

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

My best wishes for the new year of 2017 to many readers of the In Touch with Prairie Living column. The year of 2017 marks the 38th year of the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, 1979-2017. This year also marks my 49th year of my work at North Dakota State University.

Dr. Tom Isern, Distinguished Professor of History at NDSU is author of his Plains Folk commentary for Prairie Public Radio – www.prairiepublic.org/radio/radio-programs-a-z/plains-folk. A recent commentary is titled: *German Farmers in Russia*. With permission from Tom Isern, a longtime colleague and Friend of the GRHC, the commentary is shared below.

“Possibly the most conspicuous class of ethnic immigrants on the North American plains is the Germans from Russia. There are Volga German settlements in many parts of the plains, especially on the central prairies of Kansas, Colorado, and Nebraska. There are larger numbers of Black Sea Germans. The settlements of Black Sea German Mennonites have centers in Kansas and in Manitoba. The center for settlements of other Protestants as well as Catholics from the Black Sea region is in North and South Dakota.

The Germans from Russia have a reputation as master farmers, who transferred their agricultural expertise readily from one steppe region to another one across the Atlantic. Were the German-Russians indeed master farmers?

The question has become more pertinent as I’ve become involved with the establishment of the Ludwig and Christina Welk homestead (birthplace of the entertainer), in Emmons County, North Dakota, as a state historic site. We’d like to be able to say intelligent and authoritative things about the

German-Russians as agriculturalists.

So, with the help of my assistant, Amanda Biles, I’ve started to investigate the historical record of the Germans as farmers in Russia. Right off the bat, my friend Michael Miller, of the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, has presented us with a remarkable tract entitled, *German Farm Economy in the Black Sea Region*. Authored by Dr. Alexander Vaatz, translated by Cleon F. Ochsner. Originally published by the C. V. Englehard publishing house in—wait for it—Berlin, 1942.

You see what I’m saying here. At the very time when German divisions were investing the Soviet Union, as they saw it, liberating old German settlements in Russia, this fellow Vaatz was writing up the story of the Germans as farmers in Russia. His tract, then, is essentially a work of German intelligence and propaganda. Vaatz is arguing that the Germans are good people and great farmers who deserve to be saved from Russian tyranny by the German army. And what’s more, the German-Russians, brought back into the fold, will be good and productive citizens of the fatherland.

So that’s a point of political interest, possibly concern, but Vaatz is, nevertheless, a valuable source on German farming in Russia. He himself came from a successful, indeed wealthy, German family in the Black Sea region. Here are some highlights of German agriculture, as Vaatz recounts them.

Before small-grain culture boomed on the Russian steppe, the Germans were wonderfully successful sheep raisers, introducing Merino breeding lines, as well as livestock specialists, from Saxony.

The Germans also developed a distinctive breed of cattle, using Red German bulls with Russian cows,

producing what were known as Colonial Cattle. (Simmentals also were popular among German stockmen.)

The Germans introduced Belgian and other heavy horses, crossing them with local stock, and thus converted from oxen to horses for draft animals.

The Germans pioneered the techniques of crop rotation and tillage, including their distinctive bukkermulti-bottom plow, for the chernozem soils and semiarid climate of the steppe region.

There is a whole ‘nother story about the antecedents of agriculture on the American plains to be learned by going back to the Russian steppe.”

If you would like more information about the 2018 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.

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