

Interview with Elsie Gackle Wagner (EW)

Conducted by L. Gerald Wagner (LW)

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Ellendale, North Dakota

LW: What is your name, your date of birth, and where you were born?

EW: Elsie Gackle Wagner born February 28, 1904 in a sod house on a homestead two miles west of Fredonia ND.

LW: What is your father's name and where was he born? If he was born in Russia do you know the name of the village?

EW: Gottfred Gackle born in Alt Postal, Bessarabia Russia August 5, 1861

LW: When and where did he die? Where is he buried?

EW: April 2, 1938 of a heart attack in Fredonia ND and is buried in the Congregational cemetery

LW: What is your mother's name? Where was she born? If she was born in Russia do you know the name of the village?

EW: Born Rosina Dittos June 21, 1864 Alt Postal Bessarabia. Dau. of Adam and Christina Scherer Dittos

LW: When and where did she die? Where is she buried?

EW: January 30, 1922 of cancer at Fredonia ND

LW: When and where did your mother and father marry?

EW: 1883 in Alt Postal

LW: How many brothers and sisters did you have in your family? Can you give their names in order of birth?

EW: 4 boys and 4 girls: Otilie Gackle b. 9 Dec. 1884, d.19 Feb 1885, Alt Postal; Gottfred Gackle Jr. . 3 Jan Alt Postal, d. 12 Nov 1978 Terry, MT; Otilie Gackle b 21 Aug 1888, Alt-Postal d. 19 Apr 1978 Fargo, ND; Pauline Gackle b. 1 Mar 1891 Alt-Postal, d. about 1989 Burnsville, MN; Daniel Gackle b.24 Jan, 1894 Alt-Postal, d. 25 Oct 1985 Carrington, ND; Ida Gackle b 15 May 1896 Alt-Postal, d. 1897 Kulm, ND; Otto b 10 Oct 1898 Kulm, ND, d. 1991; Oscar Gackle b. 20 July 1902, d.14 Feb 1977 Monango ND.

LW: When did your family come to North America? Do you know why they came to this country?

EW: Passport dated 7 April 1897 cost 10 rubles. Came so boys would not have to serve in the army and free land to homestead in America.

LW: Do you know how they traveled to this country?

EW: They left Alt-Postal and went to Bremerhaven Germany where they boarded an oceanliner to New York.

LW: Where did they settle? Did they homestead? Where?

EW: They settled on a homestead two miles west of Fredonia ND

LW: Let's go back to your ancestors who came from Russia. What relationship were they to you?

EW: (Great-grandfather) Philipp Gackle (1794-1850) b. Germany d. Alt-Postal; (grandfather) Jacob Gackle (1824-1870) Alt-Postal; (father) Gottfred Gackle b. 1861 Alt-Postal d. 1938 Fredonia ND

LW: Do you know where your ancestors came from in Germany?

EW: Ancestors came from Bernbach Baden-Wuerttemberg, Germany

LW: When did they leave Germany and live in Russia?

EW: They left Germany about 1803 to Lodz Poland and in 1813 migrated to Bessarabia.

Memories from the Homeland

LW: Do you remember family stories your father and/or mother told about ancestral German villages in Russia?

LW: Did your grandparents talk about how life was in the villages? Such as social events, stories about other family members, nicknames of people or villages.

EW: They never spoke of the 'old country' of course I was born 7 years after they arrived in ND.

LW: Did your parents or grandparents or other relatives ever say they wished they were back in the "old country"?

EW: They never spoke of it.

LW: Do you recall your family receiving letters from relatives who stayed in Russia?

EW: I don't recall that they ever received any communications from Russia. Your Childhood Memories

LW: What language did you speak at home? Did all family members speak German?

EW: Everyone spoke German.

LW: Do you know the name of the dialect?

EW: We spoke the German Swabian dialect.

LW: Can you still speak this language fluently today?

EW: Not fluently as it has been so many years that I have spoken it.

LW: Can you repeat a story, poem or prayer in this dialect?

EW: No

LW: Is it comfortable for you to speak German in conversation? If not, can you still understand it when spoken?

EW: Speaking German is not good but I can understand most of it.

LW: Have you taught your children or grandchildren to speak German, such as phrases, rhymes or prayers?

