

Volga German Customs

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I. Calendar Customs.

A. New Year's.

[B]New Year's customs were a little bit different among our people. Our people had a habit of wishing each other happy New Year each New Year's morning very early. That is, of course, winter time, and it is dark at that time, but it was not unusual I know for people to come to our door at five o'clock in the morning, and you had better be up at that time of the morning. They were always using— The older boys, the teenagers, would always use a shotgun or something to be sure you knew they were coming, or that you knew they were outside the door. The small ones would have cap pistols, and they would come in and wish you a happy New Year, which in literal translation was a little bit longer than the ordinary "Wishing you a happy New Year," because in addition to a happy New Year you wished them unity and happiness in this life and life in the ever after. There was a little significance attached to that.¹

Everybody had to be ready with something to give to these wünschers and wishing this happy New Year. The older folks, of course—that is, the teenage boys, those which were of marriageable age—they would normally go to the place where there were girls of that age, and the girls were there with ribbons. They would attach a ribbon to the lapel of the boy who they wished a happy New Year. Or if for— Incidentally, there were several colors of ribbons; if there was a boy they particularly liked, the girl had one color of ribbon for him, and another color ribbon for the usual run of the boys. But the small children, boys and girls together, when they came to wish happy New Year, they usually got candy, nuts, and things like that, which was a carry-over from probably St. Nicholas Day, and when people in Germany used to give nuts and candy and sweets. I know that it was quite an event for us; several days before New Year's we would try to get a big box of some kind. We would be— In later years, little sacks

As collected from Lawrence A. Weigel, Hays, 1958: "Ich wünsche Euch ein gluckseliges Neujahr, langes Leben, Gesundheit, Friede und Enigkeit, nach dem Tode die ewige Gluckseligkeit." *Translated*. I wish you a happy New Year, long life, health, peace and unity, and after death eternal happiness. [Reprinted from *Kansas Folklore*, p. 200, by permission of the University of Nebraska Press.]

in the grocery store. We bought the sacks—and the local grocer knew that they had to have the sacks on hand—and we would buy the sacks, and we would fill them: so many peanuts in each; one apple in each; so many pieces of this candy and so many pieces of that candy; and usually a penny in the bottom of that. If you had a particular good friend of the family, there was a nickel or a dime. It all depended on if you were a close relative or not a close relative. If you were a godchild you might get considerably more than that.

Now that was the wünsching. It would continue, so far as the people generally were concerned, for the New Year's Day. But actually the older people would go wünsching for the next five days, until the Feast of the Three Kings—that is, the sixth of January. And the older folks, instead of getting, of course, their sweets, would just sit and visit and get their drinks of liquor, and there was always something to eat; that is, the eats were standing on the table, and if anybody would come in, well—if you wanted to eat a little something, or if you wanted to drink a little whiskey, why, they were in the mood to eat a little bit.

B. Holy Week.

[B]...those of you folks who may be going to the Catholic Church know that during Holy Week, the latter part of Holy Week, we don't ring the bells. The bells, especially in the small communities—and this is traditional in Germany—ring to call the people to church. In our community, of course, the bells rang usually at the half-hour before church time with a single bell, and then at a quarter till or ten till, depending on how big the town was or how far the people were away, why, the bells would all ring together, usually three of 'em, telling you that this was fifteen minutes before time and you'd better get on your horses to get there. Well, towards the end of Holy Week we don't have that; we have what we call "clappers." In church, for instance, instead of having our little bells to call attention to the important parts of the Mass, why, they used these wooden clappers. And in these communities they would—the servers would go around with the clappers in town, had pretty good sized ones, to do the clapping down the street instead of having the bell ring for the first time, the bell ringing for the second time.

And then as a reward for doing that service to the people, on Easter Day, usually the servers would come, and they would knock on each door with the clappers, and they would say:

Glapper, glapper, Eier 'raus,

Somst schlage ich dir ein Loch in 's Haus!

