

In Touch with Prairie Living

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By Michael M. Miller

Germans from Russia Heritage Collection
North Dakota State University Libraries, Fargo



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA

GRHC

HERITAGE COLLECTION

The heritage of the Germans from Russia is an important part of our northern plains culture.

The Germans from Russia Heritage Collection at the NDSU Libraries in Fargo reaches out to prairie families and to former Dakotans. Readers' responses with suggestions and opinions are encouraged. This column shares the holiday traditions of German-Russian customs and foodways.

Belzenickel and Christkindl Traditions

The tradition of St. Nicholas (Belzenickel) bringing gifts for children traces its origins back to the Middle Ages. According to legend, St. Nicholas, the historic bishop with his flowing white beard, was a generous, kind-hearted figure. Reformation customs developed the Christkindl (Christ Child) as gift-giver appearing in homes on Christmas Eve (Weihnachtsabend), traveling by sleigh or carriage. The Belzenickel rewarded faithful children. How do you remember the Belzenickel and the Christkindl visiting your home on Christmas Eve?

Today we know St. Nicholas as Santa Claus, the American character, who evolved from the Dutch "Sinter Klaus" of New York heritage.

Weihnachtsbaum (The Christmas Tree) in South Russia

According to Joseph S. Height's book, *Memories of Black Sea Germans*, there is no historical evidence that early German settlers in South Russia had Christmas trees in their homes due to the lack of trees on the steppes of the Black Sea and Volga regions. On the Dakota prairies, the German-Russian pioneers faced a similar situation with no Christmas trees until they were shipped for sale into Dakota communities.

Legend of The Christmas Spider

Kelly Mitchell of Calgary writes, "Many years ago in Germany, a mother was cleaning her house for Christmas. All the spiders scurried upstairs to the attic where they could hear the decorating being done. The spiders then returned running up and down the branches, covering the tree with their webs. When the Christ Child (Christkindl) arrived seeing how ugly the tree was, he touched and blessed the tree, turning all the webs into gold and silver sparkles. Thus the custom of placing a spider ornament on the Christmas tree was born. "A tree with a spider on it is blessed," according to oral tradition.

The Angels Christmas Tradition

Jolenta Fischer Masterson, a native of Strasburg, ND living in Seattle shares, "On Christmas Eve, three 'angels' would enter our home, cold with snow in their hair. Wearing wings and tinsel crowns, one would be in pink, one in blue and one in white. After singing *Stille Nacht* in German and *Silent Night* in English, the angels would disappear into the night and bring back a special gift for each child - from the Christkindl, we were told. Only after that special visit would there be a gift exchange and feasting. It was wonderful to be a child in those day!"

Halvah as a Confection with Christmas Memories

A Christmas tradition in many German-Russian homes is halvah. This pressed confection of sesame seed and honey is eaten as a desert or snack, somewhat crumbly and crunchy and quite sweet. With vanilla and chocolate flavors but sometimes marbled, Halvah is a Turkish confection. Curt Renz of Ames, IA, recalls his father selling halvah by the pound in their Herreid, SD, store. Curt remembers selling

black olives, reaching with a cup into a huge wooden barrel filled with brine and olives. These were daily purchases by the "old folks". Other common purchases were head cheese and blood sausage.

Adeline Liebholz Kosch Celebrates Christmas at 105

One of the oldest German-Russians in America is Adeline Liebholz Kosch, who recently celebrated her 105th birthday and is the oldest person ever in Yakima, WA. She was born in 1891 in the former German village of Hoffnungstal near Odessa, Ukraine. Persons wishing to send a belated birthday card can address to Adeline Kosch, c/o Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church, 1207 S. 7th St., Yakima, WA 98802.

Won't you share your childhood memories about the Christmas and holiday customs, traditions, recipes, foods and other stories? We are a research center and your contributions will provide broader insight for the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection and future "In Touch with Prairie Living" columns. Share your memories by contacting Michael M. Miller, NDSU Libraries, PO Box 5599, Fargo, ND 58105-5599. Tel: 701-231-8416; E-mail: Michael.Miller@ndsu.edu

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