

In Touch with Prairie Living

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By Michael M. Miller

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA

GRHC

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As the holiday season approaches, I wish to extend Yuletide best wishes and special “Weihnachten” greetings to you and your family. The tradition of St. Nicholas (Belznickel) today known as Santa Claus brings memories of my childhood on Christmas Eve growing up at Strasburg, N.D. I remember the Belznickel and the Angels arriving at our home on Christmas Eve before the Midnight Mass.

Jolenta Fischer Masterson, Sequim, WA., a longtime colleague and Strasburg, N.D., native, writes: “On Christmas Eve, three angels would enter our home, cold with snow on their hair. Wearing wings and tinsel crowns, one angel was 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 Christkindl, 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!”

Homer Rudolf, Richmond, Va., native of Wishek, N.D. recalls: “Some of you remember having the Belznickel and the Christkindl visit our homes on Christmas Eve. In our community, when company came to visit during the Christmas holiday, the hostess invariably said: ‘Well, let’s have the Christkindl visit us.’ What happened was that cookies and hard candy were brought out, and everyone gathered around the table to munch away and make Maistub! On the table were various cookies including Ammonia, Pfeffernuesse, Date Pinwheel, Plantation Crème, and prune-filled cookies, popcorn balls, Blachenda, Kuchen, and of course we always managed to buy some halvah. Before we had our own freezer, the unheated Vorheisl [entryway] was a great North Dakota substitute. Mom and

Dad said that often the only gift they received a Christmas was an orange.”

Barbara Bohn, Toronto, Ont., who grew up on the Saskatchewan prairies remembers: “When I was very small, I remember Dad taking the youngest children up into the attic and telling us that this was the night the Christkindl would come and bring us presents. We would hear sleigh bells outside and then the front door would crash open and a huge box full of wrapped gifts would come flying on the front porch along with lots of snow and cold. I loved Christmas Eve when Dad would hitch the horses to the open sleigh and we would all be bundled in warm coats, boots, hats, mittens and scarves. Dad would have put the bells on the horses’ harnesses and away we would go into the snapping cold under the black sky filled with thousands of stars that seemed so close you could reach out to them. It was a magical scene - brilliant white snowdrifts sparkling against the backdrop of dark spruce trees and shadows creating a mysterious and beautiful landscape.”

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.”

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 and photographs), contact Michael M. Miller, NDSU Libraries, PO Box 6050, Dept 2080, Fargo, ND 58108-6050 (Tel: 701-231-8416; Email: Michael.Miller@ndsu.edu; the GRHC website: www.ndsu.edu/grhc).