

In Touch with Prairie Living

August 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.

What a wonderful experience it was to join the community of Wishek, ND with friends and family for their successful centennial days. On July 4th, the Centennial Parade attracted one of the largest gatherings in south-central North Dakota with an estimated 15,000 people. There were almost 2,000 participants completing 400 parade entries. Many of those attending the centennial events were sons and daughters of Germans from Russia, who immigrated to the Wishek prairies and coteau over a century ago.

The NDSU Libraries participated in centennial events at the Heritage Exhibits. We were impressed and appreciative of the visitor response. The visual displays of historic clothing, textiles, and artifacts was impressive. The Heritage Exhibits provided an important aspect to the Wishek Centennial, which other Dakota communities will want to consider.

We experienced many persons desiring more about their German-Russian ancestry. Frequently, we would hear: "If only I had asked more of my parents or grandparents!" Children brought their parents, aunts and uncles to see the exhibits. They were anxious to see and experience what life was like years past in historic Wishek. Much of this history appears in the Wishek Centennial 1898 - 1998 book, now out-of-print and being considered for re-publication. I was pleased to meet Wishek's historian, Roxanne Saylor Henke. KSJB Radio, Jamestown, ND, broadcast during June historic snapshots and glimpses of Wishek's heritage prepared and narrated by Roxanne Henke.

I would recall these family names: Kaseman, Heupel, Schauer, Boschee,

Raile, Martell, Schlecht, Babitzke, Heff, Wiest, Vossler, Bettenhausen, Krein, Benkendorf, Deile, and Rudolf - all significant names in the history of Wishek. During May, we had visited the former Bessarabian and Black Sea German villages in southern Ukraine and Moldova near Odessa, where the parents and grandparents once lived before immigrating to the Wishek area. I would hear these people mention Bergdorf, Friedenstal, Hoffnungstal, Glückstal, Kassel, Neudorf, Rohrbach and Worms of the Black Sea villages, and also Beresina, Borodino, Brienne, Kulm, Klöstitz, Leipzig and Teplitz of the Bessarabian villages.

It was a thrill to see authentic historic clothing displays. Florence Geiszler Wiest, Clifton Kaseman and Jodi Haupt Weszner shared their family treasures, including wedding dresses and traditional clothing brought from South Russia. In recent months, the NDSU Libraries have added historical textiles and clothing of Dakota-pioneering German-Russian families. These culturally significant items are housed in the Emily P. Reynolds Costume Collection on the NDSU campus.

One of the more impressive displays at the Wishek Centennial was a wooden model of rural St. Andrew's Lutheran Church (near Zeeland) in McIntosh County, ND. Herman Thurn began building this model through the summer of 1997. This impressively detailed model includes both the original church built in 1892 and the larger church built in 1906. Herman's Aipperspach and Thurn relatives settled on a farmstead near this church, having immigrated from Bergdorf and Kassel in South Russia. St. Andrew's Church is still used today with a wedding held there on July 4th, 1998. This country church has been important to the religious life of many German-Russian families in McIntosh County, ND. Our appreciation and gratitude to Herman Thurn of Wishek for his fine

craftsmanship to prepare this beautiful country church model as a powerful remembrance for future generations.

During the Wishek Centennial, Prairie Public Television announced the forthcoming Germans from Russia video documentary, to be available in early 1999. PPTV and the NDSU Libraries in Fargo are collaborating on a groundbreaking one-hour documentary which highlights the Germans from Russia. The documentary will explore the history and culture of this unique ethnic group. The program will premiere on PPTV in February of 1999. Interested persons can order this videotape copy now. The limited-edition version is available to those who order their request before January 1, 1999 and will contain special footage not seen in the general documentary. Call PPTV at 1-800-359-6900 for further information about the videotape.

Hats off to the Wishek Centennial Committee and all those involved with great success the community experienced in July to celebrate 100 years of their history. We also saw parade floats announcing centennial days of July 2-4, 1999 for two other communities with many German-Russian families: Linton and Medina, ND.

For further information about the collection's resources, the upcoming Germans from Russia videotape, the fifth Journey to the Homeland Tour to Odessa, Ukraine and Stuttgart, Germany (scheduled for May 18-31, 1999) and German-Russian heritage, 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>).

August 1998 column for North Dakota and South Dakota newspapers.