The Ehrhardts: A Russian German Family's Journey From the Volga to the Panhandle

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In order to understand the bigger picture of where our family comes from, we have to take a mini history lesson on Europe and Russia. Beginning in December 1763, Russian Empress Catherine the Great sent out her Manifesto, inviting colonists across Europe to settle land along the Volga River. She promised the colonists freedom from military conscription, exemption from paying taxes for thirty years, state-sponsored travel to the area for settlement, and free land to settle. These promises were enticing, as Europe was war-weary and taxed beyond the typical family's means; however, they weren't always honored in the way they were promised. (But that's later in the story!)

Originally hailing from present-day Germany, David Ehrhardt Sr.'s ancestors moved a few times across Europe as war, famine, and economic hardship drove them to seek new opportunities. They arrived at the Volga colony of Scherbakovka in Holstein in June 1765 and remained there until David Ehrhardt Sr. moved his family back to Germany in the late 1880s/1890s. Experiencing yet more economic turmoil, David Ehrhardt Sr. leapt at the opportunity to immigrate to the United States. They spent 18 days at sea on the steamship Phoenicia, originally leaving Hamburg, Germany; being poor, they stayed within the Dampfschiff, a small area typically used on commercial vessels as freight storage - it was a VERY tight space to fit families in. Yet David and his wife Eva Krentz Ehrhardt strived on, landing with their children (David jr, Henry, and Jacob "Jake") in New York on January 17, 1901. Unfortunately, an unknown-named elder brother had died in Russia before they left when he was just 16 months old.

The family spent three years in New York before David Ehrhardt Sr. and his family moved to Lehigh, Kansas, where they had relatives and friends from Russia who had settled there previously. David worked for the railroad until 1904, when they moved the family to

Oklahoma. They settled on land about seven miles southeast of Hooker, living in a dugout until they could build a house. Two more children were born, Ira in 1911 and Irene in 1913. They went to school at Sunny Slope, and around 1930 they moved into the city of Hooker.

Unfortunately, death was a common occurrence in this time for the Ehrhardt family. Jake died in Hooker in 1925 after a horse injured his ribs, requiring surgery, and then pneumonia settled in post-surgery; he was only 29 and is buried in the Hooker Cemetery in Oklahoma.. David Ehrhardt jr unfortunately died in 1928 of tuberculosis during an epidemic while living with his family in the country of Estonia at the age of 36, but his gravesite is now a park after being leveled in WWII by the Nazis. David Ehrhardt Sr. and Eva Krentz passed away in 1936 and 1937, just weeks from one another. Irene died due to surgical complications in Beaver, Oklahoma, at the age of 35 in 1970. Ira died in 1970 and is buried in Hooker.

Mabel Spady was born in Marion County, Kansas, and her parents/ancestors were also from the Volga region of Russia - specifically Norka. Those ancestors moved there as first settlers in the Volga from Austria. Mabel Spady's father and mother, Conrad and Eva Oblander Spady, immigrated to Kansas with a group of Volga Germans in 1875 on the steamship named Sprite - they also had the cramped accommodations on the ship. When Mabel was six years old, in 1906, the family moved to a farm about six miles northwest of Hooker, Oklahoma. Henry met Mabel while threshing wheat at her family's farm.

In 1917, Henry Ehrhardt and Mabel Spady were united in marriage in Liberal, Kansas, by the justice of the peace. They moved to the A.D. Goosen Farm about twelve miles southeast of Hooker. Five children were born there: Mary Lee, Lucille "Lucy", Leo, Melvin, and Frances "Frankie".

In the fall of 1924, Henry Ehrhardt decided to move to California to join relatives who were thriving there, but he moved the family back in the spring of the next year because he missed his farm, his friends, and his church. Henry Ehrhardt and Mabel Spady raised their children in the Seventh Day Adventist Church, a family tradition passed down a few

generations. In fact, Henry Ehrhardt assisted in building the physical Adventist church in the town of Hooker. The family was heavily involved in church leadership, based upon newspaper clippings of the time.

In 1930, Henry Ehrhardt moved the family to a farm owned by Bob Mayer that was six miles east of Hooker. Two daughters were born there, one unknown named girl who died at birth, and Betty Jean Ehrhardt in 1936. The current theory is that the baby girl is buried with her grandparents, in a grave that has a damaged marker that's owned by David Ehrhardt Sr.. All of the children, except Betty Ehrhardt, went to grade school at Sunny Slope; you can find many updates in newspaper clippings of the time. They attended high school in Hooker.

