

# **German-Russian Memories written by Jim Dick of Englevale, ND** **Written for Englevale's 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary in 2006**

*Edited by Kendra Thompson*

## **Heinrich Dick's Immigration to America**

“We are going to America”, Heinrich Dick told his family one night in 1891 as he dragged his battered body through the doorway into their home in Norka, Russia. Events leading up to his painful experience began when his great great grandfather responded to an offer from Catherine the Great, ruler of Russia, to leave his home in Germany and take up farming in Russia. At the time, farming was very backward on the vast areas of her country and Catherine wanted to hurry development so she offered German farmers the opportunity to own land, keep their own identity and be exempt from being drafted into the army if they would come and farm in Russia.

So in 1787 Conrad and Margaretha Dick immigrated to Norka, Russia and for several generations things went well. But then the Russian government put restrictions on land ownership, began drafting young men into the Russian army (which was close to a one way ticket), and looked the other way when gangs began to brutalize farm families of German descent. So that night in 1891 as Heinrich was walking home from the grocery store, a group of Russians robbed and clubbed him and left him for dead. That was it for Heinrich. Within several months he and his family immigrated to America working in Nebraska until 1904 when they were able to purchase land near Englevale. Also arriving at the same time was Heinrich Dick's sister Katherina, who, with her husband, Heinrich Urbach and family purchased a farm on adjoining land. At the time there wasn't a cemetery or church in the area so Mr. Dick set aside a plot for a cemetery and Mr. Urbach offered a plot directly across the road where later on a new church would be built. I never met old Great-Grandpa Heinrich but came to appreciate him because my dad (Lawrence) told me so much about him. My dad and his grandpa Heinrich were very close buddies and the young boy thought that his grandpa was the most fun and smartest person around. He tried to be with his grandpa as much as possible, often following him out into the fields. One day as Heinrich was raking hay, young Lawrence was with him and ran alongside trying to figure out what caused the rake to dump the hay at the windrows.

As Heinrich drove his team back and forth across the mowed field, he would make distracting motions, then secretly trip the pedal that dumped the hay at the proper time. The two of them were very close even though one was young and completely carefree and the other was much older and had adult cares to think about.

Things had gone well for Heinrich. By 1914 at the age of 62 he could feel really good about his life in America. He owned land, had built a new house, he had cattle and horses, and had built several big barns. He had a grainary with a pit and elevator leg, a blacksmith shop, a steam engine with a large thresher, and an ice house on the farm that

they would fill in the winter with large blocks cut from the Englevale slough that would provide fresh ice throughout the summer. He also had a loving wife, Dorothea, a large family, and many friends and neighbors. He had helped set up a community cemetery and was looking forward to the building of a new church. He was strong of body and mind and everything with this new life in America was as good as it could be.

Then, in July of 1914 while working in the hay field, Heinrich came down with a deadly form of pneumonia. In those days there wasn't much for help in a case like that. When the doctor came out he told the family that Heinrich would shortly die. The family all gathered at the house to give support and wait. Of course nine year old Lawrence had to be there also. His turn came to go into the sick room to visit with his grandpa and Lawrence recalled later that while they were visiting Heinrich asked, "Why are those people out in the hall crying?" Then, after they had talked some more, Heinrich spoke to Lawrence in German and said, "Now I would like to be alone because I need to pray". Young Lawrence went out into the hall where the family was and after a moment a member went in to check on Heinrich and announced that he had passed away.

With Heinrich gone the building of the church across from the cemetery was put on hold and, in fact, was never built because the Norwegians, Swedes, Danes, etc., who had a congregation at Englevale, invited the German families to join with them in building the Good Shepherd Church which is still active.

The story of Heinrich Dick is very much like that of the many others, men and women alike, who left Europe and immigrated to this area to begin a new life. Each one of them has left a part of themselves behind that we can remember and celebrate during this time of 125th anniversaries.

### **Philip and Mary (Stroh) Dick**

As we look forward to celebrating the 125th of Englevale, we take time to remember the people who came before us and we enjoy recalling the kind of people they were and how they handled their lives. Philip and Mary (Stroh) Dick were two of the people who played an important part in this area's history. In 1891, Philip, with his parents and siblings, came to America from the Norka colony in Russia and stopped over in Nebraska. About the same time, Mary Stroh and family left from the Frank colony in Russia and also set down in Nebraska. Philip and Mary met there, were married, and after a few years, came to ND where they bought a farm near Englevale.

