the young people and hopefully, they will express enough interest so that they will keep up our heritage.
- LG:** I hope so.
- MM:** Do you feel Mr. Gross, it is important that we preserve this German-Russian heritage.
- LG:** I would think so. I would think so.
- MM:** Because you have such fond memories and fortunately, you have good memories, remembering how your father came over here and so forth. He had a very difficult life, not always that difficult. All of them had a hard time, but to think that he came over as a young boy, as a teenager and then made a successful life, had his own land and so forth, and then talked about it so you could preserve the heritage. That's very important.
- LG:** Communication was always good with my dad, you know. I wish I would have listened a little better. You know, there is so much now that I wish I knew because he repeated stories sometimes, and as time went by, then we forgot. But today, I wish I would have listened to more of it.
- MM:** Was the Bible and prayer important in your home?
- LG:** Yes, you never went to a table without a prayer. You never went to bed without a night prayer. We all gathered together for the night prayer, we all sat together and then we departed and went to bed.
- MM:** So, you prayed together?
- LG:** Oh, yes. Table prayer, yes. But even after we got up after [a meal], before we went out to work, done eating, and then a prayer.

- MM:** Can you recall, briefly in German, the night prayer? Feel free to speak in German. Do you remember what you used to say?
- LG:** You know, I couldn't even say them anymore now.
- MM:** Do you still speak [German] in church here in Napoleon, like when you say the rosary? Do you say it in German?
- LG:** No, no. The last German rosary I said was when a friend of mine died and they asked me to do it. That was probably in the 1960's. German rosary which they wanted, you know, when they have wake services. They asked me to say the rosary in German. I can still say it [in German].
- MM:** Now, when you are here in Napoleon and when you go downtown, is there much German spoken?
- LG:** Yes, yes. When we go to company, it's more German. Unless there is someone there that doesn't understand it. The conversation, when playing cards, this and that, we still speak German.
- MM:** What about when the children come home for the holidays? Do they speak German?
- LG:** It's mixed. Well, if there is someone with them that can't understand German, why then it's English. But if we are just with the [family], well, the older ones don't mind speaking German.
- MM:** When they come home, they probably say, "let's have some German food."
- LG:** Yes, that's a must. German food, oh, yah.
- MM:** And some Kuchen?
- LG:** Yah, yah. And they get it here.
- MM:** Do they make a lot of Kuchen yet for weddings around here?
- LG:** Yah. My wife, she was head over heels into baking Kuchen and what not.
- MM:** Yes, preserving our heritage is important. We are trying to help with this effort at the North Dakota State University. There is the Germans from Russia Heritage Society and there are local chapters. What else can you think, Mr. Gross that's important to preserve this heritage? We talked about being in the schools being important, talking about it and preserving it in the form of interviews and family histories and collecting pictures and all those kind of things. But is there any message you would like to leave? You know, someday should someone should listen to our conversation, is there a message that you would like to leave about the roots of these people that came over to Logan County?
- LG:** Well, if you want to go back to the schools, I think discipline. That went out the window. Discipline is one of the most important. You know what? The parents are to be blamed for it. That's all I have to say about that. I'll just make it short.
- MM:** Discipline in the schools. Of course, you remember going to Catechism School and going to country school and there was good discipline and I remember that I had pretty good discipline too because I went to Catholic school in Strasburg. But I think it is important that there be dialogue between the teacher and the students and be able to freely express, but have it organized and when it's time for the teacher to speak, let them speak and so forth. But it's interesting. Times have changed. Let's hope that

times will change, but the passing will bring on and continue on our rich heritage, especially here in south-central North Dakota.

- LG:** Can we talk about our school again? I still have a soft heart for the teacher, what they went through. If they would send one of our sons or daughters to Japan to teach them their Japanese language, they don't understand it and are just at a standstill right there. That's why I say those teachers didn't get the credit they had coming. I have a soft spot for them and what they went through when they worked with us.
- MM:** Right. First of all, they were foreign to the culture of the Germans from Russia. If they weren't German-Russian themselves, they couldn't speak German and they could only speak the English. And then having to go out and live in a rural setting with a family that didn't speak English. There is a lot due and we really need to pursue some of those teachers and talk to those teachers who came out to Logan County, McIntosh, and Emmons County and see what they have to say. Because hopefully, some of them could still tell us about their life.
- LG:** Some of those teachers, they came here from Minnesota. They were a little ahead of us in North Dakota. They came from the cities and then they put them out on a farm. Our lights? What did we have? We had the kerosene lamps. That's all we had! With just an ordinary kerosene lamp, she had to do her homework with us. Sometimes we were all sitting in the kitchen and she had to do the homework at one end of the table to save kerosene. It was terrible what they had to go through sometimes.
- MM:** It was terrible and yet they were all in the same boat, generally speaking, out there. We made the best of it.
- LG:** I think that people were happier in those days than they are now. They would get together more than they do now.
- MM:** Much more homelife?
- LG:** Yes, yes.
- MM:** And they did things together. They prayed together and played together and they worked together and they sang together.
- LG:** What about the younger ones with respect for the older ones? You know when, let's say we went to our Catechism school to make our First Communion and from there on we went there for three or four more years. [When] somebody older walked by there, elderly people, or elderly men went by, we had to raise our caps and say, "Praise be to Jesus Christ," in German: "Gelobt sei Jesu Christus." If we got caught not doing this, we were really punished when our instructor found out. When the Schulmeister found out that we didn't raise our caps for so and so. I still remember that. We had to raise our caps and they were into their forties. Do that! Respect!
- MM:** Into the '40's, you remember that?
- LG:** When they were 40 years old, I meant. When a man walked by there while we were playing and we didn't raise our caps, then we got punished. What would they tell to a 40 year old now?
- MM:** That would be totally different now. I think we are going to have to end our conversation. I has certainly been a wonderful experience for me coming here to the Gross home and visiting with you and we'll have

to continue our conversation privately and maybe even pursue what you might have in your home that relates to the Germans from Russia. We are interested in collecting clothing of the Germans from Russia, photographs, all kinds of things and we hope to exhibit some of those things at the university and you can play an important role in spreading the word here in the Napoleon area.

LG: Well, I'm glad [and] if I can do anything, I will do it. I wish I would have been a little better informed here today as I just didn't know what was coming up.

MM: Well, I think we did a pretty good job.

LG: I can't do no more than what I did. Well, maybe the next time.

MM: We had a wonderful time! Thanks so much! It is closing time here in Napoleon and thanks for listening.