

Strassburg Settlement

Pierce County, North Dakota

1899 - 1931

THE HISTORY

"The Strassburg Connection"

"The Strassburg Connection" begins in the city of Strassburg, the capital of Alsace, and France in the late 1700's. Alsace (French) Elsass (German) is located between the Vosges Mountains and the German border. People living here are German-speaking people of this French region. Russian rulers, including Catherine the Great, are promoting settlements along the Volga River and the black sea region. As a result, groups began leaving Alsace and German principalities where wars, invasions, high taxes, and military conscription made life unbearable. Most traveled from Ulm, Germany on the Danube river before finishing the journey overland. (see exhibit #1) many died along the way of disease. The Danube River is located in central and southeast Europe, flowing 1,725 miles from southern Germany to the Black Sea. Colonists arrive in the steppes (plains) where Russian Czars offered them free land, exemption from military service and taxation, and, to an extent, religious liberty. Living on the steppes, they continued to farm, primarily raising wheat, and adapted their system of agriculture to the new environment. The German colony had become the most advanced agriculture group in Russia. In 1808, nearly 400 families from southern Germany start the Kutschurgan colonies. Two hundred and sixty-five families are from Alsace/Elsass and one hundred and eleven are from Baden. These mother colonies were located on the banks of the Kutschurgan River. (see exhibit #1) The significant colonies are Strassburg, Baden, Selz, Kandel, Mannheim, and Elsass. The Germans retained their culture and perpetuated it through their education system seldom mixing with or marrying their host. Each German-Russian village was homogeneously Protestant, Roman Catholic or Mennonite. The Kutschurgan colonies were Roman Catholic. The seaport city of Odessa was founded in 1794 and was vitally important for the economic development of these colonies. In the 1860s, however their lives began to change. Czar Alexander II began to draft them into the army, (see exhibit #2) and in the 1880s Alexander III began a "Russification" policy to establish better control over the colonies. Germans began leaving Russia for the United States in the late 1800s.

In 1899 a group of recent Germans from Russia arrivals to the United States met in Joseph Weber's house some six miles north of Selz, North Dakota. The meeting was organized by Father James Buchler. The main order of business was to decide on a name for this new settlement. There were two names suggested, Kandel and Strassburg. The latter won out. So what started over 100 years earlier in Strassburg, Alsace, France then locating in the colony of Strassburg, one of the mother colonies, part of the Kutschurgan district, province of Odessa, in the country of Russia is now taking root in what will become the Strassburg settlement of Pierce County, North Dakota. (see exhibit #3)

The construction of a church was foremost in the minds of these early settlers. Kasper Schwan donated 10 acres. It consisted of five acres on which the church will be built, and five acres, a short distance to the west, which became a consecrated cemetery.

The Strassburg church (Saint Maria Kirche zu Strassburg) was organized in 1899 and the edifice was completed in 1900. The foundation of the church was plain prairie stone which was hauled by the settlers from land which was being cultivated and the construction work was done mostly by the founders themselves. Shortly afterwards, a parsonage was built and later on a barn was erected to keep the horses cool in the summer and warm in the winter. Horses were the only means of transportation. The church building was of frame construction and the beautiful upper windows were of lead stained glass. Each window symbolizing a biblical parable. Later on, a sacristy was added to the northeast side of the building where the priest kept his ecclesiastical robes, chalice, and other necessities.

Each adult male member was asked to donate a day's labor or pay a specific amount of money towards the construction of the church when his name came up. As most of the settlers were financially poor, they chose to donate their time, and many men worked extra days and weeks constructing this beautiful country church. (see exhibit #4)

In 1905, 105 families were members of the church and it continued to grow and prosper for many years. The Saint Maria Church was also the site of marriages like the one between Fransisca Miller Hafner (Hoffner) to Nicholas Pfau. (see exhibit #5)

But alas, fate was to decree otherwise. The population of North Dakota grew, transportation became possible almost everywhere as better roads were constructed; the great northern railroad bisected the state; older members retired, sold their property and moved away and many of the pioneers passed away.

So, for reasons of economics, the younger generation decided to consolidate with St. Anthony's church of Selz, approximately six miles south of the Strassburg church.

So, Saint Maria Kirche zu Strassburg faded away but not in vain, the heritage of this holy house of god will always be a priceless treasure to the few members who remain, and to us the memories of the shadowy evening sun radiating all beautiful colors on the white cross on the proud, high steeple, even at a distance, will never die.

Regular services continued at St. Maria until 1931 when it was discontinued and the church was dismantled and most of the materials were hauled to St. Anthony's Catholic Church in Selz and to St. Boniface Catholic Church in Esmond. The original church bell at St. Maria's is located at St. Anthony's Church in Selz.