They represented the last generation of true immigrants to settle in this area. There wasn't much development on the land they bought and the first year they lived in a shed while they built their house. Their first two children, Dorothy and Lawrence, were born in Nebraska and six more were added after they were settled on their new farm. Philip and Mary were both very strong individuals, as the people of their generation had to be. Philip could be determined and hard, but also very kind and gentle. My dad, Lawrence, told me how an older cousin from Nebraska was visiting. One day as they were out in the barnyard, he began throwing rocks at the barn windows. Lawrence and his little

brother, William, didn't know any better and joined right in. When Philip came home and saw the carnage, he asked his two little boys who did it. They answered, "We did". He understood their innocence and spared them any punishment, but roundly scolded the older boy.

Philip was interested in the immigrants who passed through Englevale and would often meet the train to see if any of them might have news of his uncles and cousins who had stayed behind in Russia. One time he brought a family to his farm to rest up and in the morning the immigrant lady was sitting on a stool in the kitchen combing her long hair that reached down almost to the floor. Dad said that he was standing close by and was fascinated by little creatures that were running up her hair trying to keep from being combed out. Mary saw this also and whisked her kids out of the room. When the lady left, she scrubbed the part of the house that the visitors had been in with hot water and strong lye soap.

Many stories are told of how Mary responded to the many challenges she faced. One day, her sister Katherine came running from across the field to Mary's house. Mary was home alone with her children and Katherine said that her husband John Keiser was threatening to kill her. Mr. Keiser had the reputation of being the meanest man around so Mary hid her sister by parting a mattress and hiding her in the bed. That was possible because the stuffing was of soft corn husks, (that were replaced each fall at corn picking time), and with effort could be shaped. Mean man Keiser searched every inch of the house, but did not find Katherine. He left soon after checking the house because he didn't want to be there when Philip came home. After this, Katherine left Keiser and went back to Nebraska where she had relatives.

During the summers back then it was not unusual for bums to stop by for a free meal and Mary would hand a plate full of food out the door. Dad remembered one day when a bum came to the door and their farm dog that was resting on a pad behind the cook stove began to let out a low growl. Mary answered the door and told the bum that she would hand a plate of food out to him. He sensed that she was alone with none of the men folk around and announced that he was coming in. As he forced the door open and came into the kitchen, Mary called the dog, which chased the bum out of the house tearing his clothes off him all the way to the road.

Then there was the time when Lawrence and his little brother, William, were out at the windmill. It was not pumping water at the time as the pin was not in place, so the lift rod was simply sliding up and down in the sleeve. Little William was watching as the empty pin hole was going by and poked his finger in to check it out. His finger got bit off, so they ran to the house to tell their mother. Mary promptly found the finger, packed it in ice, hitched up the running horse and a doctor in Lisbon sewed the finger back on. It turned out perfect except for a slight kink.

Women during those days had to be extra self-sufficient and capable. During a stormy night in December of 1919, Mary knew that her seventh child was about to arrive. This was a little more of a problem than normal because her husband, Philip, was in Saint Paul

selling a load of cattle and the weather was so bad that night that Mary wouldn't ask anyone to go out in the blizzard to come to her aid. She delivered the baby herself, and two days later, when Philip walked in the door, he was handed his newest baby daughter. Another time when Mary rose to the occasion was several years later when my dad Lawrence hurried to Mary's house expecting to use her telephone. The problem was that company was over and the people were sitting next to the wall where the telephone hung. Dad was too embarrassed to call the doctor in front of all those people to say that his wife Ruby was starting to have a baby, so he quietly told his mother and Mary hurried home with him and delivered the baby (who turned out to be me).

We have all heard that this is a man's world and stories of the early settlers are more often the achievements of the men. But the really good things in this community would not have come about if it weren't for the many women like Mary Dick.