Henry Ehrhardt purchased the home place where he remained the rest of his life, a farm just outside of Hooker. This farm was the culmination of Henry Ehrhardt's lifelong hard work; literally, he worked the land as a farmer with a joy of nature, his savings, and his strong ancestry of Volga farmers. His granddaughter, daughter of Betty Ehrhardt, recalls him always being out on a tractor as she helped him with the chores growing up. This farm became a safe space, a place where she could grow up and be close to her grandparents. From finding Indigenous arrowheads from the Plains Indians along some train tracks in the fields, having snakes chase her, to cooking with Grandma Mabel Spady - the farm was an active place to grow up in.

One of the vivid memories passed on is that once the children were back home from school, they were to speak German only. Passed along through the generations, I have physical books once owned by my ancestors that are all in German as well. They also kept their food traditions strong, with all of the women making various Volga recipes - a favorite being my great great grandma Mabel's bierocks.

Mabel Spady sadly passed away in 1975 after falling and breaking her hip; she unfortunately never left the hospital. She is buried in the Hooker Cemetery alongside Henry Ehrhardt. Henry Ehrhardt married Ernestina Strauss in 1977. She owned a place in California, so for a few years they would spend the winters in California and the summers on the farm. He

sold his farm, very cheaply, to his daughter Betty Ehrhardt and her second husband, Homer Ray in January 1977. There were two houses on the property, one that was Grandpa Henry's, and then the main home where Betty Ehrhardt and her second husband Homer Ray lived. In 1993/1994, there was a fire that destroyed the old Ehrhardt home; the cause has never been definitively determined, but the valuables were removed to a garage prior to the fire. Henry had previously died in April 1982 and was buried in the Hooker Cemetery.

Leo Ehrhardt died in Dec 1991, and is buried in the Liberal, Kansas. Marylee Ehrhardt died in 1998 and is buried in Shattuck, Oklahoma. Frankie Ehrhardt died in 2008 and is buried in Farmerville, Louisiana. Melvin Ehrhardt died in 2012 and is buried in San Juan Capistrano, California. Lucy Ehrhardt died in 2015 and is buried in Liberal, Kansas.

Betty Ehrhardt, previously married to Carroll Griggs, and married at the time of her death to Homer Ray, became suddenly very sick in June 1991, and she rapidly deteriorated to her end. She was very close to one of her granddaughters who grew up on the farm. Unfortunately, at this point, the Ehrhardt Farm was lost to Homer Ray after Betty Ehrhardt's death, and remained so until sections were willed back to the family post-Homer's death, and that land was then collectively sold. Homer Ray buried Betty Ehrhardt in the Hooker Cemetery in a three-grave plot he purchased in August 1991 after Betty Ehrhardt's death; he joined her in 2017, and his then-wife chose to be buried in a separate plot altogether.

The Ehrhardt and Spady lines of our family had to face untold struggles, leaving their original countries of origins and settling not just once, but having to do it all over again generations later. We come from down-to-earth folks, people who were deeply religious and kept their feet close to the ground. It's that never-giving-up that we all have inherited as a family. May we honor the sacrifices made by our Ehrhardt and Spady ancestors in the ways we cherish the freedoms we have because of them. Had our Ehrhardt and Spady ancestors remained in Russia, we would have been forced to work in labor camps in Siberia and genocided by Joseph Stalin during World War II. And had our distant ancestors not immigrated from Germany and

Austria to Russia in the 1760s, we would have been subjected to occupation under Nazi Germany during World War II. Something to ponder…

As the family genealogist and historian, I have spent five years working on unearthing the people behind the stories and genealogy site profiles - getting down to who my ancestors were and what their dreams, beliefs, and visions for the future were made of. It's been a labor of love, and it's brought me to feel like I actually "know" these ancestors. We as a family were not aware of any of our people's history until my genealogy journey began as the pandemic unfolded. The stories of my Volga ancestors will not be forgotten, nor will their tenacity. I am so grateful to them and feel called by them to witness, write, and tell the world of the Volga Germans of Russia who fled to a little ole town like Hooker, Oklahoma.

(Above) Henry Ehrhardt & his first wife Mabel Spady

(Above) Eva Oblander & Conrad Spady on their land in Hooker, Oklahoma

(Above) Henry Ehrhardt Family;

(Back row) Lucille “Lucy”, Leo, Marylee, Melvin, Francis “Frankie”, Betty (my great grandma)

(Front row) Mabel Spady and Henry Ehrhardt. Circa 1980s

(Above) Betty Ehrhardt, daughter of Henry and Mabel Spady Ehrhardt (my great grandma)

(above) David Ehrhardt Sr's Family:

-back- Great Great Grandpa Henry, David Jr, Emma Schmidt (wife of David Jr.)

-front- Ira, Great Great Great Grandpa David and Grandma Eva Krentz Ehrhardt, Irene, Jacob Ehrhardt

(above) newspaper clipping of Mabel and Henry's wedding announcement