

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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I want to share with you an article about the Germans from Russia in Eureka, South Dakota. Harper's Weekly published "A Bit of Europe in Dakota" on July 11, 1896.

"Away out near the border-line of the two Dakotas, lies a stretch of rolling prairie-land where lives a colony of peasants; the most remarkable, in certain ways, to be found in this country. They are self-isolated from the rest of the world, safe as they communicate through the medium of their marketing-place; the little town of Eureka. They have established a small section of Europe in the New World, and they are very, very slow to merge it into the type and texture of the new civilization.

As soon as the news could be communicated to Russia, the hegira from Odessa began. In 1887-88, over nine thousand came; in 1889-90, three thousand; in 1891-1892, four thousand five hundred – all of them settling in the region close about Eureka, and beginning at once the cultivation of wheat on the same careful, methodical plans that they and their ancestors had followed from the old German days down. The largest number of them settled in the counties of McPherson and Campbell.

Some families were poor, many of them were in comfortable circumstances, some of them were rich, as wealth goes among those who till the soil for a living, but all of them were industrious and inheritors of ancestral thrift. But they did not assimilate with American ways and customs - perhaps because there was neither opportunity nor inclination. They were a people by themselves as much as they were when, still German to the core, they toiled in the wheat-fields of Russia. The men assumed early the obligations of American citizenship but, for the most part, they remained distinctively foreign.

They are said to be unusually honest people. The same simple, plain, common life they followed on the plains of Odessa has been followed here. In person, the women are small, given to

breadth rather than to height. The men are strong of frame, of average height, and look to be possessed of great endurance.

Low-roofed and broad are the houses of the peasants, veritable homes of earth. They are not the sod shanties of the Western boomer by any means, for these foreigners have a way of building for the future. They construct their homes in curious fashions and build them so substantially they will last half a century if necessary - last until greater prosperity and American influences call for houses of wood or stone. When the farmer has decided upon the location of his house, he plows up the heavy sod in the swale at the foot of one of the low Coteau Hills and draws it to his house in long strips. The sod is the roof for his house. He has been making bricks for days, huge clay and straw bricks, perhaps twelve inches thick by eighteen inches long. The clay subsoil affords material for a brick that will last for years. After the bricks are sun-dried they are laid up for his walls with the joints being properly broken.

The home life of these peasants seems to be particularly happy. By far, the greater number of them are church-goers; Lutherans and Presbyterians predominating. They make large, fine loaves of bread in their big ovens. They are innocent of desserts. They raise vegetables - or go without. Some meat finds its way into the larder if they raise animals for food themselves. I do not know that I ever saw a healthier lot of men, women, and children than those I saw filling the streets of Eureka on a market-day. Their menus may be meager, but their muscles are not.

During the period between the day when the first load of wheat was drawn into Eureka last autumn and the time when the last load of the season was hauled in mid-February, there were unloaded from the wagons of these peasants three million bushels of wheat. In 1888, about nine hundred thousand bushels were marketed. Four

years later, this had been increased to two million bushels.

Some of the farmers still cling to the ox-team mode of locomotion and haul their wheat by slow and laborious stages. There are thirty-one different grain firms and about forty small elevators and grain warehouses.

While this town of Eureka is the end of the railroad, and on the very frontier, and while some eight or ten saloons run at full blast even in prohibited South Dakota it is a remarkably sober and unquarrelsome lot of people who throng this curious little town to send their wheat into the great arteries of trade.

It will doubtless be many years before these peasants shake off their picturesqueness, if they shall be left to themselves as much as they are today."

Harper's Weekly magazine complete article along with a hand-colored photograph is available at https://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/history_culture/history/eureka.html.

Visit the birthplace of North Dakota most famous native son, bandleader Lawrence Welk, experience the heritage and culture of the Germans from Russia, and homesteading on the prairies. The Welk Homestead State Historic Site is open until Labor Day Weekend, Thursdays to Sundays, 10a.m. to 5p.m. For more information go to – www.history.nd.gov/historicsites/welk.

If you would like more information about the 24th Anniversary Journey to the Homeland Tour to Germany and Ukraine (May 2021), or would like to donate a family history and photographs, contact Michael M. Miller, NDSU Libraries, Dept 2080, PO Box 6050, Fargo ND 58108-6050 (Tel: 701-231-8416; michael.miller@ndsu.edu, or go to www.ndsu.edu/grhc.

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