

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 Germans from Russia Heritage Collection at the NDSU Libraries in Fargo reaches out to prairie families and former Dakotans. In various ways, it affirms that the heritage of the Germans from Russia is an important part of the northern plains culture. In this month's column, we focus on the traditions of canning garden vegetables in the fall. Cora Wolff Tschaekofske, Dickinson, grew up in a German-Russian home in Mercer County, ND. Her parents immigrated from the village of Glueckstal, South Russia, in the late 1800s. Cora visited Glueckstal in May, 1997. She shares her memories.

Pioneer Parents and Ancestors

Many Germans from Russia, who immigrated to the Dakotas in the late 1800s and early 1900s, came to their new prairie home with little more than their faith in God. Our pioneer parents and ancestors brought with them a strength of character into this rough frontier where they settled to establish a new home in a new land. Times were often very hard but they persevered through harsh winters, crop failures and loneliness.

For the housewives, life became a real challenge. They had to feed their families quite often with only meager provisions. They read their Bibles and prayed for help. They found comfort and encouragement in the verse of Proverbs 30:8. They prayed: "Remove for me vanity and lies; give me neither poverty nor riches; feed me with food convenient for me."

With these thoughts, they preserved native fruits and wild berries. They picked choke cherries, plums, buffalo berries and June berries, making jellies, jams and sauces. They cooked meals from grains and vegetables that they were able to raise. They flavored them with herbs grown from the seeds brought from their former homes in Russia. They came from a land where fruits and vegetables grew abundantly. These

women were adept in the knowledge of food preservation. They canned vegetables, pickled cucumbers and watermelon, often in large crocks, and stored potatoes, carrots and beets in cool root cellars built by the men.

Making Sauerkraut and Canned Meat

Husbands often helped to make cabbage into sauerkraut. They grated fresh cabbage with kraut cutters into large stoneware crocks, salted before adding bay leaves and allspice, then tamped it firmly with a heavy wooden stomper. Into this they grated some onions and often stuffed some green peppers with some of the shredded cabbage and buried them in the kraut. Sometimes apples were also buried in the mixture to add a fruity flavor.

When the kraut was tamped and stomped sufficiently, a large plate or wooden board was placed as a top press weighted down with a heavy, well-scrubbed rock. A large cotton cloth was tied over the crock, before the crock was stored in the root cellar to ferment and turn sour. During long winters, this sauerkraut provided many tasty and nutritious meals when cooked with pork and served over mashed potatoes, or served with dumplings. Poultry and red meat were often canned in glass jars. Pork was cured in salt brines and smoked. Sausages were spiced and smoked, although sometimes canned for longer preservation.

A New Miracle, Refrigerators and Freezers

What a day of joy it was when, after many years of grueling efforts to preserve food, electricity came to the farms. Refrigerators and freezers became a household necessity. Now the housewives were liberated from the struggle to preserve food. These German-Russian pioneers, along with other ethnic neighbors, finally saw a

light at the end of the tunnel. They were free, and their faith moved them to recall, in thankfulness, the promises of God: "The Lord shall command the blessings upon you in your storehouses, and in all that you undertake, and He will bless you in the land which the Lord your God gives you." Deut. 28:8

We invite readers to share memories of canning in the fall. Review the GRHC website at <http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc> or 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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