

## **Biography of Daniel Netz (1868—1948)**

### **Pioneer of 1888, McIntosh County, Fredonia, North Dakota**

*As one of the WPA work projects during the Depression, field workers were asked to interview and document the biographies of many of North Dakota's pioneers. This is the biography of Daniel Netz, born in Neu Elft, Bessarabia, who came to McIntosh County, North Dakota in the late 1880's. This interview took place sometime between 1934 and 1948.*

Daniel Netz was born on August 26, 1868 at Neuelft [Neu Elft], Bessarabia, So. Russia. His father owned a small farm near Neuelft. Mr. Netz's parents were also born in Neuelft but Mr. Netz does not know their birth dates. His parents were William and Christine Netz.

At the age of six, Mr. Netz was sent to school at Neuelft, Russia. A term of school there was six months long. The scholars, according to Mr. Netz, were probably more rigidly disciplined than here. They were taught the German and Russian languages. The children were taught to read, write and speak both. Other subjects taught were geography, arithmetic, catechism and Bible study. Mr. Netz attended school until he was fifteen years old.

Leaving school, he was hired out to different farmers. He also worked at different trades such as milling and other work. The first year (1884) he worked for Andreas Kruger of Neuelft at a salary of \$12 a year. Later, of course, he was paid more.

When Mr. Netz was twenty years old, he decided to go to America to join his brother Emanuel Netz and two sisters, Mrs. Karl and Mrs. John Hillius, all of whom had come to America in 1885 and 1887. His decision coming partially from the fact that, had he stayed in Russia, he would have, in another year, been eligible to join the Russian Army. Nobody could avoid joining as it was compulsory that each man when he became twenty-one years of age must join. There was also another reason; it was Mr. Netz's contention that to stay in Russia was to consider yourself tied to a poverty-stricken life with only a bare living eked out of the undernourished wheat land. The letters from America served to spur Mr. Netz on in his desire to leave Russia. A friend of his, Mr. Karl Kruger, now of Fredonia, North Dakota, who was serving compulsory military duty was also tired of the life he was leading. Mr. Kruger had a wife and child in Neuelft but he was never able to be at home. Mr. Kruger and Mr. Netz, having talked it over, decided they would go together.

Mr. Netz had saved most of the money he had earned working, and with some money he had received from his father, he paid his fare to America. The trip from Leipzig, Russia to Scotland, Dakota Territory cost Mr. Netz approximately \$150.

Mr. Netz and Mr. and Mrs. Karl Kruger and son were taken to Leipzig, Russia in a wagon by Mr. Netz's brother. They took enough food to last them until they would reach Bremen, Germany. This food consisted of dried bread and dried meat. They left Neuelft and reached Leipzig the same day. This was March 26, 1888. At Leipzig they boarded the train to Bremen, Germany. They arrived at Bremen on March 29<sup>th</sup>. Upon arriving there they found that the ship in which they were to sail, the Werrah, was not ready and they had to wait

three days before sailing. While waiting, they stayed at a hotel near the waterfront. The ship took care of all expenses while they waited. On April 2<sup>nd</sup>, they embarked on their ship for America. On board ship their food consisted of soups, meat, some vegetables and tea. Mr. Netz enjoyed the trip and wasn't seasick at any time. When they were out at sea about three days a terrific storm struck the ship but they did not suffer any damage and the storm soon abated. The rest of the trip was made without any trouble. The ship docked in New York harbor on April 10, 1888. The same day, Mr. Netz and Krugers boarded a train for Dakota Territory. On April 13, 1888 they arrived at Scotland, D.T. Here they stopped off for three days to visit at the home of Simon Klein, who had been a good friend of the Netz family in Russia before migrating to America a few years before. Leaving there April 17, they arrived at Ellendale, D.T. on April 18, 1888. They hadn't informed their relatives of the time of their arrival, so they were not met at Ellendale. After spending the night there, they set out on foot for the Hillius home. They asked directions from settlers and made the entire 45 mile journey on foot.

Mr. Netz parted with Krugers at the Karl Hillius home, when Krugers went on to the Brost home which was about 15 miles northwest of the Hillius home.

