

# In Touch with Prairie Living

August 2019

By Michael M. Miller

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA  
**GRHC**  
HERITAGE COLLECTION

On July 21-22, 2019, I visited several southeast South Dakota towns, historical sites and cemeteries of the first settlement of the Bessarabian, Black Sea, Crimean and Mennonite German families in the 1870s and 1880s.

Lesterville, Dakota Territory, near Yankton, SD, was the first settlement of immigrant families in 1873 who came from Johannestal, Beresan District, South Russia, today near Odessa, Ukraine. Other towns visited were Parkston, Tripp, Menno, Kaylor, Scotland and Freeman, SD. Cemeteries I visited included the Dennewiz Cemetery, Johannesthal Reformed Church Cemetery, Petersburg Congregational Church Cemetery and the Postahl Lutheran Cemetery. My thanks for Gary Jerke of Tripp and Daniel Flyger of Freeman showing me and providing historical information.

At Rose Hill Cemetery in Scotland, are the gravesites of Pastor Karl Bonekemper (1828-1893) and his wife, Eugenie (1836-1905). The GRHC Archives houses the Bonekemper Collection. In Freeman, I visited the Heritage Hall Museum & Archives. My appreciation to Marnette Hoffer, Director, for the informative visit. Freeman is well known for their annual Schmeckfest. In July, Freeman hosted the South Dakota Chislic Festival.

One of my highlights was visiting the first Hutterite Colony in North America, the Bon Homme Hutterite Colony. It sits along the Missouri River in Yankton County, established in 1874 by Michael Waldner who emigrated with families from the Hutterite colonies of South Russia (Crimea). My thanks to Alvin Stahl, minister of the Bon Homme Colony, and to Thomas Stahl, head of the sheep barns, for their warm hospitality including delicious homemade evening dinner.

From Yankton, SD, I traveled to Lincoln, NE, to attend 50th Anniversary convention of the American Historical Society of Germans from Russia (AHSGR), July 23-27. I had a chance to

see the impressive AHSGR headquarters and their historical buildings including a Summer Kitchen. I was pleased to visit with Dodie (Reich) Rotherham, President of AHSGR, who will attend the GRHS Convention in Fargo, July 31-August 3.

Receiving AHSGR's 2019 Distinguished Service Awards were dear colleagues Dr. Dona Reeves-Marquardt, Dr. Lewis Marquardt, and the late Dr. Irma Eichhorn. They have done outstanding work with their research, writing and public service for AHSGR and the Germans from Russia community. Dona and Lew were scriptwriters for Prairie Public's award-winning television documentaries, "At Home in Russia, At Home on the Prairie" (2012) and "We (Never) Don't Forget: Germans from Russia in South America" (2015).

I was pleased to visit with Carolyn Schott and Sandy Schilling Payne. Carolyn presented a workshop, "Discovering Your Black Sea German Heritage" covering her website – [www.blackseagr.org](http://www.blackseagr.org). Sandy presented a workshop, "Mapping America: Germans from Russia Settlement Locations" explaining her website – [www.germansfromrussiasettlementlocations.org](http://www.germansfromrussiasettlementlocations.org).

Dr. Tanja Schell, Berlin, Germany, presented, "A Ray of Hope and Cloud of Darkness". She shares letters from Germans in Russia seeking help from their Volga German relatives in the USA during the Stalin Era of the 1920s and 1930s and famine in Russia and Ukraine. Tanja received her doctorate at North Dakota State University in Fargo. Her doctoral dissertation analyzed a private collection of personal letters sent to a Volga German couple in the Midwest by their relatives from the Soviet Union. Tanja joined us in Berlin, Germany, in May 2019, for the Welcome Dinner of the Journey to the Homeland Tour.

Other excellent workshop presentations included "The Immigrant

Women" by Norma Pipkin, who portrays her great-great Aunt Eva (Spotter) Rupp (1828-1902). Norma, dressed as her aunt, vividly describes farm life including making "Mist Holz" (manure with straw), life in a sodhouse with a dirt floor and Volga German Hochzeit wedding traditions including Suppa, Kucha and homemade Schnapps. Norma would say, "Auch der Liber". Her Volga German immigrant family homesteaded in 1878 near Munjor, Ellis County, western Kansas.

Bob Lettenberger, Education Director, National Railroad Museum, Green Bay, WI, presented, "Germans from Russia & the Railroads". He showed a photo of the railroad station at Wishek, ND, with hundreds of immigrants in the early 1900s. The photo is taken from an article in North Dakota History, by Dr. Gordon Iseminger, "Are We Germans, or Russian, or Americans?" I will feature this article in a future column. There were "Immigrant Trains" to central and western USA. "Sugar Beet Trains" carried workers to western Nebraska in the 1880s and 1890s. Railroads bringing immigrants from Ellis Island and New York City also had Chapel Cars.

Dr. Michael Brown, University of Wyoming, presented, "German Russians in Siberian Kazakhstan". He shared the tragic story of the deportation of 440,000 ethnic Germans who suffered life in slave labor camps in Kazakhstan of the Volga and Crimean and Black Sea Germans.

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, Dept 2080, Fargo ND 5801-6050 (Tel: 701-231-8416); Email: [michael.miller@ndsu.edu](mailto:michael.miller@ndsu.edu); [www.ndsu.edu/grhc](http://www.ndsu.edu/grhc).

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