

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 the heritage of the Germans from Russia as an important part of the northern plains culture. In this month's column, we focus on special traditions of Christmas with Cora Wolff Tschakofske of Dickinson and Bonnie Zeller Whillock of Vista, CA.

"Ihr Kinderlein kommet, O kommet doch All / Zur Krippe her kommet in Bethlehem's Stall"

Cora Wolff Tschakofske shares these memories. These are comforting words I remember learning as a child in my home where our family roots were German-Russian. They were words that my siblings and I learned in preparation for the Christmas season. We also memorized the carols "Stille Nacht, Heilige Nacht", and "O Tannenbaum" and "O Du Froehliche, O Selige." We learned these songs as we sat around our dining room table. Our Americanized German-Russian mom read these words to the seven of us kids many times, until we knew them by memory. We couldn't read the words by ourselves, because we had not learned to read the German *fraktur* script. We were already in a daily cultural frame as Americans.

The community where we lived had been settled by Germans from Russia. These pioneer settlers, like any other ethnic group, could not speak, read or write American English when they arrived in America as immigrants. They clung to their spiritual heritage and built a church hall. They celebrated only German Christmas (Weihnachten) services for many years, until having religious worship in American English upon learning that new language.

Yet, they wanted to instill in their offspring the advantage and the beauty of being bi-lingual in their offspring. The Sunday School Christmas program was a cultural symbol using the German language. Most youngsters, who participated in this program, learned

their recitation pieces because their parents persevered at these recitations during their own learning years, thus keeping alive their German heritage.

In our home, excitement ran high during the Advent season. Not only were we excited about traveling to town every Saturday afternoon for Christmas program practice at our church, but just the trip to town was exciting. We seldom went to town at other times of the year. Now, during this festive season, the town streets were decorated and the stores had such lovely things on display. We were taught to "not touch," no matter how compelling the temptation. We were obedient and did not allow temptation to ruin our rewarding visit from "Santa."

We really didn't believe so much in Santa any more. One day after a quiet napping session in our household, our big sister discovered a box under Mom and Dad's bed. We quietly peeked into the box. Then all pandemonium broke loose! One of us ran screaming to Mom, telling her that Santa was "all wrinkled up" in a box under her bed. We learned that "Weihnachten" is the birthday and incarnation of Christ. We need to be accountable to Him. "Santa" (Saint Nikolaus) is only make-believe.

The days of the Advent season were always rewarding when the house was filled with the best baking smells of Christmas. Our Americanized German-Russian mother always baked her traditional kuchen and tempting goodies that were reserved and served only during this season as special treats. These special treats are a part of our heritage. Mother's recipes have been handed down to the present day generation. We all enjoy *pfeffernuesse*, *lebkuchen*, anise cookies and *zucker kuchen*, along with common fruit and cheese kuchen -- they make a Christmas gathering in a German-Russian kitchen so very special and memorable.

Bonnie Zeller Whillock shares these memories near Heil, ND. Church celebrations at Christmas time in rural

ND during the 1930's were wonderful experiences. I recall, after a severe snowstorm, we had to attend the church Christmas program traveling with a team of horses and sled. Each child had to recite a German piece. After the service, we received a small bag of assorted nuts, homemade candy, and an orange or apple. The congregation consisted of a dozen families. The lighting in church consisted of kerosene lamps that were mounted on walls. The program consisted of German Christmas songs by the congregation accompanied by a beautiful sounding pump organ. Everyone exchanged holiday greetings after the services and headed home on their sleds to see what Santa Claus had left at the house.

The little St. Luke's Lutheran Church near Leith, ND, we attended was moved and restored by the Elgin (ND) Historical Society and is now part of the Grant County Museum.

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