Mr. Netz stayed at the Hillius home only a few days. He was informed he would probably [not] be able to find any work there, as most of the settlers had only been there for a year and were not financially able to hire anybody. Mr. Netz returned to Scotland, D.T. Here he stayed with Mr. Klein for a few days and was then given a job on the farm of a Mr. Bender, near Scotland. He worked there from May 1 until December 1, 1888. For this, he was given a salary of \$125 for the eight months. Then he returned to the Hillius home northwest of Ellendale. He stayed at the Hillius' until March 1889. By that time he had decided on what land he wished to homestead. Although the two Hillius brothers had filed on Township 132, Rge. 66, he filed in the adjoining township. His claim was the southwest half of the southeast quarter and on the southeast half of the southwest quarter of Section 20, Township 132, Rge. 67. Here he built a small sod house, size 12X24 feet, with two rooms. In the house he built a stove of bricks made out of common clay which could be found any place on the prairie. This stove, used for heating and baking, was about six feet long, five feet high, and three feet deep. There was a steel plate on the inside of the stove on which was placed the food to be prepared. This plate was about two feet off the floor of the stove. Beneath this was the fire. During the first years on his homestead, Mr. Netz burned hay in this stove. With oxen he drove to Edgeley, D.T. [Dakota Territory] where he purchased enough lumber for the roof and doors to the house. He had no floor in his house. The furniture consisted of a few shelves, in place of a cupboard, a homemade trunk, in which to keep clothes, a table and a long bench for seats. All of this furniture was made out of lumber left over from building the house. Also at Edgeley he bought two each of cups, saucers, knives, forks, and spoons. His food was very simple consisting mostly of flour, coffee, sugar, and once in awhile a small piece of salt pork. Flour at Edgeley cost \$2.25 per 100 pounds. Coffee was \$0.15 per pound, salt \$0.02 per pound and sugar cost \$4.00 per 100 pounds. The only clothing he bought was overalls which at Edgeley sold for \$0.75 per pair.

As Mr. Netz had no farm animals with which to work he bought a team of oxen from Andreas Blum, a neighbor of Hillius'. He paid \$40 for each of these oxen. As he didn't have

enough money, he was given credit by Mr. Blum until he could pay. Mr. Blum also gave Mr. Netz a wagon fastened together from old farm machinery parts. Mr. Netz purchased seed from Karl Hillius. He broke up ten acres, which he seeded to flax and rented another ten acres which had been broke[n] up the previous year, from John Kroll, a neighbor. This was seeded to wheat. Mr. Netz does not remember what he paid for the seed. The Hillius brothers gave Mr. Netz a plow with which to prepare his land. This plow and the old wagon were the only farming implements Mr. Netz had. The seed had to be sown by hand. The seeds were then covered by dragging the land with a heavy pole. The year 1889 proved to be a drouth [drought] year and Mr. Netz's first crop was a total failure. In order to earn money with which to buy food supplies, Mr. Netz picked buffalo bones on the prairie. These he sold at Edgeley and Ellendale, Dakota. The bones brought about \$4 per load for it. He borrowed a mower and rake from the two Hillius brothers. Most of his haying had to be done in the fall of 1889 as he had to wait until Hillius were through with the haying tools. The bones he picked during the summer and sold them as he picked them. Sometimes he would spend a whole week at this occupation until he had a wagon load.

The winter of 1889-90 was very lonesome for Mr. Netz. He did not have any close neighbors and the snow piled up in huge drifts making it almost impossible for anybody to traverse them. If the settlers were forced to go to town they usually went in groups. In this way, they would usually break a fair road and insure easier travel plus the lessened danger of getting lost. Edgeley was the town the settlers would usually patronize. By 1889 the town was fairly well established with ample supplies to take care of the settlers' wants. Edgeley was only 25 miles northeast of the settlement, whereas Ellendale, the next closest town, was 45 miles from the settlement. Mr. Netz never made more than three trips to town during an entire winter. The winters were all rather severe and without roads it was hard to make such a trip. A trip to town and return would take two days. The most severe winter in Mr. Netz's memory was the winter of 1893. Blizzards would rage for a week at a time. He dared not go out, even as far as the barn, and horses and cattle suffered from lack of water and feed. The few times that Mr. Netz was able to reach the barn he could not give his stock sufficient water and feed to last. His well, which was a hand dug one, was covered with snow and snow had to be melted for the stock and household use. This winter came to an end, and luckily without loss of any kind to Mr. Netz.

Before Mr. Netz left Russia for America he became engaged to Mary [or Maria] Keller of Neuelft, South Russia. He wanted to get a start in America before sending for her. So it was that in 1890 Mary Keller came to join Mr. Netz. She was born to Jacob and Sophia Keller at Neuelft on April 12, 1874 and grew to womanhood there. She came to the German Settlement northwest of Ellendale, North Dakota during May, 1890. She was taken, by Mr. Netz, to the Karl Hillius home until June 30, 1890 when Daniel Netz and Mary Keller were married at Ellendale. It was a simple wedding ceremony performed by Reverend Wacker of the Congregational Church of Ellendale, North Dakota.

