

In Touch with Prairie Living

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



GERMANS FROM RUSSIA
GRHC
HERITAGE COLLECTION

I am looking forward to attending the 154th American Historical Society of Germans from Russia Convention in Oklahoma City from August 7-9, 2024, with Jeremy Kopp, GRHC interim director, and Wyatt Atchley, special collections archivist.

As I reflect back on July, I want to share a USA Today article from July 3, 1986, celebrating the 100th anniversary of the Statue of Liberty. It has been 138 years since 1886 when immigrants, including the Germans from Russia, arrived at Ellis Island, New York.

Allan Neuharth, a native of Eureka, S.D., was the founder of USA Today. His ancestors emigrated from the Glueckstal District villages in South Russia to South Dakota, in the 1880s.

The USA Today article includes: "For nine days, a family of seven boarded a steamer at the port of Bremen, northern Germany, to immigrate to America. Johann and Maria (Walz) Ellwein and their five children huddled with 602 other often-seasick passengers. The Ellwein family had come from South Russia to Bremen. On November 6, 1886, the ship steamed into New York Harbor, having crossed the Atlantic Ocean, and the Ellwein family became part of the biggest immigration movement in U.S. history.

"Today, the Ellwein family has grown to 1,000 U.S. descendants. The family journey actually began years before the 1886 ocean crossing. In 1804, Matthauss Ellwein, lured by the promise of farmland and independence, left Hemmingen, Germany, and traveled 1,700 miles to Russia, settling near the Black Sea. But in 1886, faced with mandatory service in the Russian Army and a loss of German traditions, the family joined the torrent of immigrants here.

"On that November arrival day in New York, the harbor was full of ships: 52 huge steamers and 42 square-rigged sailboats had been cleared through customs. Ten more incoming steamers and barks were lined up at Castle Garden immigrant station, an old fort that preceded Ellis Island's gateway. Up to 5,000 people came each day, totaling 30 million from 1880 to 1930.

"The Ellweins were lucky: All gained entry. Some immigrants, suffering from cholera or heart diseases, were rejected and

families were split up. Once in the city, the family encountered a noisy world of trains on elevated tracks, organ grinders, pushcarts, and horse-drawn carriages. Teddy Roosevelt had just lost the election in 1886 for mayor of New York. Signs offered bewildering choices in a new language: rooms for \$2, gambling houses on Broadway.

"The next day, the temperature plunged to 36 degrees, and the season's first snow fell. The Ellweins boarded a train for the Dakota Territory, where neighbors from Russia had already settled. They stayed with Maria's family, where their oldest daughter, Jacobina, 16, fell in love with her cousin, Chris Walz. They married three months after her arrival. They filed a homestead claim, built a sod house near Freeman, South Dakota, and had 13 children. Jacobina, who never learned English, used to read the Bible every night, aloud in German," recalls her grandson, John Galster, 69, of Sioux Falls, South Dakota.

"Electricity didn't come to the farms until the 1950s. Jacobina's house was heated with cow chips and corn cobs, and lit with kerosene. They cooled butter and cream in the artesian well. For half a century, there was no indoor plumbing.

"That spring, Johann and Maria led their children 400 miles north to a homestead on the bank of the Missouri River in North Dakota. They settled near the town of Mannhaven, a bit of fertile prairie without roads, stores, or schools. With rock and felled trees, the settlers slowly built a thriving town. But life was not easier in the north. Neighbor John Kruckenburg later recalled for oral historians five years of crop failure when many a child didn't have shoes on their feet all winter long. Another neighbor tied old grain sacks around his feet for shoes. Smallpox, scarlet fever, and tonsillitis outbreaks killed children.

"In the 1940s, while many of the children moved away and had children of their own, the economy improved. Families built barns and windmills while government teams stretched the network of roads. From the 1930s to the 1960s, Ellwein, Walz, and Bauer children joined the migration from farms to cities, from the Dakotas to the Sunbelt and eastern states."

Dr. Armand Bauer was a great-grandson

of Johann Ellwein. Bauer was one of the founders of the North Dakota Historical Society of Germans from Russia in 1970, which later became the Germans from Russia Heritage Society (GRHS) in Bismarck. He was the founding editor of *Heritage Review* for many years. I have fond memories of visits with Armand when he was on the faculty in soil sciences at NDSU. We often discussed his vision for the development of a historical society for North Dakota's Germans from Russia community.

Bauer tells the type of hardship stories that make teenagers roll their eyes, "As an eight-year-old farm boy, it was my job to break down the coal in the coal bin, and it took a whole summer to earn \$2 to buy a jacket."

The Welk Homestead State Historic Site near Strasburg, North Dakota, is open until Labor Day weekend from Thursdays to Sundays, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. For more information, visit www.history.nd.gov/historicsites/welk.

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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