

Christmas is embedded in the German soul



By MIKE McCLEARY OF THE TRIBUNE

The Rev. John Kuhn with his Christmas crib made from an apple box. The figures are at least 50 years old. Kuhn's mother used to leave the wise men out until the proper time for their arrival, then added them and removed the shepherds.

By JULIE FREDERICKSEN
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"No other festivity is embedded into the German soul as is Christmas," Johannes Schleunig once wrote.

Those Germans who immigrated to North Dakota via Russia brought along their beloved Christmas traditions.

Hazen native Ed Zuern, Bismarck, a member of the Germans from Russia Heritage Society, remembers how important his church Christmas programs were. German Congregational programs had an emphasis on children — perhaps, he says, because they celebrated the birth of the Christ child. They were services a child "could participate in and impress Grandma and Grandpa. That didn't happen at Easter or any other church festivity," he says.

The Christmas tree (Christbaum or tannenbaum) was also very central to the holiday, at home and at church. "I grew up with the Christmas tree being the central focal point in church," Zuern says. However, he remembers when that was not always the case. His father's uncle once threw the church Christmas tree into the ash pile, saying it didn't belong in church.

Homes were highly decorated, and featured paper roping strung from the corners of the ceiling with a bell hung from the middle. "Even the church was decorated in that fashion," says Zuern, "more than we'd see today. I think it was a little more festive in that respect."

Singing was also very important to Zuern's fellow church members. Three of the favorites were "Stille Nacht" (Silent Night), "O Tannenbaum" (Oh Christmas Tree) and "Ihr Kinderlein Kommet" (Oh Come All Ye Children).

Even New Year's had a definite religious aspect, Zuern says. "Shooting in the New Year" involved a local man who would visit area homes and shoot his rifle in the air, then recite a poem giving God's blessing.

"It was exciting!" says Zuern. "We'd go to bed and just wait for that rifle shot. Then we'd quickly get dressed and run downstairs."

As a child in Napoleon, the Rev. John Kuhn, Bismarck, a retired Catholic priest, also experienced holiday visitors, both sacred and secular.

A week or two before Christmas, the Christkindel, or Christ child, would make her rounds. Always an adult female, she would "take an old lace curtain and drape it over her body and double it over her

Christ child so that we would know what Christmas is all about."

On Christmas Eve, the dreaded Pelzenickel would appear, looking for naughty children. Dressed in a heavy fur coat, rattling a chain and

that the Christkindel or the angels were baking cookies. The Weihnachtskrippe — Christmas crib or creche — would be set up, and the Adventskranz, Advent wreath, was prominently displayed. The night before Epiphany was celebrated as Dreikoenigsabend, Three Kings Eve.

In Kuhn's neighborhood, the holiday celebration went even beyond Epiphany. For a week after, the priest, accompanied by altar boys, would go around blessing homes. Kuhn remembers that the homes were marked over the doorway with the year and the initials of the Three Wise Men, signifying that they had paid a visit.

Christmas carols were sung in the Kuhn home until Feb. 2, the Purification of the Blessed Mother.

“It was a preparation for the coming of the Christ child so that we would know what Christmas is all about.” — Rev. John Kuhn

face," says Kuhn. She would ask the children questions from their catechism, and also ask them what happens at Christmas.

Those lacking answers would receive a gentle slap from a switch she carried. "She would always try to impress on you that you could be better," Kuhn says. "It was a preparation for the coming of the

speaking in a gruff voice, "He scared the daylights out of us!" Kuhn says. "I remember I crawled under a chair."

The Germans from Russia holiday season actually ran from Advent, the first Sunday in December, through Epiphany, January 6. Children seeing the rosy glow of December sunsets would be told