



# Lincoln Chapter The American Historical Society of Germans From Russia NEWSLETTER

VOLUME VIII, ISSUE 1

FEBRUARY 2000

## Notes from Ruth

by Ruth White, President, Lincoln Chapter AHSGR

We are marching into the year 2000 and the International Convention of the American Historical Society of Germans From Russia. I am Ruth White, your president for 2000.

A precedent has been set at the last several conventions. Welcome Night had excellent acceptance, as well as the good food and entertainment. We will do our best to meet the challenge!

You will be asked many times for

help. Volunteers will be needed at every event, and that means we are all volunteers because we are the Lincoln Chapter. It will be a time for all of us to come together to ensure a good feeling from all attending the convention.

So PLEASE keep an open mind and say "YES" when requested to furnish monetary help, maybe some baked goods, or as a volunteer!

## And the Balalaika Band plays on in the hearts, memories of family

by Cindy Lange-Kubick, reprinted with permission from the Lincoln Journal Star (Thursday, February 10, 2000)

He calls. He writes. He calls again. Finally, in desperation, he visits.

He insists this tale be told.

It's not even his story.

Still, Howard Luedtke can't let it go.

"Time is growing short, Cindy," says the 76-year-old retired traveling salesman, still not afraid of a cold call. "I want you to get on this."

Howard brings a photograph when he stops by. Fifteen musicians dressed like Cossacks – silky high-buttoned shirts and billowing peasant pants – against a backdrop of wooden onion domes at a long-gone Lincoln theater.

These are the men, he says.

The members of the Balalaika Band.

Between the time of that first phone call and the insistent last visit, Henry Beltz died. The band's last living member.

You waited too long, Howard scolds.

Still, he honors me with a reprieve. three days later we go to see his friend, Don Herzog, whose father and cousin strummed the wedge-shaped, three-stringed wooden instruments called balalaikas and the lacquered domras, shaped like melons split in two.

The boyhood chums, both sons of Germans from Russia, tell the story of these men, now dead, because it happened.

And because it's over, almost like it never was.

Maybe nobody gives a damn, says Don, a retired dentist, who still meets once each week for coffee with the men

who share his Russian Bottom roots.

"It's just a part of Americana and the history of Lincoln," he says. "I just thought it was something the people should know."

The band formed in 1925.

Victor and Alex Maul, sons of a German preacher from Russia, called on the good hard-working men of Lincoln's South and North Bottoms – enclaves of German immigrants who lived in Russia before settling here – to form a group to play traditional Russian music.

Folk tunes, says the son. Gypsy music.

Men named Zieg, Stoehr, Grasmick, Beltz, Ernst and Herzog, who worked as railroad mechanics and accountants, Linotype operators and dentists, began to strum balalaikas and pluck domras.

They weren't musicians. But they loved music. Even the music of the Russians.

"They escaped from Russia. When they were there, they were secluded," says Bill Zieg, son of a band member, whom Howard has invited over. It seems strange to me they took this on.

"The German families loved music," explains Don's wife, Ruth. They may not have had a sofa in the living room, but they had a piano."

The men nod their heads.

They were just boys when their fathers played. "You're asking me to reach back 60 years," says Don.

The band lasted until the late '30s – performing at local theatres and Omaha

(continued on next page)

## From...

## Larry Schenkel

Hello and thank you all for the H cards, visits, and most of all, your love and prayers. Since the last newsletter, I have had two surgeries on my back. First, the middle (thorax) of my back, and the second on the lower (lumbar) at the Nebraska Medical Center. I am currently at the Rehab Center of Immanuel Lutheran Hospital, both hospitals in Omaha.

Outpatient Rehab will be at St. Elizabeth's Hospital when I leave here. However, I don't have any idea how soon that will be! The problem was caused by pressure on my spine, but I don't know for sure if there was any one thing that was the cause of it.

Nor do I know how far I will be able to come to using my limbs again. At present my left leg has about 25 percent mobility, and my right leg is at about 75 percent. But hope is with me as each day brings something new and promising.

Again, thank you for your support and prayers. I have said it over 1,000 times – Unser Leute are the best!!!



Larry Schenkel's New Year's Eve party!

## Quick Wit:



A Sunday school teacher asked her little children as they were on the way to church service, "And why is it necessary to be quiet in church?"

One bright little girl replied, "Because people are sleeping!"





## Balalaika

(continued from page 1)

nightclubs frequented by crowds of Russian immigrants.

The retired dentist recalls listening to the men play from the balcony of the downtown Buick dealership as a radio station recorded their tunes.

"The whole thing was so unique," says Don. "They were the only Russian balalaika orchestra in the country."

He lost his father's balalaika – and almost everything else – when a flood swept through the South Bottoms in 1949.

But the band is still woven tight into the fabric of home.

"We were a close-knit ethnic community," says Don. "And we still are, those of us that are still left."

Visiting New York City in the 1970s he found his way into a Russian nightclub and there sat three men playing the old melodies. When they finished, he introduced himself. They handed him a balalaika.

He strummed a tune from his boyhood and they gave it a name.

"Bright Shines the Moon," he remembers.

It's the only song he knows, now.

They don't remember all the details, not the way they remember 10-cent malts at Brick's soda shop downtown, or 3 pounds of pork chops for a dollar at H.J. Amen's Grocery, or old cowboy

shows at the Colonial Theater.

Not the way Don remembers selling newspapers at 13th and O streets for 3 cents apiece.

Or the way Howard remembers Saturday mornings at home.

"You could smell the whole neighborhood, Cindy," he says, "because our mothers were baking rye bread and runsas."

He does remember hearing the men play once. At Epworth League Park in the countryside south of town.

The park is long gone.

But now, says the salesman, maybe someone would remember the Balalaika Band.

"I couldn't let a bit of history pass away," says Howard. "That just wouldn't be right."

Cindy Lange-Kubick can be reached at 473-7218 or [clangekubick@journal-star.com](mailto:clangekubick@journal-star.com)



Members of the Balalaika Band, dressed in Cossack costume, pose on the stage of a long-ago Lincoln theater. The band is gone, but the members are well-remembered by their sons (below), such as Howard Luedtke (standing), Don Herzog (left), holding a domra; and Bill Zieg, with a bass balalaika.



## Open House at the Headquarters



Be on the lookout for convention information arriving in your mailbox soon. Convention brochures and information will be mailed out mid-March, with tentative program information and special tour information.

We need your help! If you are interested in volunteering for the convention, please contact Jan by phone at 474-3363 or email her at [Jantraci6666@aol.com](mailto:Jantraci6666@aol.com).

Volunteers are needed in all areas including Genealogy, Bookstore, Registration, Membership, Computer Room, and Information.

Mr. & Mrs. Donald Schwartz  
1000 Butler Ave  
Lincoln NE 68521

NON-PROFIT ORG.  
U.S. POSTAGE  
PAID  
LINCOLN, NE  
PERMIT NO. 69

Lincoln Chapter  
American Historical Society of  
Germans from Russia  
631 D Street  
Lincoln, NE 68502-1199