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## WWI, family history, and what it means...

As an "early" Baby Boomer, World War I always represented fascinating, big-scene history to me, in no small part due to my experiences growing up.

First, let me note that my late father was a World War II veteran. Drafted when he graduated from Terry High School in May 1945, he finished basic training by early 1946. He shipped to Germany as part of the Occupation Forces who helped rebuild the country from Nazi-caused devastation. As I grew up, I heard stories about his Army days and saw photos he took in Germany, but it all seemed more like current events than actual history.

If fine wine takes time to age, I submit history takes time to gain perspective. World War I, which ended 100 years ago this Sunday and 33 years before I was born in 1951, did that for me, especially since I had a living connection to the Great War era as a boy.

I'll always remember the summer of 1964, the 50th anniversary of the start of World War I. I was 13 and lived in Miles City. We often traveled to Glendive to visit my grandfather, my mother's father, who had retired from the family farm south of Glendive and was living in town. I recall seeing three or four magazines – Life, Look, Saturday Evening Post and maybe another one in the heyday of picture magazines – lying on the coffee table of John Neiffer's living room.

I didn't realize it then, but World War I represented a pivotal experience to my grandfather as a man in his early 20s. In the same way, the Vietnam War became a pivotal experience to those of us who came of age in the late 1960s.

My grandfather wasn't a World War I veteran. Instead, he had served in the Russian army in the decade before the October 1917 Revolution. It brought to power the Bolsheviks, later renamed the Communists, and ended the Romanoff Dynasty that had ruled Russia for centuries. But my grandfather wasn't Russian. He was German, part of a group of several hundred thousand Germans who had settled in Germany. Starting in the late 1700s, they migrated to the steppes of Russia, along the Black Sea and near the Volga River, at the invitation of Catherine the Great, the German-born empress of a vast land that needed farmers to tame its frontier.

In her Great Manifesto, Catherine promised her countrymen and countrywomen free land, freedom to practice their religion and cultural traditions (including language), and a waiver from required military service. Later czars, however, reneged on those promises, prompting a wave of immigration by these Germans. Some of the first to leave, starting in the mid-1800s, were Mennonites and Hutterites, whose beliefs did not allow serving in the armed forces of any country.

By 1914, my mother's family, part of the Evangelical community in Germany and then in Russia – Lutherans today in America – evidently felt increased Russification pressures and decided to leave. So, in May 1914, they migrated to America. The group consisted of my widowed maternal great-grandmother, Caroline Schock; my mother's parents, John and Eva (Schock) Neiffer and their infant daughter, Lydia (oldest of nine children; my mother was second-youngest); and five of my great-uncles, ranging in age from 19 to 3, and a six-year-old great-aunt.

The group apparently traveled by train to either Bremen or Hamburg,



### REPORTER'S NOTEBOOK

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main embarkation points in Germany for migrants, and booked passage to England. Then, likely traveling by train again, they reached Liverpool and bought passage on the SS Teutonic, an immigrant ship that was part of the White Star Line. They did not, however, pass through Ellis Island. I've found a ship manifest that shows the group arrived in Quebec on May 28, 1914.

They stopped for a while in Gackle, North Dakota, to stay with relatives. Before the decade was over, they moved to Eastern Montana and began farming in Dawson County (where I was born, in the Northern Pacific hospital).

A family history written by one of my mother's cousins gives as good a reason as any for why my ancestors left Russia after experiencing decades of relative prosperity in what was then called the breadbasket of Europe.

"Probably the reason for their leaving Russia was that war was imminent and Grandmother had sons that were of fighting age," including one son, who turned 21 in June 1914 and had come to the U.S. earlier than the rest to avoid the Russian draft, according to this account.

Prescient or not, this migration occurred before Serbian anarchist Gavrilo Princip assassinated Austrian Archduke Franz Ferdinand and his wife, Sophie, in Sarajevo, starting a slow-motion chain of events that culminated in the start of war in August 1914.

A fortunate result of that migration of Germans from Russia involves Mennonites, credited with introducing one of the prime varieties of wheat grown in the Upper Midwest and Montana during the first half of the 20th century. That's Turkey Red, a hard red variety that lent its name to a Milwaukee Road spur railroad line that ran north from Bozeman.

Although historians trace the origins of the wheat to Turkey, Turkish immigrants didn't bring seeds to the Great Plains.

One account comes from a retired Presbyterian minister who was raised in Eastern Montana in the Mennonite community of Bloomfield, a town near Glendive. The late Dr. Roane Deckert authored a 2012 historical novel called "Comes the Morning," which describes Mennonites who brought prized seed wheat with them when they migrated from Russia.

"Our Mennonites went to Turkey some years ago to get this wheat because it is so productive and resistant to disease and drought. This wheat grows extremely well here on the steppes, and we think it will grow just as well as well on the plains of America," the book's protagonist, Peter Deckert (Roane Decker's real-life great-grandfather) says.

Those Mennonites took passage to New York City, traveled by train to Newton, Kansas (a major hub of Mennonite education to this day), and then took the Missouri River steamboat Far West to Yankton, S.D. By 1878, they were growing Turkey Red wheat on land they homesteaded in South Dakota, and they later moved to Montana, bringing wheat seed with them.