

Interview with Emma Fischer (EF)

Conducted by Ronald Vossler (RV)

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Transcription by Lena Paris

Edited and Proofread by Peter Eberle

RV: We're going to be talking with Emma Fischer. Give me your name, age, rough background about yourself and where you've lived.

EF: Emma Fischer. I was born and raised on a farm about 10 miles northeast of Ashley in McIntosh County. I was raised there until I was 11 years old, and then my parents moved to Ashley and bought this house. I had to work hard and help my mother who was crippled. We always had a lot of people working for us during threshing in those years. My brother and I had to milk 7 cows every night, feed the calves and chickens. Put the hay down for the horses when you come home so they were ready to feed. That was my work on the farm.

I went to school on the farm, but there wasn't much to that school; reading, writing, arithmetic and learning how to write. When I came to Ashley I started the fifth grade and graduated from the eighth grade. I didn't go to high school because I had to stay home and take care of my mother. I wanted to go so bad, but they didn't let me.

RV: So you're the force behind your daughters' education in some ways.

EF: Right, that's why I said she's going to get all the education I can give her, and I did.

RV: Well, some of what Shirley has written in her book, Central Dakota Germans, or a lot of it, you really have lived haven't you?

EF: When we washed clothes father helped me. He turned the wringer which was screwed onto the tub. I had to wash the clothes, hang it outside, iron, help cook and bake. I had to help with everything because my mother couldn't work. My brother was 2 years older; he did a lot - like scrubbing and some of the heavy work. We also had a cow to milk, chickens in town.

RV: So you were kind of the mother in the home doing a lot of work, very early, weren't you?

EF: Yes, I'd come home from school sometimes at 4, and then I'd wash the biggest loads of clothes and hang them out. In the morning I'd bring them in, go to school and in the evening I'd iron.

RV: So your childhood was very different than what...

EF: ...many others do.

RV: Even then or more now?

EF: No, then it was hard work.

- RV:** Then it was hard.
- EF:** But still I could go away and play baseball and horseshoe and things like that. In the wintertime we'd have games in the snow called "The Goose." I suppose you've played that. We had all kinds of games; we had fun though. Kids would always come, they always liked me; I had no trouble getting company, even if I didn't go to school.
- RV:** When you played those games were they in English or German?
- EF:** Mostly English, I think. I knew German, but the kids in town that lived here all the time, they talked English. I had to learn it. I knew a little, but not much.
- RV:** So there was a difference between town kids and farm kids.
- EF:** Day and night.
- RV:** What were some of those differences?
- EF:** They thought they were so much more, and they didn't want to associate with these farm girls and boys.
- RV:** Even though they were of the same background.
- EF:** Right. I had two cousins who tutored me a lot and helped me learn how to speak and everything. With our school work they helped us, my brother and myself.
- RV:** Was there teasing about the way you spoke?
- EF:** Yes, they sometimes did tease me a lot, especially my brother, because I could get along a little better than he could. He didn't have any patience, and he'd get mad at them.
- RV:** Do you want to say a little more about the teasing or the difference between the town and country?
- EF:** The first day I went to school in town, of course, I was scared. I was in this grade, I think about three or four days when the professor came in and said he'd like to see me after school. I thought I wonder what...so I went in and he said, "Well, I'm going to tell you one thing, Emma," he said. "Why don't you go back one grade?" That will help you a lot and the kids might be better, you know they're not so educated (A50) than I was. And so I went back to the fifth grade, and had a good time. I got through it like everything. The kids weren't mean, they were nice. I got along real well with my teachers. It helped me. But that's the way it went. They teased you, sure, "you're a dumb farmer," which was not bad, I was (laughter) and so was my brother. He had more of a rough time than I did.
- RV:** But the town kids wouldn't have done so well on the farm either.
- EF:** If they'd have went out there to that school they wouldn't have nothing, they wouldn't have known nothing because those teachers didn't know anything. They were just kids that graduated from maybe 3rd or 4th Grade that were teaching us. You can imagine what we got out of them. They were local, living out there and everything, a lot of them, because they couldn't get teachers; they were hard to get, and the kids wouldn't come. In the summertime we drove with a buggy, and in the wintertime we drove with the sled. My older brother drove us to school and back. We had a lot of fun doing that.

The older ones had to stay home and work – plow the fields and rake. They had no time for school. They go home and make hay and the threshers would come. I helped a lot by taking the wagons home and they would unload them, and I would take the wagon back again. About 3 or 4 in the afternoon, I'd have to take the lunch out for the threshers. That's the way I had to work. Then I came home and helped my mother feed them; there was a lot of people to feed that night. Also worked for my brother driving the header box; that was another job of mine because I was the youngest, I had to help.

