

## ANNA MARIA GEBHARDT (1878-1979)

Anna Maria was born on November 29, 1878, in Galicia, former Habsburg Empire. The forefathers of Anna Maria and her husband Johann Gebhardt migrated with many fellow German Lutherans from Alsace-Lorraine, Rhineland, Baden-Württemberg and Switzerland in the latter half of the 1700s to form new colonies in Russia. Empress Catherine II (1762-69), after steadily expanding the Russian Empire into western and southern territories, wished to quickly settle these new areas with skilled agriculturalists who were loyal to her. The Empress, also known as Catherine the Great (Princess von Anhalt-Zerbst married Tsar Peter III), extended an invitation to farmers in Germany to establish ethnic colonies in Russia. Her proclamation promised free land, a farmhouse, freedom of religion, military exemption and no taxation for 10 years. Hence, many thousands of farmers were lured to southern Russia, northwest of the Black Sea, forming new villages, of which many were purely German.

The first Gebhardt shown in the parish records was Georg Gebhardt, born on April 17, 1775, in Ugartsthal, Galicia. He was the great grandfather of Johann Gebhardt. Later, the Gebhardt family and others moved on to the town of Scholtoi in Bessarabia which had been annexed from the Ottoman Turks in 1812.

Anna Maria married Johann (John) Gebhardt on May 1, 1894, and they made their home in a small village (Dorf) in Scholtoi. Anna Maria never talked much about the earlier



**Anna Maria and Johann Gebhardt on their  
60th wedding anniversary in 1953**

years but said they had an orchard, a garden and enjoyed a river (Fluss) flowing nearby. They ate apples, pears and plums and raised cows, geese, chickens and pigs. Meat was not plentiful due to the lack of refrigeration. Many meals were called Mehlspeise<sup>5</sup>.

The progressive erosion of rights and privileges granted by the Empress – especially those of military service, cultural and linguistic freedoms – caused Germans to emigrate from their colonies in the late 1800s. Again, it was the lure of inexpensive farmland that made several Scholtoi families consider the long and arduous trip to Canada. Johann's older brother Phillip and family left Russia in 1903 to settle in Melville, Saskatchewan.

In 1906, 28-year-old Anna Maria embarked on the same journey with her husband Johann and their four small

<sup>5</sup> Meatless meals based on flour

children: Adolf (12 years), Carolina (seven years), Wilhelm (three years) and baby Eleanor, who died en route at the age of eight months. They arrived in Saskatchewan after about five months of travel. In the village of Neudorf, Anna Maria and her family spent the first winter in a wagon box turned upside down since there was no time to build a sod house.

In 1907, Johann filed for a homestead north of Cupar. In 1910, the couple had a 16-foot by 30-foot log house valued at \$300, a stable, one granary, a 14-foot by 20-foot storehouse valued at \$300 and 10 acres of fenced pasture. Between 1908 and 1919, six more children were born. Anna Maria gave birth to 13 children in total. Heinrich, Valentin, Eleanor and Emma died in infancy. The nine who lived to adulthood were: Adolf, Carolina, Wilhelm, Philipina, Philip, Elisa, Wilhelmina, Rudolf and Maria.

They lived a simple life, speaking mainly German since most of the settlers in the district shared the same background and Lutheran faith. They homesteaded in the Cupar area and worked the land with oxen and later with horses. In 1919, they moved south of Markinch, where Johann built a two-storey house along with a larger barn and animal shelter.

The Dirty Thirties struck and the family had to lie on the floor many times with wet towels across their faces waiting for the wind, loaded with topsoil and sand, to die down. Nothing grew during those years, except for Russian thistles and tumbleweed that rolled up against the fences. Sand and drift dirt piled up so high that only the tops of the fence posts could be seen. It was a very bad time.

During the drought years, the government offered 160 acres for \$10 in what was considered northern Saskatchewan. So Johann and Anna Maria, Wilhelm, Rudolf and Maria moved to Archerwill, where there was a good water supply and, most importantly, rain. Philip, Elisa and Wilhelmina stayed in Markinch. By that time, Adolf, Carolina and Philipina were living on their own.

In the Archerwill area, they built a log cabin and animal shelter. The family planted and harvested in order to also keep the Markinch home supplied. With the abundance of practical

knowledge that Johann and Maria had, the family was able to live off the land and slowly recover from the early 1930s. And finally the rains came back. Johann and Anna Maria along with Philipina, Rudolf and Maria moved back to the Markinch farm in 1936. Wilhelm and Wilhelmina stayed in Archerwill.

In 1940, Johann and Anna Maria retired to a small home in the town of Markinch and took life easier. They enjoyed their home and small garden and learned how to relax. They always had time for friends and family, which they richly deserved.

After Johann died in 1962 at the age of 90, Anna Maria lived with family until 1965 when she moved into the Lutheran Home in Regina. She still knitted and crocheted at the age of 95 but her sight and hearing slowly dimmed from then on. Her mind however, remained alert and she enjoyed visits from family and friends.

Anna Maria lived for 100 years and died in February 1979. Anna Maria is buried next to Johann in the peaceful Wheatwyn Church Cemetery, which is a designated provincial heritage site.

Anna Maria's life exemplified the pioneering spirit. Endurance, hard work and determination moved her family forward often in most difficult and challenging times. Anna Maria was a caring woman and had a strong faith in God. Her whole life was centred on God, the church and her family. Her motto was, "You do your best. God will do the rest!"

*By Mary Schneider, daughter*

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