

In Touch with Prairie Living

October 2017

By Michael M. Miller

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA
GRHC
HERITAGE COLLECTION

The North Dakota State University Library will host an event to celebrate my 50 Years at NDSU, on October 27, 5-8pm at the Harry D. McGovern Alumni Center on campus. Our Germans from Russia community is welcome to attend. My deepest appreciation to the GRHC staff, to the Friends of the GRHC and to our volunteers for their dedication to the GRHC. My lifelong dream has been to keep alive and enhance the heritage and culture of the Germans from Russia.

As I reflect on my university years 1967-2017, some of my fondest memories are interviews with members of our Germans from Russia community, including: Fern (Renner) Welk (1903-1998), wife of Lawrence Welk; Helen (Feist) Krumm (1920-2009); and Sister Reinhardt Hecker (1901-1994).

Fern (Renner) Welk was born to an immigrant family from the Beresan District, South Russia, who settled near St. Anthony, Morton County, ND. Her father died when Fern was four, leaving her mother to take care of the 750 acre ranch. "There were eight children in our family. I never heard her say, 'Oh my, I'm a widow and am left with eight children.' My mother never learned English. She would read the German newspaper, *Nord Dakota Herald*."

Fern shared, "When I met Lawrence in church one Sunday (in Yankton, SD), he said, 'Can I take you to lunch?' I said, 'Well if you take somebody else along.'" Lawrence and Fern were married in 1931 in Sioux City, IA, at 5:30pm because Lawrence had to play with the band that night. "I wrote my mother and said, 'He is a musician and has his own band. He doesn't appear to be like the average musician.' So mother's letter comes back, 'Does he have more than a shirt on his back?'" Fern earned a RN Degree at Sacred Heart Hospital, where she took care of Lawrence Welk as a

patient.

Helen (Feist) Krumm was born in Strassburg, Kutschurgan District, South Russia, today near Odessa, Ukraine. Helen married Eugene Feist, a young soldier in the German army. Tragically in 1944, Helen's husband was killed shortly before the birth of their first child. Helen shared, "They came to the house and knocked on the door and said, 'Well, pack, March 23, 1944, that's when we we're going to leave. Twenty-three families went together and put up stuff. All in one wagon we start driving. We didn't have too much clothes, a little smoked meat and bread. Ma was such a feisty lady. She said, 'We're going to make it.'" In 1951, Helen and her daughter, Marie, left Germany, immigrating to Hague, where she was sponsored by Joseph and Katherine Krumm. Helen learned English by listening to the radio and reading. Helen appears in the award-winning 2012 documentary, *At Home in Russia, At Home on the Prairie*.

Sister Reinhardt Hecker was born in the village of Muenchen, Beresan District, South Russia. In 1914, at age 13, she left Muenchen with her parents and six siblings by train to Hamburg, Germany. They then departed on a ship named *America* bound for New York City and Ellis Island. The family was given a box of bananas, apples and sandwiches. "We didn't know how to eat bananas. Then, I saw some people peel those bananas. Then we learned how to eat bananas 'cause we never saw those in Europe." From New York, the family took the train to Dickinson, ND, later settling near Belfield, ND. "We didn't know the English language, we didn't know people." At age 20, she entered the Benedictine Convent, St. Joseph, MN. Sister Reinhardt was one of the first sisters to move to Bismarck

in 1943 to establish Annunciation Priory. The complete interviews with transcriptions are at https://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/history_culture/oral/samples/index.htm.

The Journey to the Homeland Tours to Germany and Ukraine beginning in 1996, have enriched the lives and memories of descendants traveling to the homeland of their ancestors. For me personally, witnessing this once-in-a-lifetime experience for our Germans from Russia community has been incredibly rewarding. As a result of the Homeland Tours, filming began in 1996 for the award-winning Germans from Russia Documentary Series, produced in cooperation with Prairie Public Broadcasting beginning with *The Germans from Russia: Children of the Steppe, Children of the Prairie*. In September 2017, the ninth documentary premiered, *Gutes Essen: Good Eating in German-Russian Country*. These documentaries are available at <https://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/order/tapes/prairieindex.html>.

Other wonderful memories include the GRHC's Dakota Memories Oral History Project of 2005 to 2009 with 199 interviews in North Dakota, north-central South Dakota, and southern Saskatchewan. Further information is available at <https://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/dakotamemories/home.html>. We are placing Dakota Memories interviews at www.digitalhorizonsonline.org.

If you would like more information about the 22nd Journey to the Homeland Tour to Germany and Ukraine (May 16-26, 2018); becoming a Friend of the GRHC, or to donate (family histories and photographs), contact Michael M. Miller, NDSU Libraries, PO Box 6050, Dept. 2080, Fargo, ND 58108-6050 (michael.miller@ndsu.edu – 701-231-8416); website: www.ndsu.edu/grhc.