

In Touch with Prairie Living

December 2013

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 extend Yuletide Best Wishes and special “Weihnachten” greetings to you and your family. For this month’s column, Chris Huber, Bernelda Becker, and Sue (Kaseman) Balcom, Germans from Russia with roots to the Dakotas, share their childhood Christmas memories.

Chris Huber of Fridley, MN., a native of rural Hosmer, S.D., shares a holiday memory, “As a child of immigrant South Dakota farming parents, the Depression of the 1930s remains a most vivid memory for me. A yearly high point for me was our country church’s annual children’s Christmas program. St. John’s Lutheran Church, rural Hosmer, S.D., was still conducted in the German language with the children’s program consisting of children reciting many German Christmas religious folk songs. Every Wednesday evening, my parents would pack us, their six children, into the unheated Ford Model A sedan and off to practice we would go.”

“After many weeks of practice, the big night arrived. The country church would be filled, the kerosene lamp chandelier would be illuminated, the pot bellied stove would be flowing red from overheating, and the children would be seated in the front pews. The ushers would light hundreds of wax candles on the decorated Christmas tree. The other children and I proudly recited our memorized pieces and loudly sang our songs. Once the program concluded, bags of treats were given to each child. The bags contained glorious treats - hard ribbon candy, boxes of animal crackers, homemade marble fudge, cookies and nuts plus a large delicious apple or orange. The tree candles were then individually extinguished and in the warm flickering glow of the chandelier lamps, all would sing “Stille Nacht,

Heilge Nacht”.

Bernelda Becker, of St. Louis Park, MN., a native of Eureka, S.D., writes about her childhood Christmas in 1938, “In Eureka, I would have been in in the church Christmas program. In Michigan, we didn’t even go to church. In Eureka, my classmates were cousins and neighbors, and we would have had a program at the country school. In Michigan, I hadn’t been at this school long enough to even have friends. And then - Mom found a box of tree decorations in the attic. Dad cut a tree from the woods on the farm where he worked. What fun we had decorating our very first ever Christmas tree. Mom found home-canned strawberries in the basement. She made ice-cream and we had strawberry sundaes. I had never tasted strawberries before. My Aunt Olga sent a doll in a case with a drawer, hangers and a change of clothes. She’d never sent a gift before. My Michigan Christmas turned out wonderful after all, even though it wasn’t in South Dakota.”

Huber and Becker are among the essayists whose memories are captured in the forthcoming anthology, “Hollyhocks and Grasshoppers: Growing up Germans from Russia in America”, published by the Minnesota North Star Chapter, Germans from Russia. This book will be able from the GRHC.

Sue (Kaseman) Balcom, Mandan, N.D., a native of Gackle, N.D., describes, “Christmas Eve was always spent attending services at Martin Luther Church in Fredonia. There was the typical Christmas Children’s Program and real candles for a candlelight service. Silent Night was always sung in German. Without fail, we always spent Christmas

Day visiting our grandparents, first one and then to the other. Grandma Kasemen had dried fruits and lots of nuts. When asked, she would produce a jar of her effervescent dill pickles - beyond compare. Grandma Meidinger had frosted honey cookies, homemade caramels and fruit. My mother told me once, after I said I didn’t want to take an orange home, to never say no to my grandmother’s offer again. There were not a lot of presents. We were poor, inasmuch as we just didn’t have as much stuff as others...we never noticed.”

Sue Balcom is author of the impressive 2013 hardcover book published by the Tri-County Tourism Alliance, “Ewiger Saatz: Everlasting Yeast - The Food Culture of the Germans from Russia in Emmons County, Logan County and McIntosh County, North Dakota”. The book is available from the GRHC.

For additional information about the Friends of the GRHC, the 20th Anniversary Journey to the Homeland Tour to Odessa, Ukraine and Stuttgart, Germany (May 15-25, 2014), and donations to the GRHC (such as special collections, 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

December column for North Dakota and South Dakota weekly newspapers.