EW: No

LW: Were there other dialects spoken in your home by other family members or married-in spouses of German from Russia descent?

EW: No

LW: What were some of your childhood chores that you were responsible for? Which ones did you enjoy and which ones did you not like to do?

EW: Gather eggs and errands outside and dusting inside. My mother did not let me do baking because she could do it faster.

LW: When you did not do the work that was expected of you, how were you disciplined?

EW: No spanking. Don't remember scolding, as I was the youngest.

LW: Were girls and boys disciplined differently? Who did the disciplining?

Memories about School

LW: Where did you go to school?

EW: A one-room country school about a mile away.

LW: How many years did you go to school?

EW: Eight years of country school, four years HS (two at Kulm and 2 at Edgeley where she graduated. Business school 6 months in Bismarck and summer session at Ellendale ND & I then taught country school 2 years.

LW: Did you go to school the full school term or did you have to stay home at times to help with work?

EW: Never had to stay home from country school. After two years at high school in Kulm she had to stay home when her mother got sick and died and then had to cook and take care of the house for a couple of years till her father remarried. She then returned to high school at Edgeley.

LW: Were there students of other nationalities at your school?

EW: No, all were German Russians

LW: What are some special memories about your childhood school?

EW: Christmas programs, box socials that were auctioned off. We had to learn to read and speak English

LW: What are some playground memories, such as games and recess times?

EW: Ante-over, red rover, pum pum pull-away,

LW: How did you travel to and from school? How far was it to school?

EW: I walked most of the time. School was about a mile away. In bad weather my father would take me with a team and sled.

LW: What memories do you have of your teachers?

EW: Sometimes the teacher stayed with us and sometimes the teacher would have to sleep with me.

LW: What type of discipline was used, when someone did not behave during school?

EW: Sit in the corner and stay in at recess time.

LW: Did you change schools or go on to a town school? If so, what were some of the differences between the country and town schools?

EW: Went to the same country school all eight years. Then went to HS in Kulm for one full year and started the second and then had to stay home to care for my mother till she died and then had to cook and care for the home for several years till my father remarried. My parents had retired from farming and moved into Fredonia. I went back to high school in Edgeley where she graduated at age 21.

Spiritual Upbringing

LW: Was religion and church education important in your upbringing? If so, how did this influence your family values?

EW: My parents were very religious, no swearing, drinking or smoking. They were members of the Congregational Church.

LW: What were some of the religious activities you experienced in your daily family life?

EW: I was baptized and confirmed in the Congregational Church in Fredonia. There was always meal prayer and her father would read to the family from the bible in the evening.

LW: In what language were church worships and prayers?

EW: Services were all in German in the early years but later changed to English.

LW: Approximately when did these worship services switch to English language?

EW: By age

LW: How did your parents feel about this change?

EW: They were not comfortable with this in the beginning but later accepted it.

LW: Can you tell about when you were baptized and/or confirmed? What special meaning did it have for you?

EW: All of this was in German. My religious up-bring has been an important part of my life and daily living and rearing the family.

LW: Were there any special festivities for these events? Who and where were these held? Did you have a framed certificate of these events?

EW: These were all important in their lives. Framed certificates were given.

LW: Were your parents and grandparents involved in founding a church or did they join a neighborhood church?

- EW:** My parents were instrumental in the founding and building of the Congregational Church in Fredonia.
- LW:** How did your family respond and react toward death?
- EW:** Deaths among infants was high, two of her siblings died in infancy and in my father's family there were 14 children born and 6 died as infants. Church bells were tolled after a death, one toll for each year of life. Some time pictures were taken of the deceased in the casket.
- LW:** Were Holy Scriptures, such as psalms, recited during times of trial or stress?
- EW:** My father would read special scriptures and psalms at these times.
- LW:** How did people express their grief?
- EW:** They believed it was all in the Lord's hands and went on with life.
- LW:** What traditional funeral songs were sung? Are you familiar with wrought-iron crosses as grave markers?
- EW:** *In the Sweet By and By* and *Nearer to My God to Thee*. They were not the custom in the Fredonia/Kulm area.
- LW:** If so, do you know if the various shapes had special meaning? Did your family have a design?
- LW:** What kind of markers were used, if not iron crosses?
- EW:** Granite and slab markers
- LW:** Is there anything else about spiritual upbringing you would like to tell us?
- EW:** There was church every Sunday, sometimes three times and sometimes in Sunday evening. Holidays and Festival
- LW:** How was Christmas celebrated in your family? Tell us about what Christmas was like during the war or Depression times.
- EW:** There was church Christmas day and evening. Christmas Eve programs with children. Children would get a bag of nuts and candy. There were not many gifts as church was most important and most people were poor.
- LW:** What do you know about "Belzenickel" and "Das Christkindel"?
- LW:** How did you celebrate Easter?
- EW:** It was celebrated a lot like Christmas regarding church activities. There were colored Easter eggs and the Easter rabbit for the kids.
- LW:** When you or a family member were married where did it take place? How long did the festivities last? Tell us about the reception, music and dancing.
- EW:** I was married in my brother's house and immediate family members came. My brother's wife served a dinner for the family. After the wedding we drove to St. Paul MN to visit my husband's parents and sister and family.
- LW:** Were there money dances for the bride and groom? If so, explain how this was done.

