

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

The month of July provided many wonderful experiences renewing friendships and sharing about the rich culture and rich heritage of the Dakota's Germans from Russia at the Eureka 125th celebration and the 42nd Germans from Russia Heritage Society International Convention in Bismarck. I was pleased to assist in hosting Dr. Ute Schmidt of Berlin, Germany, for her visit to North Dakota with the warm welcome and splendid reception she received.

The GRHC has recently published, "The Farm at Pony Gulch," by Eddie Knalson (1900-1905), edited by his daughter, Patsy Knalson Ramberg. The book shares wonderful memoirs telling the story of Michael and Anna Sophia (Witt) Baier, who came to America in 1883 from Arzis, Bessarabia. The Baiers first settled at Scotland, S.D., and then in 1896, chose to homestead in Pony Gulch Township near Harvey, N.D. The book includes oral history told to Eddie Knalson by his Aunt Bertha.

Knalson tells how the family with ten children moved from Scotland to Pony Gulch, which was a six-week walk. He writes: "Four wagons, 11 horses, chickens, pigs and whatnot, this Baier wagon carried some wonderful things. It held seeds of all kinds: pumpkins, cucumber, corn, carrots, and flowers. Also on board were a lot of cabbages and seed potatoes; if they were hard up for food they would cut out the eyes of the potatoes, to save for planting and eat the rest. They carried several bushels of wheat, oats, and flax seed.

Flax was usually the first crop planted because it brought a good price. These immigrants hybridized the wheat into the famous North Dakota hard durum wheat which grew better in the colder, northern climate."

"A second wagon, pulled by two horses, carried the family's plows. One was a one bottom plow which could plow one farrow, or row, at a time. A second plow was a hand plow, pulled by a horse or mule; Grandpa walked behind this plow and shoved it into the soil by hand. The third smaller wagon held four or five crates with four to five chickens in each. Such cackling and clucking went on in those wagons! The chickens were for eggs, food, and to raise more chickens. Gramma Sophia also had crates of ducks and geese, and, of all things, guinea hens. A smaller herd of sheep and three or four cows, several steers, and a sire would follow the wagon train over the plains."

"Pigs were the back bone of the early Dakota settler's diet; therefore, six or eight of those noisy, messy, smelly, hungry creatures were in a fourth wagon. Getting the pigs back into their wagon pen was a donner wetter of a job according to Gramma Sophia. Well, these pigs were the grandparents of many more pigs plus German sausage, hams, headcheese, pickled pigs' feet, and pork jousts."

"One of the problems on a trip like that was to find fuel to keep warm and cook the food. The travelers collected dried buffalo bones and cattle dung

and use it for fuel. It burned fast with a faint blue flame and created a lot of ashes. Each evening, Christina, Bertha, and Lydia were given gunny sacks and sent into the grassland to gather the dried cow dung, also called buffalo chips and meadow muffins."

Upon arrival in central North Dakota, the author writes: "The first job at the Pony Gulch site was to build a sod barn for the animals. As with all settlers, housing for the animals came first. Just like the barn, the house would be made from strips of sod. These strips were cut from the prairie grasses whose roots grew from five to six inches deep. The sod house could be built in a week, but many times families arrived too late to build a proper sod house. In those cases, dug-outs often served as a home for the first year of homesteading."

Contact the GRHC to secure "The Farm at Pony Gulch: Michael and Anna Sophia (Witt) Baier Come to America and Homestead in North Dakota, 1883-1926."

For further information about the Friends of the GRHC, the 19th Journey to the Homeland Tour to Odessa, Ukraine and Stuttgart, Germany (May 16-26, 2013), and donations to the GRHC (such as family histories), contact Michael M. Miller, The Libraries, NDSU Dept. #2080, PO Box 6050, Fargo, ND 58108-6050 (Telephone: 701-231-8416; Email: Michael.Miller@ndsu.edu; the GRHC website: www.ndsu.edu/grhc).

August 2012 column for North Dakota and South Dakota newspapers.