

In Touch with Prairie Living

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By Michael M. Miller

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA
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Join us for the 53rd Germans from Russia Heritage Society Convention, July 17-20, at the Baymont Hotel, Mandan, N.D. For further information, contact GRHS at www.grhs.org.

Leona (Woezner Neu (98) passed away on May 2nd in Ashley, N.D. Leona, daughter of Jacob J. Woeszner and Marie (Sackmann), was born on May 7, 1925. Leona attended Beresina Rural School #3 and Ashley High School. She sang in the Zion Lutheran Church Choir from 1958 to 1993. Leona was Co-Chair of the Ashley Centennial Pageant and North Dakota's State Centennial Quilt Co-Chair. Leona leaves a living legacy for the community of Ashley as a local historian.

JoAnn J. Nitschke writes, "Leona gave so much for herself to the church and the community and was a walking history book." Dr. Tom Isern comments, "A community treasure house of knowledge." Gwen Renz writes, "She was an awesome seamstress! And an awesome lady."

Leona Neu wrote two impressive articles for *Prairies Magazine* in 1980, published by the Ashley Tribune. The title of the articles is "Humble Beginnings: Story of a German-Russian Pioneer Family." The articles feature the Woeszner family who settled near Ashley in the 1890s. This column focuses shares from the first article.

Prairies Magazine is available online at the South Dakota Germans from Russia Center, Northern State University, Aberdeen, S.D. Original copies of *Prairies* (1975-1986) are available at the GRHC Archives.

Andreas Woezner, and his wife Magdalena Stepper, were the parents Jakob, born September 12, 1866, in Beresina, Bessarabia (near Odessa, Ukraine). He was baptized in the Lutheran faith and confirmed in Kloestitz, Bessarabia.

Leona writes, "Andreas Sr. died when his son, Jakob, the grandfather of Leona Neu, was three years old. Andreas told us that in order to keep busy he had to move rock piles from one place to another. His sleeping quarters were in the cattle shelter among the stalls to keep watch over the horses and prevent from stealing.

On January 28, 1890, Jakob married Anna Maria Biederstadt, the daughter of Frederich Biederstadt and Elizabeth Klamens (born in Beresina in 1868). After a

few months of married life, Jakob Woezner and his wife, Anna Maria, left their families and homeland and started for the 'Promised Land' in America. Arriving April 9, 1890, their destination was Ellendale, North Dakota.

They purchased a wagon and supplies, a horse and an ox. Some of the relatives, who had arrived earlier, had homesteaded in McIntosh County. They were looking for land with rocks from which to build their first home. However, until they were ready to build, a hole was dug and the wagon box was turned upside down on the hole of shelter. It was all prairie as far as they could see. In 1897, a diphtheria epidemic crossed the country and the Woezners lost three children. Only little Christine survived.

They made their home and built up the farm. It had a large kitchen, parlor, and two bedrooms which were small. The entry had two doorways – one into the kitchen and the other led into the parlor. The reason for the latter doorway was that whenever there was death in the family, the coffin was at the home until the day of the funeral. The house had three bedrooms upstairs.

A summer kitchen was built west of the house. It had two large rooms. One for cooking area, and the other was the dining area. The use of the second house was to keep the big house cool and clean in the summer since the cook stove was the only means of heat for cooking and baking, summer and winter. A bench was outside with a wash basin and towels for the fieldworkers to wash up before mealtime. The older girls had to do the food preparation while the younger children had to gather the fuel for the stove. This could be cow droppings ("misht"), wood scraps, corn cobs, or whatever could be found that burned.

Providing for the family in those years took many hours of work. Grandmother Anna Maria would spin all of her own yarn to knit stockings, mittens and caps made from wool." Grandma's spinning wheel was repaired and refinished by Leona and a treasured lamp at her home.

"Dad Jacob J. never said much about his youth. His school years ended after the fifth grade. Until then he attended Beresina School #3. In 1920, when Jacob was a young man, he met Marie Sackmann. The occasion

was when about 1,500 people gathered in Ashley to attend a promotional event – an airplane was scheduled to land there. Jacob J. gathered enough courage to ask Marie if he could take her home. So, the romance began. Marie was the daughter of Andreas Sackmann and Karolina Schlabsz.

Mom Marie was born on a farm in Jewel district. It then had a sod house which consisted of two large rooms as bedrooms, with a lean-to for the kitchen and parlor. The home was heated by the cook stove in the kitchen. The sod houses were made of earth cut into squares with a spade and then dug up land laid in tiers. The walls were about two feet thick. The few windows were small, maybe about two feet square. The sod blocks were piled up to the ceiling or roof. The roof beams were laid across the top of the blocks, and the roof boards had a slight pitch. These were also covered with sod. The sod walls were plastered over with a clay soil mixed with water and straw and smeared over the sod blocks by hand. The sod houses were cool in summer and warm in winter. The floors at first were the earth, packed and swept smooth."

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 or email michael.miller@ndsu.edu.

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