

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 August, I joined Prairie Public Television (PPTV) videographers in Emmons, Logan and McIntosh counties in south central North Dakota for filming and interviews for the 2019 Women Behind the Plow documentary. We filmed wheat harvesting on the Mosset Farm near Linton, Rau Ranch near Napoleon, Kleingartner Farm near Gackle, and the Wald Farm near Hague.

We filmed and interviewed Evelyn (Welk) Schwab at the farm where she grew up which is now the Welk Homestead State Historic Site. Evelyn's uncle was bandleader Lawrence Welk. There were memorable interviews with Alice (Woehl) Buerkley in Kulm; Mary Ann (Schumacher) Gefroh and Alice (Rohrich) Kramer in Linton; Nikki (Lund) Rau on their cattle ranch near Napoleon; Sue (Hoger) Kleingartner on their dairy farm near Gackle; and Eileen (Hulm) Wald at the grain and cattle farm near Hague.

On August 9, there was an Open House at the Welk Homestead featuring Tom Isern speaking about his new book published by NDSU Press, *Pacing Dakota*, which includes stories about homesteading of the Germans from Russia. Hunter Heidrich, a senior at Eureka High School entertained with his accordion music. Kristi Goldade, who grew up east of Strasburg, performed talented singing and yodeling. To end the evening, delicious custard fruit kuchen from Model Bakery at Linton was served to attendees, compliments of the Friends of the Welk Homestead.

From July 27 to August 3, I visited Hays in western Kansas. Hays, Ellis and Rush counties were heavily settled by Volga German immigrant families. The Volga German Catholic churches in Ellis County are beautiful. The Basilica of St. Fidelius at Victoria called "The Cathedral of the Prairies" was erected in 1909, built by Volga German

immigrant farmers. Other churches I visited include Saint Francis of Assisi in Munjor, Holy Cross in Pfeifer, St. Joseph in Liebental, St. Anthony in Schoenchen, St. Catherine in Catherine and St. Joseph in Hays, KS.

At the popular Das Essen Hutte Café in Hays, the menu even included some Volga German dishes that were new to me; Green Bean Dumpling, Chicken Noodles, Noodles & Beans, Bierock, Chicken & Dumplings, Fried Dumplings & Sausage and Bread Bowl. Volga German desserts include Hearts cookies and Grape & Strawberry Spitzbuban. Visiting Saint Francis of Assisi Catholic Church at Munjor, the women were making cherry, blackberry and apple Kuchen in square tins for baking.

While in Hays, I attended the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia (AHSGR) 49th International Convention on the campus of Fort Hays State University (FHSU). Longtime colleague Michael Wanner of Germany was one of the convention presenters. In 1989, Wanner emigrated from Kazakhstan (formerly of the Soviet Union) with his family to Germany. His ancestors lived in the Catholic Beresan villages near Odessa, Ukraine. Wanner is head of the Historical Research Association of Germans from Russia. In May 2017, after the 21st Journey to the Homeland Tour, I was a guest at the Wanner home in Germany.

In Hays, KS, I met Dr. Olga Litzenberger, who immigrated to Germany in 2017 from Saratov, Russia. She is well known for her writing as a Volga German historian. With Michael and Olga, we communicated in German language.

Alex and Nancy Herzog, Boulder, CO, presented a workshop, *Lives of Ethnic Germans in Soviet Exile During*

and After WWII. They were featured speakers at the banquet, *Surviving and Nazis*. Alex was born to ethnic Germans near Odessa, Ukraine. In 1953 with his family, they immigrated to Hays, KS. Alex is a volunteer German translator and Nancy does editing for GRHC. They are special Friends of the GRHC.

There were many other excellent convention workshops including the *Dutch Hop: Music of the Volga Germans* by Terry Batt, Thornton, CO. Batt continues to perform with the Polka Kings Band his father started nearly 40 years ago. Sr. Mary Eloise Leiker, Sr. Alice Ann Pfeifer and Sr. Mary Ann Schippers of the Sisters of St. Agnes, Fond du Lac, WI, presented a touching story of *Facts and Stories about Volga German Survivors of Soviet Labor Camps*. The three Sisters completed missionary work from 1994 to 2001 at Chelyabinsk, Russia, where they interviewed older Volga Germans about their difficult life working in slave labor camps (Gulags) in Siberia, Russia. They have published the book, *Conversations with the Elders*, about ethnic Volga Germans living in Russia today. The three sisters grew up in Ellis and Rush counties, western Kansas.

I visited the Ethnic Studies Collection at the FHSU Library in Hays to see the Lawrence Weigel Collection. Weigel was well known for his Volga German folk music and writing stories of his heritage.

If you would like more information about the 23rd Journey to the Homeland Tour to Germany and Ukraine (May 2019); becoming a Friend of the GRHC, or would like donate (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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