

In Touch with Prairie Living

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Germans from Russia Heritage Collection
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One of the most important books published about the Germans from Russia in North Dakota is “Along the Trails of Yesterday: A Story of McIntosh County” by Nina Farley Wishek, published by the Ashley Tribune in 1941.

Nina Farley Wishek (1869-1957) arrived in 1887 with her family in McIntosh County, Dakota Territory, where her father filed a homestead. Nina became an educator, painter, historian, and poet. In 1889, with the establishment of Ashley, she was the first teacher in the first school. She taught at several country schools before her marriage. Nina Farley married John H. Wishek in 1891 and they had eight children.

Nina was chairperson of the history department of the Federated Women’s Clubs of North Dakota for eight years and was director of the State Historical Society of North Dakota. Nina also authored a poetry book, “Rose Berries in Autumn.”

The Table of Contents includes: Geography and Typography, Old Trails and Stage Lines, The Coming of the Railroad, Pioneer Life, The Story of the Church, the Story of the Schoolhouse, Events of Early Days, And They Came Unto a Far Country, Manners and Customs, The Storms, German Maids Who I Have Knowns, Cities and Towns, Moving Forces in County Progress, and Our Soldier Boys.

In the foreword, Wishek writes, “When I came to McIntosh County in the year 1887, it was sparsely settled, and in all its broad expanse there was but one crude little town called Hoskins, located on the southern bank of the lake by the same name. There was neither stick nor stone to mark the spot where Ashley or other towns stand today – nothing but the waving grass and vast unbroken silence.

I have seen the great influx of immigration and the rapid settling of our own and surrounding counties. I have seen the families of the old pioneer grow into third and fourth generations. I have seen the passing of the oxen team, the ox displaced by the horse; the horse, in turn, by the power tractor, and the old stage lines made obsolete by the coming of the Iron Horse.

In 1887, at Ellendale, Dickey County, lay the edge of the frontier. There was no Eureka, Herreid, Artas, Greenway or Pollock

over the line in South Dakota; there was no Linton, Braddock, Kintyre, Hazelton, or Strasburg in Emmons County; no Ashley, Wishek, Zeeland, Ventura, Lehr or Danzig in McIntosh County; no Kulm in LaMoure County.”

In the chapter, And They Came Unto a Far Country, Wishek, includes lists of settlers filing in McIntosh County in 1884, 1885, 1886, 1887, 1888, 1889. The author writes, “Some of the first arrivals came down from Bismarck, but the great majority came over the long stretch of flats and through the tedious range of hills from Ellendale. There were some with horse teams but hundreds with slow-moving oxen teams and lumber wagons.”

Wishek shares in her Manners and Customs chapter, “We must include the striking picture they presented in the style of their dress which they had brought from South Russia, and which was distinctly Russian in character. The women wore heavy woolen skirts, made extremely full and quite short and attached to a fitted underwaist. During the winter, their footwear consisted of high heavy shoes, probably half-skin, and home-knitted wool stockings.

On their heads, they wore small square fringed head shawl called “Tuechles.” For dress-up and church, the headcover was made of net or lace for coolness. On Sunday, with their best dress they always wore an apron – their best and nicest apron – even for church. These Sunday aprons were often made of dark or black fine wool material, with a cross stitch pattern of bright colors, or of fine cotton, or silk with a ruffle and lace.

When the first came from the old country, the men wore costumes which were extremely picturesque. Beginning at the top, they wore high round black caps of real, beautiful astrakhan fur. These heavy “peltz” as the coats were called, a man could endure the intense cold. No such garment was made in this country; all were brought from Russia.

Visually a tall Russian in a cap increased his height, his long fur coat tied with a scarf, his feet encased in high top boots. Standing beside him his wife with her full short woolen skirts, her bright shawl wrapped around her ample form, and her “Tuechle” on her head. There you have

a picture brought out from Russia of the nineteenth century.”

Wishek shares of women who bore large families during busy times of seeking or harvest. Wishek writes, “There was a mother who came in from the field, gave birth to a child and cared for it alone, and then prepared the meal in time for the workers when they came. They seldom employed a doctor. Each community supported a midwife who felt amply competent to care for such cases at a charge of \$2 to \$5.

Being frugal, these German people never used cream or butter, but saved all dairy produce to take to the nearest town in exchange for groceries. They used chicory instead of expensive coffee. In those times they knew nothing of pie or cake, but for a sweet taste they did make “kuchen” from bread dough. For fats, in place of cream or butter, they had their fat pork, meats, and gravies. They even ate fat salted pork raw; the children often brought a piece of it to school to eat with their dry bread.”

In Wishek’s chapter of German Maids of Whom I Have Known, she writes, “Often girls came in my home who had been over from the old country only a week or two. Not a word of English did they know, nor did they have the slightest comprehension of our American way of doing things. To them the land looked so different, so bare of trees and buildings. With faltering broken German, I tried to explain to them that this land of Dakota was a new land, even to me.”

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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