Which is the equivalent of "I'm rapping for eggs, and if you don't give me eggs I'll knock a hole in your house," or something like that, and they would get the eggs and sweets as a reward for that.

[T]...A custom which disappeared in Hays, but which still exists in Schoenchen, Park, Antonino, and Munjor is that of summoning the people to devotions on Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday by striking wooden clappers, rather than by the ringing of bells....

In the homes of the early German-Russians, no cooking was permitted on Good Friday. The older people would fast all day; the smaller children would frequently only eat wheat grains on this day. No washing of any sort was permitted on Good Friday among many German-Russians. One informant related that this custom went back to a popular fable of Our Lord. When Christ was carrying His cross on the way to Golgatha, He passed a woman washing, and the smell was very offensive to Him. He cursed her and moved on. When He passed a woman baking, He stopped and said: "Blessed is she who bakes on this day." Baking was, therefore, permitted on this day according to some. On Holy Saturday the altar boys would visit the different parishioners and receive Easter eggs for their faithfulness as servers at church services. They would frequently sell the eggs to the local store and split the money which would have been frowned upon if anyone had found out.

C. Christmas.

[T]...The German-Russians preserved a number of unusual customs during the Christmastide and also preceding it. In Victoria, Kansas, it was customary to have a rough, mean person dressed as St. Nicholas who would come to the home to check up on the discipline of the children, often reprimanding them for past offenses. At best, he would give out peanuts to the good children, but never candy and cookies. Other German-Russians celebrated St. Nicholas Day with more joy and gift-giving. One custom practiced by some German-Russians was an arrangement whereby the mother of the family would choose an evening a few days before Christmas during which the children were gathered in one room, and then would rattle the screen on the outside of the window. The purpose of this was to draw the children's attention and then show them different presents, while she was hidden from their sight. The idea was to impress upon the children that good children will receive many fine gifts at Christmas.

II. *Customs of Significant Personal Occasions.*

A. Birth.

[T] In Catherine, Kansas, visiting a woman who recently had given birth and presenting her with certain foods is a practice still commonly observed by relatives. The food is designated as "Vateressen" and consists of noodle soup, peaches, fried chicken, and angel-food cake with coconut. In Victoria, Kansas, prune soup was

substituted for noodle soup. My informants were unable to explain precisely the reasons for the particular dishes served.

B. First Communion and Confirmation.

[T]In the religious life of the German-Russians, as in that of all Catholics, the second momentous occasion after baptism was the receiving of the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. No one left the settlement in former times on First Holy Communion Sunday, whether a youngster of the family was receiving the sacrament for the first time or not. Presents were always given to the new communicants. A gold cross was always given to a girl-communicant and a small statue, usually of St. Joseph, to the boy.

The administration of Confirmation by the Bishop annually highlighted the public religious ceremonies of the early settlers. The Bishop, who journeyed from Concordia, formerly the Episcopal See of the present-day Salina Diocese, was met at the Victoria railroad station with much enthusiasm and splendor. He was solemnly escorted from village to village. When the bishop, for example, was to go to Catherine, men from the town on horseback, bedecked with multi-colored ribbons, would meet His Excellency half way from the previous place where he administered the sacrament and then escort him to Catherine. The Papal and American flags were displayed on all the houses and the bishop was escorted in the finest carriage.

C. Weddings.

[D]Informal groups composed of teen-age boys of the village were formed for recreational purposes. These groups, or comrades as they were commonly known, usually consisted of eight to twelve boys. The girls formed similar groups, but they did not congregate on the street corners as the boys were accustomed to do. It was customary for the girls to take a leisurely stroll to town on Sundays; their primary purpose was to meet the boys of a certain comrade....

If a boy was too bashful and shy to meet and talk with girls, the father would select several eligible young women and go to their homes and attempt to arrange a marriage for his son with one of the girls. "Rarely were the marriages arranged without the daughter's consent. On the other side it may be said that rarely did the daughters object to their parents' decisions."² Frequently, however, when a Russian-German youth wished to be married to a certain girl, he asked two of his elderly men friends to act as *Freiersmänner*, or matrimonial agents, for him. Very often these two men were the boy's father and godfather. The young man and his agents went to the girl's home. There they visit-

²Mrs. John Dreiling, interview at Victoria, Kansas January 3, 1958, concerning her experiences at the early-day weddings.

ed with the girl's parents, and the *Freiersmänner* informed the parents of the request of their client....

