

In Touch with Prairie Living

April 2023

By Michael M. Miller

Germans from Russia Heritage Collection
North Dakota State University Libraries, Fargo



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA
GRHC
HERITAGE COLLECTION

The Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, NDSU Libraries, premieres the new traveling exhibit, “Building Life and Home on the Prairie: German-Russian Homesteads of North Dakota” on April 18, 5-7pm at St. Paul’s Newman Center, Fargo, ND. This event also includes a panel discussion about the exhibit and the life of Father William C. Sherman. Please RSVP by April 7th at <https://grhc-exhibit.eventbrite.com> if you plan to attend.

The images and documents in this exhibit are a result of the dedicated work of celebrated religious leader, scholar, and educator, Father William C. Sherman, and his students. In the 1970s, they created over 13,000 images and site survey documents of early settler homesteads. Their work comprises the Father William C. Sherman Photograph Collection, preserved at the GRHC. The collection is an essential resource to understand the history of settlement in North Dakota and how distinct ethnic groups built their homes. You can browse the Father William C. Sherman Collection at digitalhorizonsonline.org.

Since its early beginnings, North Dakota has been home to numerous ethnic groups with unique cultural and architectural practice. One such group is the Germans from Russia, who emigrated to North Dakota from the Black Sea and Bessarabian regions of southern Ukraine. An estimated 30-40% of the state’s population has German-Russian ancestry. The Germans from Russia brought a unique culture to North Dakota, and the characteristic homes they built represent a foundational part of the material culture of early German-Russian settlers. This exhibit is a celebration of their unique culture, architecture, and experience building a life and community on the vast prairie. The goal of this exhibit is to help sustain the memories of early homesteads and the families that built them.

Father William C. Sherman (1927 – 2022) taught Sociology of the Great Plains and Religion at North Dakota State University from 1971 to 2001. He was named Professor Emeritus at NDSU and was also awarded two honorary doctorates, one from the University of Mary, Bismarck, and one from the University of North Dakota, Grand Forks.

Father Sherman authored many books including “Prairie Mosaic: An Ethnic Atlas of North Dakota,” a comprehensive account of the many ethnic groups that settled in North Dakota. The second edition was a collaborative effort between the NDSU Press and the GRHC, and includes new photographs, a redesigned cover, and an introduction by Dr. Thomas Isern, NDSU professor of history and university distinguished professor.

In his “Prairie Mosaic” book, Father Bill wrote, “Sadly it must be said that we know much more about the soil, crop, weed and water conditions of any particular Dakota township than we know of the national character of the people who reside there.”

Father Bill wrote about his travel to central and western North Dakota in the 1970s, “For about ten years at NDSU, I’d get the architecture and the history students together and we’d saturate the state studying how the Germans from Russia built out there. They didn’t build sod houses. They didn’t build claim sheds. They built houses out of adobe, just like they did back in the Black Sea area near Odessa, Ukraine.”

In 1995 and 1997, Father Sherman and John Guerrero traveled to Odessa, Ukraine, and the surrounding former German colonies near the Black Sea and in Bessarabia, where they took hundreds of color slides of homes, buildings, barns, and other structures.

Fr. William Sherman also authored these important books, “African Americans in North Dakota,” “Prairie Peddlers: Syrian-Lebanese in North Dakota,” “Scattered Steeples: The Fargo Diocese, A Written Celebration of Its Centennial,” “Selz, Russia: Home Colony,” “St. Michael’s Church and Native Americans,” “Valerian Paczek: Polish Priest, War Hero,” and “Wagons North: Minnesota to Oregon.” Sherman was also editor of the book, “Plains Folk: An Atlas of North Dakota’s Ethnic History.”

Father Sherman served as Pastor of St. Paul’s Newman Center at NDSU from 1965 to 1975. He was Pastor of St. Michael’s Catholic Church at Grand Forks from 1976 until his retirement in 2003.

In the Grand Forks Herald of May 6, 2022, Father Jason Lefor of Pisek, ND,

shared, “He was larger than life. You can go to any town or village in North Dakota and get stories about him. He was so colorful, so full of life.” An NDSU alumnus, Father Lefor remembered taking sociology courses taught by Sherman, and the research he conducted about people of various ethnic backgrounds and where they settled in North Dakota.

I have my own fond memories of Father Bill Sherman when I began work at NDSU in 1967. He was a dear friend, colleague, and mentor to me. I cherish our travels together on the North Dakota prairies. Father Bill leaves a living legacy with his research, writing, and image work of the homesteads with the Father William C. Sherman Photograph Collection.

The traveling exhibit, “Building Life and Home on the Prairie” will be on display at St. Paul’s Newman Center from April 18 to May 18 and then at Prairie Village Museum, Rugby, ND, from June 5 to August 21, 2023.

For more information about donating family histories and photographs, or how to financially support the GRHC, contact Jeremy Kopp, at jeremy.kopp@ndsu.edu or 701-231-6596; mail to: NDSU Libraries, Dept. 2080, PO Box 6050, Fargo, N.D. 58108-6050; or go to www.ndsu.edu/grhc. You may also contact me directly at michael.miller@ndsu.edu or 701-231-8416.

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