

In Touch with Prairie Living

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Germans from Russia Heritage Collection
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Father Thomas Welk, Wichita, KS, grew up on a farm 11 miles directly east of Strasburg, ND. He translated an important work by Johannes Brendel, “Aus Deutschen Kolonien im Kutschurganer Gebiet,” or “The German Colonies in the Kutschurgan Region.” The original translations were published in a series in “Heritage Review” from April 1979 to December 1981.

Johannes Brendel was born in 1874 in the Catholic village of Selz, Kutschurgan District. He had six brothers and three sisters. He completed a teacher course in Grossliebental, near Odessa, Ukraine. In Saratov, Volga Region, he had the first German publishing house. In 1918, he settled in the German-occupied city of Odessa. In 1927, Brendel immigrated to Bismarck, ND, where he worked at the “Dakota Rundschau,” a German newspaper. Of particular value were Brendel’s writings that described the folklore and customs of his home ancestral villages in the Kutschurgan District. The following are excerpts from Johannes Brendel’s writing as translated by Fr. Thomas Welk.

“Each man built his own home with the support of the government and according to the prescribed laws and in the way designated for the particular street. Some built a little house from small sandstones, others put together the walls from clay. There were some who simply put four posts in the ground, one at each corner, filled in walls with reeds, and inside and outside thickly smeared these walls with clay. A stone-lined cellar in each yard was roomy enough to hold the winter provisions, and even had a place for a few barrels of wine. An ash pit was located near the cellar, also stone-lined, indicating that that colonist wanted to keep his yard clear of ashes.

As was the case 100 years ago, so today the main building material was clay. The clay, mixed with straw, was made into adobe and bricks. These were thoroughly dried and used for construction. Only the foundation and roof were made of stone, which was purchased in Elsass. In Elsass and Mannheim, the buildings were constructed exclusively from field stones which could be found in the ground. The colonist’s house was dry and warm and was kept in good shape and so lasted a long time.

The housewife did a masterful job in her household tasks and whitewashing so that the farmer himself had to do little upkeep. The house consisted usually of two to four rooms, a vestibule, and a kitchen. The rooms were about three meters high. The floor was about a half meter above the ground, though in some houses there was not a wooden floor.

The old people put much stock in the ‘folk medicine (Brauchen).’ Even today, there are many who believe in this. For example, they believed that a sore on the finger or wildfire (rash) in the face could be gotten rid of with folk medicine cures. Usually, old women were the practitioners of this type of medicine, and they usually asked only a small fee and a piece of bacon, bread, or something else from nature for payment for their service.

The farmer did not like to run to the doctor for just any ache or pain, such as when his side or back was causing him pain. First, he would try home remedies. This might include a pillow filled with bran and heated and then placed on the source of pain, or hay flower compresses. Then only if he still felt weak would he ask his wife if it wouldn’t be better to fetch a doctor. Quacks, who knew how to exploit the ignorance of the farmer, always abounded in the villages. Many a German housewife bore a lifelong affliction because of old women, who could hardly read, helping during childbirth. Only since the beginning of the century could trained midwives be found in all the bigger villages.

The colonist in his external appearance can only be described in the following way: first of all, his face was clean shaven. He always had a razor in his house, which seemed as necessary and important to him as having bread in the cupboard. He shaved once a week, on Sunday morning. Until 1874, the year in which the German colonists first had to enter military service, it was rare for a anyone to have a moustache, and if anyone did, all six villages would talk about it. In Elsass, a certain man was called M. Schnauzel (Mr. Moustache). He was given the nickname because he persisted in having a moustache, even after the military service.

The colonist knew little of the world beyond what was happening immediately around him. Political questions were foreign

to him. He was too poor to buy a book or a newspaper. He figured this to be the concern of the rich people who had time to read such stuff. For the village events, no newspaper was needed to report these. Should something happen at one end of the village, it would be known that same day at the other end. The news would always be spread quickly for the village gossip was constantly flowing. When the Odessa Tribune (two or three copies of which were available in the Kutschurgan villages) reported a robbery which occurred in Moscow or any other big city, this was spread around in the village and earlier similar occurrences would be recalled and repeated in their (Maistuben).”

Fr. Tom writes, “Translating Johannes Brendel’s book has given me a great feeling for my ancestors’ stay in Russia. And I’ve also obtained a great deal of insight into some of the practices and customs that I experienced growing up in south central North Dakota.” Fr. Tom’s paternal grandparents were born in the village of Selz, Kutschurgan District, today located near Odessa, Ukraine. The mother colonies are: Baden, Elsass, Kandel, Mannheim, Selz and Strassburg. Fr. Tom grew up speaking German Alsatian dialect. He was ordained in 1969 as a member of the Society of the Precious Blood. He was interviewed for Prairie Public’s 2012 award-winning documentary, “At Home in Russia, At Home on the Prairie”. Fr. Tom’s grandfather, Johannes Welk, was the brother of Ludwig Welk, father of Lawrence Welk.

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.

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