

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
HERITAGE COLLECTION

In early July, Bob Dambach, director of television, Prairie Public, and I completed site visits traveling to Emmons, Logan and McIntosh counties in south central North Dakota. We visited Lehr, Wishek, Napoleon, Hague, a farm near Westfield, and Zeeland. Visits included the Hague Café, Sportsman's Den at Zeeland, and kitchen homes of local members of the Germans from Russia community. The landscape of the rolling prairie fields of wheat and soybeans with hilly buttes in the distance near Westfield in Emmons County was especially impressive.

The visits were completed for filming and interviews for the 2017 Germans from Russia foodways documentary sponsored by Prairie Public Broadcasting and the Tri-County Tourism Alliance. This will be the 9th documentary in the award-winning Germans from Russia Series – <http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/order/tapes/prairieindex.html>.

We are grateful for the warm hospitality and willingness of persons to prepare German-Russian recipes. Filming and interviews will be done in August and October including Oktoberfest (October 4, Napoleon, ND) and Sauerkraut Day (October 12, Wishek, ND).

The Welk Homestead near Strasburg, ND, is open to the public until Labor Day, September 5, Thursday to Sunday, 10 a.m.-5 p.m. The Welk Homestead became a North Dakota State Historic Site on July 1, 2015. More information about the Homestead is at <http://history.nd.gov/historicsites/welk> and http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/history_culture/lawrence_welk/index.html.

My July travel to Emmons County, reminded me of a longtime colleague, Herman D. Wildermuth (1908-1999),

who wrote his memories of "Life on the Farm". The Wildermuth family emigrated from Lichtental, Bessarabia, Russia, to Emmons County near Linton in 1894. They lived in a sod house on 160 acres of homestead land.

Herman shares, "Our family lived in a sod house until sometime after Katie was born. I was the first to be born in the new house built of hand-made sun-dried clay-and-straw blocks, 18 to 20 inches thick. This provided space in the window area which was used for flower plants in the parlor. A cellar beneath the house (with an outside entrance) provided storage for winter supplies: potatoes, vegetables, dill pickles, a barrel of pickled watermelon, a big crock of sauerkraut, canned vegetables and fruit, as well as, homemade jelly (currant, gooseberry, buffalo berry, and juneberry, and best of all, chokecherry). Another item found in the cellar before prohibition, was wine and beer."

Herman goes on to write, "The first fields on the homestead had to be plowed by a hand-held, one-share, sod-breaking plow pulled by a three or four horse team. The ground was possibly disked, then seeded to flax, while an additional plot (called a Bashtan) was planted to with potatoes and a variety of necessary vegetables. Our parents raised some sheep. Mother used some of the saved wool in making patchwork comforters. Grandmother had a spinning wheel which was also used in earlier years to make yarn from the wool which was then used for necessary articles of clothing."

"I still remember roaming the farm pasture in search of the delicious, tasty cactus berries found on the land. These cactus plants were a small mound of green berries with spiny thorns on the top of each berry. In the spring, one or several berries would flower where

the spine had been and this ripened into a sweet berry in the fall. Unfortunately, almost all of these plants became victims of the drought of the 1930s. In searching the local prairie land after World War II, I found only one surviving plant on what had been our farm."

Wildermuth's "Life on the Farm" article is at – http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/history_culture/history/lifeonthefarm.html. Wildermuth Family Photographs are at – http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/history_culture/photo/wildermuth.html.

The NDSU Libraries' GRHC is sponsoring the 21st Journey to the Homeland Tour to Germany and Ukraine, May 17-27, 2017. Leading the tour will be Michael Miller, GRHC director, and Jeremy Kopp, GRHC special collections associate. The tour includes Berlin, Germany; Odessa, Ukraine & the former German villages, and Stuttgart, Germany. Travelers have the unique opportunity to visit the villages of their German-Russian ancestors near Odessa, Ukraine and walk where their ancestors walked and have their eyes opened to village life. For complete information, visit: <http://library.ndsu.edu/homeland-tour>. Limited registration is available for the tour.

The Germans from Russia Heritage Society 46th International Convention will be held September 7-11, 2016, at the Ramkota Hotel, Rapid City, SD. For registration and schedule information, go to www.grhs.org. I look forward to seeing colleagues and friends at this event.

If you would like more information about the Journey to the Homeland Tour to Germany and Ukraine; or would like 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.