RV: Because you were the youngest you had to help?

EF: Yes, we always had work you know. On the header, they had to be on the header box and work that wheat away. It came up so fast that you sometimes got covered. You had to watch while you drove; if you didn't drive right, boy my father would scream. He'd get so mad because you didn't get too close or else the header, you know, where that big thing coming up, had to lay just right.

RV: Now you've been talking some about your background in school and the work. What was your reaction when your daughter, Shirley, started to write about and explore this ethnic, German background?

EF: I didn't think she'd ever do it and make it, because there was a lot to that. But once she started interviewing the older people, she got me involved. I had to go with her because she didn't know where they lived, and how they would react. So I was always with her for that part. And then, of course, when she wrote her thesis I knew she could do something with it. And I always told her too bad I didn't get no school like she can have, so she better go and take all the school she can get. I told my grandchildren that all the time. Remember? [talking to daughter who is present during interview] I'd always say, "Go to school as long as you can." Be glad you can. I cried my eyes out, and I wouldn't dare go. I was a bit different (A81 that really kept in me, takes a little bit, because I couldn't go.)

RV: That anger that you couldn't go, so then...

EF: Kids would walk by here and they'd say, "Emma, aren't you going to school?" "Nope, I have to stay home," and that did it. Then I had to cry when they left; because they could go and I couldn't. A little hate in there all my life because I couldn't do it. Nobody knows what it's like.

RV: In this book there is a lot of you too isn't there?

EF: My mother was a smart woman. She helped me; she got me into this Brauche. She said you can learn it, and if I'm not here so you know. There was one Brauche that she had that I didn't know. She said she couldn't give it to me or say it to me. She had to put it on paper and hide it. When she's dead I have to find it, and then I can use it. It was more like a (A95 schindles now days) and then I looked for that and I couldn't find it. We had a big Bible that my father and mother had. One day we paged through that and I said to him, "Look what's here." I found the Brauche. (A97)

RV: (A98))

EF: She wanted it so bad, and I said if I ever find it I'll give it to you. My mother couldn't give it to her; she had to give it to me and she had to hide it, you know, until I found it. And it worked, but I don't know, that's what they believed. They had very funny beliefs (A100), those Brauche, I'm telling you.

RV: Do you know what some of those beliefs were?

EF: Well that one that I found was like for rash, you know, like wildfire. They called it a "wildfire." There was a woman that came here one morning; they brought her here and she was all red and her head was all full of that rash. My mother said, "Just leave her here today, I can help her." And she Brauched her. She said you have to do it three times.

RV: So what did your mother do then? Could you explain?

EF: With her hands she'd go like this, and then she'd say a verse.

RV: Did she have the person lie down?

EF: No, sitting in front of her and she'd go like that. By evening she was pretty good and went home and she healed; helped her.

RV: What verse did she say?

EF: (A108 German) I haven't read that for so long, (A110 German) and I think they said something about (A111 German). I have it written down though, someday I can read it to you. (A113)...had to blow on it three times, and that's what healed her. Some had a pimple in the eye, like dust went in there or a little bug and they had a big red eye and they couldn't blink, a terrible eye. Then she'd say, (A116 German). I just don't know it anymore. I haven't used that stuff for so many years. I should have taken the book out when I started. It's in the book. I wasn't too interested in it, I don't know why.

My mother was a Brauche. She had a lady, a friend who was all covered with rash and they brought her here. Then my mother Brauched her three times that day. She said she could help her and she did. By evening it was almost gone. Then she went home. Then she said to me, "I can't give you the Brauche." I asked her if she could give me that too so I can learn it. And she said, "Not this. I have to hide that, and if I ever die you look through the house, you'll find it," she said. I did find it. It was in the big Bible.

After I had it I called Mrs. Iszler, because she was a Brauche and wanted it, so I gave it to her. I didn't use it much, but when I needed it I used it. (A130 German) Then you blow on it three times.

Then when you get something in the eye like a little pimple, like a little bug or something that went in, and that's why if you didn't do it right away it got all red and you had to put some cotton on it because otherwise you couldn't be up because it hurt so much you couldn't blink. Then my mother would do this (A138 German) ...and blow three times, and it always went away.

