

In Touch with Prairie Living

February 1997

By Michael M. Miller & Carol Just Halverson

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 former Dakotans. Readers' responses with suggestions and opinions are encouraged. In today's column, guest writer Carol Just Halverson of St. Louis Park, MN, shares her experiences as a historian and oral interviewer. Carol grew up in a German-Russian family near LaMoure, ND.

"Remember the year Dad stuck his hand in the hopper of the combine, lost a few fingers and landed in the hospital at the height of the harvest season? What lousy timing! Our neighbors really came through for our family. Why, I can still see the caravan of combines and trucks arriving at our farm that August morning as if it were yesterday. There was Jake and his son Roger, Uncle Reinhold and my cousins, the Long brothers, and others I'm sure. I was the water girl which at the age of ten is a pretty important job.... that is, when I wasn't performing my other important job... helping mom butcher enough chickens and peel enough potatoes to feed that crew...."

Oral History

What you have just read is an example of Oral History; taking a memory and sharing it with as much detail as can be remembered. This story was not uncommon in farm communities on the prairie where I grew up. However, that way of life and community support wouldn't be documented without the help of oral tradition. Furthermore, without the story, the listener may not know how important harvest is in terms of family economics or the fact that most of the farmers who came to rescue our harvest were leaving their own crops standing, risking personal economic loss with each hour that passed. Telling about a personal experience in the oral

tradition allows for detail and emotion. It blows life into the past...making history come alive.

Legends And Lore

For centuries, cultures have used oral tradition as a way of preserving their legends and lore. Native American and Hmong cultures enhanced the verbal telling with weavings and paintings using visual documentation to provide images. Since the dawn of taxation, governments have kept census of people. Clergymen documented names and dates of significant religious events. As society accessed education, families documented their ancestral history in Bibles. All are sources used by genealogists as they construct family trees. Oral history takes genealogy a step further, making names and dates come alive as they bring the listener back to another time and place. All families have interesting stories with listening and learning value. These family stories give today's modern pioneers a connection with their heritage and a sense of identity in a culturally diverse society.

How Do We Get Started?

Anyone can do it. Even small children have a personal history and love to share their experience. There is neither a right or wrong way to capture your heritage, but here are a few tips. Perhaps you've chosen to interview Grandma, who made growing bountiful flower and vegetable gardens look easy, Aunt Mary who rode horseback to country school, Grandpa who farmed the early half of his career using real "horsepower" or maybe second-cousin George who has the family sausage recipe in his head. Simply ask if they are willing to talk and set a time and place. Arrive promptly with pencil and pad, audio or video tape-recorder already tested, labeled and ready to operate (extra tape and batteries are a must).

Have a list of questions ready, but be flexible in case Uncle Ephraim begins to follow a line of questioning not on your list but important nonetheless.

Listen And Learn

Always be respectful, do not interrupt or correct. This is their story as they remember it. Memories are sacred and should not be challenged. Invite the interviewee to take you back to the age they were at the time period you are discussing. Encourage them to use popular phrases of the period and their first language (if other than English) to tell the story. Welcome them to translate after they have shared their story in their first language. This dialogue always opens doors to new information about emigration from the old country: worship practices, customs and foodways, and adjustment to life in a new country. Photographs and heirloom items are good memory triggers and very useful in the interview process. However, when you are recording with audio tape be certain to describe the heirloom item you are discussing.

Keep distractions to a minimum. When possible, interview in private since most interviewees are self-conscious. If your interviewee defers with "ask my brother John, he knows more," gently reply that you will consider their suggestion, but for now you have chosen him or her.

Always thank them for their time and for sharing their precious memories. Offer a copy of the interview tape and transcription, inviting them to make any corrections. A follow-up note thanking them for giving you a memorable visit is advised.

Other vehicles for capturing oral history are games such as "Lifestory" or "Reminiscing," which can be played by all age groups in a non-threatening environment, providing multi-generational fun. Consider planning a fruit canning, bread baking, soup cooking or sausage making project during the

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next get-together of grandparents and grandchildren. This shared activity sets the stage for traditional storytelling and creates new memories at the same time.

Plan to Come Back for More

Always leave the door open for the next interview...."as I remember it, our crop was harvested in a short time that year while Dad roamed the hospital corridors testing the nurses patience. I don't know what was harer on him, losing a few fingers or missing the thrill a bountiful harvest provides a good soil steward like my father. I'll never forget those neighbors and the creed by which rural people live. My farming community understood that farm accidents happen and that if misfortune had visited another neighbor, my father and his sons would be driving their combines and trucks up the lane to rescue that harvest."

Arizona Snowbirds

Memories and friendships will be shared this winter in Arizona. Join us for Germans from Russia outreach events on February 27 at Lakeview Hall #1, 10676 Thunderbird Blvd., Sun City, 1:30-3:30 p.m.; March 1 at Mesa Regal Resort, Royal Hall, 4700 E. Main, Mesa, 1:30-4 p.m.; and at the NDSU Libraries tables at the North Dakota Picnic, Pioneer Park, Mesa, March 2, 10 a.m.-3 p.m. Featured speakers will be who those visited the German villages in Ukraine in June, 1996.

Share Your Memories

Thanks to Oral Historian Carol Just Halverson for sharing these valuable tips from her LIFETIMES Workshop. We welcome our readers to share their oral interviews. Collect your parent's and grandparent's shared insights and family heritage, for the archives of the Germans from Russia Heritage

Collection. We are actively completing oral interviews on cassette tape and videotape. The GRHC has prepared "Questions for the Interview" available. 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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