

Fessenden Woman Plans Major Bequest to NDSU Libraries and Germans from Russia Heritage Collection

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Marie M. Rudel Portner, born on April 23, 1897, 100 years ago, on a farm in North Dakota and now a resident of Las Vegas, Nevada, has expressed an intention to leave a substantial portion of her estate to the North Dakota State University Libraries and the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, announced John W. Beecher, Director of the NDSU Libraries.

"We are tremendously grateful to learn of Mrs. Portner's generous intentions," stated Beecher. "She has been a major benefactor to the Libraries for a number of years now, not only because of her interest in our Germans from Russia Collection but also because of the strong ties she has to her own German-Russian roots in the Fessenden, Harvey, and Wells County areas of North Dakota."

Mrs. Portner's wish for the intended gift would be to establish a permanent endowment in memory of her parents, Simon and Dorothea Weber Rudel, who immigrated from South Russia and homesteaded on the prairies of North Dakota in the late 1800s. Annual proceeds from the endowment would go to support the Libraries' preservation of the Germans from Russia heritage as a unique cultural force in shaping the history of the northern plains of North America.

"Marie and her late husband Hal Portner have generously contributed to many philanthropic interests during their lifetimes. Their giving nature has made them very special clients of our firm," said W. Owen Nitz, senior partner with the law firm of Nitz, Walton & Heaton, Ltd., Las Vegas, and Mrs. Portner's attorney for over 30 years.

While the endowment would be established in honor of her parents, the Libraries would also recognize Mrs. Portner for her generosity by setting aside a specific space within the Main Library for the purpose of furthering the bibliographic, preservation, and communication activities of the Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, and naming it "The Marie Rudel Portner Germans from Russia Heritage Center."

According to the Libraries' Development Director Charlotte Cox, "An endowed fund established with such a generous bequest would provide, conservatively speaking, \$50,000 or more in interest income every year." Such funds would help to support many projects related to the Germans from Russia, such as the publishing of manuscripts and oral histories, traveling exhibitions, video documentaries, expanded facilities for the Libraries' growing historical/ethnic/cultural collections, and the electronic networking of NDSU's special collections with scholarly research centers all over the world.

Mrs. Portner's substantial gifts over the years have already helped to finance the research, publishing, and travel involved in studying and documenting this extraordinary culture, according to Michael M. Miller, the Libraries' Germans from Russia Bibliographer. The Germans from Russia Heritage Collection at NDSU is recognized as one of the outstanding collections on the subject in North America and the world, and it provides valuable resources for scholars, students, and family historians. Because of Miller's genealogical research, he has been able to

inform Marie about the ancestral villages where the Rudels and the Webers once lived in Bessarabia, now part of southern Ukraine.

One of Marie's most prized possessions is a history of the Rudel family, carefully collected, documented, and compiled by her nephew Norman Rudel, who still lives in Fessenden with his wife Norma and works part-time on the family farm. According to the Rudel history, Marie's father Simon came to America when he was 21 years old with \$1 in his pocket. He and his wife Dorothea set out to establish a farm and family, first in a sod house and later in a wood-framed farmstead on the windswept Dakota prairie.

Marie, the ninth of Simon and Dorothea's twelve children, was born on April 23, 1897. Now the oldest living graduate of Fessenden High School, she also attended Valley City State Teachers College. She then taught school at West Norway Township, Wellsburg, and Heimdal, earning \$65.00 per month. On recent trips to the Las Vegas area, Miller and Cox have found Marie eager to discuss her Dakota past. With a sharp memory and a keen wit, she reminisces about being baptized in the James River, herding sheep with her sister Hilda, and teaching in the country schools where the "blackboards" were simply plaster painted black.

After marrying Hal Portner of Spokane, Washington, Marie traveled far afield from the Dakota plains of her youth, living in Washington, California, and finally Nevada. Hal, an electrical engineer who became interested in land development in the Las Vegas area, died in 1972. While Marie says, "I never expected to live in a place like Las Vegas," she remained there after his death, continuing to live independently in her own house and taking the mile walk "downtown" at least once a week. She is no longer able to return to the Fessenden area to see the many Rudel and Weber family members who still live and farm there, but she remembers her many German-from-Russia relatives and her heritage with great affection.

Marie plans to celebrate her 100th birthday quietly with her nephew Weston Rudel, who lives near her in Las Vegas and helps her to do her grocery shopping. Representatives from the NDSU Libraries joined her for an early birthday party in March when they visited her area prior to the North Dakota Picnic in Arizona. They also presented her with a plaque from the NDSU Development Foundation awarded for her past generosity to the university.

"Mrs. Portner is a shining example of the strength, wit, and determination that characterize not only the Germans from Russia but also a great many of the early pioneers who settled the northern prairies of our region," said Beecher. "We are honored to have her continuing friendship for the North Dakota State University Libraries."

For more information, contact Michael M. Miller, Germans from Russia Bibliographer, 701-231-8416, Michael.Miller@ndsu.edu.



Marie M. Rudel Portner, age 34.



The Simon and Dorothea (Weber) Rudel Family Fessenden, North Dakota, June, 1932, taken the day after celebrating the 50th Wedding Anniversary of Simon and Dorothea (Weber) Rudel, married on February 10, 1882 in Scotland, South Dakota. Simon Rudel was born on September 20, 1857 and Dorothea Weber was born on March 20, 1866. Back row (left to right): Herbert, William Gustav, Simon (father), Edward, Christian and Frederick. Front row (left to right): Laura, Mary Marie (Marie Rudel Portner), Hilda, Dorothea (mother), Emma, Bertha and Therese.



Simon and Dorothea (Weber) Rudel farmstead near Fessenden, Wells County, North Dakota, circa late 1920s/early 1930s.



Marie M. Rudel Portner (left), age 99, Las Vegas and Charlotte Cox, Development Director, North Dakota State University Libraries, Fargo. Charlotte Cox presents Marie Portner the NDSU President's Bronze Medallion Society Plaque for her annual gift of \$10,000. Photo taken in February, 1997, Las Vegas, Nevada. Marie Portner celebrated her 100th birthday on April 23, 1997.



Marie M. Rudel Portner and Michael M. Miller, Germans from Russia Bibliographer, North Dakota State University Libraries, Fargo. Photo taken in February, 1997, in Las Vegas, Nevada.