

# In Touch with Prairie Living

July 2021

By Michael M. Miller

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA  
**GRHC**  
HERITAGE COLLECTION

The Tri-County Tourism Alliance (Emmons, Logan and McIntosh counties in south central North Dakota), has launched an exciting new Talking Trail. The user-friendly mobile app, created by Talking Trail LLC, is a platform for use with your cell phone. Stories, memories, photos, and voices are shared of the rich history of sites in the three counties. Visit the website at [www.talkingtrail.com](http://www.talkingtrail.com) for more information.

Carmen Rath-Wald, President of the Tri-County Tourism Alliance, comments, "A Talking Trail in German-Russian Country allows travelers to hear stories about the people, places and cultural traditions of the Germans from Russia settlers in North Dakota. These authentic stories will create layers of understanding of the Real People, Real Places and Real Things in German-Russian Country."

In Logan County, the Talking Trail features Dinosaurs on the Prairie, located east of Napoleon. You can view more than 30 threshers, collected by Harley Grenz and his father John "Custer" Grenz. Threshers were used to separate seed from the stalks of grain crops like wheat, oats and flax. Threshing was one way farmers helped each other. Men and women went from one farm to another, until the grain was harvested, the workers were fed and the job was done.

In McIntosh County, the Talking Trail takes us to St. John the Baptist Catholic Cemetery, north of Zeeland, ND. The first sod church was built in 1888 and the earliest iron cross marks a grave from 1889. The diphtheria epidemic had a devastating impact on families in the St. John's area between 1897-1899. There were 99 deaths in the St. John's Parish. The greatest number of losses were children. Cast iron crosses mark the graves of the children of Michael and Louise (Elizabeth Scherrer) Feist. Deaths in this family were, Magdalena - 4, Franz - 6, Michael - 7, twin sisters Barbara and Francisca - 9, and Johannes - 13. They all died during Lent of 1898, between March 7 and April 2.

At the Talking Trail near the McIntosh County Courthouse, hear the story of a spring day in 1898, when Wilhelmina Geiszler, watched from her home as flames burned on the horizon. The threat of prairie fires loomed large in the minds of German-

Russian homesteaders. Wilhelmina ran to save her daughter Anna from the prairie fire, but both were badly burned. Anna died that night, and her mother died two weeks later, leaving behind eight children under the age of thirteen. Historian Tom Isern refers to Wilhelmina as the "Martyr Mother of the German-Russians." The glazed clay bust of Wilhelmina Geiszler is located within the McIntosh Heritage Museum in Ashley.

In Emmons County, the Talking Trail enlightens us on the Old St. Mary's Cemetery, west of Hague, ND. Founded in 1884 on the grounds of the first St. Mary's Catholic Church, the cemetery features the impressive handmade wrought-iron crosses of four blacksmiths who immigrated from South Russia to the Hague area - Paul Keller, Michael Schmidt, Jacob Schneider and his brother Deport. These handmade crosses are a symbol of the German-Russian characteristics of thrift, hard work, practicality, faith and creativity. The iron crosses make St. Mary's one of North Dakota's most important artistic cultural sites.

The Schwab Sod House, northeast of Strasburg, ND, provides a vivid view of three generations of Schwab families who were raised in this home. Lorenz and Regina (Wald) Schwab had 17 children; their son John and his wife, Magdalena (Baumgartner) Schwab, had ten children; and their son Joseph, and his wife, Imogene (Schwahn) Schwab, had ten children. The early years were very hard for the Schwab family. Their crops were often scattered by the harsh prairie wind. The Schwabs gathered the crops that survived, by hand, and hauled them by wagon to Eureka, SD, a round trip of 100 miles, where the wheat was sold. Our appreciation to Antonia (Schwab) Baumgartner for having the vision, in 1988, to purchase the sod house on the farm. And, for her efforts to restore the house to look as it was when she grew up there in the 1940s and 1950s.

The Logan County Historical Society near Napoleon, ND, highlights a country school that looks just as it would have been in the 1930s and 1940s, there is even a bell to ring to let the kids know when lunch was ready! German-Russian heritage in the area was, and is, very strong. German was the

spoken language at home, so the majority of the children referred to their country school as "the English School" because at home, German was most often spoken. Religion schools, taught in German, were called, "die Deutsche School." The original post office from Burnstad and the first framed house in Logan County are both at the site.

The Welk Homestead State Historic Site near Strasburg is open until Labor Day Weekend, Thursdays to Sundays, 10 am to 5 pm. For more information, go to - [www.history.nd.gov/historicsites/welk](http://www.history.nd.gov/historicsites/welk). Two Talking Trails are featured at the Homestead.

Shawn Brannan, CEO of Talking Trail, writes, "We are excited to share the rich Germans from Russia history and heritage along the Talking Trail mobile app and dial-in platforms. Talking Trail takes guests beyond the line or two found on a sign by connecting them with an audio recording of the whole story! We currently serve the sites of Fort Lincoln State Park, the National Buffalo Museum, Fort Seward, Frontier Village, Fargo Air Museum, Camp Hancock and Old Red Old Ten Scenic Byway. Working with the Tri-County Tourism Alliance has been a blast, and we can't wait for everyone to experience these rich stories that you will be retelling around the campfire and dinner table. Download the Talking Trail mobile app and experience the stories of the Germans from Russia today!"

Other Talking Trails in the three counties include: Courthouses at Ashley, Linton and Napoleon, Logan County Historical Museum, St. Mary's Church at Hague, Wishek Civic Center, Zeeland City Hall and Arch, Sts. Peter and Paul Church at Strasburg, South Central Threshing Grounds near Braddock, Burnstad, St. Andrew's Lutheran Church near Zeeland, and the Emmons County Museum. View the new Tri-County Tourism Alliance website at [www.germanrussiancountry.org](http://www.germanrussiancountry.org).

For more information about the 24th Journey to the Homeland Tour to Germany and Ukraine, donating family histories and 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](mailto:michael.miller@ndsu.edu); or go to [library.ndsu.edu/grhc](http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc).