

In Touch with Prairie Living

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By Michael M. Miller

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.

Sister Judith Fischer, OSB, a member of Mother of God Monastery, Watertown, S.D., has contributed a copy of The Fischer Family Chronicle to the GRHC archive. It was written by her Grandfather Mathias J. Fischer, with the help of his daughter, Mary H. Fischer. Sr. Judith grew up in Strasburg, where she graduated from high school in 1957. Her older sister, Jolenta (Fischer) Masterson, from Sequim, Wash., a long-time genealogist, also donated an extensive photographic collection of families from her hometown of Strasburg. Shared below are excerpts from The Fischer Family Chronicle.

Mathias J. Fischer begins, "My grandfather, Franz Karl Fischer and his family arrived in New York, USA, on November 3, 1884, on the ship, S.S. Fulda. They immigrated from South Russia where the so-called German-Russians had made their home for over 100 years.

"From there they went by train to Yankton, in Dakota Territory, now South Dakota. With Franz Karl, was his family: wife Margaret (Kraft) Fischer, seven sons and four daughters. The oldest son, Jacob, my father, was married to Helena Ripplinger and had four children at the time of their arrival in the U.S.

"When we arrived at Yankton, Dakota Territory, we were a tired family. We stood around in the depot wondering what was in store for us. We had no friends to help us or no relatives to meet us. It wasn't too long, however, before we met and became acquainted with the Yankton people. Among them was Peter Schamber who took all the Fischers to his farm where he let us use one of his barns to live in until we found something better. The boys soon got jobs on various farms where they were glad to work for board and room.

"On May 1, 1885, the Fischer family moved north to Ipswich, S.D. Each family bought a pair of oxen and a covered wagon for it. Each family took up 'preemption,' 160-acres of land. In the fall of 1887, the Milwaukee Railroad came through South Dakota as far north as Eureka, which made it much easier for all of us since we did not have quite so far to travel for trading

purposes. Some of us collected buffalo bones and sold them to the sugar refineries who burned them and pulverized them into carbon which were used for filters.

"We broke the sod with a 12-inch braking plow. The sod was then used as walls to build our homes, put up with four inches in thickness. This was the grassy top layer of the soil, which was placed very similar to laying present-day bricks. When it was all in place, a mud mixture was spread all over it, then it was leveled until it was smooth and hard. After the walls were erected, a 10 by 10 stringer, a heavy horizontal timber was placed from gable to gable to act as a support. The houses put up in this fashion were warm in the winter and cool in the summer. It did not take the men very long to put up the four walls and cover them, because they helped each other, and everyone was most cooperative. When this work was finished, the men went south to the settlement to find work during harvesting and threshing. I was, at that time, during the summer and fall of 1885, herding sheep and cattle for a family by the name of Stoller, living near Scotland, S.D. I worked there all summer until early winter for \$45.00.

"Restlessness took over the men. They needed more land and needed room to expand. In the fall of 1886, they all moved to their new place in Emmons County. It was called Beaver 'Kirk', west of Strasburg, N.D. Due to crop failure and fires of 1889-1890, there was much suffering and hardship among the early settlers. Our missionary priest, Father Bernard Strassmeier, came to the rescue and promised to find relief for us.

"Food was scarce at the beginning. Our main food was always noodles, bread, coffee, Rival soup and potatoes. In Russia, we grew our own vegetables and had our own orchards and vineyards.

"Housekeeping was no easy matter in those days. Water supply was always scarce. There was no wood, no coal, no kerosene. We had no stoves. Both the cook stove and heating stove were home-made. The men built a hearth out of a mixture of mud and stones. On top they had two holes in which they could hang their heavy black kettles. The hearth had two openings, the front for shoving in the fuel, mostly straw, hay and brush. The other end led to the chimney. A

special oven, also made of mud and stones, was put up for baking bread. The oven was fired until it was good and hot. After a good cleaning, the bread dough was placed into the baking oven. The results were beautifully baked bread.

"One time I was allowed to go along on a trip to get supplies and groceries. However, it took me a long time to get back, as I was 'traded off' for a cow. All that summer until November, I worked on a farm as payment for the cow. Our family back home enjoyed the luxury of milk, and it gave me pleasure to be able to furnish that much for them. They felt rich that milk had been added to their diet. We had little opportunity for receiving an education. The classes were conducted at my father's house for only four pupils. We had school only two winters and then only part-time because we had too many chores to do. Fortunately for me, the schoolteacher always stayed at our house, so I had many private lessons.

"The pioneers loved to visit each other. Because of the distances, no roads, and bad weather, the company often had to stay overnight. Those were enjoyable days with lots of 'gemutlichkeit' (pleasant sharing). When bedtime came, the men made beds of hay and straw on the floor for the rest of us.

"My father became a U.S. citizen at the Emmons County Court House in Linton, N.D. in February 1891. He was married to Katherine Eberle on January 10, 1898, at the Assumption Church near Hague, N.D. We stayed on the farm until 1907, then we moved to Strasburg, N.D. At Strasburg, I had a third interest in a general merchandise store called the 'Strasburg Bazaar.' My partners were Damien Lauinger and John J. Baumgartner. We also had the greater interest in the Security State Bank, as well as the Lumber Yard. All this happened until the depression of 1933."

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, N.D. 58108-6050, (Tel: 701-231-8416); michael.miller@ndsu.edu; or go to library.ndsu.edu/grhc.

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