

# In Touch with Prairie Living

November 1997

By Michael M. Miller

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 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 recent visit to North Dakota in October, by Philo T. Pritzkau, author of the book *Growing Up in North Dakota: A Memoir*. Philo Pritzkau's visit was sponsored by the NDSU Libraries and the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection.

Philo Pritzkau, who lives in Massachusetts, was born in 1902 in a sodhouse built by his immigrant parents near Burnstad, Logan County, ND. He states, "I miss the open prairies and the rolling pastures. I return to this land once more, where I have so many fond childhood memories. This is why I wrote *Growing Up in North Dakota* -- to share my memories about growing up on a farm in a German-Russian family on the Dakota prairies."

Philo recalls attending country school where many of the farm children spoke German, with English as their second language. "Even on cold days, we walked...we arrived at school with frostbites on our cheeks and noses. Ours was a one-room school of wood frame construction, with no insulation, and was heated by a pot-bellied stove stoked with soft coal. There was no well... we all drank from the same pail. Each pupil brought lunch in a dinner-pail or lunch box; I used a large 'Union Leader' tobacco can. The chairs and desks were screwed to the floors, and we sat two to a seat...and studying by a dim kerosene lamp."

He was one of the first students to attend Burnstad High School in 1918, when there were 18 students. Philo attended the University of North Dakota for one semester. He returned home to Logan County, teaching in a country school near Napoleon, from 1920-1922. "The youngsters would recite their lessons in English, but when lunch time

or recess on the playground, they spoke German."

Philo remembers the monumental task of building a granary on the homestead. He recalls, "Expansion was overdue...so everyone went about this project with a vengeance. A granary was just that -- a structure to store grain -- but father had greater ideas. Why not build a big one with a two feet thick wall! Some people asked father if he was building a monument."

Philo recalls in his book, "The house was something else -- no storm windows. The old stove in the parlor burned lignite coal, which was rather gaseous...if it wasn't carefully watched, it would puff, and all the stove-pipes would come apart and fall, with smoke and soot all over the house. It was a wonder we never got burned out. But we didn't, so come spring, we could start all over again".

Philo shared his experiences of attending a country school. Even on cold days, we walked...we arrived at school with frostbites on our cheeks and noses. Ours was a one-room school,... of wooden frame construction, with no insulation, and was heated by a pot-bellied stove stoked with soft coal. There was no well,...we all drank from the same pail. Each pupil brought lunch in a dinner-pail or lunch box. I used a large "Union Leader" tobacco can. The chairs and desks were screwed to the floor, and we sat two to a seat studying by a dim kerosene lamp."

He reminisced how his daughter, Patricia Pritzkau MacLachlan, became interested in reading and writing. Patricia is a nationally known children's writer. In 1986, she received the Newberry Award for *Sarah, Plain and Tall* as the best children's book in the United States. Patricia writes in her father's book, "It is no surprise that in my own writing I see my father's land, his life, and many of his values. In my book *Sarah, Plain and Tall*, I see the North Dakota prairie and the slough, the family dogs, and the lives of the

people he loved".

Passing of Adeline Liebholz Kosch

Lee Naasz of Seattle informed me that Adeline Kosch of Yakima, WA, died in October only 29 days before her 106th birthday. Born in 1891 in the Black Sea German village of Hoffnungstal, she was perhaps the oldest living Germans from Russia. Adeline could not understand what all the fuss was about in November, 1996 when many German-Russians sent her birthday greetings after the announcement appeared in this column and the German-Russian e-mail discussion groups. Adeline was one year old when she came with her parents from South Russia to Ellis Island and on to Yakima. She was an active member of Grace Evangelical Lutheran Church where she would attend German services. Send cards of condolences to Dale A. Gray, 18 W. Washington Ave., Yakima, WA 98903.

We invite readers to share memories of life on the Dakota prairies. Review the GRHC website at <http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc>. For information about Philo Pritzkau's book *Growing Up in North Dakota*, his daughter's books and videotapes, and the Germans from Russia, contact Michael M. Miller, NDSU Libraries, PO Box 5599, Fargo, ND 58105-5599 (Tel: 701-231-8416; E-mail: [Michael.Miller@ndsu.edu](mailto:Michael.Miller@ndsu.edu)).

*November 1997 column for North Dakota and South Dakota newspapers.*