

# In Touch with Prairie Living

April 1997

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 former Dakotans. Readers' responses with suggestions and opinions are encouraged. In this month's column, we focus on spring planting traditions and memories.

## The Village Stork Welcomes Spring

"The clattering of village storks always announced the arrival of Spring." Storks were attracted to the reed thatched roofs of older German houses. This Alt-Posttal village memory was cited by Dr. Joseph Heidt in his book *History of Mannheim Heidt Kinship*.

Dr. Heidt, well-known to prairie researchers, mentions major field crops in the German villages of South Russia were potatoes and winter wheat, with plantings of maize, rye, barley, flax, spring wheat, millet, oats, hemp, and rape seed. Rape seed, a traditional household oil, is today's "Canola."

"Among the maize, Alt-Posttal gardeners planted melons, watermelons, and sunflowers. Garden vegetables, usually found in the family yard (hof), were lettuce, radishes, peppers, tomatoes, carrots, onions, red beets, beans, peas, lentils, cucumbers, white cabbage, red cabbage, garlic, parsley, dill, celery, leeks, hyssop, mint, basil and horseradish. Vegetables, not eaten fresh, were dried or stored in a root cellar, packed in damp sand or in salt brine crocks. Pumpkin was used more as fodder for cows and pigs. Pumpkin seeds and sunflower seeds provide very nutritious nuts for snacking," as Rachel Gackle Pribbeno relates in her book, *250 Years of Gackle Family Trails*. Alt-Posttal is a Bessarabian German ancestral villages for many Dakotans.

## Aunt Louise's Memories

Deloris Boschee Zimmerman of Wishek, ND, shares her memories of Aunt Louise Boschee Koepplin and her gardening, "In the early spring, in the corner of the garden, a window frame was put up and cabbage seeds were started; so when the weather was warm enough, these seedlings could be planted in the garden. Sometimes the seedlings were started in the house. Much cabbage was planted because they made lots of sauerkraut. The cabbage was shredded on a cabbage shredder or cut fine by hand. The cabbage was put into a large crock with salt so it could ferment. Aunt Louise remembers that someone had to wash their feet and trample the cabbage down so it packed very tightly. When done, a lid was put on the crock and a large rock was put on the lid to keep it down tight."

Aunt Louise also remembers that potatoes were left in the cool cellar until spring. When it was time to plant, these potatoes were cut into pieces and planted. Each piece had to have an "eye" or two for a new plant to sprout and grow. They planted many potatoes, enough to last through the next winter.

Also in the spring, a special plot, not in the garden, was plowed up. This melon patch (bashtan) was where the vining seeds, such as watermelon, squash, pumpkin, cantaloupe, musk melon and citron melon, were planted. The citron melon was canned with whole cloves and sugar syrup. The melons had a delicious taste. Some seeds such as beets, lettuce, carrots and radishes they could not save themselves; these were bought in the grocery stores.

## Philo Pritzkau Remembers

Philo Pritzkau writes, "Most white cabbage raised in the garden was made into sauerkraut, or kept for borscht soup. Sauerkraut prepared in crocks or

kegs was brown with a spicy flavor.

Bushels of cucumbers were made into sour dill pickles (with much dill) for our winter diet. Fresh sliced cucumbers with sugar, vinegar, nutmeg, and sour cream provided an exotic summer salad. Green beans cooked with cream. Green beans usually were matured for dry beans, to fix my favorite baked beans (with sweet molasses). Fresh-steamed sweet corn for summer meals, with popcorn grown for winter snacking." Such foods were the gardening harvest of mother, Elinor Pritzkau.

Philo Pritzkau remembers, "That the potato cellar was used for keeping cream cool, storing sauerkraut and pickles, and other roots as carrots, rutabagas, and turnips. During spring and summer rains, this wet cellar became home to slimy salamanders. These lizards would crawl over your hands when reaching for potatoes in the dark."

Philo Pritzkau is 92 and lives near Boston. He grew up in a sodhouse, on a farm near Burnstad in Logan County, ND. His book, *Growing Up in North Dakota*, is available from the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection.

## Planting Oats in the Spring

Jan (Schleuger) Blomberg of Penn Grove, CA, writes by e-mail, "I'm not at all sure this is a German-Russian custom but it is a memory of my father planting oats. Every spring he would take oats from the seed he was going to plant and with great ceremony they were placed in a special cloth loosely tied and kept moist in a warm, sunny window sill in the kitchen. Every couple days we would gather around to watch Dad unwrap the cloth and count the sprouting seeds. This told him the amount of seed to plan per acre."

"I spent a great deal of my childhood in the garden with my loving mother,

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“but watching my father tenderly care for that little bundle of seed helped me see into his soul and understand and respect the gentle man that lived below the gruff exterior. My father died this March 12th, the day before his 82nd birthday. I hope he spent his birthday on a tractor plowing God’s fertile fields in heaven!”

Marie Rudel Portner’s 100th Birthday

Marie was born on a farm near Fessenden in Wells County, ND. She is 100 this month and lives in Las Vegas. Marie has never forgotten her Bessarabian German roots back home in North Dakota. She has provided major financial donations to the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection for the oral history project, traveling exhibits, and translation work.

## Share Your Memories

We invite readers to share their memories of spring planting and gardening. 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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