

# In Touch with Prairie Living

September 2016

By Michael M. Miller

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA  
**GRHC**  
HERITAGE COLLECTION

In August 2016, Prairie Public Television videographers and I traveled to Emmons, Logan and McIntosh counties, south central North Dakota – We filmed in Hague, Lehr, Napoleon, Wishek, Zeeland and a farm near Westfield. In October 2016, filming will include these events: Church Supper at Sts. Peter and Paul, Strasburg, October 2; Octoberfest in Napoleon, October 7; and Sauerkraut Day in Wishek, October 12.

The filming and interviews were done for a 2017 Germans from Russia foodways documentary. This will be the 9th documentary of the award-winning Germans from Russia Series of Prairie Public Broadcasting. Co-sponsors of the new documentary are Prairie Public and the Tri-County Tourism Alliance. The Prairie Public documentaries are available at <http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/order/tapes/prairieindex.html>.

Brauche, prayer healing, was brought to North Dakota by Germans who had left their homeland in South Russia to seek a better life. They continued many traditions, including the practice of Brauche. Stan Stelter writes in the *Bismarck Tribune* article dated February 16, 1982, “Brauche served as an answer for a practical problem; the transplanted Germans found themselves short of doctors and other medical help. Villagers relied on some talented residents who, according to one historian, were ‘old women (who) picked the herbs and made the remedies.’ Intermingled with Brauche are folk remedies and some formal training, perhaps midwifery or massage therapy.”

In 1998, the GRHC published, *Tender Hands: Ruth’s Story of Healing* by Ruth Weil Kusler with Peggy Sailer O’Neil. A powerful element in Ruth’s family tradition included the belief

that a healer or Braucher was a chosen instrument of God. An ironic twist is the story that her mother, Katherina Fischer Weil, a practicing Braucher, was harassed by religious leaders but respected and referred to by local physicians on the plains of western North Dakota.

Katharina Fischer was a midwife and healer in Neu Glueckstal, Odessa District, South Russia. Sensing her daughter, Ruth, also had the gift of “tender hands,” the instinctive ability to seek out aches and pains and to soothe them away with her fingers, Katharina passed on the ancient healing methods of prayer, massage and herbal remedies to her daughter. Ruth lived in the Beulah area in western North Dakota.

Braucherers were firm believers and they claimed no special powers themselves, saying that God had given them a special talent to use their knowledge. Brauche is important as a strong cultural symbol to the Germans from Russia.

The book includes medicinal remedies passed down to Ruth. Crediting her mother, Katharina, as “my counselor – physically, mentally and spirituality,” Ruth shares healing options for over 75 ailments, all the while stressing the importance of and offering examples of prayers to use with the remedies.

Many of the products needed for healing reflect agrarian life earlier in the century. Wormwood, horseradish, fresh chamomile and fresh sweet cream. Knorr’s Genuine Hein Fon Essense (Green Drops), Dr. Forni’s Alpen-Kraeuter and Smith’s Rosebud Slave will require a search, but likely cannot be found through health food source.

Dr. Roland Wagner writes in a review of the book: “Ruth’s story may strike a note of familiarity to many

people who are aware of folk healing traditions around the world. The many remedies for the aches and pains of daily life are valuable in and of themselves, but the book also has special interest because of its formation on the German folk-healing tradition known as “Braucherei”.

A well researched essay entitled *Brauche, Healing and Home Remedies*, written by Carol Just can be found in the book, *The Glückstalers of New Russia in North America*,” – <http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/order/general/glueck.html>.

*Tender Hands: Ruth’s Story of Healing* is available by contacting GRHC. The webpage is – [http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/order/nd\\_sd/kusler.html](http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/order/nd_sd/kusler.html).

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.

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](http://www.ndsu.edu/GRHC).

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