

In Touch with Prairie Living

May 1997

By Michael M. Miller

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA

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In this month's column, we focus on the tragic stories unfolding from those unforgettable disasters of April, 1997. The rapid succession of a destructive ice storm; a monstrous April blizzard; deadly loss of cattle and wildlife; loss of electrical power and water supply; massive flooding by the raging Red River; flash flood evacuations; additional overland flooding from record snowfall of up to 120 inches; and focusing these paralyzing disasters, unique to North Dakota's 108 year history, upon the emergency evacuation, record flooding, and fire in Grand Forks and neighboring East Grand Forks. This long-term trauma extends to surrounding rural communities and farms up and down the Red River Valley. Future columns will share episodes of heroism, despite extreme hardships and challenges beyond common imagination.

Grand Forks: Grit of the Pioneers Lives On

The Star Tribune in Minneapolis shared this April 14 editorial: "... Look at Grand Forks. Look there to see Nature's awful power to devastate human handiwork. And look there to see the even greater power of the human spirit to endure... There were no deaths and no injuries to report. That remarkable fact may be the finest tribute of all to the steady sensibility of a hardy breed. Again and again in the last four days, Grand Forks has displayed the grit and optimism of the pioneers who settled the Red River Valley. Those qualities live in their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The nation will surely respond with admiration..."

A Cruel Blow, a Tough Recovery

Mike Jacobs, editor of the Grand Forks Herald writes on April 21: "... The Herald's archives were destroyed, for decades, librarians here have clipped the newspaper, recording the comings and going of the mean and the mighty,

the haughty and the humble... Some issues may be salvaged on computer or on microfilm at UND. But everything else is gone.

Unrecoverable... Past and potential. All lost in the present..."

Herald writer Tim Fought shared this message on April 22: "... We'll do our part, and we'll repay the nation. We need help, Mr. President... We'll repay the nation by restoring the heart of a vast agricultural region, supplying the nation and the world with wheat for bread and pasta, barley for beer, potatoes for french fries, sugar for sodas and on and on..." Throughout the Dakotas we are going to need extensive help to recover, move forward and become a stronger Northern Plains in the months and years ahead.

Young People Have Been Crucial to Flood Fight

The Forum editorial of April 20 comments: "... In every city, on every dike line, in every aid agency there are young people at work. They come from all economic circumstances and ethnic backgrounds, brought together by a common community purpose... Many heroes will emerge from the flood battle after the water subsides and the aftermath is cleared up. The young people will be among them. Young people should know that their selfless work for their communities not only is recognized, but also is appreciated. They are great kids and good citizens."

Volunteers Saved Our Cities and Towns

Thankful signs appear throughout Fargo-Moorhead saying, "Bless You Volunteers" and "You Saved Our City Volunteers". People of all ages from throughout the Dakotas, Minnesota and the Upper Midwest came to rescue our towns during times of calamity.

They came in school buses, church vans, military trucks, and payloaders.

Despite her own city struggles with the soggy James River, Jamestown on April 19 sent 60,000 sandbags on 12 train cars, traveling 100 miles to help their Fargo neighbors.

These volunteers worked to exhaustion, filling thousands of sandbags, protecting homes and communities, and creating bridges of new friendships destined for a lifetime. They exemplify a caring people, who share the spirit of our Northern Plains prairie people.

Living without Lights and Water in Casselton, ND

Rebecca Rudel Torgerson, a Fessenden native of German-Russian heritage, teaches in the NDSU nursing program. She writes an April 8 e-mail message, during a time of no heat, electricity, and water in her Casselton home: "We've mentioned many times over the past few days, 'How could the early settlers have persevered?' Then again, someday, we've said... I think Laura Ingalls had life easy. Meanwhile, we hand-dipped water from our house basement. We hosted two families in our home, sharing heat from a amazingly-capable gas fireplace.

"Our new public school is housing and feeding 350 people. Yes, people are getting impatient and stressed. I feel fortunate to offer support and ideas to many who are chronically ill and elderly. We are blessed through our community spirit. We are grateful for safe shelter to benefit needy people. We are thankful for generous neighboring communities who muscle beside us to bag sand. We are encouraged by the active elderly, unable to lift sand, who have jointly prepared casseroles."

Now the people of Casselton, our small towns and farm families have opened their homes with sharing hearts to provide refuge for those thousands of evacuated persons from Grand Forks plus families from farms and flooded

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small towns.

Travel to Odessa and the German Villages

On May 17, Americans of German-Russian heritage begin their "Journey to the Homeland Tour", sponsored by the NDSU Libraries. Their destination is Odessa, Ukraine, where they will tour former Bessarabian and Black Sea German villages. Prairie Public Television joins us to document this historic tour for a future television documentary in cooperation with the NDSU Libraries. Our next tour is planned for May 26-June 8, 1998.

Share Your Memories

Readers are invited to share their survival stories during these difficult days of historic devastation in our region. During April, 1997, I kept a diary of the tragic events that struck North Dakota and the Red River Valley. These daily commentary summaries were received by thousands of e-mail subscribers, who immediately responded with a tremendous outpouring of concerns, prayers, and relief donations. These daily reports along with personal flood photos appear at my personal home page at <http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/biography.html>. The Germans from Russia Heritage Collection website is <http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc>. For further information about the tour and other comments, 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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