

In Touch with Prairie Living

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By Michael M. Miller

Germans from Russia Heritage Collection
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My January column focuses on the important historical book, *Along the Trails of Yesterday: A Story of McIntosh County* by Nina Farley Wishek.

Nina Farley (1869-1957) married John H. Wishek, a founder of the towns of Wishek and Ashley, N.D. They had eight children. Wishek was proud of his German heritage and, through his land office, brought 2,053 German-Russian settlers into McIntosh County in 1890. Wishek helped the immigrants get settled, establish land claims and find employment.

Jay Gage, former GRHC exhibits curator, in his review of this book writes, "In 1887, young Nina Farley arrived with her family on the stone strewn Coteau de Missouri, central Dakota Territory, to be destined as a young educator, astute observer of life, respected historian, and talented poetess. Besides assembling her classic history of McIntosh County, she later published a second work devoted to her pioneer poetry, *Rose Berries in Autumn*."

Nina Farley was captivated by the vastness of Dakota Territory and its topography, although a blue-blood Yankee of New England heritage, she expressed deep respect for the customs and manners of the distinctively ethnic Germans from Russia, "whose folk beauty was worth to be displayed in an art museum." Comprising most of the McIntosh County immigrants, Nina was fascinated by the integrity of these "Gluecksal" and "Bessarabian" Germans, who spoke antiquated survivals of mumbled dialects.

In her book, Nina describes "a Russian-German Meeting of Early Days", a rare insight of pioneer Lutheran worship in the Christian Becker Bastensod house, a memory from March 1890. She writes, "These German people from South Russia live on bread and

chicory... their thrift and stoic fortitude, give to those immigrant settlers their just due." She continues, "The German Hausfrau was the champion bread baker in the country. Their festive award was sweet Kuchen."

Nina also lends comments on the festive splendor of their vivid-colored shawls, "Blachte (Plachta) and Kanapee textiles, which symbolized their paradises-contentment for family-bonding... hand-woven ones [Blachte shawls and paradises-decken], very striking in appearance because of their design in stripes, plaids or squares, always in the brightest and strongest colors. The women carried their babies wrapped in their Kinderplachta. Every mother owned one or two, which were brought from Russia and later passed as heirlooms to their daughters when they married."

She also writes about the young women in McIntosh County who had come from the 'Old Country of Russia'. "To them the land looked so different, so bare of trees and buildings. The cities and towns were different, not nice or beautiful, the people were so different, they wore funny clothes. The churches were small and poor. With faltering words of broken German, I tried to explain to them that this land of Dakota was a new land, even to me, that there had been, as yet, no time nor money for the fine buildings and that in other parts of America that there were beautiful cities, grand and wonderful churches, and miles of country with trees, flowers and shrubs."

"I explained that we were glad to get even sour grapes, which were sour because they had been picked half green and shipped hundreds of miles to us, and I told them that somewhere in America, we too had grapes, ripe and sweet, even as those picked in Russian

vineyards."

Nina continues, "When Katrina came to live with us, she told me at length the story of how the German people became interested in emigrating to America. In the long summer evenings after the day's work was done, the older people would gather in some open spot or yard and spend the evening visiting and telling about the pamphlets or papers which had been scattered about their little dorf and which they had read. Constantly they talked of America, that far-off country with thousands of acres of land, wonderful land with no irksome military draft. The children would play and sing, *Dort naus ist Amerika (Away there is Ameriika)*. Friends, neighbors, and relatives were leaving the old country for the new, and at last Katrina's own people took up the lone trail from the Black Sea country to McIntosh County, Dakota Territory."

The book also outlines the early days of cities and towns; Ashley (with the land office), Danzig, Lehr, Wishek, Kulm, Venturia and Zeeland. Early McIntosh County was also unique for a sizeable Jewish population with agricultural pursuits.

Family biographies include these German-Russian family names: Becker, Beitz, Breitling, Boschee, Billigmeier, Geisler, Giedt, Goehring, Haas, Haerter, Hein, Kempf, Jenner, Krein, Lehr, Lippert, Meidinger, Moench, Neu, Pudwill, Rempfer, Roeszler, Rau, Schulz, Strobel, Thurn, Wahl, Walz and Wolff.

If you would like more information on how to purchase these books 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; website: www.ndsu.edu/GRHC.