### **How Lawrence Met Ruby**

When we look back at the 125 years of Englevale's history, we think of the first immigrants, the homesteaders who came and claimed their piece of the bare prairie. We admire them for their bravery and determination. As time went on they were followed by other immigrants who had to purchase their land, often from mortgage companies or from private investors who had foreclosed on the original settlers. The younger generation of this second group of immigrants quickly populated and developed the countryside and the towns. On their farms this meant going from the horse to the steam engine and on to the automobile. They put in the telephone poles and built the roads, churches, and schools. Their children comprised the first complete generation of native born citizens in our local communities. It was they who set the tone for the society which we now enjoy. My parents were part of that group and it is sad to see that most of that generation has now passed away, but the few who are still with us would have many interesting stories to tell. My Dad, Lawrence, was born in Nebraska in 1905 and came to the Englevale area with his parents Philip and Mary to the farm they purchased in April, 1906. Stories are told of Lawrence as a lad being a bit mischievous and having to escape from a lot of situations. Early in his life, he had plans of going on in school and becoming a school teacher. The morning when he thought he would start high school, he came down from his room dressed for school and his dad Philip asked, "Where do you think you are going? There's a team for you hitched up to the plow and we have work to do". That was the end of his plans for high school.

Lawrence worked for his dad for several years. When he was 17 years old, his uncle Ed Mueller convinced Philip that Lawrence should come to Wisconsin and work with him. Ed was a dairy farmer carpenter and didn't have any sons, so his nephew would fit right in. Lawrence helped with the farm work and also had a job working in the local lumber mill. Those were very happy times for Lawrence, but after a year it was time to return to the family farm where he again worked for Philip. He was now a grown young man and after a time, started to think about a girl he had met in Wisconsin while living with his

uncle Ed. He wrote a letter to her but did not receive a reply. He thought enough of her so that he got up courage again and wrote to her the second time. Again no reply, so he got on with his life. Then, a friend, Albert Stroh, invited him to go on a double date to see a movie in Enderlin. Albert and his steady girl knew a young woman who would double date to the movie, so Albert, with his new car and date picked up Lawrence and then drove south of Lisbon to meet Lawrence's blind date. She was a cute girl and Lawrence was very impressed but puzzled as they neared Lisbon because she was laying down on the floor of the car. This was more than a little unusual. She explained that she was engaged to a man from Lisbon and didn't want to be seen stepping out. But the evening turned out okay with everyone getting to see a good movie. Later, the girl married her betrothed and together they left many descendants in the Lisbon area.

But Lawrence was still without a steady until he met a local farm girl, Ruby Hallquist, whom he married in 1926. Ruby and Lawrence were just getting started in farming when the crash of 1929 came, followed by the drought and the low farm prices of the "dirty 30's". Many of the banks closed and kept the money that the people could have used to pay on their mortgage. Land foreclosures and the sale of land for taxes was a regular occurrence and every farmer was hard pressed to survive. The cream check and the sale of eggs was the only source of steady income for many. The Dick farm kept both milk and beef cows, pigs, and chickens for eggs and meat, and also a few turkeys. One fall in about 1932 Lawrence and Ruby had 30 turkeys ready for market when they heard that a Jew was coming to Lisbon looking for New York Dressed Turkeys for the Thanksgiving market. "New York Dressed" meant stuck and plucked with the heads still on and the entails still in the bird. So the day before the buyer arrived, Lawrence and his hired man, George Falk, killed and plucked those 30 turkeys and hung them to cool. Dad said that the next morning those birds looked real tough. Their skin was covered with unsightly patches caused by the hurried removal of the feathers and he feared the buyer might reject the whole lot. But he loaded them into the back seat of the '29 Chevy and headed for Lisbon. The buyer needed turkeys and offered 75 cents a lb., which to dad was like winning the lottery. Lots of hard work and a little luck was the recipe for hanging on during the depression. By 1938 the war in Europe was starting and the rains came bringing good crops for a rising market. Lawrence and Ruby, like the neighbors around them, worked hard all of their lives, skimping on themselves to raise their family and keep the farm. Looking back, I would have to say that my mother and dad were a good match, but perhaps things might have turned out differently. Years later, after dad's mother Mary had died at the age of 97, his older sister, Dora, said to him, "Lawrence, remember when you wrote to that girl in Wisconsin and you thought that she didn't respond? She really did answer your letters, twice. Our mother burned those letters because she was afraid that you would go to Wisconsin again and raise your family there."

This might seem like something a mother shouldn't do, but having family close meant so much to Grandma Mary. The German families lived close together in the colony in Russia and when they came here, they put great importance on the families buying land that touched each others. So Grandma Mary got her best wishes. Lawrence married a local farm girl and raised two daughters who became school teachers and four sons who

farmed land close by. Now in 2006 family members find it less possible to live their lives close to home territory, and we have come to accept that.