

# In Touch with Prairie Living

December 2007

By Michael M. Miller

Germans from Russia Heritage Collection  
North Dakota State University Libraries, Fargo



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA  
**GRHC**  
HERITAGE COLLECTION

As the holiday season approaches, I wish to share in the spirit of the Yuletide holiday season. May I extend special “Weihnachten” greetings!

I would also like to share with you some Christmas traditions of our German-Russian families, and memories from personal email messages.

The tradition of St. Nicholas (Belznickel) bringing gifts for children traces its origins back to the Middle Ages. According to legend, St. Nicholas, the historic bishop with his flowing white beard, was a generous kind-hearted figure. The Belznickel rewarded faithful children. Today we know St. Nicholas as Santa Claus, who evolved from the Dutch “Sinter Klaus”. I recall the Belzenickel in my childhood on Christmas Eve at Strasburg, ND.

According to Joseph S. Height’s (1979) book, *Memories of the Black Sea Germans*, “There is no historical evidence that the German pioneer settlers in Russia set up a Christmas tree in their homes. Perhaps the most obvious reason why the colonists did not have a Christmas tree for several decades is the simple fact that no evergreen trees were to be found on the open steppes of the Volga and the Black Sea regions” (p. 205). On the Dakota prairies, the German-Russian pioneers faced a similar situation with no Christmas trees until they were shipped for sale into Dakota communities.

Jolenta Fischer Masterson, Sequim, WA, native of Strasburg, ND, writes: “On Christmas Eve, three angels would enter our home, cold with snow in their hair. Wearing wings and tinsel crowns, one would be in pink, one in blue and one in white. After singing “Stille Nacht” in German and “Silent Night” in English, the angels would disappear into the night, after bringing a special gift for each child - from the Christkindel, we were told. Only after that special visit would there be a gift exchange and feasting. It was wonderful to be a child in those days!”

A Christmas tradition in many German-Russian homes was halvah. This pressed confection of sesame seed and honey was eaten as a dessert or snack, somewhat crumbly and crunchy and quite sweet. With vanilla and chocolate flavors but sometimes marbled, halvah is a Turkish confection.

Curt Renz, Ames, IA, recalls his father selling halvah by the pound in their Herreid, SD, store. Curt remembers selling black olives, by reaching with a cup into a huge wooden barrel filled with brine and olives. They were daily purchases by the “old folks”. Other common purchases were head cheese and blood sausage.

Bonnie Zeller Whillock shares these memories of growing up near Heil, ND: “Church celebrations at Christmas time during the 1930s 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 the walls. The program included German Christmas songs accompanied by a beautiful pump organ. Everyone exchanged greetings after the services and then headed home on their sleds to see what Santa Claus had left at home. This little St. Luke’s Lutheran Church near Leith, ND, where we attended, was moved and restored by the Elgin, ND Historical Society as part of the Grant County Museum.”

Jim Heilman, College Station, TX, a Eureka, SD, native writes: “My favorite childhood memories from the 1950s and early 1960s are associated with Advent and Christmas services at Zion Lutheran Church, Eureka. Saturday afternoons were reserved for endless rehearsals of the Sunday School Christmas Program held on

Christmas Eve, part of which consisted of recitations in German, which were incomprehensible to most of us. The services ended with the singing of “O Du Froehliche”, which most of the adults knew and most of the children didn’t. I’ve never forgotten the sound of the old folks, most born in Russia, as they sang that hymn in their quavering voices. After the service, we received bags of treats (candy, fruit, and Cracker Jack) from our Sunday School teachers. Then my family and I walked to my grandparent’s house to open gifts. I never understood why Santa Claus always visited their house while I was in church. Advent traditions are still the most meaningful part of the holiday season for me, especially here in Southern Baptist country of Texas.”

Please share your Christmas memories and traditions by contacting me with a letter or email message.

For further information about the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, Dakota Memories Oral History Project, Journey to the Homeland Tour and donations to the GRHC such as family histories, contact Michael M. Miller, NDSU Library, PO Box 5599, Fargo, ND 58105-5599

(Telephone: 701-231-8416; Email: Michael.Miller@ndsu.edu; GRHC website: [www.ndsu.edu/grhc](http://www.ndsu.edu/grhc)).

*December 2007 column for North Dakota and South Dakota newspapers.*