[T]...Marriages between individuals of different settlements were looked upon as "mixed marriages." When a Munjor boy, for example, married a Victoria girl, it was unfortunate. Frequently, fisticuffs resulted on account of a "mixed" wedding. Often, the young men on horseback from the one village would "drag Main" of the other settlement involved in the marriage, firing shotguns and, in general, looking for trouble. One informant, it is interesting to note, reported that intermarriage between the German-Russians ("die Rusland Deutsche") and the Germans of Walker, Kansas ("die Plattdeutsche"), was unheard of and never practiced, as a matter of record, before 1900.

[D] The dowry was decided on either during the visit of the matrimonial agents and the young man or at some later time before the marriage. The bride's dowry consisted of household utensils, linens, and supplies. The young man received land and farm machinery. Many times the father gave his son land from his own farm. For example, if the father owned 640 acres, he gave a quarter of it to his son. "If the couple planned to live with the husband's parents for a time after marriage, they received the land and farm machinery when they moved into a home of their own."³

As a rule, the period of engagement was not long. The maximum length of time was several weeks or the time that it took to prepare for the wedding. Most marriages took place immediately after the Lenten season or during the autumn months after harvest. Tuesday was a popular day for weddings.

The groom and his mother selected and paid for the bride's trousseau. ...The prospective bride was taken along when her clothes were purchased. She was allowed to help select her wedding clothes. Very often the trousseau consisted of two and three dresses. The morning dress was made of silk or some other better grade of material. There was no definite color, but blue was frequently used. The afternoon dress was made of cotton, while the evening dress was usually a white print. The bride wore either black or brown shoes. She carried no flowers; however, she did carry a prayer book and rosary. Some brides wore glass beads as ornaments. The veil, which extended to the floor, was held secure by a wreath; the more beautiful the wreath, the more beautiful was the costume as far as the people were concerned. Both the veil and the wreath were removed after the bride changed to the second or third dress.

³Mrs. Pauline Goetz, interview at Victoria, Kansas, January 3, 1958, concerning her experiences at the early-day weddings.

It was, and still is, customary for the banns to be published in the Catholic Church for three successive Sundays immediately before the actual date of the wedding....On the Sunday when the banns were published for the second time, the young couple went to their relatives' homes and invited them to the coming celebration. On the Sunday when the banns were announced for the third and last time, the fathers of the bridal couple appointed two men to invite neighbors and friends to the wedding with invitations known as *Nötigen* or *Einladen*. The men carried canes; as they went from house to house, it was customary for someone to tie a ribbon to the cane as a mark of acceptance. The invitation was usually in verse, sometimes impromptu....

[Collected from Lawrence Weigel, Hays, 5 May 1958; translated by Dr. Hans Beerman, Kansas State College of Pittsburg. Reprinted from *Kansas Folklore*, pp. 132-133, by permission of the University of Nebraska Press.]

Wir kommen nicht hergeritten,
Wir kommen sicher geschritten;
Braut und Brautegam, sie lassen Euch bitten,
Sie lassen Euch laden insgemein,
Ihr sollt auch Hochzeitsgaeste sein,
Zehn Gaens—die muessen dran,
Neunzehn Huehner und der alte Hahn,
Die sind gefuettert und so fett,
Wie ein altes Wagenbrett,
Dann kommt auch gleich die Kathrin Woes,
Und kocht auch gleich die dicken Kloess;
Sie kocht sie nach Belieben,
Und kocht auch gleich die roten Rueben.
Potz Blitz! Was faellt mir ein!
Ich hab' ja vergessen den Branntwein,
Wenn Ihr uns unser Stoecklein ziert,
So sagen wir auch wo Ihr hin-gehoert.

