

In Touch with Prairie Living

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By Michael M. Miller

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA
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Our Germans from Russia community has lost one of its shining stars, Eugene Weidenbach, Scotland, South Dakota, born December 17, 1920, and died February 27, 2021. Elizabeth Weidenbach Peterson, a granddaughter, wrote for his 100th birthday on December 17, 2020, “Our grandpa is the cornerstone of our family and has taught us about hard work and the importance of family.”

Eugene grew up in a small farmhouse in Odessa Township, Yankton County, SD. His parents were Herbert and Lea (Auch) Weidenbach. He attended Odessa School District 24 through 8th grade. After his formal schooling, he then served in the Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC), from Fall 1937-Spring 1938. At the age of 21, Eugene joined the war efforts in 1942. He served as a tank mechanic in the U.S. Army’s 533rd Ordnance Heavy Maintenance Company.

The Press & Dakotan, Yankton, SD, published an article written by Rob Nielsen on May 7, 2020, “WWII Veteran Recalls His Path to Germany.” Nielsen wrote, “Weidenbach’s road to Germany started in 1942. “The army had a lot of vehicles,” Weidenbach said. “They need mechanics and they decided I should be a mechanic, so they sent me to school at Bloomington, Illinois.” He would also go to Flint, Michigan, for further mechanical training and complete basic training before being sent to England in February 1944.”

“Weidenbach was on duty as D-Day began to unfold. His unit landed on Omaha Beach to back the forces that were beginning their penetration into France. As forces finally broke out of Normandy, Weidenbach’s unit remained at Omaha Beach for the rest of 1944. “We stayed on Omaha Beach over the winter and prepared tanks for Patton’s army,” he said.

“With the Americans moving deeper into Germany, Weidenbach moved on to Cologne where, for a time, he helped to guard the Cologne Cathedral. With the German war machine crumbling and with the death of Adolf Hitler at the end of April, surrender became inevitable.”

Eugene served 22 months overseas in Europe during World War II. He received the French Jubilee of Liberty Medal for his

service in the Battle of Normandy, American Theater Service Medal, European-African-Middle Eastern Theater Service Medal, and Gold Conduct Medal 44. Eugene was a member of the VFW and the American Legion Post, in Scotland, SD, for more than 65 years.

After Germany’s surrender in early May 1945, Eugene finally returned home on December 12, 1945. Eugene and Lorene Behl were married in 1946 and celebrated their 74th Wedding Anniversary in 2020. He proudly owned the original farm land that was homesteaded by his great-grandfather in 1873. Eugene and Lorene spent many of their years on the farm. They had five children, 14 grandchildren, and 28 great-grandchildren. Lorene at 94, survives her husband.

Written in Eugene’s obituary: “His family reflects on his incredible 100-year life, from traveling by horseback as a boy, to serving in WWII, to witnessing man land on the moon. He was the last living WWII veteran in Scotland, SD. Eugene taught his family to love and serve the Lord, to work hard, to put family first and to be grateful for all that God provides. He will be greatly missed.”

Elizabeth Weidenbach Peterson, granddaughter of Eugene, wrote, “My grandfather was a living record of our family history and all of our relatives, and had an incredible gift for recalling information. He’d tell stories about his great-grandfather first settling in Odessa Township, Dakota Territory in 1873 (the farm where I grew up) and as a boy, going to the little country schoolhouse that is no longer there. I will always remember him talking proudly about our heritage – Germans from Russia – and what that meant, where we came from, the traditions, and food. Each year I’d go with Grandpa and Grandma Weidenbach to Oktoberfest in Menno, SD, to eat, listen to German music, and of course, polka dance. I cherish those memories! Sharing our family heritage was important to my grandfather and I am so glad he did because now I can pass on our oral histories and continue our family legacy.”

Eugene loved to go fishing for walleye with Lorene and his sons Paul and John, and to teach his grandkids to fish. When

Eugene and Lorene retired in 2006 and moved to Scotland, he stayed busy helping his sons on the farm, operating and fixing the machinery during harvest time, volunteering at the nursing home, and playing cards and dominos with family and friends.

Eugene served on the Board of Directors of the Germans from Russia Heritage Society for 12 years, and was president of the local SoDak Stamm German-Russian chapter. He leaves a living legacy for our Germans from Russia community in the Dakotas with his important work on behalf of the organization. Dr. Homer Rudolf and I have fond memories of meeting Eugene in Scotland, SD, in July 2010. He showed us many German-Russian sites in Scotland and Hutchinson County.

Gary Jerke, Tripp, SD, shares, “My thoughts are that Eugene was someone who was truly committed to his faith and family which personifies our German-Russian culture at its best. He was a library of information on numerous items from the first settlement at Odessa to history of his family and church, and now those library doors are closed forever. He will be greatly missed.”

For more information about the 24th Journey to the Homeland Tour to Germany and Ukraine, 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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