Coming to America

The Story of Francis Miller Hafner (1)

Francis has been planning her trip to America for some time. It's the spring of the year of 1905 and spring is the ideal time to leave, so she must leave soon. She will be traveling with her mother Eulalia Schwab Miller, her brother Peter Miller, and her three children George, Anna, and Sebastian. There has been communication between her and others that left Kandel, Odessa, Russia earlier and are now living in North Dakota. She has so much to do and so little time to do it. She knows that she must travel light, packing only those few necessary and precious items like bedding, extra clothing, her bible, her rosary, and family photos. She will use a trunk and a few other sacks and baskets to pack her belongings. The remaining items she has she will try to sell. The things she can't sell she will give to relatives, friends, or neighbors. Frances will go to mass one more time in Kandel at Saint Michael's Catholic Church and spend some time visiting her late husband Johann's gravesite. Johann died a year and a half ago. She will also visit the gravesite of her Father Henry Miller. She realizes that this will very

likely be the last time she can do this. Emotions run high. Francis also realizes that tomorrow she must say good-bye. She has mixed feelings knowing that the journey will be challenging and saying good-bye to relatives and friends will be painful, but there is no turning back now.

The trip from Kandel to Odessa is about 35 miles. The items she is taking will be placed in a large wooden cart that is pulled by horses. Men and some women walk while older women ride in the carts. Eulalia will ride in the cart holding her 7 month old grandson Sebastian. They arrive in Odessa in about three days. The journey from Odessa to Liverpool is via Germany. Arrangements for mass transit are made by railway and shipping agents in Odessa. (see exhibit #11) they board a train for Hamburg, Germany the next day. They arrive in Hamburg three days later. They then board a steamship that will take them to Hull, on the east coast of England. The travel on the North Sea is usually fierce and passengers frequently experience seasickness. They will travel by train from Hull to Liverpool. The decision to leave from Liverpool and travel to Quebec city, Quebec, Canada instead of Hamburg, Germany to Ellis Island, New York is unclear, and why was the final destination Anamoose, North Dakota? The answer to those questions may lie in what other relatives had experienced earlier on their journey to America.

They now must cross the Atlantic ocean, leaving Liverpool, England on May 26th, 1905. Before they board the ship Southwark, (see exhibit #10) they must go through a control station and be subject to a medical exam. Each year thousands are turned back to the country whence they came from. The port is full of people and the ship is extremely crowded. The passenger tickets they have are for steerage class. Steerage class can cost \$12.00 up to \$30.00 while cabin class can cost \$32.00 up to \$50.00. The steerage area of the ship is used to accommodate passengers, often placing hundreds together in a single large hold. Beds are routinely long rows of large shared bunks with straw mattresses and no bedding. Passengers frequently end up with bed bugs and lice. The trip could take anywhere from a week to two weeks depending on the ship and weather conditions. Passengers play cards, sing, dance, and talk, talk, and talk some more. The only water for washing themselves is salt water. There is hardly any food, a strong odor permeates the ship, many passengers are ill and while it is not common for passengers to die during the journey some may.

Once they arrive in Quebec City, Quebec, Canada they travel by train to Winnipeg on the trans Canadian railroad. Year's earlier Jim Hill "the empire builder" and other businessmen bought a railroad company in St. Paul, Minnesota and named it the Manitoba railroad. Tracks were built west from St. Paul to the Red River Valley, reaching Grand Forks in 1880. The Manitoba railroad then extended a line that connected Grand Forks with Winnipeg. The Grand Forks to Minot railroad line was completed in 1886. In 1898 the SOO line railroad connects Anamoose and Minot. It's this railroad system that takes them from Quebec City, Quebec to their final destination in Anamoose, North Dakota. Francis' goal of getting her mother, her brother, her three children and herself safely to Anamoose is now complete.

On August 17, 1905, Francis marries Nicklaus Pfau who lost his wife Magdalena earlier that year. They are married in the Saint Maria Catholic Church at the Strassburg settlement. (see exhibit #5) Francis spends the rest of her life living in North Dakota, helping to raise her children George, Anna, and Sebastian, his children Clementine, Peter, Agatha, Paul, and Elizabeth and their children Joe, Mike, Eugene, Tom, Genevieve, and Julia. (see exhibit #8) Nicklaus passed away in 1947 and Francis passed away in 1954. They are buried in the saint Boniface catholic cemetery in Esmond, North Dakota.

