

In Touch with Prairie Living

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On November 8, 1993, I interviewed Eva (Gross) Schatz at the Marillac Manor Retirement Center in Bismarck, ND. Eva was 89 at the time of the interview. She died on April 2, 2002. I have fond memories interviewing Eva. Her heartwarming complete oral history audio and transcription are at <http://hdl.handle.net/10365/14243>.

Eva was born October 3, 1905, in rural Napoleon, ND, to Matthias and Barbara (Schweitzer) Gross. Eva's mother was 17 years old when she emigrated with her parents, John and Christine Schweitzer, from the village of Strassburg, Kutschurgan District. Her mother got very homesick and said if she could walk back, she sure would. Eva's father, Kasper, was the son of John and Benedicta Gross of Mannheim. John was a soldier in the Russian army. Eva was the oldest of girls in the family.

Eva's parents never learned to speak English. German was the language spoken in the home. The family attended St. Anthony Catholic Church, south of Napoleon, where Fr. Stephen Stenger was the priest. "Fr. Stenger stated, 'You should keep your mother's language! Don't listen to them!'"

Eva attended country school and assisted her parents with the family farming operation. She later married Kasper Schatz at St. Anthony's Catholic Church and they made their home in rural Zeeland, ND, where they farmed and reared their eight children, four boys and four girls.

Eva shared, "My mother was always sick with rheumatism, so I didn't get too much in the English school. For German, they teach me German but nothing else at that time. What the little bit I know talking, I learned by myself. Not in school. Everything was in German. I went to First Holy Communion in German. I came to religion school until I can read good German. I learned everything early because I didn't get to the English school. At twelve years old, I made the dresses for me and for my sisters and there were no pockets. With the step sewing machine, I put on some pockets.

We milked cows with the hand at that time. This was not easy, the hand milking. Our dad and me had to do the farm work, making hay and everything. We had good horses on the farm. We worked with three horses, two plows and one drill. After my

brother got married, I had to do the drilling and two of my sisters did the plow and field work.

They butchered their own meat, their own pigs. There was always this and sauerkraut and potatoes. I think only twice a year they came to the grocery store with the horses. We lived 50 miles from a town. In the fall, they always bought boxes of apples. They took 100 or 200 pounds of sugar. We had a root cellar outside. In that root cellars, we put potatoes on a pile. There was one barrel with pickled watermelons and one barrel with pickled cucumbers which were still good until springtime. Still better than those canned nowadays."

Eva's mother made plachenta with all pumpkins from their home garden. "We scrubbed the pumpkins out and we scraped the middle out. We put some sugar and a little bit of pepper, a little bit of salt, mixed it and a little bit of onion. We made dough almost like pie dough. That the way we made plachenta."

Eva grew up in a sod house made of basta bricks, "There were two big rooms and in each room was two beds and the middle was the kitchen. They had a little room in the front entrance, where the cream separator is usually. For heating at that time, we didn't have coal. They made their own fuel with manure. At the entrance for the wintertime, there were piles of stacked dry manure. They put all the manure on a pile from the horses and cows during the winter on the farm. In the springtime, they had the horses run around making tight packed about a foot and half deep. When the manure was dry, they put them on a pile. In the fall, they put some in the house entrance so they didn't have to go out when it was so cold. That's the way they had to heat those sod houses. I even had to help pick up cow chips when I was young."

Eva shared one of her first memories, "My mother was ironing in the kitchen and at that time, they had to heat the cook stove to make the iron hot. They were no electricity. I was about 2 years old. I was standing there and then a bunch of the neighbor's sheep, about 12 sheep came running through the door. They came in our yard and the dogs chased them and they just came into the kitchen and run around the table. I went back

to the wall and I watched them, and I was scared. And then they went out again. This I can remember.

When I was 16 years old, there was one farmer who had a radio. We went to listen to that radio. When we heard it, I really couldn't believe it that somebody could talk from far away. A lot of people came to the farm to listen to that radio. Of course, the radio show was in English."

Eva tells about making homemade liquor, "They put some wheat in a 50-gallon barrel and put water in. They had a little machine, and they heat that. And before, they put sugar in, a lot of sugar. In the oven, they heated and then a little whiskey came out. But in the beginning, my father always bought a quart or two quarts of whiskey from town. My dad took it home and he mixed it the way they needed. They browned sugar, made sugar brine and water. I think two to one they mixed it. With that sugar brine and whiskey, two water and one whiskey."

Finally, Eva said, "What I think is that if the generation now had to live like we did without running water, to go out in the night to the outhouse, they could not live that way anymore without running water."

For more information about 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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