

In Touch with Prairie Living

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA
GRHC
HERITAGE COLLECTION

With the Holiday Season approaching, I extend Yuletide Best Wishes to you and your family. This month, I would like to share some Christmas memories from our Germans from Russia community.

The late Mary Lynn Axtman, native of Rugby, ND, who dedicated many hours for GRHC, shared this message about ornaments from Joseph S. Height's section on Christmas in his book, *Paradise on the Steppe*. "About Christmas trees – the reason is simply that no evergreen trees of any kind could be found on the grassy steppes of South Russia. [And probably the same on the grassy prairies of the USA and Canada.] However, on Christmas Eve of 1828, Count Voronzov, the governor of Odessa, did have a Christmas tree in his residence. It was described as a six foot sapling that was planted in a box of earth and adorned with a variety of artificial flowers and gift packages. The salon in which it stood was illuminated by a large number of lighted wax tapers that were placed on the tables.

On St. Barbar's Day (December 8) it was the custom to bring branches of fruit trees or sprigs of willow into the house, where they were placed in water, so that they might produce green shoots and blossoms before Christmas Day. This was regarded as a good omen of prosperity in the coming year. Some people planted various kinds of grain in boxes, hoping they might have some greenery in the house during the festive season."

Cindy Mitzel Longtin, Fargo, was a member of the 1996 and 1997 Journey to the Homeland Tours, visiting her ancestral village of Selz, near Odessa, Ukraine. Her mother, Mary (Welk) Mitzel, born in 1913, grew up on a farm near Orrin, ND. Cindy writes, "We didn't put up a Christmas tree, mother had a large oleander plant tree in the living room that was decorated with snap-on candles, strings of cranberries and popcorn. We would light three candles at a time for daily evening prayers and then Christkindl came.

I remember the excitement in the air and we kids running to the windows when we heard the bells from the horse harness and bobsled on Christmas Eve. Belzneikel was bringing Christkindl along with six others singing Christmas carols into the house.

Belzneikel (St. Nicholas) usually wore a fur cap and a long fur coat, rarely speaking to hide the person's identity. Christkindl wore a beautiful dress with a white veil attached to a hat or crown over her head with many flowing broad multiple colors of ribbons. Our parents would offer homemade chokecherry wine, cold meats, breads, and kuchen to Belzneikel, Christkindl, and the singers before they were on their way to the next home."

Jerry Richter, Jamestown, ND, writes, "The central tradition at our house was going to Christmas Eve's Midnight Mass. Even with no lights nor tree ornaments, everything was so beautiful, plus the music sung by the St. James Academy. I would in later years try out for the choir, only to have Sister Camilius take me aside and say to me, 'Jerome, God is gracious to all his children and give each one special gifts and talents. But I am sorry to say that the gift of singing is not one of his many gifts, which he has given to you.'

My sisters and I would wear out pages of the Sears wish book, hoping Santa would bring us our heart desires. We usually got one item of our many desires. The proverbial shirt, blouse, and hankie... and always a book from Dad. And always there was fresh fruit, oranges, apples, and bananas. Also for us children was a big bag of mixed nuts. Even today, some fifty-plus years later, I still try to open a Brazil nut without demolishing the nut meat."

Jerry Richter shares, "Christmas day was the culmination of suspense completing our morning chores and making sure all animals had extra feed and bedding. It was time to cleanup, to finish breakfast, and to see what Santa had brought us."

Gerald Wagner, St. Paul, MN, writes, "Our Christmas was very simple with our parents, brothers, and sisters as we did not travel or have visitors because at Christmas we were usually snowbound. We were nearly two miles of hilly section line trail to the nearest graded road so horses and bobsleds were needed. We were seven miles south of Fredonia, ND, in 1937, as the crow flies. We had canned vegetables, sour kraut, canned meats both pork and chicken, smoked hams, bacon, and homemade sausage my father made. We also had plenty of potatoes and

home baked bread. Everything was home grown. We always had plenty to eat. We had no radio, telephone or newspaper. We played many board games and cards for entertainment."

Gilbert Schauer, Longview, WA, shares, "I went to the Glueckstal Church, near Napoleon and Tappen, ND. What I remember most is it always seemed the roads were blocked. So my older brothers and my Dad had to hook up a team of horses on what was the bobsled. It was about five miles to church. We always had bells on the reins of the horses. As we would be nearing the church, there would be several other families, Mertzes, Langs, Reuers, just to name a few. There was hay in the sled, we were covered up with what was called a lap robe that was made out of one of Dad's horse hides. It was 30 and 40 below zero. I have told this story to my two girls, Tauni and Terri. Their response was, 'Dad that was living.'"

Mary Ebach, Rugby, ND, comments, "We would eat a meatless meal, usually fried fish, since we could not eat meat on Christmas Eve, open our presents, and get ready to go to Midnight Mass. After Mass, we went home and stuffed ourselves with a ham our mother had made, wrapped in dough to keep it moist and then baked, her vinegar and oil potato salad, goladetz, head cheese and kucha. I missed the most important part before we ate, our mother passed around some home made brewed Schnapps. Those fantastic memories are as vivid and happy as if it were yesterday and we are so grateful we came from a family that built those memories."

Additional Christmas memories from our Germans from Russia community are at Customs, Traditions, Memories – <https://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/research-history/germans-russia/customs-traditions-memories>.

For more information about the 24th Journey to the Homeland Tour to Germany and Ukraine (May 2022), donating a family history and/or photographs, or how to financially support 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 library.ndsu.edu/grhc.