

In Touch with Prairie Living

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By Michael M. Miller

Germans from Russia Heritage Collection
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I look forward to visiting the Eureka Pioneer Museum on July 13 with a bus tour traveling from Aberdeen, SD, during the 51st Germans from Russia Heritage Society Convention, July 13-16. I will also attend the 53rd American Historical Society of Germans from Russia Convention, July 27-30, in Lincoln, NE.

The July column focuses on Charles Pfeffer of Eureka, South Dakota. Eureka, Dakota Territory, today in McPherson County, north central South Dakota, was established in 1887. The first train arrived in Eureka on July 27, 1887, but the original plat of the city was not completed until October 3, 1887.

Trains of twenty to thirty cars filled with immigrants were common arrivals at the Eureka train station, many included emigrants leaving Russia and Germany. The great majority of newcomers were thrifty, hard-working people in good financial standing and contributed much to the welfare and prosperity of Eureka. Charles Pfeffer was one of them.

The 50th Anniversary book, "Eureka 1887-1937," includes, "The name of Charles Pfeffer is one that must always remain an important one in the annals of the Eureka community. Coming to the town as a townsite agent for the Milwaukee Railroad, he was an important factor in the development of the community from 1887 until his removal to the Pacific coast shortly after the new century came in. He was an implement dealer, banker, miller, and mayor of the city during his residence here. Previous to coming to Eureka in 1887, he was engaged in the general merchandise and implement business at Ipswich [SD]. Immediately after the Milwaukee Railroad had established service in Eureka, he opened a farm implement business on the east side of the railroad track, combining the sale of implements with the duties as townsite agent."

As the local townsite agent, Charles Pfeffer was besieged daily by people who wanted to purchase lots and establish business places and residences. Soon, the immigration of Germans from Russia became instrumental in the establishment of Eureka's reputation as the greatest inland wheat market of the world.

The 50th Anniversary book further chronicles, "His [Charles Pfeffer's] restless energy sought further outlet and he established the Bank of Eureka in which he placed Wm. Bramier, Pfeffer's brother-in-law, as manager. In 1888, he established the Eureka Roller Mills, the enterprise which probably was closest to his heart. The Eureka Roller Mills established a premium grade flour named Dakota Gold. The Mills was very popular in those days. In the fall of the year, farmers traded their wheat for flour which lasted them through the year. Some wagons took home a thousand or more pounds of flour. Large families in those days consumed a great deal of flour. The cotton sacks supplied durable cloth for shirts and underclothing sewn by the housewives. These garments would often still contain the gold and silver emblems.

The Eureka Roller Mills had the distinction of supplying excellent flour in the 'World's Greatest Wheat Market.' During the harvest season, the mill operated day and night. Fifteen persons worked in shifts around the clock to meet the demand for the special flour milled from wheat grown on new overturned sod, where the hot August sun refined and supplied the kernels with that extra energy protein. Strangers who ate at the table of rural folks often remarked about the tasty home baked bread. Carloads of flour, 1,000 sacks in a box car, moved by rail to other states. During World War I, he had government orders for flour overseas shipment for the U.S. Army soldiers.

While he was perhaps a bit too imperious in manner and often too abrupt in speech to become generally beloved, he was none-the-less popular and looked up to as a leader in the commercial and political life of the city. In fact, he was known, especially in adjacent communities, as "Der Russlander Vater," (the Russian father) a term which was not always accepted by his friends and neighbors as being entirely deserved."

In the book, "Eureka, 1887-2012: Celebrating 125 Years," Edmund Opp remembers his father, John D. Opp, speaking highly of Pfeffer, "[He] had a sympathetic heart for struggling farmers, making loans to immigrants for farm machinery. He said you could trust him, and he was very understanding about the hardships the

farmers were going through in the early years. Some couldn't pay taxes for at least three years, or make payments on their loans, and many banks took advantage of that, paying the overdue taxes and claiming the properties. But the Eureka farmers who banked with Pfeffer did not have to worry, as he just gave them more time, helped them, and never foreclosed on them.

As Eureka prepares to celebrate its golden jubilee anniversary, its older citizens recall with a certain wistfulness the stocky figure of Charles Pfeffer. They remember him best not at a desk but along the streets and around the flour mill talking with farmers and other visitors to the city."

An article titled, "Schools Receive Fortune as Gift of Charles Pfeffer" was published in the Northwest Blade on June 23, 1921; it read, "Charles Pfeffer, former resident of Eureka, has given approximately \$100,000 to the schools in McPherson County, South Dakota, and Logan County, North Dakota, in the past few days. Mr. Pfeffer was a banker, miller, and implement dealer in Eureka at the time when Eureka was known as the largest grain distribution center in the world. The land which Mr. Pfeffer has given to the cause of better education is estimated to be worth on the average of \$50 an acre, so that the value of the gifts which he has made runs well up to \$90,000 or about one fifth of Mr. Pfeffer's total fortune."

Charles Pfeffer believed in and supported the Germans from Russia in many ways. From assisting them while they struggled to establish themselves in a new land, to assuring the future of children through education, he was there to help them survive and prosper.

Upon entering Eureka, SD, there is large signage that reads: "Wheat Capitol of the World." The homeland of many of the immigrants is Ukraine – today's leader in wheat production.

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.