We had a carpenter who built a house. He came down one morning and he said, "I gotto go home." I said, "What's the matter?" "I got something in my eye," he said. "It's all red and I can't blink." I said, "I'll help you, I can Brauche." "Can you Brauche?" he said, and I said, "Yah." So I Brauched him three times, and by the afternoon he came down and was okay, and he worked the rest of the afternoon. That helped him. Then I like to Brauche something with the moon. If you have something that hurts you bad, or something you want to heal you look at the moon, and you say, (A146 German) but you have to do it when the moon is full. (A147 German)...you know you hold that, whatever it is (A148 German) ...and you blow on it. It helps you and it heals it. I taught Shirley that, but I don't think she ever did it.

RV: Did most of the people...

EF: The moon is a big thing...(A150).

- RV:** Would you say most people believed in...
- EF:** You have to believe. There were a lot of them that didn't believe, and it wouldn't help. It's something you need to believe in, absolutely.
- RV:** Do you want to say anything more about Brauche that you think is important for people to know?
- EF:** There's not that many around any more. I don't know if there's any even here in Ashley anymore. I think the older ones have all passed away, and the younger generation doesn't believe in it, (A157), which I still do and I always will. And I think Shirley does, I hope, and so does (A159), helped him already. When Shirley was sick, my mother did so much on her. When she was sick in her bowels; she always had a stomachache. My mother took a string, and she wrapped it around the stomach three times. Then she wrapped it around an egg, and then she laid it in the ashes, in the fire yet, but not too long. Then she'd work on it with a stick and she'd say, (A165 German) And that egg would explode, (A166).
- RV:** What do those words mean in English?
- EF:** I don't know. If you ate something that didn't agree with you, that's when you did that. When you were sick, couldn't eat, no appetite; then my mother would do that, and put it on ashes with a little fire in there yet.
- RV:** Ask for that pain to go into the egg?
- EF:** Yah, (A171 German) she said as you burn that egg and that string, it should take away the pain from the stomach. That's the way I think it was.
- RV:** Maybe we'll talk a little bit about when you helped your daughter, Shirley, gather information for the book. How did the people you interviewed and talked with - your friends and acquaintances – what was their reaction or how did they respond?
- EF:** They had a good time; they loved to do it with me. If I (A178) then sometimes they had something wrong, and then they'd giggle and laugh. Then I'd start them out again. I had a lot of fun doing it, and people were really nice to me. There were a few that said, "You don't have to come again; I want nothing to do with that." I had those kind too.
- RV:** Why do you think that is?
- EF:** I don't know – was it jealousy or something? I just can't figure it out why they didn't do it. It was people I knew real well you know; they were mean.
- RV:** What do you think about the different women of your generation - the people, the world and the American public don't know about Dakota German women. About the life here, or...
- EF:** They liked their little towns they lived in. People are friendly to each other, and there is no hatred. It happened very little that somebody didn't like you or some didn't like each other. I think they were pretty good – all of them.
- RV:** There's a lot of talk about the Women's Liberation Movement, and who really ran German households. Would you say that the men and women shared equally in the labor?

EF: The first people that came, the German Russians, I think their women had to work too hard. They had to share, but I think the men could have done a little more of the heavier work and left the women at home more – they were always out. My mother baked bread during the night, and if she baked anything for us kids to take to school, she had to do it all during the night. I don't know when she rested.

RV: How did this affect the women; just the overwork and hard lives?

EF: Overworked, and very hard lives, then some men were mean and some weren't so mean.

RV: Do you think the women were more isolated than men? Did they get to town less?

EF: Very little.

RV: Very little, the men got more...

EF: The men would bring stuff in. At about ten or eleven years old I drove with my father all the time to get groceries. When he came home, he would say to my mother, "she knew how to spend the money," because I bought more stuff than I was suppose to; I bought stuff we kids liked - licorice and candy. They didn't buy much in groceries. They bought coffee, flour, sugar and a big can of syrup for the kids' lunch at school – syrup bread. Those old women had to bake a lot. We were a family of seven. My mother baked an awful lot of bread and we kids ate it, because we didn't have much more.

Well they butchered in the fall. In the fall they had a lot of meat because they butchered a couple of three or four hundred pound hogs and made sausage. They made all that lard, always enough lard to use, they never used different lard other than the homemade – for cookies, for everything they made. Now days everybody has cholesterol. In those days, I don't know, they ate all that fat; I think they ate too much fat.

RV: Were you surprised by anything that you found when you worked with Shirley and this material that you gathered or anything that was either emotional or very interesting to you?

EF: It was very interesting to me – I loved it. I read everything when she had it done, before she printed. I had to go through it to see if she had any mistakes and I found them sometimes. She liked that. "Mom you have to read it," she'd always say, so I sat in the evening and I did it. Every once in a while I'd find a mistake. I helped too; she asked me questions and questions and questions. How this was and that was, how we did this and how we did that; how they cooked and what all. Even recipes we had in there.