(1) Francis's story is based on facts and significant research. However, there are times that parts of the story are judgement calls based on what research would suggest. Example: it's unknown whether Eulalia rode in the wooden carts from Kandel to Odessa while holding Sebastian as the story tells us. However research tells us that the oldest and the youngest would likely ride in the carts. Eulalia was sixty two years old and Sebastian was seven months old at this time.

Other items of interest: two individuals mentioned in this story are buried in the Saint Maria cemetery and they are Eulalia Miller and Magdalena Pfau.

Point of clarification: when Francis arrived in America she was spelling her last name Hafner. (see exhibit #5) over time her last name evolved into Hoffner.



Exhibit #10



(Exhibit #1)

Joseph Erck Sr. Served in the Russian Army before immigrating to America and becoming part of the Strassburg Settlement. Joseph also had a son Wendelin Erck who died at the age of 21 and is buried at the Saint Maria Cemetery. (Exhibit #2)

1910 Atlas
Strassburg Settlement
Pierce County, North Dakota

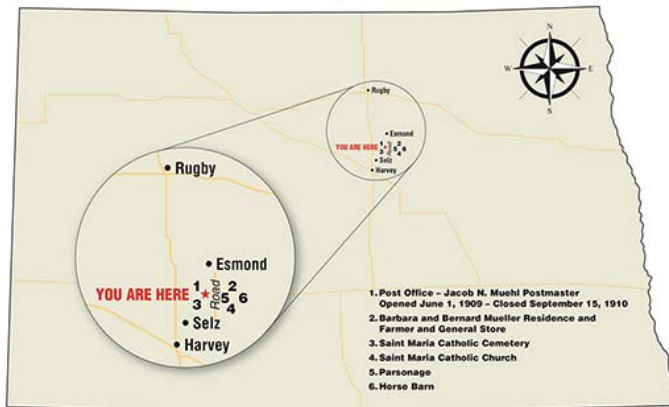


Exhibit #4

Saint Maria Kirche zu Strassburg
1899-1931
Rural Selz, North Dakota

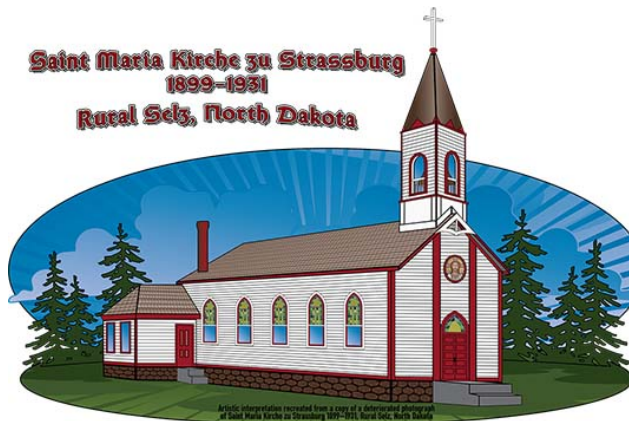


Exhibit #5

(Exhibit #3)

(Exhibit #4)

Exhibit #6

(Exhibit #5)

THE MONUMENT

Nicholas A. Braunagel 1901-1973

By Fred Fleck

Nicholas Braunagel was born in 1901 in the Selz area, one of five children. He was the son of pioneer Anton Braunagel and his wife, Margaretha Klotz. He received his elementary and secondary education at the school for the deaf in Devils Lake, North Dakota. Braunagel, who came to the so-called Strassburg settlement during the pioneer days, had a dream of establishing a worthy memorial to the people he loved with deep ancestral piety and pride.

Nicholas Braunagel was the planner and architect of the monument. Many letters were written, for he lived in South Carolina, a thousand miles or more away. His only way of communication was by writing and the use of sign language, for Nicholas had lost his hearing when he was five years of age, during a scarlet fever epidemic.

He received his higher education at Gallaudet College in Washington, D.C. Where he passed with high honors, and became a teacher in a school for the deaf in South Carolina in 1925. (see exhibit #6)

He married Margaret Gatch, and moved back to North Dakota where he became a member of the faculty at the school for the deaf at Devils Lake, North Dakota where he served for many years. (see exhibit #7)

When he retired he moved back to Round O, South Carolina, where he lived until April 14, 1973 when he lost his life in an automobile accident.

Ground Breaking Ceremony

Many gathered at the site of the saint Maria Kirche zu Strassburg cemetery on June 15, 1973, for the groundbreaking ceremony for the erection of a monument that will symbolize a proud and lasting tribute to those who unflinchingly held up the torch of our father almighty and passed it on to us, and will be passed on to our descendants for generations to come.

