

In Touch with Prairie Living

August 2021

By Michael M. Miller

Germans from Russia Heritage Collection
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Larry Kruckenberg of Cheyenne, WY, a native of Hazen, ND, has authored a new book, “Big Bend Country: A Journey of Good Times, Hard Times, and Hope,” available from GRHC.

Kruckenberg shares memories of his German-Russian mother, Lorraine Guenther Kruckenberg. He brings the travails of working a prairie farm into sharp focus. It was a good life, but a hard life, filled with work and family. Through his mother’s words, Kruckenberg details every aspect of what it was like to grow up in a remote part of Mercer County, northwest North Dakota, and upon reaching adulthood, raising a family under difficult circumstances.

The book is a chronicle of life, hardship, and sometimes tragedy, that underscores the strength of our forebears, and renews appreciation for those who came before us. It is one of person’s remarkable journey, grounded in personal sacrifice, and hope of the times.

The book involves North Dakota history and the Germans from Russia heritage. This inspiring true story covers four decades, beginning in 1915. The language is genuine and takes the reader back in time. This book is entertaining, revealing, and beautifully written. In reviews, the book has been compared to Laura Ingalls Wilder’s “Little House on the Prairie” series.

In the Prologue, Kruckenberg writes, “On December 26, 1989, I sat down at the kitchen table with my 75-year-old mother, Lorraine Guenther Kruckenberg. I was home for Christmas. Just like we’d done countless times in the past, we were engaged in meaningful conversations about days gone by. This time, however, was different. Lying beside was a note of the subject matter to be covered. I had a small tape recorder in one hand and a pen in the other. The moment was right; she was anxious to get started and I was prepared to listen like never before. Besides, the temperature outside was below zero – perfect North Dakota weather. There was no better setting in which to have my mother begin to reflect upon some experiences that helped shape her life and those of so many others.

My intent from the onset was to find out what it was like being a young girl growing up on a Mercer County farm in the

1910s, 20s, and 30s. I also wanted to know more about my mother’s married life and experience raising a young family during very difficult times.

My mother was well suited for what was about to unfold, because, as those who knew her best recall, she loved to talk and tell stories. People marveled at her memory, and this is why this it mattered. During seven kindred recording sessions that spanned the next 15 months, she shared some experiences from the first 40 years of her life. What follows are her memories and her words. Having rested for the past 30 years, it is time for them to come to life and be shared. No finer gift could my mother have given.”

In Chapter I, Hatched, the author shares, “To me, home will always be that little 600-acre farm in the extreme northeastern part of Mercer County, North Dakota, where I grew up, along with seven other siblings. It was predominately pastureland. At that time, the surrounding area was known as “Big Bend Country.” It was a beautiful chunk of prairie and farm and ranchland bordered on the east and north by the Missouri River, to the south by the Knife River, and to the west a little farther than one could see – all the way to the For Berthold Indian Reservation.

In that era, German was the predominant spoken language of many people living in the area. They were proud to be identified as “Germans from Russia.” They were hard-working, strong-willed, resourceful, and caring. Each large family was determined to make a go of it, no matter what that entailed. Church services had a hard time breaking from the home country speech and local newspapers still printed some material in German.”

In the Epilogue, Kruckenberg writes, “Lorraine Guenther Kruckenberg went on to enjoy the remaining 43 years of her life with amazing grace and dignity. Lorraine never drove or owned a car. She walked to work, which was a distance of nearly a mile when she worked at the hospital.

At her funeral, the congregation sang one of Lorraine’s favorite hymns, “Precious Lord, Take My Hand” – including one verse in German. It was a fitting tribute to a truly remarkable woman. She was known, and is remembered, as someone who asked

for little, gave so much, and, in some very special ways, enriched the lives of those who knew her.”

Larry Kruckenberg was born and raised in North Dakota and graduated from Hazen High School in 1966. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Zoology/Wildlife Biology from North Dakota State University. He is now a retired agency administrator. His career spanned nearly 50 years with two state wildlife agencies – North Dakota and Wyoming – and the Western Association of Fish and Wildlife Agencies. Larry is an avid upland bird and waterfowl hunter, and an accomplished freelance photographer. He still proudly refers to North Dakota as “home.”

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; or go to library.ndsu.edu/grhc.

August column for North Dakota and South Dakota weekly newspapers.