With the Holiday Season approaching, I extend Yuletide Best Wishes to you and your family. I would like to share Christmas memories from our Germans from Russia community.

Theresa Meier Eissinger, Napoleon, ND, writes, “Christmas Eve at the Meier farm (between Linton and Napoleon) was the most exciting time of the year. Chores were done early; supper was early, and then my mother gave each of us a large soup bowl of goodies. We got a handful of peanuts, a few mixed nuts, an orange, boughten cookies which were a treat especially the chocolate covered marshmallow ones with the cherry center, and a few hard candies. We also had animal crackers – the boys wanted to be farmers, so we traded our horses, cows, and sheep for the lions, giraffes, and tigers. About 8:30pm, everybody got ready, and we all bundled up in our warmest clothes. My father would hitch the team of horses to the bobsled, the bottom which was covered with hay, old quilts, and blankets. We all got into the sled and covered up with quilts and took off for town to my grandma’s place which was five miles away. All the aunts and uncles were there, including my cousins.

My grandpa had a small barn in the backyard where they kept a cow so they could have milk and cream. My father unhitched the team and put them in the barn. We all walked to the church for midnight mass. The mass was beautiful. I remember distinctly all the flowers, candles, the choir, and the music. When the mass was almost over, my father would walk up to grandpa’s place, hitch the team to the bobsled and be waiting for us in front of the church. The sled, hay, and blankets were all so cold. Even the stars looked cold, but we huddled together under the blankets, and we were soon warm. Lulled with the swish of the bobsled runners and the clip-clop of the horses, I was soon asleep. My last thought was, like every year, this was the best Christmas ever!”

Fr. Leonard Eckroth, Mandan, ND, shares, “As a Catholic, we would follow the day of fasting before the feast. On Christmas Eve of the big feast day in our home, we ate fish or a German dish like Rahmnoodla. As a family, we went to Confession before Christmas. Our dad put the first ornament on the tree, starting with the star on the top. Us juniors put the tinsel on after the older brothers and sisters hung the lights and other decorations. My mother did a lot of baking like fruitcakes, cookies, and special German-Swiss bread. Our folks and older siblings attended Midnight Mass while us youngsters were in bed, though we wanted to play with our Christmas gifts. Just like Easter time, my older brothers and sisters would eat our candy out of our Easter baskets when we were not there to defend our treasures.”

Kim Joachim Kraushar writes, “My most vivid memory of Grandmother Beata (Bauer) Joachim at Cresbard, SD, was rolling out cookie dough on the tabletop of their beautiful solid oak dining room table. She was always wearing a dress with real candles at home. The only gifts we ever received from Santa Claus was a box of tree decorations in the attic. Dad cut a tree from the woods on the farm where he worked. What fun we had decorating our very first ever Christmas tree. My mother would make a big stuffed deer on the mantle that was so big it covered the top of the tree. She would put a bright red bow to the end of the tree where the star was going to sit. She used a real pepper tree to make the star. It was a very special and wonderful Christmas.”

Bernelda Becker, Eureka, SD, writes about her childhood Christmas in 1938, “In Eureka, I would have been in the church Christmas program. In Michigan, we didn’t even go to church. My classmates were cousins and neighbors, and we had the program in the country school. In Michigan, I hadn’t been at this school long enough to even have friends. And then—Mom found a box of tree decorations in the attic. Dad cut a tree from the woods on the farm where he worked. What fun we had decorating our very first ever Christmas tree. My parents made home canned strawberries in the basement. She made ice cream and we had strawberry sundaes, I had never tasted strawberries before. My Aunt Olga sent a doll in a case with a drawer, hangers, and a change of clothes. She’d never sent a gift before. My Michigan Christmas turned out wonderful after all, even though it wasn’t in South Dakota.”

Chris Huber, Hosmer, SD, writes, “As a child of immigrant South Dakota farming parents, the Depression of the 1930s remains a most vivid memory for me. A yearly high point for me was our country church’s annual children’s Christmas program. St. John’s Lutheran Church, rural Hosmer, SD, was still conducted in the German language with the children singing many German Christmas religious folk songs. The country church was be filled, the kerosene lamp chandelier illuminated, and the potbellied stove would be glowing red from overheating.”

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.