

In Touch with Prairie Living

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By Michael M. Miller

Germans from Russia Heritage Collection
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Florence Dockter Scherbenske has authored a new book, “My Impossible Dream: You Can Do It Too, Germans from Russia Immigrant Grandparents Ethnic Life Style.” Florence grew up on a farm near Venturia, McIntosh County, south central North Dakota. She vividly shares the story of her German-Russian family.

In her Dedication, Florence writes, “I give tribute to my maternal grandmother, Katherine Helfenstein Esch Ritter, for the love and kindness she gave me when I was child. Also, for the letters she wrote to me when I was growing up. She came as a Germans from Russia immigrant to America at age eight. She was married to Heinrich Esch. He died in the 1918 Influenza, and left her a widow with five children under the age of ten. She endured the hardship of that time.”

Later in the book, Florence writes about her grandmother. “Dear Grandma Katie, times must have been very hard for you sometimes. Your oldest daughter, Helen (my mother) went to Ashley to live with her grandfather, Johann Helfenstein Sr. and her grandmother. Grandfather Johann Sr. hired her to farmers in the surrounding community. She was assigned to chores on the farm, yard work, housekeeping, and caring for children. She also did field work. She knew how to harrow, seed drill, and disc with a team of four horses.”

In the Dedication, she also includes, “I give tribute to my paternal grandfather, Gottlieb Dockter, Jr., who was man of wisdom and generosity, and was well respected in his community. He taught six sons the industry and art of farming and livestock. He was a Germans from Russia immigrant. After hard work and hardships, he acquired enough property to set up each of his sons in farming. It was of benefit to my parents and to us siblings. We had the good fortune to have food and a house to live in during the dust storms and depression of the 1930s.”

Florence later expands on her grandfather’s story, “Grandfather Gottlieb Jr. was a bonanza farmer. There was some money to be made farming in the 1920s. Grandfather built an eighty-foot cattle and horse barn. He owned forty draft horses. He, with his six sons, farmed a sizeable number

of acres of crop land. The result was acreage of approximately fifteen quarter sections of land.

After his sons were twenty-one years of age, he gave each 160 acres of land with the farm buildings, and another 160 acres of land which he expected them to pay him back for his retirement. In addition, he gave them a complete set of farm machinery, four work horses (complete with harnesses), a cream separator, 100 pounds of flour, some sugar, plus many other items to set up farming and a household. He gave each of his three oldest daughters 160 acres of land, six milk cows, and a complete line of household furniture. He compensated his two youngest daughters with homes and money.

At the end of the twenties, he was considered a wealthy man. However, after the crash of 1929, with several years of drought, he bankrupted and applied for welfare. He had given all of his land away. Because of the economy, he was never paid back. The end result he died a poor man. Grandfather gave my parents a farmhouse, a place to put a pillow under our heads, and never had to move. During my childhood, we visit him often. We were never allowed to go up the stairs. It was later in life that I found out that he had stored his coffin in a room upstairs. He had arranged his funeral complete with the purchase of a coffin. Grandfather was a kind and generous father. He also demanded a lot of work from his children and taught them a great deal about life.”

In her Preface, Florence writes, “I grew up in a home never having a childhood, was not allowed to go to high school, and had a teenage marriage. I took charge of my life and lived a life of volunteer, business, and hard work. I worked hard to overcome my physical and mental abuse in my childhood, which continued into my adulthood. To the reader: Never give up. You can take charge of your life. I did, and you can do it too.

From learning to cook on a cookstove (a stove with black lids that burned coal and mischt), snaring gophers in the prairie pasture on Sunday afternoon, and bucking the northwest wind in south central North Dakota while riding a two-wheeled chart hitched to a non-stop pony in January of 1938 – to flying in an Eastern Airlines jet

that served gourmet meals and endless champagne in 1968, traveling in a 747 jet airliner, and enjoying ocean and river cruises in my life as world traveler. My life story.”

Florence was interviewed in July 2005, in Bismarck, N.D., for the Library of Congress Americacorps Story Program. She shared, “My ancestors were Germans from Russia. I vaguely remember my maternal-great grandmother. I was six when she died. She was born in Ukraine and was a midwife in Ukraine and on the prairie of North Dakota. She delivered over 1,000 babies. I went to a country school and walked most of the time or went with horses. It was a one-room school. There were thirty children in all eight grades with one teacher. I learned to milk a cow at age seven. I could butcher a chicken and prepare a dinner for a family of seven at age ten. At that time, I was also taking care of four siblings while my mother worked in the field. My weekly allowance was five or ten cents.”

The book has twenty-six chapters, including: Wedding, Farm Purchase; Dockter Family; Helfenstein Family; John Ritter and Children; Florence Schooling; Childhood Responsibilities; Inez; Sibling Death – Florence Pearl, Stanley Julius; Cooking; The Chick Project; World War II; Beginning Travel; The Winter of 1950; Farming; Friendship Force; Divorce; Goodbye Elder; Climbing the Mountain; 4-H Related Activities, Jocie, Glenny; Recovering from Shame; Lee; Health Failure; Personal Development and Accomplishments; Leadership and Accomplishments; Closure; In a Nutshell.

Inez Dockter, sister of Florence Dockter Scherbenske, authored the book, “Prairie Girl Memoir,” available from the GRHC.

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.

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