History comes to life

Inside, read about the historic Schwab sod house, the boyhood home of Larry Schwab and his nine siblings which has been preserved for history.
Larry Schwab pushes open the white, wooden door and steps inside his boyhood home. Toes once tapped on the wooden floors, keeping time to the lively accordion music. At one time, 18 children squeezed into the tiny rooms, probably filling the cracks with laughter.

"There are too many good memories there," says Antonia (Schwab) Baumgartner, Larry’s sister who now owns the home.

In fact, there were so many memories within the sod walls that the family couldn’t bear to say goodbye. So, the Schwab home was refurbished in 1988 and is now open to visitors as an historical site in Emmons County near Strasburg, in KEM Electric Cooperative’s service territory.

"The Schwab sod house is a beautifully preserved time capsule of early prairie life. One of the few sod houses left in the area, it has stood the test of time for over a century and stands now as a testament to the lasting influence of Emmons County pioneers," promotional materials describe.

"I couldn’t see it go down to nothing," Antonia says.

And a promise to her mother to keep the home intact led to the restoration project. Since then, the Schwab house has been a part of Emmons County history, open to the public to share the past.

"I want people to enjoy the past," Antonia says. "It’s a little bit of how"
A cccordian rests in the living room as a tribute to John Schwab.

Schwab home preserves memories

BY LUANN DART

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“I want people to enjoy the past,” Antonia says. “It’s a little bit of how
we lived in the old days.”

She describes working from
dawn to sunset — milking cows,
washing dishes and cooking meals
for threshing crews. But she also
remembers making mud pies in old
tuna cans and cutting paper dolls from
the catalogs.

“It was a fun time at home,”
she says.

The Schwab children were
modeled and shaped on the dark soil
of Emmons County, where John
and Magdalena Schwab raised 10
children, including Antonia and Larry.

And then there was the music.
An accomplished accordion player,
John Schwab shared his music with
visitors on Sundays and played at area
weddings. The music spilled over to
the children, with several forming
the Bubbling Quintet, with Larry at
the piano.

Larry remembers learning to play
the piano when he was 10 years old,
playing at weddings with his father.

“I got paid $1 at each wedding,” he
says with a chuckle.

**Homesteading**

**Emmons County**

In 1889, Martin and his son, Lorenz
Schwab, came to America, arriving at
the homestead May 7, 1889. Turning
their wagons over for shelter, they
began the work of constructing
the first sod house similar to the
semeljankas their forefathers built in
Russia some 80 years before, using
sun-dried adobe blocks. The earthen
walls were plastered inside with a
mixture of flour, water and paste, then
wallpapered, Antonia describes.

In 1902, Martin Schwab took his
family to the area of Karlsruhe, while
Lorenz stayed in the Strasburg area.
Lorenz and Regina Schwab had 17
children during their married life.

The first two boys, both named
Karl, were born in Russia, and both
died in infancy. Two daughters were
born in Russia, while the rest of the
children were born in North Dakota,
probably on the Schwab farm.
Another son, Lawrence, died in the flu epidemic in 1918 as an adult, while two more sons died as children.

Lorenz Schwab, the father, died at the age of 54 in 1917. He worked the Schwab farm for nearly 28 years. His wife, Regina, died in 1938.

John Schwab, the 12th child of Lorenz and Regina, was only 16 when his father died. John was described as a fun-loving, jovial man, full of laughter, and kind-hearted. He was a joker and often imitated voices and mannerisms of others. On Jan. 7, 1925, he married Magdalena Baumgartner and they lived on the Schwab farm, which they eventually bought.

Antonia, the ninth child of John and Magdalena, was the last born to them in the old sod house.

During the Depression, John’s brother, Ludwig, and Ludwig’s wife brought their eight children to live at the farmstead, too, so 22 people occupied the small house. Larry remembers climbing a ladder with the other children to sleep in a loft above the main floor.

In 1948, John and Magdalena moved to Strasburg, and the oldest son, Joe (Juddy), took over the farm.

In 1974, Juddy and Imogene moved to Strasburg, and the old sod house sat empty for 14 years.

Then in 1988, Antonia and her son, Daryl, decided to have a picnic in the tree row at the home. Seeing the home in disrepair prompted them to decide to restore the house.

“There were bowling ball-sized holes in the walls,” Antonia describes. But by 2009, the home was again in need of repairs, so Antonia decided to have it repaired. The new gray steel roof, new windows, and white vinyl siding should keep the sod house standing for many years to come.

**Sharing history**

This time-tested building housed four generations of Schwabs, and now stands as a reminder of Emmons County’s past. Nearly 100 visitors recorded their names in the guestbook last year, coming from coast-to-coast and points in-between. Open to the public year-round since 1988, the home welcomes the public to tour.

Each room in the house features furniture from different eras in the Schwabs’ history, transporting visitors into times unfamiliar and sometimes even forgotten. The house lies amidst a quiet prairie, much like it did over a century ago. The thick walls are one hint of the sod underneath the plaster.

The old sod house lives on, and so do the descendants of Lorenz and Regina Schwab.

“There are lots of good memories there,” Antonia says.

**Directions:**
To get to the Schwab sod house, turn onto Main Street of Strasburg and go east. Follow this road as it goes one-half mile east of Strasburg, then turns north for one mile and then turns east again. After two miles comes 13th Ave. S.E. Take this road north for three miles, and the house will be to the east.

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**To learn more:**
- To learn more about the heritage and culture of the Germans from Russia and destinations in the area, visit http://germanrussiancountry.org.
- For more information about the Tri-County Tourism Alliance, contact: Carmen Rath-Wald, president, 301 Broadway Napoleon, ND 58561; email: Carmen.Rath.Wald@ndsu.edu; or phone: 701-754-2504.
- View photos of German-Russian Country at flickr: http://www.flickr.com/photos/german-russian/sets/
- To read about preserving the food culture of the Germans from Russia, visit Das Gute Essen at http://dasguteessen.com.

Historical information provided by the Emmons County Record.