

In Touch with Prairie Living

By Michael M. Miller

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA

GRHC

HERITAGE COLLECTION

I want to extend warm holiday best wishes and a special “Weihnachten” greeting! This year has been enriched with the announcement that the GRHC received 2011 Award of Merit and the WOW Award from the American Association of State and Local History for “highly inspirational, exhibits exceptional scholarship, and is exceedingly entrepreneurial in terms of funding, partnerships, or collaborations, creative problem solving, or unusual project design and inclusiveness.”

Bob Dambach, director of television, Prairie Public Broadcasting in Fargo, and I prepare for travel in February to Argentina and southern Brazil to review plans for a documentary on the story of the Germans from Russia who immigrated to South America many who have relatives in Canada and USA – Black Sea Germans, Volga Germans, Volhynian Germans, Bessarabian Germans and Mennonite Germans. We will review logistics, meet with potential interviewees and visit German-Russian communities. The program will be part of the award-winning Germans from Russia Documentary Series of Prairie Public Broadcasting [www.prairiepublic.org].

Dr. Jessica Clark, authored an article published in *Heritage Review*, 2007, “The German-Russian Christmas: Oral Histories from the Northern Plains,” based on stories collected as part of the GRHC’s Dakota Memories Oral History Project (2005-2009). Dr. Clark writes: “For German-Russian children growing up on the Northern Plains, Christmas was a time of joy, cheer and celebration. The season began with the annual Christmas

program held at school or church. Most Christmas programs had a play or skit about the birth of Jesus Christ. Born in 1922, Alma (Janke) Schott of Gackle, N.D., remembers that most of the community participated in these programs. There was never an empty seat. Alma remembers her teachers always had the schoolhouse frugally decorated and a Christmas tree ornamented with student-made paper chains.”

Dr. Clark writes: “The Christmas celebration commonly included a traditional character or characters. For the second and third generation these characters include the Belznickel and Krist Kindel (Christ Child), Santa Claus, or all three. Growing up during the 1930s near Devils Lake, Balzer Kurtz remembers all three were present during his childhood. According to Balzer, the festivities always started two weeks before Christmas. As he remembers it, first there was the Belznickel. ‘He was a mean dude,’ exclaims Balzer. The Belznickel came to identify which children had been naughty and which had been nice. Balzer recalls that the Belznickel always reeked of booze, carried a willow whip, and dragged a chain. Then, a few days later, the Krist Kindel appears. Balzer always recalls the Krist Kindel being a woman – a woman dressed in colorful formal attire, with a hat and veil. She was a nice one, according to Balzer. She gave the children candy. According to Balzer, on Christmas morning someone always came to his house dressed up as Santa Claus, handing out a small gift for each child. For the

young children, these colorful characters (the Belznickel, the Krist Kindel, and Santa Claus) were the highlight of Christmas.”

Katherine and Mary Weisgerber, Las Vegas, Nev., natives of Weyburn, Sask., write: “We remember a lot of baked goods: Baska, Marrvis, Kaeskuchen and Sukar Kuchen. Our mother was very artistic so she could create beautiful things such as a Christmas tree. She would shape an object from mud with wheat kernels mixed into it. The object was the shape of a cone upside down. This was done long enough before Christmas so that after spraying the mud with water periodically, the wheat would grow enough to make the object remind us of a tree.”

Mary Ebach of Rugby, N.D. recalls: “Mother has to do all the baking and the cooking. Her baking consisted mostly of making her fabulous bread with raisins, and those fantastic ammonia cookies. After Midnight Mass, we went home and served a meal with ham our mother made, wrapped in dough to keep it moist and then baked, her vinegar and oil potato salad, Goladetz, head cheese and Kucha.”

For further information about the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, Journey to the Homeland Tour to Odessa, Ukraine and Stuttgart, Germany (May 17-27, 2012) and donations to the GRHC (such as family histories), contact Michael M. Miller, NDSU Libraries, Dept. #2070 PO Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050 (Telephone: 701-231-8416; Email: Michael.Miller@ndsu.edu; GRHC website: www.ndsu.edu/grhc).

December 2011 column for North Dakota and South Dakota newspapers.