

In Touch with Prairie Living

January 2024

By Michael M. Miller

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GRHC published the book, “Tender Hands: Ruth’s Story of Healing,” by Ruth Weil Kusler, native of Beulah, ND. A powerful element in Ruth’s family tradition included the belief that a healer or ‘Brauchere’ was a chosen instrument of God. An ironic twist is the story that Ruth’s mother, Katherina Fischer Wild, a practicing Brauchere, was harassed by religious leaders but respected and referred to by local physicians on the plains of western North Dakota in the Beulah/Hazen area. Ruth Weil Kusler was born on January 8, 1908, nine miles south of Beulah, ND. Her mother, a midwife and faith healer, taught her the family’s healing methods and home remedies. Ruth followed her mother’s footsteps, massaging and caring for the sick throughout her life. She feels blessed that God gave her “tender hands.”

In the Preface, Pauline Neher Diede, author of “A Homesteader’s Daughter,” writes, “There was barely a doctor available anywhere. Any kind of human need depended on the intuition of a midwife for the birth of babies as well as her practical use of herbs, setting broken or fractured bones and the touch of Brauche, a spiritual meditation. Your mother had the touch of healing, Ruth. And she passed on her aptness to your tender hands and healing prayers.”

“Tender Hands” includes medicinal remedies passed down to Ruth. Crediting her mother, Katharina, as “my counselor – physically, mentally and spiritually,” Ruth shared healing options, all the while stressing the importance of offering examples of prayers to use with the remedies. Katharina Fischer was a midwife and healer in Neu Glückstal, Odessa Region, South Russia. Sensing her daughter, Ruth, also had the gift of “tender hands,” the instinctive ability to seek out aches and pains to soothe them away with her fingers, Katharina passed on the ancient healing methods of prayer, massage, and herbal remedies. Brauche is important as a strong cultural symbol to the Germans from Russia.

A book review at Amazon shares, “A lifetime’s worth of experience in the healing arts has been condensed into this small booklet. The many remedies for the aches and pains of daily life are valuable in and of themselves, but the book also has special

interest because of its information on the German folk-healing tradition known as ‘Brauche.’ Ruth sites specific prayers for certain Braucheri but these practices are not emphasized as a major aspect of her practice.

Most of her remedies involve the use of well-known healing herbs, such as garlic and chamomile. It is also notable that many non-traditional products are utilized, such as Dr. Forni’s Alpen-Kreuter, Smith’s Rosebud Salve, Aspirin tablets, Clorox bleach, Epsom salts, Niacin and Vitamin C. Fruit juices are a prominent ingredient in the remedies, but whiskey and Schnapps as well. Ruth’s story is not just of her own practice, but also of the adaptations and modifications in folk healing traditions throughout the world.”

Dr. Roland Wagner writes, “Ruth Weil Kusler’s life-long journey in the healing arts began with her mother, Katharina Fischer, who was a midwife and a healer in Neu-Glückstal, Odessa District, South Russia. Sensing that her daughter Ruth also had the gift of ‘tender hands’ the instinctive ability to seek out aches and pains and to soothe them away with her fingers, Katharina passed on the ancient healing methods of prayer, massage, and herbal remedies to her daughter. As I write these words, Ruth is approaching her 90th year, and she has spent most of her life carrying on her mother’s practice, caring for the sick near Beulah, North Dakota. Her well-earned reputation continues to draw people seeking her advice and treatment.”

“Tender Hands: Ruth’s Story of Healing” is available for purchase at www.ndsu.edu/grhc.

Dr. Shirley Fischer Arends, a native of Ashley, ND, shares in her important book, “The Central Dakota Germans: Their History, Language, and Culture,” that Brauche serves as the “art and practice of healing,” an expression of folk medicine. Arends writes, “Emma Fischer, my mother, received the verses and the Brauche traditions from her mother, Friederike Opp, whose maiden name was Bendewald. Friederike brought the traditions with her when she emigrated from Glückstal, Russia, in 1905. Friederike practiced as a fulltime Brauchere when she arrived in 1905 until she married in 1908.” Arends details Brauche verses in German with English translation for toothaches,

infections of the eye, stomach flu, intestinal convulsions, swelling, boils, fever, yellow jaundice, and ringworm.

Dr. Shirley Fischer Arends and her mother, Emma, were interviewed about Brauche for Prairie Public’s award-winning documentary, “The Germans from Russia: At Home in Russia, At Home on the Prairie.”

Brauche was brought to North Dakota by Germans who had left their homeland in South Russia to seek a better life. They continued many traditions, including the practice of Brauche. Stan Stelter writes in a Bismarck Tribune article (February 16, 1982), “Brauche served as an answer for a practical problem, the transplanted Germans found themselves short of doctors and other medical help. Villagers relied on some talented residents who, according to one historian, were ‘old women’ who picked the herbs and made the remedies.” Intermingled with Brauche are folk remedies and some formal training, perhaps midwifery or massage therapy.” The greatest concentration of Brauchers was found in south central North Dakota because of the large settlements of Germans from Russia.

A well-researched essay entitled “Brauche, Healing and Home Remedies,” written by Carol Just, can be found in the book, “The Glückstalers of New Russia in North America: A Bicentennial Collection of History, Genealogy and Folklore.”

Just writes, “The healer, called a Brauchere, was often identified and recruited intuitively by another healer before the future student understood his or her own gift. All Brauchere believed that their healing gift was the mandate of a higher power in the form of the Triune God: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Brauchere were esteemed and trusted within their communities and sought after by many for physical healing.”

For more information about donating family histories and photographs, or how to financially support the GRHC, contact Jeremy Kopp, at jeremy.kopp@ndsu.edu or 701-231-6596; mail to: NDSU Libraries, Dept. 2080, PO Box 6050, Fargo, N.D. 58108-6050; or go to www.ndsu.edu/grhc. You may also contact me directly at michael.miller@ndsu.edu or 701-231-8416.

January column for North Dakota and South Dakota weekly newspapers.