

# 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  
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Distinguished Professor and longtime colleague at North Dakota State University, Dr Thomas Isern, has written a fine new book, *Pacing Dakota*, a collection of essays reflecting on the history and culture of the Great Plains of North America.

From the book jacket, “Isern, with more than forty years as a working historian and regional author, transitions from the close confines of historical archives into the prairie landscapes of the northern plains. *Pacing Dakota* speaks with the mingled voices of scholarly historian, outdoor sportsman, culinary enthusiast, lifelong Lutheran, and prairie farm boy. The author prowls prairie churches, finds forgotten artifacts, and gathers cherished stories from Williston to Wahpeton and points beyond. He situates his encounters along the way into the canon of literary and historical writing on the prairies. In the end, he speaks for a generation committed to making a good life in this place.”

Isern shares his stories, including German-Russian culture. For instance, Isern writes, “The bust of Wilhelmina Geiszler is one of the most historical works of art in North Dakota, not only because of its illustrious maker but also because of the story behind its heroic subject.” Nina Farley Wishek recruited Laura Taylor, pottery artist, to make the bust for the Ashley 50th Golden Jubilee in 1938. The ceramic bust of Wilhelmina Geiszler, the martyr mother of the Germans from Russia is on display at the McIntosh County Historical Museum in Ashley, ND.

Nina Farley Wishek, a teacher and poet, was born in Michigan in 1869. She later came to McIntosh County with her family. Wishek authored, *Along the Trails of Yesterday: A Story of McIntosh County*. She writes in her book, “As time passed, I learn more about the Old World and the way in which they

live there.” Isern writes of Nina Farley Wishek, “She tells some of their stories, including one of a family traumatically divided by a case of trachoma, which caused a sister of the maid telling the tale to be turned back at Ellis Island.”

Jacob and Pauline Lang, farmers south of Lehr, had ten children. On November 17th, 1946, a fire at the one-story farmhouse saw seven of the ten children die. The Lang family plot is in the George Station German Baptist Cemetery, seven miles south of Lehr. “It’s gorgeous, the middle of a pasture and right alongside a blue kettle lake,” shares Isern.

Isern also reflects on his July 2011 visit to rural St. Andrew’s Lutheran Church near Zeeland, “They were the houses built of faith and wheat, for just as various ethnic immigrant farmers were getting well established in the new land they benefited from a strong agricultural economy in the first decade of the twentieth century.”

The historic Hutmacher farm, a German-Russian farmstead of earth roofed buildings in Dunn Center, western North Dakota is also featured in the book. “The sod house stands as the foremost material symbol of pioneer life on the Great Plains of North America. We think, as people of the plains, that we know what there is to know about sod houses,” writes Isern.

Of the Tri-County Fair Kuchen Contest at Wishek (sponsored by BEK Communication), Isern writes, “The BEK ladies were setting out the entries in the stipulated categories: cheese, peach, rhubarb, apple, prune, wedding, and other. They asked, would you like to judge the Kuchen contest? Well, yeah!”

Isern is known in the region as author of *Plains Folk*, the radio feature he reads weekly to a statewide audience on Prairie Public Radio. He

is ‘Historian in Residence in German-Russian Country’ in cooperation with the Tri-County Tourism Alliance (Emmons, Logan, McIntosh) with a grant from the North Dakota Humanities Council.

“Isern has wandered everywhere on what he calls the ‘post-rural’ plains of North Dakota. His unapologetic respect for plains life, from six-man football to the Christmas Eve candle festival at Canaan, reminds us that we live a storied – not a storybook – landscape. *Pacing Dakota* will make you want to fire up the car, crank the windows down, and amble off the beaten path to where authenticity, integrity, and ethnicity continue to shape the North Dakota character,” writes Clay Jenkinson, author of *For the Love of North Dakota: Sundays with Clay* in the Bismarck Tribune.

Sabrina Hornung, editor of the *High Plains Reader*, wrote the article, “Dr. Tom Isern: Man About the Plains.” Hornung writes, “*Pacing Dakota* documents Isern’s travels throughout the region as a working historian documenting a changing landscape in an area he refers to as ‘post-rural,’ a culture that’s no longer rural and nowhere near urban. When asked if he had a favorite region in Dakota he said he found himself to be drawn to the coteau in central Dakota for its gentle rolling landscapes, the hunting and fishing, the Dakota war battlefields, and certain sites in German Russian Country.”

*Pacing Dakota* is available at the GRHC website – [www.ndsu.edu/grhc](http://www.ndsu.edu/grhc).

If you would like more information about the 24th Journey to the Homeland Tour to Germany and Ukraine (May 2020); becoming a Friend of the GRHC, or would like to donate (family histories and photographs), contact Michael M. Miller (Tel: 701-231-8416; Email: [michael.miller@ndsu.edu](mailto:michael.miller@ndsu.edu)); website: [www.ndsu.edu/grhc](http://www.ndsu.edu/grhc).