

(1971) Germans from Russia Wedding (Hochzeit) Tradition

On 28 May 1971, Clyde Eisenbeis (a:3.1.5.3.7-4.8.2.1.3-7.1) and Sheryl Narum were married in Douglas, North Dakota. After the ceremony, the wedding dance was in Zap, North Dakota.

Little is known about typical weddings in Germany or Russia prior to the 1900's. This is an account of typical wedding celebrations in western North Dakota.

Our wedding in Douglas included a pastor and friends who attended the University of North Dakota in Grand Forks. The wedding was somewhat atypical as some of the singing was accompanied by a guitar. Using guitars in a church was quite new, not only in North Dakota, but throughout the US.

After the ceremony and the reception, people traveled to Zap for the wedding dance. Zap has an exceptional dance hall. It was formerly a movie theater ... wooden floor, stage for the band, and a very high ceiling.

The dances were called "old-time" and were comprised of fast waltzes, polkas, schottisches, two-steps, and a butterfly. The music, played by local folks, always included an accordion.

The waltzes were fast ... almost as fast as a polka. The polkas were short ... to allow people to catch their breath. All the music was in groups of three ... three fast waltzes, three schottisches ... except for the polka which was between some groups of three.

Everyone loved to dance. It was not unusual to see folks in their 70's dancing everything, including the polka.

The butterfly was comprised of three people. Two men and one woman ... or two women and one man. They moved three abreast until the music switched to a polka beat. Then the person on the middle was swung around by the outside people in the shape of a butterfly. Then the music slowed and they moved arm-in-arm as they had started. This cycle was repeated a number of times. It was great fun.

Throughout the dance, there was a beer keg in one corner. And there was a Schenker who walked around and served the guests with a mixture of brown sugar water mixed with Everclear (190 proof). The brown sugar was regular sugar that was heated until it turned brown (was call schnapps, although it wasn't really schnapps). Sometimes the Schenker carried the bride's shoe ... people put money in the shoe for the wedding couple.

At one point in the evening, we were put into chairs and hoisted into the air while people sang, "Schön ist die Jugend". Most everyone in the community still talked German ... a dialect called Schwäbisch.

Heading toward midnight, some sandwiches were brought out and people ate. Then the dancing started again.

The celebration often continued a couple of nights later. Folks would visit the wedding couple's yard with large metal objects ... much of it from a junk yard. The people would clang the metal and make a lot of noise until the couple came out of the house. This was called a chivaree.

There were also celebrations for 25th Wedding Anniversaries and 50th Wedding Anniversaries.

We celebrated Fred and Lidia Boeshan's 25th Wedding Anniversary (in the 1960's), at a two room school house (Kronthal). We danced until 4am! Then Lydia invited us to her house for breakfast. After breakfast, I went to my Grandparents / Uncle farm, helped milk the cows (by hand), fed the cattle from a sled (wagon type sled) pulled by a team of horses, then went to bed.

At a 50th Wedding Anniversary in the 1990's, during the program, folks who had been married 50 years were asked to stand. A third of the room (between 20 and 30 couples) stood. This was a unique time in history. Earlier years, many people died before they were married 50 years.

Then the music started ... live music (accoridian, etc.). The floor was packed with people in their 70's and 80's. They loved to dance. And they loved to sing.

It is quite likely these traditions were the same in Russia and Germany many years before.