

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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Some time ago, the GRHC published the book, *Tender Hands: Ruth's Story of Healing*, by Ruth Weil Kusler, native of Beulah, ND. A powerful element in Ruth's family tradition included the belief that a healer or Brauchere was a chosen instrument of God. An ironic twist is the story that Ruth's mother, Katherina Fischer Wild, a practicing Brauchere, was harassed by religious leaders but respected and referred to by local physicians on the plains of western North Dakota in the Beulah/Hazen area.

Tender Hands includes medicinal remedies passed down to Ruth. Crediting her mother, Katharina, as "my counselor – physically, mentally and spiritually," Ruth shared healing options, all the while stressing the importance offering examples of prayers to use with the remedies. Katharina Fischer was a midwife and healer in Neu Glückstal, Odessa Region, South Russia. Sensing her daughter, Ruth, also had the gift of "tender hands," the instinctive ability to seek out aches and pains to soothe them away with her fingers, Katharina passed on the ancient healing methods of prayer, massage and herbal remedies. Brauche is important as a strong cultural symbol to the Germans from Russia.

Dr. Roland Wagner writes, "Ruth's practice is an intriguing case study of how these old traditions have continued to evolve and to adapt to changing circumstances by assimilating other alternative healing traditions. Most of her remedies involve the use of well-known healing herbs, such as garlic and chamomile. Fruit juices are prominent ingredients in the remedies, but whiskey and Schnapps as well."

Tender Hands: Ruth's Story of Healing is available for purchase at www.ndsu.edu/grhc/order.

Dr. Shirley Fischer Arends, a native of Ashley, ND, shares in her important

book, *The Central Dakota Germans: Their History, Language, and Culture*, that Brauche serves as the "art and practice of healing", an expression of folk medicine. Arends writes, "Emma Fischer, my mother, received the verses and the Brauche traditions from her mother, Freiderike Opp, whose maiden name was Bendewald. Friederike brought the traditions with her when she emigrated from Glückstal, Russia, in 1905. Friederike practiced as a full-time Brauchere when she arrived in 1905 until she married in 1908." Arends details Brauche verses in German with English translation for toothaches, infections of the eye, stomach flu, intestinal convulsions, swelling, boils, fever, yellow jaundice, and ringworm.

Dr. Shirley Fischer Arends and her mother, Emma, were interviewed about Brauche for Prairie Public's award-winning documentary, *The Germans from Russia: At Home in Russia, At Home on the Prairie*.

The Central Dakota Germans: Their History, Language, and Culture is available for purchase at www.ndsu.edu/grhc/order.

Brauche 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 a Bismarck Tribune article (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." The greatest concentration of Brauchers was found in south central

North Dakota because of the large settlements of Germans from Russia.

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: A Bicentennial Collection of History, Genealogy and Folklore*. Just writes, "The healer, called a Brauchere, was often identified and recruited intuitively by another healer before the future student understood his or her own gift. All Brauchere believed that their healing gift was the mandate of a higher power in the form of the Triune God: Father, Son and Holy Ghost. Brauchere were esteemed and trusted within their communities and sought after by many for physical healing."

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, 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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