

In Touch with Prairie Living

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By Michael M. Miller

Germans from Russia Heritage Collection
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GERMANS FROM RUSSIA

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Dr. Gordon Iseminger, Professor Emeritus of History, University of North Dakota, Grand Forks, authored an important article for *North Dakota History*, 1992, “Are we Germans, or Russians, or Americans?”

Let me share valuable text presented in this essay about Germans from Russia who lived in McIntosh County, south central North Dakota. Dr. Iseminger writes, “Richard Sallet, in his book, *Russian-German Settlements in the United States*, wrote that when war broke out among the major European powers in August 1914, German-Russians in the United States agonized over the question: ‘Which is our country?’ Their ancestors had come from Germany, they or their parents had been born in Russia, and they were living in America.

“German-Russians, no less than other German-Americans, were subjected to indignities. With the entry of the United States into the war, wrote Sallet, a period of intense suffering began for them. German-Russians were admonished from childhood, for example, never to forsake the mother tongue and for many it was the only language they knew. The German language united the German-Russians, linked them to their past, and helped them maintain their cultural identity. To forbid German-Russians to use their language was to impose a severe hardship on them.”

“McIntosh County was opened for settlement in 1884, and the first German-Russian settlers probably entered the country towards the later part of the same year. They settled near present-day Zeeland. By 1886, many families had settled near the present-day towns of Ashley, Wishek, Venturia and Lehr. Within twenty-five years of its opening, McIntosh County had attracted hundreds of land-seeking German-Russians, many of whom by 1914 had resided in the country for only a short period of time.”

“In 1890, 2,053 of McIntosh County’s 3,248 inhabitants were German-Russians. In 1910, the county

contained 7,251 people. Of the total population, 5,745, nearly 80 percent, listed Russia as the birthplace of themselves and their parents, that is, they were German-Russians”.

“From Aberdeen, Ipswich, or Eureka, German-Russians made their way north to McIntosh County by team and wagon, and it would be logical to assume that they settled first and in large numbers on the more desirable land on the southern edge of the county. Even by 1920, when the population of McIntosh County had increased to 9,010, the county was still predominantly rural and overwhelming German-Russian.”

“Heimat meant something to German-Russians that non-German-Russians have difficulty appreciating and understanding. It was Heimweh, or homesickness, but it was more than that. Joseph S. Height, in his book, *Homesteaders on the Steppe*, wrote that wherever a German-Russian went he remained deeply attached to the “Heimat” with every fiber of his being. Height description details the feelings and experiences of German-Russians living on the prairies of McIntosh County as aptly as it recalls their memories of what life had been like on the steppes of South Russia.”

“Heimat was billowing fields of grain. The long sweep of stubble stirred by the mournful winds of autumn, the white pall over the boundless winter landscape, the blustering snowstorm that turns day into sudden night and dreaded darkness, the fragrant scent of the fresh earth of spring.”

“Heimat meant the nearness of parents, relatives, friends and neighbors. It meant mother tongue and folklore, the wisdom of the old and the pranks of the young. It meant the ringing of church bells and the singing of children. It meant free men walking behind their plows. Heimat meant the wide horizon, the big sky, the snow-bright landscape, and the wind-swept flowers of early spring.”

“A thrifty, hard-working, God-fearing people who respected authority, McIntosh County German-Russians were aware of the war – they read it in the county’s newspapers and their sons and daughters were serving in it. They contributed to the Red Cross, bought Liberty Bonds, sold scrap iron, and bent every effort to coax their farms and herds to produce more. But the war was thousands of miles away. They were farmers, and, like rural folk everywhere, their lives were governed by the cycle of seedtime and harvest.”

“During World War I, McIntosh County German-Russians were people with German ancestors who had come from Russia and who were living in McIntosh County – their “new Heimat.” For them, the truth for them with a Latin adage was particularly appropriated: “Ubi panis, ibi patria” – Where there is bread, there is my Fatherland.”

Read the complete article at https://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/history_culture/history/iseminger.html. The book, *Russian-German Settlements in the United States*, by Richard Sallet, is available at <https://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/order/general/sallet.html>.

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 58108-6050 (Tel: 701-231-8416); Email: michael.miller@ndsu.edu; www.ndsu.edu/grhc.

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