

# GRHS: Yesterday, Today, and Forever

by Cynthia "Cindy" (Frank) Stupnik

“Study the past if you would define the future.”  
Confucius

I was young enough to be able to be in the bathroom with my father as he shaved but old enough to remember my first history lesson about our family's heritage. I watched with fascination as Dad lathered his face. The mirror started to steam over when he made the first pass on day-old black stubble. As pink stripes began to show, he told me about Catherine the Great and her invitation to Germans like us to settle in Russia. This wasn't the only history lesson I received from my dad. Over the years, I learned about his pride in his ancestry, the sacrifices many made, and the hardships he and other family members experienced. But without their sacrifices, those of us who call ourselves German Russians would not be able to call America our home. Like those pioneers on two continents believed, in order to live for today and plan for the future, we need to embrace our past.

From my dad and my own research, I learned that life wasn't easy for any of our ancestors. Although he didn't know much about the years they lived in Germany, he knew what they forsook when they left their homeland to take advantage of Catherine the Great's offers for free land, freedom of religion, freedom from paying taxes, and freedom from serving in the Russian military. Years before railways made for easy transportation, many Germans loaded their belongings onto wagons and walked the hundreds of miles to their Russian destinations. Numerous individuals died along the way, while others suffered more misery after they settled in this foreign, primitive, and nearly inhabitable Russian land. As I researched our families from various sources available to me as a member of the German Russia Heritage Society, I found many entries for deaths of infants, youth, mothers, and fathers. Although information doesn't

specify what they died from, other historical texts indicate that until the 1900's the infant mortality rate all over the world was high. In addition, various world-wide epidemics like smallpox, diphtheria, measles, and typhus ran rampant and even simple colds and influenza turned into pneumonia quickly. It was not unusual for husbands and wives to have two, three, or more marriage partners, making for many blended families. For instance, sometime before 1848, my great-great-grandmother, Magdalena Muetzel, married Lorenz Wagner from Neu-Danzig. She had three children when he died around 1858. She then married my great-great-grandfather Gottfried Hauck who died six months their son, my great-grandfather, Michael was born in 1859. In 1861, Magdalena Hauck married Georg Jasmann and had son Heinrich. Then she died. Georg married for the third time to Catharina Barbara Mueller Diede Kussler. She had children from her previous marriages before she and Jasmann had son Frederich. Although other hardships abounded, plagues of grasshoppers, crop failures, floods, drought, and raids by Cossacks, our families were determined to protect their culture and to provide a better way of life for themselves and future generations. Consequently, their initial step of faith made the Germans and their motherland an experimental, agricultural success in Russia and the world.

When the United States opened the west for homesteading, many German Russians decided it was time to look for a new home. Simply put, Russia began to take back her promises. In the 1870's with Russian interest in creating a strong nationalism, Germans could no longer count on maintaining their own culture. Those who read the tracts that were posted around the world about free land followed their instincts and came to America for a new beginning.

Although my dad, Harold Frank, was the orphan of Frederich and Anna Maria Hauck Frank, he was raised by cousins, Emil and Emma Engel, who made sure he knew his heritage and the price these pioneers paid for their new-found freedoms. Dad's relatives were part of the

first German-Russian settlement in Odessa, Yankton, Dakota Territory. These folks, like those to follow, left behind established homes and farms to do just what their predecessors had done when they settled in Russia. At first, many lived in dugouts or sod huts and toiled for years breaking the virgin sod to raise wheat like they had in Russia. They experienced the wild Dakota prairie that provided few trees for shelter from winter storms, the intense summer sun, and the ever-present wind. They endured drought, prairie fires, small pox, and diphtheria that nearly wiped out whole families. Odessa Township's Hoffnung Cemetery, what we referred to as our family burial ground because everyone buried there is related to us, testifies to what these families went through for freedom. Johann Georg and his wife Rosina Saylor Engel buried five children within five years. Karl and Maria Engel Ziegele who had lost two other children in the 1890's, buried five more in 1893 from a diphtheria outbreak. Dad knew the Engels and Franks also were cursed with tuberculosis. His great aunts Carolina and Elizabeth died in the early 1890's from the disease before their mother, Rosina Engel Frank, died in 1896. Later, two more uncles and an aunt succumbed from TB, joining the rest of the family in the Hoffnung Cemetery.

While there was misery and suffering, the early German-Russians left a legacy that can still be seen all over the country. For the first time, winter wheat was able to endure Dakota's harsh climates. Existing towns like Yankton, Lesterville, and Scotland flourished. *The Yankton Press*, dated August 23, 1873, stated that the first groups had contracted approximately fifty homes to be built in northern Yankton County. It goes on to say that in Yankton, "times are lively" as one thousand dollar bills "are in circulation," creating a "greenback harvest." These early settlers built churches and schools, and towns like Freeman and Menno sprang up because of them. We, the offspring of these immigrants, enjoy the liberties for which they had to pay

dearly. So what can we do as a genealogical and historical society to preserve the foundation they set for us?