The monument was built of stones-stones that in many cases were laboriously dug out of the ground when the virgin prairie was broken up. (see exhibit #9)

Monument Dedication

It was Nicholas Braunagel's idea and dream to build a monument on the site of the abandoned cemetery, as a memorial in memory of the pioneers. That dream is now a reality.

The building of the monument was a serious undertaking. There were many happy moments and times of discouragement and frustration.

The monument was completed in 1974, and on August 18, 1974, the dedication service was held. There were nearly four hundred present at the dedication. The participator at the field mass was Father Bernard Pfau, of Tolna, a descendant of Nicklaus Pfau who helped build the Saint Maria Kirche zu Strassburg; he was assisted by Father Leibhan, who served at Orrin, and whose grandparents were also pioneers.

The monument, ten feet high, with a base of ten by ten feet, is built of prairie stones that in many cases were laboriously dug out of the ground when the virgin prairie was broken up. These stones are embedded in the cairn, also embedded is a stainless steel plaque, which contains names of pioneers and adult sons.



(Exhibit #6)



Nicholas & Margaret Braunagel with sons Patrick and Lemuel "Tony" (1940)
(Exhibit #7)



Photo of George, Anna, and Sebastian, was taken July 1967 (Exhibit #8)



Ground Breaking Ceremony, June 15th, 1973
(Exhibit #9)

THE BRAUNAGELS

Car Crash Fatal to Truman Township Native, 1901 - 1973

Nicholas Braunagel, 70, former editor of the banner publication of the school for the deaf, and linotype operator for the *Devils Lake Journal*, was killed Saturday in a car accident at Round O, South Carolina, where he had been living for a number of years.

Mr. Braunagel, born and raised in Truman Township of Pierce County, lost his hearing due to scarlet fever when he was five years old.

With two of his friends, Joe Schmaltz of Minot and Fred Fleck of Rugby, Mr. Braunagel currently had been working on having a monument placed on the cemetery of Saint Marie's Catholic Church of Strassburg, north of Selz. Mr. Braunagel had been confirmed in the church which was built in 1899 and dissolved in 1931. (see exhibit #4)

Margaret Gatch Braunagel

January 4, 1912 - January 1, 2017

Devils Lake, North Dakota: Margaret Gatch Braunagel, wife of the late Nicholas A. Braunagel, went to her eternal rest on January 1, 2017 in Devils Lake, North Dakota. She was 105 years old.

Margaret was born in Round O, South Carolina, a daughter of the late Lemuel and Rebecca Gatch. She lost her hearing at the age of 3 from a chronic ear infection that in today's world could be easily treated. Nevertheless she had a wonderful childhood full of love and attention from her family. She attended the South Carolina school for the deaf, and later met her future husband, who was a professor there. He too suffered the same illness at the age of 5, and was also totally deaf. In 1942 they moved to her husband's home state of North Dakota so that he could teach at the North Dakota state school for the deaf.

Margaret was brought back to her home and was buried on January 6, 2017 beside her late husband at the Ackerman family cemetery in Round O, South Carolina ... Less than 100 yards from the home in which she was raised.

Priests that served at Saint Maria:

- Father James Buchler 1899-1905
- Father Gerhard Wilkes 1905-1908
- Father James Buchler 1908-1910
- Father Joseph Kern 1910-1910
- Father M.V. Muller 1910-1914
- Father Dickers 1914-1915
- Father Anthony Nussbaumer 1915-1917
- Father Ambrose Johamus Herbert 1917-1927
- Father Basil Thums 1917-1927
- Father Herbert Bierchinger 1927-1928
- Father Tambert Weckwert 1927-1928
- Father George Keim 1928-1929
- Father John Lungert 1929-1931

The following business' helped with the "Before It's Forgotten" Project:

- Bobby Hoffner construction Esmond, North Dakota
- Capitol City Welding, Inc. Bismarck, North Dakota
- Indigo Signworks, Mandan, North Dakota
- The Printers, Inc. Bismarck, North Dakota

The "Before It's Forgotten" Project Members:

- Father Frank Miller
- Patrick Braunagel
- Sylvester Hoffner
- Robert Hager
- Lori Miron
- Adrian Hoffner
- Douglas Wolf
- Serenus Hoffner



Thank you to Michael M. Miller, Director, Germans from Russia Heritage Collection (GRHC), NDSU Libraries, Fargo, ND.

Related Links:

- [St. Maria's Catholic Cemetery, near Selz, Pierce County, ND, Flickr Photo Album](#)
- [St. Maria's Strasburg Cemetery Monument near Selz, Pierce County, ND, Flickr Photo Album](#)