EW: We did not have a dance but it was a custom for many to have barn dances and square dances

LW: Did wedding guests get together to sing German songs? Do you recall any of these songs?

EW: I doesn't recall any of these.

LW: Did you participate in a "chivaree" for the married couple? What did the people do?

EW: Yes, we would make a lot of noise, sometimes we would steal the bride's shoe and the husband would have to buy it back. We also sang songs.

LW: What foods were served at special events? Were there special cured meats, hochzeit schnapps, homemade beer, etc.?

EW: Kuchen, home made beer and wine.

LW: Who helped with the food preparation?

EW: Family and neighbors

LW: Explain the bridal clothes, decorations, ribbons and flowers of the wedding. Was there a "liebsband" sash?

EW: There was no special wedding dress just a nice regular dress

LW: Were photographs taken of the bride and groom (Bratspaar)? Who was the photographer? Where was his studio?

EW: There was no special wedding picture taken.

LW: How did you meet your spouse? Was it arranged, or unusual courtship?

EW: I lived with my parents, which was next door to the beer parlor and pool hall that he operated and got to know him that way.

LW: What social events were available to meet your spouse, such as community and church events, blind dates, etc.?

EW: They went to movies and dances but he didn't dance.

Memories of Music and Dance

LW: What music and entertainment was in your childhood home?

EW: We had and organ and I took lessons. My mother and father and children would sing songs.

LW: Did anyone in your family sing, play accordion or other musical instruments?

EW: I played the organ and piano.

LW: Were you encouraged to play an instrument?

EW: Just allowed me to take lessons.

LW: Did you take lessons or were you self-taught? Do you play tunes "by ear", rather than by written music?

EW: I played by written music.

LW: If possible, could you sing one of your favorite songs, which you sang as a child?

LW: What styles of dancing did you learn?

EW: Square dance, waltz polka

LW: Were there traditional dances that survived from South Russia?

EW: No

LW: Where did you go dancing?

EW: Saturday night dances.

LW: Did you attend barn dances? Who attended these dances - young people, few older couples and/or families?

EW: I did attend dances. Both young people and couples.

LW: What was the attitude of the older generation towards dance halls?

EW: Many objected to these activities. For card playing, the devil was in most card games except ones like old maid and similar kid's games.

LW: Was there a community meeting place for people to socialize, whether in town or someone's farm or school?

EW: There were pie socials in country schools and basket socials at the beginning of school year.

Games, Superstitions and Mystery

LW: What games or puzzles did you play as a child?

LW: What were your favorite childhood stories? Do you recall any fairy tales?

EW: Goldilocks, Sleeping Beauty, Black Beauty

LW: Were there superstitions about unknowns or scary stories about the bogeyman, ghosts, or hooting owls?

EW: Walking under a ladder, black cat, broken mirror. May day rhyme repeated would make the freckles go away

LW: How did your family view "Brauche" or folk medicine? Can you tell specific techniques that were used?

EW: Garlic on bread as a protection against the flu and Epsom salt as an antiseptic

LW: Do you recall any home remedies or cures?

LW: Do you think there are different sicknesses today, as compared to sickness in past generations of your family?

LW: What do you remember about the role of midwives? Did a midwife ever come to your home? How were midwives paid?