For now there are steps we can take to maintain our culture. As a secondary and now post-secondary English teacher, I have been asked by students what nationality I am. Some think I am Swedish or Norwegian because of my “Uffdas.” I correct them and proudly explain, yes, I am part Swedish and learned the phrase from my mother, but I am mostly German. I then give them a quick lesson in how my people came to help settle the west. Even though I have to get them to complete rigorous local, state and federal English requirements, I figure a couple minutes of extra teaching time will not hurt, and I am sure their geography and history teachers appreciate it too. I have often been surprised that students don’t know where countries are. When Sochi sponsored the Olympics, I took the time to show students where the city was on the map, and told them a bit of history about that part of Russia. Then when the Ukraine and Russia began fighting over Ukraine’s independence, again students asked where Crimea was. This prompted another teaching opportunity to show them on the map where the great peninsula was. At that point, I told them about how some of my German Russian kin settled there and why. I proceeded to include their arrival in America and settlement in Yankton County. While I was still teaching high school English, we had a special all-school, family-history project. Speech, history, geography, English, and even the sciences joined in to create interest in family roots. Students learned interviewing techniques to ask the right questions from family members about their heritage. Some learned they were living on century farms and who their distant homesteading relatives were. Those who were direct descendants of homesteaders learned what crop worked best for their soil. They learned the proper technique to write their family histories

and cite their sources. All of us teachers were surprised at how much interest we gleaned for this project from students, their parents, and the community.

More can be done, though, especially for those of us who are descended from Germans from Russia. In this age, when young people are preoccupied with various extra-curricular activities, video games, and maybe some activities that aren't so healthy, we have to light a spark of interest however we can. Parents like mine and grandparents, aunts, and uncles can make sure their families continue to know about the history of the Germans who went to Russia before settling in America. Few families are pure blood anything anymore, so it is even more important now for everyone to understand that we didn't just show up on the soil. We were born here because of other people's labor and endurance.

Like our ancestors who were forward thinkers, everyone has to do his or her part to keep the interest in family heritage and the German Russian Historical Society moving ahead. When I took over as president of the South Dakota State Poetry Society, I knew that we had work to do to maintain and create interest in poetry and the society throughout the state. We re-created ourselves. We started sponsoring various poetry readings wherever anyone wanted to hear us. We became part of the South Dakota Arts Council and helped with the poetry track at the Festival of the Books. We sponsored events like poetry day at the state fair because we knew that the youth are the answer for the future. I asked our district superintendent if our society could make a visit to various elementary schools to listen to original poems written by the youth. Although many of the teachers were preparing for required exams, she found one or two teachers from each of the four elementary schools to plan a poetry unit. When we arrived on the fall day in 2008, teachers told us that students were excitedly waiting for us so they could read what they had composed. We, South Dakota poets and our state poet laureate David Evans, had a glorious

day listening to children recite. Representatives from GRHS can do similar projects. In groups, they can approach the school superintendents and ask if they'd be willing to bring in volunteers to the classrooms to discuss family history. It takes some scheduling because after No Child Left Behind, teachers have to work like crazy to get everything covered in their curriculum, but as I was told, it can be done and students are eager to tell stories about their grandparents, aunts, and uncles, and they are willing to learn.

GRHS and its members should continue to support its many excellent endeavors, but the society, like the majority of the world needs to lasso the various media. As I help others in their search for family history, I appreciate what GRHS has already done. The online Odessa Digital Library has been to the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century what Karl Stumpp's book was to early researchers. The woman and manpower to do all this was extensive. The various GRHS census books, like the *Waterloo: Beresan District 1858 Census*, at our disposal to purchase or take out on loan have helped me and others piece together family lineages. With the blessings of so many offspring of original homesteaders, I was able to research and write the first and second edition of *Steppes to Neu Odessa: Germans from Russia Who Settled in Odessa Township, Dakota Territory, 1872-1876* about the first groups to establish themselves in Dakota Territory. The society can continue to help sponsor or support PBS documentaries about the German-Russian culture; so many areas in the country are also PBS-worthy. It can continue to encourage youth and adult interest by holding exciting and informational conventions. It can encourage interest in the society by continuing to sponsor youth and adult essay contests. It can continue to create interest in the society, its current members, and those people who have given us a history by providing interesting stories through the quarterly *Heritage Review*. But now we no longer have to walk,

take long ship trips, or dirty train rides to reach our destinations. We can continue to travel on the wings of the Internet to spread the word about who we are and what we represent.

Dad taught me to be proud of my heritage. Years later, once I saw the 1880 Yankton County Census microfilms and saw family names of those long dead, I was hooked into learning more about my ethnicity and the Germans from Russia. I joined the society many years ago. Every quarter, I eagerly wait for my copy of *Heritage Review* in which I have had poetry and an article published and read the interesting articles, always hoping for another clue to answer another genealogical quest. Yet for me, none of this would have taken place without that initial spark of interest Dad created while I watched him shave.