

In Touch with Prairie Living

February 1998

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 as an important part of the northern plains culture. In this month's column, Betty Kuss Schumacher continues to share her family research techniques.

It was exciting that a "grandma," such a stranger to my childhood mind, is now identified as my mother's fraternal grandmother. My husband's grandfather was fondly reflecting that my grandfather, Joseph Volk, was his first cousin. That "grandma" is the "sister" of my husband's great-grandfather.

Now my quest moved into fervor! Family matriarchs and elderly aunts were questioned for details, later documenting local cemeteries with headstone photos. Having this addiction is a "hereditary trait" linked to Vetter heritage. My unknown "grandma" was Elizabeth (Vetter) Volk Klein. In my great-grandmother's "All Saints Book," she recorded handwritten names of her parents and parents-in-law, further listing her fraternal grandparents and great-grandparents. What a legacy!

The Vetter clan massively immigrated to Emmons County. I even surprised my matriarch aunts, showing their great-parents immigrated to America, where they lived, when they died, and where they were buried. I met other family members, to "ring little bells" of memory. I treasure these "Family Keepers" and dedicated historians.

Computer archival-filing, a super tool for cross-referencing complex family relations, allows my double-checking for other common ancestors and inter-marriages. No person is entered into my database unless linked to someone listed previously. After four years, I have passed the 21,400th data entry. Whenever printing out a new matrix of family charts, I am amazed to

discover "who" my relatives are!

Adding a "photo scanner" to my computer furthers my photographic comparisons, as I gather immense pleasure by matching names to faces. Imagine your excitement viewing a century-old photograph and recognizing a familiar face staring back at you. An out-of-focus photo of my fraternal grandfather is compared to early photographs of my uncles; a definite resemblance can help to determine how he appeared. Even Internet and World Wide Web respond: A "Kuss" in Germany inquired, "from where the heck I was writing?" since the Kuss name is rare.

Cherish old photographs, yet unidentified. Please, Please! Do not throw photos away. They can provide a missing link for someone else.

Consider donations to the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, NDSU Libraries, Fargo, or the Germans from Russia Heritage Society, Bismarck. You may hold the key to someone's past. Please think about it!

During the holiday vacation later in December, I visited Stuttgart, Germany, where I renewed friendships with members of the Choir of the Homeland (Heimatlaenge Chor), who toured North Dakota in July. They expressed their greetings to their many friends in North Dakota. For some, it was their first Christmas in Germany immigrating from Siberia and Kazakshstan. They shared their stories of the winter months: fetching wood in the Siberian forests to stay warm and how the snowfall and snowstorms would compare to living on the Dakota prairies. Their Christmas gifts for children would mostly be handmade from textiles or from wood. We have begun an Oral History Project with the help of the choir members. Oral interviews in the German language of persons who recently immigrated to Germany from the former Soviet Union including their youth in the Black Sea German villages of South Russia (today Ukraine) begin in 1998.

The Heimatklaenge Chor will present a special concert for the Journey to the Homeland Tour members in Stuttgart on June 7, 1998. Our first interviews of North Dakotans now appear at the GRHC website under "Oral History Interviews."

At Darmstadt Technical University near Frankfurt, German-Russian students gathered to hear about the life of the Germans from Russia on the Dakota prairies. They were most interested to learn about the comparisons of the landscape and geography of the Dakotas. Many of these students who have immigrated since 1991 to Germany from northern Kazakhstan near Siberia where the landscape and climate is similar to the northern plains. Since the late 1980s, close to 2.1 million ethnic Germans have immigrated to Germany from the former Soviet Union, many with relatives in North America. The university students are interested to make contact with young German-Russian students in America via the Internet. Information will be sent to the Germans from Russia electronic discussion groups. I sensed much interest among the young people to learn more about their German-Russian culture, heritage and folklore.

The North Dakota Picnic is Sunday, March 1, 1998, from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m., at Pioneer Park, 525 East Main in Mesa, AZ. The NDSU Libraries and the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection sponsor a table.

If you missed last month's column shared by Betty Kuss Schumacher, please write to the address below. For further information about the collection, German-Russian heritage, the 1999 Journey to the Homeland tour in May, contact Michael M. Miller, NDSU Libraries, PO Box 5599, Fargo, ND 58105-5599 (Tel: 701-231-8416; E-mail: Michael.Miller@ndsu.edu; GRHC website: <http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc>).

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