



Marriage and Weddings: Past and Present

By Gayla Ohlhauser Aspenleiter

Edited by Carolyn Schott

Prehistoric man simply seized his bride by force.

But as civilization progressed, marriage by force was exchanged for marriage by purchase – a bride was sold to the highest bidder.

In our own German-Russian culture, marriage for a price was sometimes practiced in South Russia in the 1800s in many of the villages. For example, in *The German Colonies in South Russia 1804 to 1904, Volume II*, Rev. Conrad Keller writes, "If the bride is from another village or community, the matter [marriage] becomes somewhat more complicated. The fiancé then selects a spokesman to ask the bride in marriage on his behalf, or, as it happens in recent times, he engages a 'broker' who solicits the selected bride for a price."

Even today in America this custom still exists, although a little differently. For example, on November 10, 2005, on a news report published by msnbc.com, a woman in Albuquerque decided to sell her 95-year-old home, fully furnished, with herself included. She simply added herself to an eBay auction for her \$600,000 home located in Denver. I guess that is one way to kill two birds with one stone.

Marriage by Arrangement

Marriage by purchase was exchanged for marriage by arrangement. In our own German-Russian culture in the 1800s and possibly 1900s, marriage was sometimes arranged by the parents of the bride and/or groom or by the godparents. Elaine Becker Morrison, Boulder, Colorado, describes the following in her article "Courtship Customs": "my husband's great-uncle arranged for a bride by writing to a family that he met on a ship during their immigration to Saskatchewan eight years earlier. He sent money for train fare and asked for one of the daughters to be his bride. The family recalled that the

uncle requested and anticipated the arrival of the older, beautiful daughter, but she already had a boyfriend so the father sent another daughter instead. The father probably felt that it would be her only chance to marry as she had become quite scarred as a result of smallpox and was blind in one eye. What a surprise this must have been for the uncle meeting his new bride for the first time. The uncle was 51 years old and his new bride was just 22."

Wedding customs probably varied some in detail in the different German colonies of Russia, but the process of marriage was brought about by mutual consent of the parties, instigation of the parents, or the use of a matchmaker. A young man wishing to marry had to get permission from his family first, then permission from the parents of the bride-to-be. According to Joseph S. Height in *Paradise on the Steppe*, "In the colonies the girls usually married when they were eighteen, the young men at the age of nineteen or twenty. A young woman who was still single at twenty was practically regarded as an old maid. The young men of the village quite often married their school-time sweethearts or one of the girls from the appropriate comradeship, of which there were three social classes, namely rich, middle class, and poor. Marriages to partners from other villages were likewise fairly common. Extremely rare were marriages to persons of another faith or to Russian nationals."

The article "How the Volga Germans Celebrated a Wedding" (*Heritage Review* September 1992, Vol. 22, No. 3), states, "When one attained the age of 25 and was still single, he was counted as being in the 'picked over' group."

Marriage by Choice

Marriage by arrangement was replaced with marriage by choice. Dale Wahl, before

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his passing, sent me the following story titled *Choosing a Wife*:

Most of us are aware of the stories about how our ancestors' marriages were "arranged." My own story of my German-Russian grandparents does not tend to support such an arrangement! I cannot speak of the validity of this story but perhaps you will find it interesting and enjoyable.

The time was about 1910. My grandfather was apparently working as a hired man for Christian Essig, father of Walter Essig [who was the husband of our own GRHS Alice Essig].

It appears that it was on a weekend and my grandfather Gottlieb Wahl was over south of Mercer walking down the road when he was passing the house of Philipp Wall. (Wahl and Wall are two different families at this point in time.)

Maggie Wall's father, Philipp, was up on the roof working on the sod and the females of the household were out back working in the garden. There is nothing reported as to where the other males of the household were.

Anyhow, they were exchanging a little conversation when out of the blue, Gottlieb announced to Philipp that he would like to marry one of Philipp's daughters. This was news to Philipp as he did not have a clue as to this young fellow knowing any of his daughters!

After being taken back by the declaration from Gottlieb, Philipp asked him which daughter he was talking about.

Gottlieb sized up the young ladies he could see in the garden and pointing at Maggie (Magdalena), he said "I think I will take that one right there" as if he

were buying something in the market place.

There is no report as to how Philipp reacted to Gottlieb's choice, nor what transpired between then and Gottlieb and Maggie's marriage about a year later.

But that is the story as it has been passed down.

Today, technology has made it easier to find just the right partner. We now have cars, trains, airplanes, and, of course, the Internet to help us find just the right partner. The modern version of the "broker" or matchmaker can be found by subscribing to websites such as Match.com and eHarmony.com or participating in reality TV programs such as "The Dating Game" or "Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?" Internet websites and reality TV programs can allegedly match individual backgrounds and traits so accurately that two people brought together for a date can be assured of "common interests" at the very least. In any event, these matchmakers can only arrange the dating, not marriage. Matchmaking has not disappeared; it has merely changed its appearance and emphasis.

Marriage by choice has not been replaced, but now more emphasis is placed on marriage based on love and mutual respect. For example, in May of 1946, my mother met my father and it was "love at first sight." My father was on leave from the Navy when they met and before his week-long leave ended, he and my mother were married in Woonsocket, South Dakota by the Justice of the Peace. Needless to say, my grandparents on both sides were furious and would not bless this mixed marriage. They told my parents that it would not last because no one falls in love in seven days and my mother was brought up by Hutterite-Mennonite parents and my father by Lutheran parents.

My grandparents, however, were proven wrong. My parents were happily married for 34 years with the marriage ending only at the death of my mother at age 52.

