

In Touch with Prairie Living

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA

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As the Holiday Season approaches, I extend Yuletide Best Wishes to you and your family!

Prairies magazine, published by the *Ashley Tribune*, Ashley, ND, published this interesting article, "There Were No Christmas Trees for Germans in Russia: On the Steppes, Evergreen Trees Were Scarce; Instead, People Used Cherry and Lilac Branches". The article was first printed in *Heritage Review*, North Dakota Historical Society of Germans from Russia, December, 1976. The article is shared with permission of *Heritage Review*, Germans from Russia Heritage Society. Read the complete article including the musical lyrics for "O Tannenbaum!" at <https://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/articles/magazines/articles/files/prairies/trees78.pdf>.

The article shares, "There is no historical evidence that the German pioneer settlers in Russia set up a Christmas tree in their home. Some of them may have known about the custom in their German homeland, but were not familiar with it in their villages. Indeed, there is a strong presumption that the Christmas tree did not make its appearance in the Russian colonies until about 1870, when it was introduced by pastors, priests, and teachers who had learned of it in seminaries and institutes back in Germany. The presumption is confirmed by evidence of the older Christmas custom that prevailed among the Volga Germans in the village of Anton, in the district of Balzer. Here it was a custom to cut the cherry or lilac branches three weeks before Christmas and place the cuttings in water. Similarly, seeds of wheat or barley were planted in a box, so as have lots of greenery in the house on Christmas Eve. The boxes with the green branches were decorated and set at the center of the dining table. There is no mention of a tree of any kind. This represents the earliest forerunner of the Christmas tree tradition.

Perhaps the most obvious reason why the colonists did not have a Christmas tree is the simple fact that

no evergreen trees were to be found on the open steppes of the Volga and the Black Sea regions. When the custom finally came into vogue in the 1870s, Christmas trees were brought in by rail to the larger cities. The earliest evidence of the Christmas tree custom in all of Russia goes back to the year 1828. On Christmas Eve of that year, Count Michael Voronzov, the governor general of Odessa, had a Christmas tree set up in his palatial residence.

The tradition of St. Nicholas as the bringer of gifts for children probably goes back to the Middle Ages. As a historical personality, St. Nicholas was the bishop of Myra in Asia Minor in the fourth century. He is said to have been a generous, kind-hearted man, and on one occasion helped out three young maiden sisters who were poor, by giving each of them a dowry that enabled them to get married. In subsequent centuries, he became the most popular of all saints in the church calendar. In fact, there were over 2,000 churches in Europe that were dedicated to his patronage.

St. Nicholas Day became a very special day for all the children, and was celebrated by having the good Sankt Nikolaus make his appearances as a venerable bishop with a flowing white beard and in full episcopal regalia, including mitre and crozier.

With the coming of the Reformation, the time-honored St. Nicholas tradition lost much of its appeal. In the Bavarian (Germany) region, the term "Klaus" commonly designated the masked bogeyman, who appeared in many of the popular folk festivals. Others alluded to his shaggy appearance. Thus we encounter various forms of the dread figure in different parts of Germany, the Belzenickel and Belezbock.

The Dutch Sente Kloas, whose name was a garbled form of the older Sankt Niklaus, was a jovial kindhearted figure who still had the long white beard of his remote prototype, but was clad

in an attractive red suit. Santa's home at the North Pole and his reindeer-drawn sleigh were the only significantly new American features. Attempts have, of course, been made to enhance the image of Santa Claus by giving him a consort named "Mary Christmas" and by adding a "red-nosed" reindeer to guide his sleigh.

Thomas Nast, who was born in Landau (Germany) in 1840 and immigrated to America in 1846, became a talented illustrator and cartoonist. Besides the creation of the Republican elephant and the Democratic donkey, he also produced several illustrations of Santa Claus. In a later sketch which was published in the 1880s in *Harper's Weekly*, Nast depicted him in a red suit. Many of the Christmas customs popular today have resulted from several of those early traditions."

If you would like more information about the 25th Anniversary Journey to the Homeland Tour to Germany and Ukraine (May 2021), 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; or go to www.ndsu.edu/grhc.

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