We do not come on horseback
We come staidly on foot
Bride and bridegroom, they ask you
To be invited all together
You shall also be wedding guests
Ten geese—they have to end in the pot
Nineteen chickens and the old rooster,
They have been fed to be as fat
As an old chopping block
Then Kathrin Woes comes right away

And cooks the fat dumplings
She cooks according to her own way
And cooks the red beets right away
Heavens...what am I thinking about?
I have forgotten the brandy....
If you will grace our premises
We will tell you where you belong.

[D]...The invitation was well received by all, and the people usually treated the men to refreshments--especially to a drink of their favorite beverage. On the Sundays when the banns were published at Mass, the couple went to a neighboring village to attend church.

The day previous to the marriage was full of excitement, and it certainly was not a day for relaxing. On this day the cooks prepared the meat and all foods which had to be cooked beforehand. The cooking was done at the place where the feast was to be the next day. If there were not enough chairs, tables, and cooking utensils available, someone would go to the homes in the village and gather such items from friends and relatives. "The evening before a wedding, known as *Polterabend* (racket eve), was given over to music, dancing, and general merry making."⁴ The party was as lively as the name implies. It was given for anyone who helped with the preparations for the wedding. The prospective bride and groom did not usually attend.

On the day of the wedding the groom, his parents, and his attendants walked to the bride's home. Upon reaching her home, the young couple knelt on a white cloth spread on the floor to receive the blessing of their parents and relatives who were present. The procession then formed to go to church. The couple walked together, followed by their attendants and relatives. Frequently young men, called *Schusser* (the shooters), walked on the side carrying guns. Some shooting was in evidence....

The ceremony took place during Mass. The most common hour was 8:00 A. M. However, if there were more than one marriage scheduled for that particular day, it was not uncommon for the first couple to be married at 6:00 A. M. As the couple walked down the aisle after the wedding ceremony, the choir sang a German song....

[B]...For some reason or other the servers always fixed it so they could get out to the back door before the married couple could get to the back door, and servers would stand on one side of the aisle and servers on the other side with a little rope to keep them from going

⁴Marjorie Gamett Raish, *Victoria: The Story of a Western Kansas Town*, Fort Hays Kansas State College Studies, No. 3, p. 69

out until they had tipped. Quite often the best man would do the tipping to the servers, but quite often it was the bridegroom himself.

[D] If the wedding festivities were to be a long distance from the church, perhaps in the country, there would be wagons waiting outside the church for the bridal party. The wagons were gaily decorated; the horses had bells or ribbons on their harnesses and tassels on their bridles. The young couple and their attendants rode on one wagon; another wagon was for the musicians and shooters. As they went through town, the musicians played the violin and dulcimer and much shooting was in evidence. If the marriage celebration was to be in town, the bridal party, musicians, and shooters walked to the home.

Upon arrival at the home, the bridal couple stood at the main entrance to the house to accept the congratulations of all, which consisted of a handshake and "*Viel Gluck und Segen zum Ehestand*" The couple did not answer a word to all the good wishes. The wedding feast was always held at the answer a word to all the good wishes. The wedding feast was always held at the house of the groom. The bride sat at the table with the *Braütüher* (groom's attendants), and the groom sat across the table among the *Brautführerinnen* (bride's attendants). Much work and planning was given to the preparation of the meal. No expense nor trouble was spared to provide all the delicacies, fresh breads, and cakes that they liked.

Friends and neighbors baked the sweet rolls and breads for the feast. *Kuchen* was a special favorite. This fancy bread was served at the meals and also during the entire day. "A whole hog or quarter of beef often barely sufficed for the many quests. There was, of course, plenty of liquid refreshment in the form of a drink, made from rye, which was called *Quast*." The dinner consisted of roast, sausages, relishes, and coffee. They served no potatoes. For dessert there was dried fruit and cake. The meal for supper consisted of a soup made of small chunks of beef and cream. They also served the remaining food from the dinner meal.