EW: Midwives were common in the rural areas.

Germanic Survival in America

LW: Did your parents use any expressions from Russian, Turkish, Platt Deutsch or French languages? Where and when were they used?

EW: Wehr sucht der fmdt-where you search you'll find it. Das hus felerit nix-the house doesn't lose anything. I gelopt shtenkt-self praise stinks

LW: Do you remember the German newspapers that you received in your home?

EW: My father got Der Staatsanzeiger and read it to my mother as she worked.

LW: What kind of information did your family gather from the newspaper?

EW: Current happenings.

LW: Did the family read the comics or "funnies"?

EW: Don't remember

LW: What do you remember most when your family got their first conveniences such as electricity, first car, telephone, windmills?

EW: Telephone about 1918. My brother, Dan, got his first car in 1918 when he returned from the service. Electricity came to the farm in 1951 from REA

LW: What do you remember most about the early days of radio? What were some of your favorite programs?

EW: Family radio program at age 11 -remember hearing new of the sinking of the Titanic. [This is not possible since the Titanic sank 14 April 1912.]

LW: What do you remember most during the early days of watching television?

EW: Didn't have much time to watch and then it was very poor due to distance from broadcast site.

LW: What do you remember about watching the Lawrence Welk Show?

EW: Christmas specials with families of musicians

Family Values

LW: Which family member do you best remember?

EW: My oldest brother, Gottfred, his kindness and goodness to me. Remember Dan's impatience in harvest when I was driving horses.

LW: Who do you look up to and admire for portraying life's best qualities?

EW: My mother.

LW: Why did their life and personality have an impact on your life?

EW: I worked hard but took time to nurture , guide and love.

Food, Work and Activities

LW: Did women homestead and prove-up their land?

EW: Yes, I read about women who did.

LW: What were the expected outdoor tasks for women outside the house?

EW: Women worked beside their husband in the fields and with livestock until children were old enough to help and even continued after that.

LW: What do you remember of the special German foods which your mother or grandmother cooked or baked?

EW: Cheese buttons, strudel, kuchen, knoepfla, kekla, pigs in the blanket

LW: Are German foods still prepared in your kitchen such as breads, borscht, strudels, halupsy, and kuchen? If yes, have your children learned to prepare these foods?

EW: Grandson made cheese buttons and daughter still makes them.

LW: Have these recipes been recorded to pass down to the next generation?

EW: Yes and there are some German Russian cookbooks with these recipes

LW: Was there anyone in your family who had artistic talent and craft skills? Such as sewing, weaving, knitting, crocheting, quilting, broom-making, basket-making, bobbin lace, and others?

EW: Most of the women knit, crochet, sewing, needle crafts, cross-stitch, embroidery

LW: Did anyone have skills in scherenschnitte (paper cut-outs)?

EW: No

LW: Did your family make their own clothes or tailored clothing for other family members? Where did they get the fabrics? How did they re-use old clothes?

EW: My sister made clothes for her mother and got material from a dry goods store. They made rugs out of old clothes.

LW: Do you recall any family member having quilting parties? Describe the occasion.

EW: Yes ladies and or circles in church-small stitches were a pain.

LW: What are your memories of reading women's activities and food recipes from the Dakota Farmer from Aberdeen, South Dakota?

EW: I cut out many recipes--stacks of them.

LW: How was this information used by family members?

EW: We used many of these recipes

Insights and Reflections

LW: Is there any topic not discussed which you would like to add?

EW: No Saturday night was the social and shopping time in town and most people were speaking German.

LW: Are there other thoughts or observations you would like to share?

EW: The depression years were very hard with little money. We grew most of the food (meat, milk; eggs, vegetables, potatoes, took wheat to the mill for flour. Clothes were hand-me-downs and patched upon patches, shoes were soled at home and home hair cuts. Manure that froze in the barn in the winter would be cut into squares in the spring and dried for fuel in the winter. Corn cobs and cow chips were used in the summer. Lignite coal was brought in the fall. Many people were very quiet about their German heritage during the World wars

LW: What things - skills, character qualities, or achievements do you want to be remembered by your next generations?

EW: Follow the motto "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you".

LW: How is your family history and culture being passed to the next generation?

EW: Photograph albums, news clippings in a scrapbook, handwork such as doilies and Afghans