

In Touch with Prairie Living

October 2020

By Michael M. Miller

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA
GRHC
HERITAGE COLLECTION

In August, the GRHC launched a new website to access our resources and collections – <https://library.ndsu.edu/grhc>. At the front page, the site is organized into four categories: 1) Research & History: resources about the culture, customs, history, and life of the Germans from Russia; 2) Collections: information related to archival collections, exhibits, and oral histories; 3) Foodways: find recipes, memories, and traditions that highlight the unique food culture of the Germans from Russia; 4) Outreach: find out about the ways we connect with the Germans from Russia and promote their culture and history.

Jeremy Kopp, GRHC outreach & operations coordinator, comments, “There is a wealth of information to be found on our website and we hope you enjoy the new look and feel. We are continuing to add resources each day and it is a ‘work in progress’ so if you notice something missing or come across a link that does not work, please have patience with us. If you find an error or need assistance navigating the website, do not hesitate to contact Jeremy.Kopp@ndsu.edu.”

Jennifer Titlbach, a former student at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, completed an excellent Senior Research Paper in December, 2005 *Germans from Russia in North Dakota*. Jennifer carefully reviewed the transcriptions of oral interviews from the GRHC website.

She writes, “Large rocks had been scarce on the Russian steppe; but a good “kraut stone” keep the lid on the sauerkraut kettle. This stone was so important that many families brought their rock from Russia all the way to North Dakota. John Henne, a German-Russian who immigrated to North Dakota as child, explained that his mother said, “If she had only known North Dakota had rocks, she would have packed something better to bring to the United States of America.”

Michael Miller writes, “I have fond memories of interviewing Sister

Reinhardt Hecker at the Annunciation Convent, Bismarck, ND, in 1990. She was born in the Catholic village of Rastatt, Beresan District, and emigrated at age 13 with her family to homestead near Belfield, ND. When asked if her mother missed Russia, Sister Hecker replied, “Oh, she cried all the time. I thought that’s why dad would take her and go out visiting... I often think how terrible it is to go to a country when you don’t know language.”

German-Russian families viewed religion and God as a central part of their life in Russia and in the United States. Richard Haring, a German-Russian born to immigrant parents in 1909, described religion as a part of life. “You went to church and participated and that was part of it.”

Ralph Dressler, who grew up at Flasher, ND, explained in his interview, “We had dinner and you would always have to say your prayers. You never went to eat without prayers and after the meal too. Well, the first thing then, you had to go read the Bible and you would always have to learn a verse before you could go to bed. Well, we couldn’t go to bed until after mother came out and we had to read it until we knew it. If we didn’t know it, we had to stay there again another half hour.”

“Kathryn (Ehni) Ternes, born in 1920 in St. Anthony, ND, shared one of the only times she remembered people skipping church was during the 1918 flu epidemic. She explained, “The flu was terrible. In 1918, so many people died. Most people did not get to church because people were afraid of getting the flu.”

Paul Welder, who grew up near Zeeland, ND, related that the community around his family’s farm included Catholics, Baptists, Reformed, Congregational, Lutherans, and Seventh-Day Adventists. He went on to say, “We didn’t know there was a difference between Catholics and Protestants. My dad did carpenter work for all of them, and we were neighbors;

and we were together. We played ball on Sundays in the summer, and we had popcorn and apples.”

For education, some families allowed the country school teacher to board in their home. German-Russians say they had a teacher to board to help the children learn English. Alma Herman of Kulm, ND, recalled that her family had a teacher boarding when she was a child. She heard her dad say he knew how to get his kids to learn English. He said, “We’ll have the teacher board here and he can teach them.” Her mother replied, “Not for very long, I haven’t any room for the kids. I can’t have anybody else.” This was true, Alma had 11 siblings. Alma desperately wanted to attend high school. But, her father told her they could not afford to pay for high school. Alma stayed home until she was eighteen and then paid for herself to go to high school.”

In her Conclusion, Tilbach writes, “This paper has tried to look at three areas of German-Russian society: religion, education, and language, and aimed to look at these areas more precisely. With this further research, it is obvious that trying to explain the culture of an entire ethnic group with broad assumptions can provide some understanding of the group. But cannot provide the entire story. Through this paper it is clear that German-Russian views on religion, education, and language were dependent upon many different factors and varied greatly from family to family”.

If you would like more information about the 24th Journey to the Homeland Tour to Germany and Ukraine (May 2022), would like to donate a family history and photographs, or how to financially support of the GRHC, 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 <https://library.ndsu.edu/grhc>.

October column for North Dakota and South Dakota Newspapers.