RV: So the book chronicles and tells a lot about the history, culture and language of this whole way of life on the prairie. A lot of that has changed now or some of it has. Do you want to talk about that?

EF: What has changed is that they all have tractors and things to work with now when they had to work with horses. The people had to work hard. They had these big headers and things. They didn't have combines and things like that. They made little haystacks where they put the wheat up; then if a little wind come, the next day we'd rake it all up, that wheat that was laying there. Nothing was lost, everything had to come in. Now days, you know, with these combines they lose a lot of wheat. I tell you they didn't lose anything, they got it all together, they went out and worked. The next morning if they threshed, you know, it was all on a pile. It's way different now than they used to live. They had their eggs, they had their cream, they had their milk, they had everything you wanted to eat.

They had little hogs they'd butcher every two weeks. They butchered them in the summertime, at about eighty pounds and lived on that. My mother would raise the ducks, geese, and turkeys, and they didn't buy things like they do now. They didn't buy groceries by the basketful, in those days you had a few pieces in there. We didn't know anything about ketchup and stuff like that. There was very few things that we had to eat. There was nothing there like that.

- RV:** What is left do you think of the traditions, customs or beliefs in Ashley, for example? What's left of the older ways that you've chronicled in the book?
- EF:** I don't know if there's much left. They're different, sure. Now days they have running water, automatic washing machines. There was nothing like that; everything's different, very different.
- RV:** What kind of traditions do you still maintain in your home? Food preparation or...
- EF:** We have it a little different, you know, when you see a recipe in a magazine or something and you try it. But I still always go back to my old recipes.
- RV:** What are some of those old recipes?
- EF:** Do you want it in food like strudels and cheese buttons? Very few people make them anymore. If they do make them, they might make them with baking powder - strudels you know. My mother made some of those too, but we kids liked the ones from bread dough better. They don't get as soggy.
- RV:** It takes a while to make strudels, doesn't it?
- EF:** Yes, almost half a day by the time you got everything done. Now days they don't make noodles anymore where the old people always made their own noodles. I still make them, but there's very few; they don't make noodles like we used to. They don't can like we used to - we canned everything. My mother would can a lot because it kept that way, otherwise the meat wouldn't keep. Now they have freezers and iceboxes that we didn't have.
- RV:** So all the food preparation was entirely different.
- EF:** Entirely different than it was.
- RV:** And the amount of labor it seems like...
- EF:** Labor too.
- RV:** So what else is different that you can think of that you've seen in the years here?
- EF:** We have different beds now - they have waterbeds. (laughter) We had a spring and just one little thick mattress on where they have these thick ones on now. Then they had the husks from the corn that was their first mattresses. They stuffed them into a blanket or sheet or something and made a cover out of them, that's what they slept on. I never slept on that, but when I met him (A285) was still sleeping on them.
- RV:** Just a comfort level then I suppose.
- EF:** Yes, just let it dry and then they put it in that sack. It was so messy though all the time. I didn't sleep on any; we didn't use any. Maybe my mother used it before my time, because I was the last one. My

mother always had a lot of geese and she always made goose down feather pillows. You remember that, you've slept on those, those were warm. If they didn't have those I think they'd of froze; it kept the people warm, those goose down. Of course you can buy them now, but they're not like the ones they made – real feather, they were different. Now they have sponge pillows; years ago they had feather pillows. Had to hang them outside often, because otherwise they stick together. You get more air in them because of that (A298) on the outside. They have different towels, we had the (A300 crock) towels. We didn't have towels like they have now. It's much different.

You couldn't have washing machines. The first years they didn't have the water. They had to use the washtub, you know, and they had a wringer. Somebody had to turn that all the time, and the women would wash. In the wintertime they dried in the house because they couldn't hang anything out – too much snow and too much cold. The irons you put on the stove to heat, and if you didn't watch it you burned it – you had to watch it pretty close or else the shirt would get yellow. They didn't wear the clothes as much either. They only had them on in church and then they'd come home and take them off, put everyday clothes on, didn't iron those. They didn't iron those everyday clothes. That's the way it was.

RV: Do you want to say something about the kinds of things you did as a child?

EF: We had toys like they have now days. I can remember I got a doll once from my aunt, and boy I thought that was the greatest thing I ever got. Otherwise we played games. As I said before, in the wintertime we'd play goose in the snow and all kinds of games. We had different games at home, but I can't remember. We had a big piece of paper on the floor and we'd lay around it and play a game; you had little brown squares there and stuff – I don't remember how it went. You'd lay down on the floor and put your leg up and the other guy would bring his leg up and over you'd go. Sometimes you played (A326oshgoshla). You know what that was, you bended down and they hit you; whoever hit the hardest (laughter) won.

