

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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The USA Today newspaper published an article on July 3, 1986, celebrating the 100th Anniversary of the Statue of Liberty. It is 134 years since 1886 when immigrants, including the Germans from Russia, arrived at Ellis Island, New York on ships.

Allan Neuharth's ancestors emigrated from the Glueckstal District villages, South Russia to Eureka, SD, in the 1880s. Neuharth, a native of Eureka, was founder of USA Today.

The USA Today article includes: "For nine days, family of seven boarded a steamer at the port of Bremen, northern Germany to immigrate to America. Johann and Maria (Walz) Ellwein and their five children huddled with 602 other, often-seasick passengers. The Ellwein family had come from South Russia to Bremen. On November 6, 1886, the ship steamed into the New York Harbor having crossed the Atlantic Ocean, and the Ellwein family became part of the biggest immigration movement in USA history.

Today the Ellwein family has grown to 1,000 USA descendants. The family journey actually began years before the stormy 1886 ocean crossing. In 1804, Matthaues Ellwein, lured by the promise of farmland and independence, left Hemmingen, Germany, and traveled 1,700 miles to Russia, settling near the Black Sea. But in 1886, faced with mandatory service in the Russian Army and a loss of German traditions, the family joined the torrent of immigrants here.

On that November arrival day to New York, the harbor was full of ships: 52 huge steamers and 42 square-rigged sailboats had been cleared through customs. Ten more incoming steamers and barks were lined up at Castle Garden immigrant station, an old fort that proceeded Ellis Island's gateway. Up to 5,000 people came each day – totaling 30 million from 1880 to 1930.

The Ellweins were lucky: All gained entry. Some immigrants, suffering cholera or heart diseases were rejected

and families were split up. Once in the city, the family encountered a noisy world of trains on elevated tracks, organ grinders, pushcarts and horse-driven carriages. Teddy Roosevelt had just lost the election in 1886 for mayor of New York. Signs offered bewildering choices in a new language; rooms for \$2, gambling houses off Broadway.

The next day, the temperature plunged to 36 degrees, and the season's first snow fell. The Ellweins boarded a train for the Dakota Territory, where neighbors from Russia had already settled. They stayed with Maria's family, where their oldest daughter, Jacobina, 16, fell in love with her cousin, Chris Walz. They married three months after her arrival. They filed a homestead claim, built a sod house near Freeman, SD, and had 13 children. Jacobina, who never learned English, "used to read the Bible every night," aloud in German, recalls her grandson, John Galster, 69, of Sioux Falls, SD.

Electricity didn't come to the farms until the 1950s. Jacobina's house was heated with cowchips and corncobs, lit with kerosene. They cooled butter and cream in the artesian well. For half-a-century there was no indoor plumbing.

That spring, Johann and Marina led their children 400 miles north to a homestead on the bank of the Missouri River in North Dakota. They settled near the town of Mannhaven, a bit of fertile prairie without roads or stores or schools. With rock and felled trees, the settlers slowly built a thriving town. But life was not easier in the north. Neighbor John Kruckenbug later recalled for oral historians five years of crop failure when many a child didn't have shoes on his or her feet all winter long. Another neighbor tied old grain sacks around his feet for shoes. Smallpox, scarlet fever and tonsillitis outbreaks killed children.

In the 1940s, while many of the children moved away, and had children of their own, the economy improved. Families built barns and windmills

while government teams stretched the network of roads. From the 1930s to the 1960s, Ellwein, Walz and Bauer children joined the migration from farms to cities, from the Dakotas to the sunbelt and eastern states."

Dr. Armand Bauer was a great-grandson of Johann Ellwein. Bauer was one of the founders of the North Dakota Historical Society of Germans from Russia in 1970, which later became the Germans from Russia Heritage Society (GRHS) in Bismarck. He was the founding editor of Heritage Review for many years. I have fond memories of visits with Armand when he was on the faculty in Soil Sciences at NDSU. We often discussed his vision for the development of a historical society for North Dakota's Germans from Russia community. GRHS celebrates its 50th Anniversary Convention, July 21-24, 2021, Ramkota Hotel, Bismarck, ND.

Bauer tells the type of hardship stories that make teen-agers roll their eyes: As an eight-year old farm boy, "It was my job to break down the coal in the coal bin," and it took a whole summer to earn \$2 to buy a jacket. Read the complete USA Today article at https://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/history_culture/history/thepromise.html.

The Welk Homestead State Historic Site near Strasburg, ND, is Thursdays to Sundays, 10 am to 5 pm until Labor Day weekend. For more information, go to – www.history.nd.gov/historicsites/welk.

If you would like more information about the 24th Journey to the Homeland Tour to Germany and Ukraine (May 2022), or would like to donate a family history or photographs, contact Michael M. Miller, NDSU Libraries, Dept 2080, PO Box 6050, Fargo ND 58108-6050 (Tel: 7010231-8416; michael.miller@ndsu.edu), or go to www.ndsu.edu/grhc.

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