

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. In this month's column, we focus on our visit in May by some of the Journey to the Homeland tour members traveling to their ancestral German villages near Odessa, Ukraine.

Bruce Mehlhaff, Rapid City, a Eureka Native, Sees the Steppes of His Ancestors

Bruce writes, "We are home! The Ukraine looks like home. From the first views of the steppes from the air, the terrain looked anything but foreign. The orderly fields below us could well have been in the Dakotas. The first trip to the villages reinforced that impression. There were significant differences of course -- the cows and goats walking in the ditches; the rows of sentinel trees that line the highways; the fields very much like the ones in America. Even the weeds were familiar -- the fox tail grass and the chamomile. Just like home!"

"We had our moment of celebrity when delivering our school supplies at the village of Strassburg (today Kutschurgan). Being graduation day, students wore red sashes which bore inscriptions from their classmates. Counter-balancing the elation was the sight of the poverty and crumbling churches, graphic symbols of a way of life that is gone."

Ron Vossler, East Grand Forks, a Wishek Native, Visits Bessarabian Villages

Ron found the home where his great-grandfather was born in the former German village of Alt Posstal, now occupied by Ukrainians. He traveled to the next village of Kulm, of the same name as the town in ND, and now a poor hill-top village with a wonderful view

of the steppe rising into the distance. Ron states, "Throughout our journey we saw high stands of wheat still green, and sugar beets, sunflowers, and corn, growing in the fertile Chernozem soil. People haying by hand, loading hay with forks onto horse-pulled wagons. Farmers in the fields hoeing tomatoes, or walking along the roadside carrying scythes and other hand-made implements."

Rev. Myrin and Audry Bentz, Portland, OR, a Hazen Native, Visits Moldova

The Bentzs' write, "Hand-hoeing of huge fields was mostly done by women. How practical that fields and roads were separated, not by fences, but by fruit and nut trees -- for miles on end. Cows and sheep did not need fences because they were tended by cowherders and shepherds. We could learn from the villagers -- not a landowner in sight. Rather, after milking the sheep or cows in the morning, they tethered wherever the grass and weeds needed trimming."

"Staying with our host Moldovan family in our ancestors' former village of Glueckstal, we had no common language; but we communicated best when I pulled out my accordion, taking turns playing music and singing. Later when we gathered with other tour members, the elderly German-Russians who we met in the villages shared unbelievable stories of hardships in Siberian 'Ausgeschlept' for many years. They sang the German hymns without text -- sometimes four verses! A favorite phrase was 'Der Alte Gott lebt noch.'"

We invite readers to share memories of their German-Russian heritage. Customs, history and folklore appear at the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection World Wide Web homepage at <http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc>. Information about the NDSU Libraries' sponsored Journey to the

Homeland Tour for May 26-June 8, 1998, and the e-mail messages from tour members of May, 1997, appear at the GRHC website. For additional 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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