

In Touch with Prairie Living

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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 this month's column, we focus on Easter traditions in German-Russian homes here on the Dakota prairies.

Lorraine Kastelen writes, "We made nests out in the yard, close to the house for spring warmth. These were lined with moss and prepared for a few 'bunny' eggs. Onion skins were included, in colored water often made from 'crepe' paper. The onion skin helped the color to 'take'. The bunny was looked after too! Earlier in the winter, we planted wheat in an empty tobacco can, so it was a nice green grass look for the bunny to eat. And sure enough, early Easter Sunday morning, when we checked our nests, we noticed one or two grass leaves had indeed been nibbled. This nest custom was a transport from the South Russia village of my mother, named Kandel near Odessa, Ukraine."

Mary (Welk) Mitzel, born in 1913 and raised on a farm near Orrin in Pierce County, ND, shares her memories of Easter, "Mother always brought two sets of egg dye. We would do the first six colors until the water cooled, then she would make the second set of colors. We would hard boil 5 to 6 dozen eggs on Easter Saturday, spending several hours helping Easter Rabbit (Osterhase). Explained to us kids that the Easter Bunny had so many children to visit, especially 'poor children', we had to help out!"

"The fun task was to search outside, to gather grass, and make several nests around the house yard for Easter Rabbit to fill with colored eggs. We made a large batch of sugar cookies decorated with colored frostings. They remained inside our house with Mother's assurance that Easter Bunny did get his cookies too!"

"For Easter candy, we had those favorite yellow or pink marshmallow chicks, along with colored candy eggs with white cream centers." [Mary Mitzel's three daughters, Cynthia, Loretta and Mary Lou, will travel to their ancestral villages of Strassburg and Selz near Odessa, Ukraine in May, 1997. They will meet their newly-found cousin, Antonia Welk Ivanova, in Strassburg, a neighboring village to Selz, Kutschurgan Enclave. Mary's parents and grandparents were born in Selz, Ukraine.]

Closer...closer...roll two eggs into collision course. Bumping like billiard balls, who has the toughest shell? This Bessarabian village of Alt-Posttal, ancestral homeland to many Dakotans, historically featured an extensive Paschen "Eierlesen". (To refresh our memories, an exquisite miniature of their Eierlesen greensward is displayed in full regalia, at the Heimatmuseum der Deutschen aus Bessarabien in Stuttgart, Germany.)

A black and white spiral-striped paschal-pole is erected in the Eierlesengarten. This 20 feet-plus vertical pole is mounted on a hinged base and is kept erect with tensioned anchoring cables in the non-cardinal directions. Along every meter (or three feet) of the pole's length, vividly-colored ribbon streamers flaunt a jubilant array of yellow, pink, lavender, scarlet, maroon, purple, blue, aqua, green, chartreuse, and white. Near this festive pole's tip, bouquets of flowers in red, purple, pink and yellow are mounted in three clustered stages.

Colorfully-dyed eggs, identified as to each entrant, are aligned in straight rows, outward from the vertical pole, in the horizontal four cardinal directions of the greensward. These horizontal rolling surfaces are painted bright pastel colors. Only celebrant officials and actively-rolling contestants are permitted in the uncluttered gaming-garden, to allow clear visibility to side line observers of cheering village

families. Ach, another "egg-bump" derby!

We were pleased to see so many attend the NDSU Libraries outreach programs in Sun City and Mesa, AZ and in Redondo Beach, Lodi and Sacramento, CA. The date for the next North Dakota Picnic in Mesa is March 1, 1998. The German-Russian community in the Lodi area historically includes many former Dakotans, since 1904 promotions by Gottlieb Hieb.

North Dakota REC/RTC Magazine Features Article on Bundestreffen. The March, 1997 issue includes the article with many photos, "You Can Go Home Again with the Aussiedlers in Stuttgart, Germany", by Ron Vossler, a Wishek, ND, native. Ron will serve as an oral interviewer and writer during the NDSU Libraries-sponsored Journey to the Homeland Tour, May 17-31, 1997.

We invite readers to share their memories of growing up in a German-Russian home. Many of these items, including customs, folklore, and recipes, appear at the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection World Wide Web homepage at <http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc>. For further information, contact 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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