And then we'd go horse riding; and we had to go out and watch the cattle so they didn't get out of the fence, they didn't have fences all over. When they were done harvesting then everything went into the fields and ate from the stubbles. The kids came home from school and we were out there watching the cattle and we'd catch gophers and sell the tails, sometimes got 10 cents a tail. Dad would bring them into the courthouse, and there's where he sold them. And if he got 10 cents a tail that was good money, we got good money. My brother and I were always out doing things like that. Barefoot, no shoes. We had very few shoes, we had a pair of shoes that were for church, and I stress that was for church only! If you got a new dress, you had to wear it to church first before you could wear it someplace else. They were very strict; my father was very strict. Those were the kinds of things we did.

We wanted to walk to the neighbor's one night, there was four of us kids, my brothers and my sister. We were about a quarter mile from home and all of a sudden we heard coyotes – Oii, were they howling! Boy we turned around and ran till home. We had nothing for light; we had the lantern and that barely burned, you could barely see. There was no such a thing as flashlights. They maybe had them, but we never got them. They saved them so they could use them.

We'd all say little verses, you know. Our neighbors would always pretend they were the ones, you know, and we'd always say to them (A350 German saying); that's a funny one. It was a tongue twister, you

were suppose to say it real fast. We always had to laugh because we couldn't do it, we never got it out right.

RV: Your church then also changed, I imagine?

EF: Yes.

RV: What ways did that change, or were even the sermons different?

EF: Yes, if the minister wasn't there some man, like a deacon, gave the sermon; he read it. They had a book that the sermon from every Sunday was in, that's where they took it from. One of our friends read it. Then they'd sing, if they didn't have an organ player then they'd sing by themselves. They were real good singers, some of them were good singers. Church was a must – rain or shine; everybody had to go to church. We all had to go to church and we had to go to Sunday school and in the summertime they had German Bible school. I walked over two miles to the church. Many a days I was scared; My brother had to stay home and plow. I was on the plow too; when I was ten years old I plowed already – we had to work. And that's the way the church was – getting together with friends, and they would stand outside sometimes and talk for an hour. Then this guy would invite that guy; they always got invited someplace to eat, and then vice versa the other would pay back.

RV: On Sunday mornings?

EF: On Sunday morning. They didn't go home or anything like I'm going to go home and go to sleep. They were visiting always. If there was a mission fest, they were invited from different congregations; they all went; they didn't miss that. Funerals neither, never. My dad drove on the (A378), with the model T.

RV: Weddings too?

EF: Weddings not so much. We had weddings at different houses. Sometimes people had small houses and they couldn't have it. But those that had larger houses, they had it. We had not too big a house, but we had a summer kitchen and the dance was in the summer kitchen. In the afternoon the old folks would dance, and in the evening the kids could go in and dance.

RV: For anybody in your family that was married.

EF: Whoever was there, mhmm. In the afternoon, we couldn't get in there, but in the evening they let us dance. Why? I don't know, I suppose they got tired by evening. The wedding usually went for three days those days.

RV: You know that saying, "Spring rains and old people's dances don't last long."

EF: Yes, that's what he always tells me. (A394 German)

RV: Is there anything else we should talk about?

EF: I don't know.

RV: We touched on most of the things, I think. Maybe I'll ask you one more question about what you think was the most important thing you learned from your mother?

- EF:** Cooking and baking. Yah, I knew everything and when she passed away I didn't have trouble. I knew it from before how to do it, and I passed it on. We had to do everything, there was nothing that we could do, we had to whether we wanted to or not. We had to work and we had to learn to do things. That's where strict families came from. They were all strict, most of them. I can't remember anybody from the neighborhood that didn't learn - they all had to. Even if they didn't have much schooling, but that was the way it was. My sisters went only through three or four grades, and dad took them out of school, and my oldest brother he took out of school. He had to keep them home, he needed them to work. There was just no time for anything. Sorry for them, but that's the way it was. And these kids got all the opportunity they need; there is no more bigger opportunity than they have now and then so many don't want to go to school. So many stay out of school, even if they have only one year left, kids stay out. It was terrible, they shouldn't do that; some day they'll be sorry.
- RV:** Sounds like you enjoyed that kind of re-learning as you worked along with Shirley to do this book.
- EF:** Yah, I liked it.
- RV:** You can see there's a lot of love in that book.
- EF:** Yah.
- RV:** Thank you both for your work.
- EF:** You're welcome. Nice of you to come.
- RV:** Thank you.