

In Touch with Prairie Living

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By Michael M. Miller

Germans from Russia Heritage Collection
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GERMANS FROM RUSSIA
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The Northwest Blade, Eureka, SD, published a wonderful article in August 2020, “Granddaughter keeps grandmother’s precious chamomile seeds,” by Cindy Schumacher. Cindy wrote about the experiences of Judy Hooff. Judy was a resident of Eureka, founded in 1887, once called the “Breadbasket of the World” for its many wheat elevators and the trains that transported the grain to the rest of the country.

When she was a first grader, Judy Hooff lived with her grandparents Christian and Christina (Neuharth) Opp and Gottfried and Eva Helfenstein. She recalled her Grandma Opp introduced her to chamomile tea, which she grew in her garden. She picked the flowers, dried them on newspapers, and stored the chamomile in mason jars.

“Grandma thought chamomile tea was the cure-all for just about anything that ailed me,” said Hooff, “Tea compresses were applied to my eyes if I had pinkeye, or she used a tea if I had a tummy ache. I’ve been told women had sewn chamomile and vermouth seeds into the hems of their coats and dresses before their departure. I’m fairly certain the seeds would have been confiscated upon their arrival to America,” Hooff explained.

Cindy Schumacher goes on to write: “Hooff said she felt strongly about preserving her grandmother’s tea, which was the same strain of chamomile her ancestors brought with them from Germany and Russia when they immigrated to America. On a visit to Eureka 40 years after moving away, Hooff found chamomile flowers growing where her grandparents’ house had been. Even though most of the farms she remembered as a child are gone, she found chamomile still thriving around the foundation.”

“Chamomile was everywhere, and these seeds were from my grandmother’s garden. I was determined to bring chamomile back to Portland. I tried planting it in my garden but was unsuccessful due to the moist northwestern climate,” Hooff remarked.

In 1998, Russia made chamomile the official national flower. The flower is an adorable little bloom with snow white petals and bright yellow center. It is cultivated in Russia and some parts of Asia. Found almost everywhere in the vast country, the flower is

deeply rooted in the Russian culture.

Chamomile originated in Europe and West Asia. Since the ancient times, it has been highly valued by the Egyptians, Romans, and Greeks for its medicinal properties. Chamomile is a common name for several daisy-like plants. Two of the species are commonly used to make herbal infusions for traditional medicine and there is some evidence that chamomile has an impact on health. The name chamomile comes from Greek and means “earth apple.” Today the most popular application for chamomile is herbal tea. Around the world, people consume more than one million cups per day.

I have fond memories of my grandmother Odelia (Wolf) Baumgartner growing chamomile in her garden. In July, visiting the Welk Homestead State Historic Site, chamomile was growing near the Summer Kitchen like when Ludwig and Christina (Schwahn) Welk homesteaded in 1893.

In the Germans from Russia community, women who practiced folk healing, Brauche or Braucherei, were well known for their important medicinal healing practices with the early immigrant families, including use of chamomile tea.

GRHC published the book, “Tender Hands: Ruth’s Story of Healing” by Ruth (Weil) Kusler, Beulah, ND, born in 1908. Ruth’s mother, Katharina Fischer, taught her tender hands and healing prayers of Brauche. Katharina was born 1882 in Neu Glueckstal, South Russia, where she learned Brauche from her mother, Christina (Kirschenmann) Fischer. The book documents medicinal remedies, including the use of chamomile for bleeding, constipation, shingles, and sore eyes. This book is available at the GRHC website <https://grhc-northdakotastate-ndus.nbsstore.net/tender-hands>.

Ted Hovland, Lincoln, NE, wrote at the GRHC Facebook, “I grew up in Eureka, SD, in the 1940s and 50s. My grandmother Elisabeth Lidele came from Russia in 1885. She was part of our family the first 18 years of my life in the same house she had lived since it was built in 1914. Wild chamomile grew in the back yard. She would pick the blossoms and dry them on a dish towel in the guest bedroom, then store them in an oatmeal

box. She called it ‘camilia’ tea. Sometimes that sweetened tea and a plate-sized piece of fried bread would be our supper. Whenever I was sick as a young child, I would be on the road to recovery when my mother, Adina Liedle Egeland, would bring me a cup of ‘camilia’ tea sweetened with honey to drink. I still keep a box of chamomile tea in my kitchen.”

JoAnne Iszler, Three Forks, MT, native of Ashley, ND, writes, “I grew up in 1948 with chamomile tea too. We get this for colds, tummy aches, and every other thing that was wrong. We had tons of it growing behind the house. When I was little, I’d sit down in it and pick the little yellow flowers mom would dry them, we always had it on hand. Sometime relatives would come for visits and I’d pick it and they’d pay me 50 cents for a sack paper bag. I thought I’d made a ton of money. The chamomile tea you buy in the little bags have nowhere near the wonderful taste as brewing the flowers. I’d love to find a way to get some started in a little patch. Even the smell was comforting.”

Linda Brook, Eureka, SD, writes, “My mother also grew it and anytime anyone was ill it was brewed, and I still love it to this day.”

Don Sayler shared, “We had a great aunt who had no lawn on her lot, all chamomile. We picked every year. Great stuff. Just add some sugar.”

Jennifer Sik, Farmington, MN, commented, “When we visited my grandmother in Eureka, she would make that tea for us grandkids when we weren’t feeling well.”

Judy Graham Thonton Barnes, Rupert, ID, writes, “As luck would have it, I still have a canister full of Grandma’s hand-picked chamomile! I plan to tie a photocopy of the article onto that canister so family can understand its importance after I’m gone.”

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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