While the bridal couple and the guests were still sitting at the table, someone would rob the bride of one shoe. Usually one of the cooks stole the slipper, but anyone could do it. Since this was needed for the dance, it had to be redeemed. Sometimes the *Braütüher*, or frequently the single young men would buy the slipper for a sum agreeable to all. This was done in fun; but as the cooks received no pay for their work, the money was usually given to them.

"Happiness and blessing on your married state." Raphael Engel, O. M. Cap., Victoria, Kansas, quoted in Sister Mary Eloise Johannes, *A Study of the Russian-German Settlements in Ellis County, Kansas*. The Catholic University of America Studies in Sociology, No. 14, p. 113.

Johannes, p. 113.

Margaret M. Detweiler, "Hays, Kansas, at the Nation's Heart." *The National Geographic Magazine* (April 1952), 480.

Johannes, p. 114.

[B] It was customary among a good section of our people that the bride and bridegroom would not eat breakfast with the rest of the people. They would sit at the breakfast table while the rest of them would eat, but they wouldn't eat then. After the rest of them got through eating, or just before they got through eating, they would go over into maybe a neighboring small room, and they would be served in private for their meal together.

[D] After the dinner was over and the room was cleared, the "Dush" (toast) took place. Each person stood with a glass of brandy and sang the customary "Dush" song. When the singing ceased, the people clanged glasses and toasted the bridal couple. The parents of the couple congratulated each other on the acquisition of a new daughter-in-law and a new son-in-law.

The dancing then began with the *Brautreihe* (bride's walk). As the orchestra played, the bridal couple walked round the room hand in hand.

[B]...They would march around the room and keep on marching around while the guests would pin their little offerings onto the bridegroom or the newly married girl. And when they didn't want to put as much money into that, they would take calico. It was not unusual to see— to take a long strip of calico and wrap it around the bride, you know, as a gift to the bride.

After they had marched around and were sure that everyone had made his little donation that wanted to make a donation, of course they would start to dance. The bride and the bridegroom would dance three dances together; it was just customary, three—it had to be three, I don't know why. And that was all that the bridegroom saw of the bride for a long time, then, because after that he never danced with the bride during the day because everybody else had to have a chance to dance one dance with the bride; and by evening to poor bride was worn out. And incidentally, if you were rich enough to have a three-day wedding, why, of course the bride had to reappear the next day and probably the third day.

The muscians had to be tipped, and where the wedding was in a relatively small place, where the house wasn't too large, why, they had one man designated to pick out the people who were gonna dance, and you danced only when they asked you to dance; and if you danced when you weren't asked to dance, why, you would be taken off the floor. And then of course the muscians, who knew— They consisted of somebody to play what we now call—oh, it was the equivalent of a zither almost; dulcimer they call it now, I think, played with little mallets, little hammers; there was always a fiddler and sometimes there was a cello with that; sometimes there was a cornet. Cornets were prevalent among our people; they had those over in the old country. Sometimes

they'd get lazy; they wouldn't play, and of course the obvious was that if they don't play, the best thing you could do was go ahead and tip 'em. It was not unusual for them, of course, to shove a bill underneath the strings so you could see it, so you would tip likewise and wouldn't be tipping in too small amounts.

(Items preceded by [B] were collected from Bernard J. Brungardt, Hays, 21 March 1959, and reprinted from *Kansas Folklore*, ed. S. J. Sackett and William E. Koch (Lincoln; University of Nebraska Press, 1961), pp. 198-205, by permission of the University of Nebraska Press; items preceded by [D] are reprinted from Phyllis A. Dinkel, "Old Marriage Customs in Herzog (Victoria), Kansas" *Western Folklore*, XIX (April 1960), 99-104, by permission of the University of California Press; items preceded by [T] are reprinted from Father John B. Terbovich, O.F.M. Cap., "Religious Folklore among the German-Russians in Ellis County, Kansas," *Western Folklore*, XXII (April 1963), 81-86, by permission of the University of California Press.)



St. Mary's Church, Gorham.