

In Touch with Prairie Living

December 2021

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



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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 small flowery print and an apron, of course. She was also rolling out pastry dough for her perfect rhubarb pies, the custardy kind made with eggs and nutmeg, not that sweet gelatinous fake-red filing. A special Christmas memory is the smell of her small Pfeffernusse cookies. The way she made these little miracles is a mystery to me. At my young elementary school age, I had no idea where that flavor came from. So spicy, peppery, warm on the tongue even if the cookie was cold. Finally, I learned about the cloves, nutmeg, and black pepper, and then learned how to make them myself."

Adi Hartfeil, Portland, OR, shares, "My family was very fortunate to escape the Russian front (during WWII) so we spent Christmas as refugees with a West German farmer. This farmer was forced to provide two rooms as shelter for our family of two parents and six kids. The first couple of Christmas holidays after WWII were spent similarly with a very small Christmas tree with real candles at home. The only gifts our parents could afford was one orange, some candies, and homemade cookies. But with my oldest brother playing those great German Christmas carols on his accordion and the rest of the family singing along, this festive holiday was always very special for the kids and grownups in West Germany.

Also, as kids we had to say a little poem, with a promise to behave, to the Weihnachtsmann (my oldest brother). Typically, the German Weihnachtsmann carried a few gifts in a sack in one hand

and a switch in the other hand. When he left, he told the kids if they did not follow the poem and promise to behave, he would come back and confiscate the presents and use his switch. As kids we enjoyed these times very much even though West Germany was almost totally destroyed (in 1945), and people were just barely starting to rebuild their lives and their country."

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. Mom found 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.