

# In Touch with Prairie Living

October 2015

By Michael M. Miller

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA

GRHC

HERITAGE COLLECTION

The GRHC installed a new exhibit at the NDSU Library, *Homesteads of North Dakota*, highlighting some of the best black and white photographs from the Father William C. Sherman Collection. The entire collection contains over 13,000 black and white photographs and also negatives and slides.

Photographs of farm buildings featured in the *Homesteads of North Dakota* exhibit include Pete Thomas, Reeder, Adams County, N.D. (built in 1916); Julius Benz/Matt Benz, Hazen, Mercer County (1911); Frank Ridl, New Hradec, Dunn County (1905); Thomas Braun/Leo Mischel, Richardton, Stark County (1907); Breitenbucher/Grosz, New Leipzig, Grant County (1900); Joseph/John Kuhn, Lefor, Stark County (1903); Anton Duchhorn/Joe Anton, Lefor, Stark County (1910); Stockart/Leo Berger, Dickinson, Stark County; Martin Haase, Kulm, LaMoure County; John Deichert, Raleigh, Grant County; Weinschrott, Lefor, Stark County, Yetzinavech/Joseph Volk, Karlsruhe, McHenry County; Goetz, Richardton, Stark County; Dan Schnabel, Burnstad, Logan County (1901); George Weller, New England, Hettinger County (1903); John Martel, Streeter, Stutsman County (1904); Weickum, Burt, Hettinger County; Anton and Anna Lefor, Gladstone, Stark County (1901); and Farber/Anton Orlacher, New England, Hettinger, County (1906).

The homesteads belonged mostly to the Germans from Russia who emigrated to the North Dakota prairies from the Black Sea shores, Odessa Region, and the Crimean peninsula of modern day Ukraine, as well as from Bessarabian steppes (of today's Moldova).

In the 1970s and 1980s, Father Sherman and NDSU students explored primarily central and western parts of

North Dakota in search for vernacular buildings constructed during pioneer times. John Guererro was a prominent member of Sherman's crew involved in research and photography. Most of the collection's images were captured during the summers of 1970-1980. Sherman's group found a variety of buildings - houses, barns, sheds, and other structures, which at that time were still numerous in the area. Today most of the buildings are gone due to abandonment and the severity of the North Dakota weather.

Father Sherman writes: "For about ten years at NDSU, I'd get the architecture and history students together and we'd saturate the state studying the housing of Germans from Russia out there. They didn't build sod houses. They built houses just like they did back in the Black Sea area near Odessa, Ukraine."

The architectural and cultural legacy of numerous ethnic groups were discovered and documented during Father Sherman's expeditions in North Dakota. Among them the German pioneers from Russia, Bohemia, Hungary and the other parts of the former Habsburg's realm, Germans from the German Empire, Czechs, English, Estonians, Norwegians and Ukrainians. He gathered valuable information about building techniques and practical solutions common for those groups and a variety of anthropological and linguistic data on them. Precise instructions for making clay bricks [batsa], a guide to the clay plastering process of Germans pioneers and the technical specifications of the Ukrainian stove-heater are some examples of materials in the collection.

Father William Sherman is a well-known and celebrated North Dakota scholar and educator. He

taught Sociology of the Great Plains and Religion at NDSU from 1971 to 2001. He served at St. Michael's Catholic Church in Grand Forks from 1976 to 2003. He was awarded two honorary doctorates, one from the University of Mary, Bismarck (2003) and one from the University of North Dakota, Grand Forks (2014). His work highlights the unique and complex history of North Dakota inhabitants, especially that of the Germans from Russia. In 1995 and 1997, Father Sherman and John Guererro journeyed to Odessa, Ukraine where they took hundreds of slides of existing German buildings in the former Black Sea and Bessarabian German villages. The Father William C. Sherman Photograph Collection is available online at [www.digitalhorizonsonline.org](http://www.digitalhorizonsonline.org).

Important books about the ethnic Germans in North Dakota which are part of the Sherman Collection include: 1) *Prairie Mosaic: An Atlas of Rural North Dakota* - [http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/order/nd\\_sd/mosaic.html](http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/order/nd_sd/mosaic.html); 2) *Plains Folk: North Dakota's Ethnic History* - [http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/order/nd\\_sd/sherman.html](http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/order/nd_sd/sherman.html); 3) *From the Banat to North Dakota* - [http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/order/nd\\_sd/banat.html](http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/order/nd_sd/banat.html). *Prairie Mosaic* will be reprinted as a new edition by the Institute for Regional Studies, NDSU.

If you would like more information or you would like to donate to the GRHC (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](mailto:Michael.Miller@ndsu.edu); GRHC website: [www.ndsu.edu/grhc](http://www.ndsu.edu/grhc).

*October column for North Dakota and South Dakota weekly newspapers.*