After the wedding they made their home on Mr. Netz's claim. Here were born all of their thirteen children. The children are: [Theodore, Hermina, Dena, Christina, Harold, John D., Nathaniel, Albert, Otto, Adelena, Viola, Lorene, Lillian.]

In 1904 Mr. Netz built a large frame house which was the first house he had since building the first sod house on his claim. This house is still being used. [Editor's note: This was also true as of 1998!]

During Mr. Netz's first winter here the first schoolhouse in Springfield Township was built. This was a frame building on a cement foundation size 12x18 feet. It stood on the northeast quarter of Section 22. The desks for the pupils were built by [by] the carpenters, Schneider and Miller, who had erected the schoolhouse. The heating stove was of the round cast-iron type, popular in that day. Both the stove and the wood for the construction of the school were purchased at Ellendale, Dakota. The total cost was only \$150. Mr. Netz does not remember who the first teacher was, but the second one was Mr. John Semple who was a farmer in the vicinity. Six months constituted a school term and the first two years only the first and second grades were taught. Among the subjects taught were reading, writing, arithmetic, and geography. Mr. Netz does not know what kind of text books were used. One winter before this, in 1887, school had been held in the John Miller home.

The first church was already established when Mr. Netz came to the settlement from Russia. This was the Congregational Church of which Reverend Hirth of Eureka, Dakota was the first minister. His salary at first was only \$500 per year. Mr. Netz isn't certain who the original members of the church were but among them were: Netz, Rollof [probably Roloff], Billigmeier, John and Gott Schneider, John Miller and Sam Fregien. Reverend Hirth was succeeded, after two years, by Reverend Bowman. The church meanwhile was held at the various homes of the members. In 1896 the first church building was erected in the township. Land was purchased from Karl Radke at a cost of \$4. Lumber was hauled out from Kulm for the church. The church was built by the members under the supervision of P. Kurtz. All of the furnishings were made by Mr. Kurtz, with the exception of the stove which was purchased at Edgeley. The church was 18x36 feet in size. It had eight windows and one door. This church is still in good shape and is still being used. The church was built on the northwest quarter of Section 26. [Editor's Note: This church continued to be used until 1953. It remained on the same site until 1982, when Daniel Netz's granddaughter and her husband, Lee R. and Alice (Fregien) Hollan, purchased and moved the church building to their own farm rather than allowing it to be torn down. It remains there as of 2001.]

Mr. Netz was elected to the school board in 1903. He held this office until 1918. He was then elected township supervisor. This office was held by him until 1928.

In 1928 Mr. and Mrs. Netz moved to Fredonia, North Dakota, where they lived until 1932, when they moved back to the farm again. In 1934 they moved back to Fredonia where they have made their home since.

Although Township 132, Rge. 67 is organized, Mr. Netz does not know when it was organized. Neither does he know who the first township officials were.

When Mr. Netz came here from Russia the township was already partially settled. Among the settlers were: John and Gottlieb Schneider, John Kroll and Samuel Fregien. With the exception of Sam Fregien, now residing in Fredonia, North Dakota, they have all passed

away. Mr. Netz does not know who the very first settler was or who the first child to be born in the township was. John Schneider and Louise Fischer were the first couple married in the township. Mr. Netz did not attend the wedding so he does not know any details about it. In 1892 Andrew Schneider died of tuberculosis. He lies buried at the Gnadenfeld Cemetery next to the Gnadenfeld Church in Springfield Township. There were no post offices or villages in or near the township.

Mr. Netz's first impressions of the country were rather distorted due to the wilderness of the country. Sometimes a person could drive for miles before he finally arrived at some homesteader's lonely home. His desires, at first, were to return immediately to Russia, but this was out of the question due to his financial difficulties. Now Mr. Netz wouldn't wish to live in any other country.

Mr. Netz was retired from all active life and now makes his home in Fredonia, where he lives quietly with his wife. His son, Albert, has taken over the farm.

(Field Worker's note: I have tried to get a true and accurate account of Mr. Netz's life in America. If dates are lacking it is probably due to the fact that Mr. Netz has forgotten details and dates. Mrs. Netz helped me quite a bit with the biography as her memory is much clearer than Mr. Netz's.)

Edward Jerke, Fredonia, North Dakota

(Source: The Collection of the State Historical Society of North Dakota, WPA Biography Project. Used with permission.)