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I completely believe in "love at first sight" because two years ago at a GRHS convention I followed my parents' example by also falling in love at first sight. Rich and I were married August 16, 2008. Although our wedding didn't follow most of the German-Russian marriage traditions, it was a somewhat traditional wedding for the 21st century.

Wedding Invitations

Invitations in the old country were delivered in person by the two bridesmen who were officially appointed by the bride and groom. They were always delivered in the traditional form of rhymed verse and almost everyone in the village was invited. Invited guests would attach a ribbon to the staff of the bridesman indicating their acceptance of the invitation. During this time period it was not unusual to have 100 to 150 guests attend a wedding.

Today, wedding invitations are pre-designed and usually sent via the post office. However, technology is making it easier to order pre-designed cards online. For example, Rich and I created and printed our own wedding invitations, and for those invited guests living overseas we sent the invitation via the Internet. Today, the number of guests invited to a wedding depends on the budget of the bride and groom.

Engagement and Wedding Rings

Some believe that the wedding band originated in ancient Egypt along with the belief that the fourth finger (counting the thumb) on the left hand contained a vein that is connected directly to the heart. Therefore, that finger became the ring finger, the finger connected to love and marriage. This is still known as the ring finger in most parts of the world. However, in Europe the wedding band is worn on the same finger though on the right hand instead of the left, as is common in North America.

In *Memories of the Black Sea Germans*, Heigt mentions that engagement rings

were not exchanged, nor were wedding bands or rings common.

Elaine Becker Morrison shared the following with me:

"My father was the Baptist minister in Herreid, South Dakota for six years. Times then were rough - coming out of the Depression. People did not spend a lot of time or energy on weddings then. Many times the couple would appear at our front door and say they wanted to be married. [No pre-marital counseling in those days!] Mother would hurry us to the living room to tidy it up a bit before Daddy tied the knot. Often the couple came alone so Mother would sign as a witness. I recall only one wedding that was held in a church. Sometimes it would be in the home of one of the couples, but usually it was in the parsonage.

During the 1930s and 40s, the ring was a band for the woman only. They were always yellow gold. Those were lean years and probably not many could afford a diamond ring as well. My aunts did not have engagement rings; however, my parents were married in 1926, before the 'crash.' Mother did have a solitaire diamond ring to match her white gold wedding band - quite unusual. My father was 16 years old when he and his family left Russia for Alberta, Canada. A few years later he went off to New York to go to college and then the seminary. It was during one of those years that he happened to spend a summer in North Dakota and 'discovered' my mother. She then went to college in Chicago for a year before joining him in New York. I have an idea that my parents were exposed to non-German-Russian ideas that they adopted - and that may explain her diamond ring."

Unlike the old German-Russian tradition, Rich presented me with a diamond

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engagement ring. I chose to use my mother's wedding band as part of my wedding ring because of its sentimental



Early 1900s— wedding of Immanuel Irion & Elisabeth Aipperspach in Hoffnungstal, Bessarabia

value and because it represented my parents' happy and successful marriage. It was important to us that Rich also have a wedding band which was very uncommon with our German-Russian ancestors.

The Wedding Report, a wedding statistics and market research firm for the wedding industry, estimates that engagement ring spending will total \$6.1 billion in America for 2008, with an additional \$2 billion being spent on wedding rings for brides and grooms. They also estimate the total 2008 market value to reach \$8.1 billion growing to \$9.2 billion by 2013, a 13.4% growth over the next five years. The vast majority of engagement and bridal rings will have diamonds, and more than two thirds will have white gold. Obviously, rings are big business in today's wedding industry.

Celebration and Dress

Weddings in Russia were usually celebrated over a three-day time period starting on Tuesday, according to Joseph S. Height in his book *Memories of the Black Sea Germans*. The weddings took place at the home of the bride's parents, but the

actual exchanging of vows took place at the local church or parish. John Philipps, in his book *The Tragedy of the Soviet Germans (A Story of Survival)* states, "Weddings usually took place in the fall, after the harvest, and the celebration lasted for two or three days. After 1934, there were no more church weddings, only civil weddings at the registry office."

"The bride was dressed in the traditional blue or black gown and she wore an embroidered shawl and a bonnet or coif. In later times, she was clad in a gown of white silk and a long veil that was fastened to her head with a crescent-shaped wreath of rosemary and myrtle – the time-honored symbols of virginity and fidelity. Around her waist she wore a silken sash which was tied in a large bow with long streamers. In her hand she carried her prayer book, a rosary, and a bouquet of myrtle." (Height, *Memories of the Black Sea Germans*, pp.193)

For her 1916 wedding in Carpenter, South Dakota, my grandmother wore a red dress (yes, red!). She was from the



Honoring their heritage, Rich and Gayla (Ohlhauser) Aspenleiter, along with German-Russian family and friends, pose for a traditional German-Russian wedding photo, August 16, 2008. Photograph reprinted with permission by Richard Learnard

Hutterite faith although her family no longer lived in the colony. From my research, it appears that Hutterite brides usually wore a blue brocade wedding dress so I assume that my grandmother's red wedding dress

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was her own choice and had nothing to do with her religious customs.

I broke with tradition, both German-Russian and my grandmother's example, by choosing purple for my wedding dress as it's my favorite and most complimentary color. Of course, white is the traditional color that most brides choose for their wedding dress today.

I did follow the German-Russian custom of making the celebration last for three days. In the old country, on the evening before the wedding day the young friends of the bridal couple gathered at the house of the bride's parents to celebrate the traditional *Polterabend*, a farewell party for the young couple entering the married state. This evening was spent singing and dancing, eating and drinking. We had our own version of *Polterabend* by serving barbecued brats, sauerkraut, beer, and wine on Friday night to special family and friends, but skipped the singing and dancing.

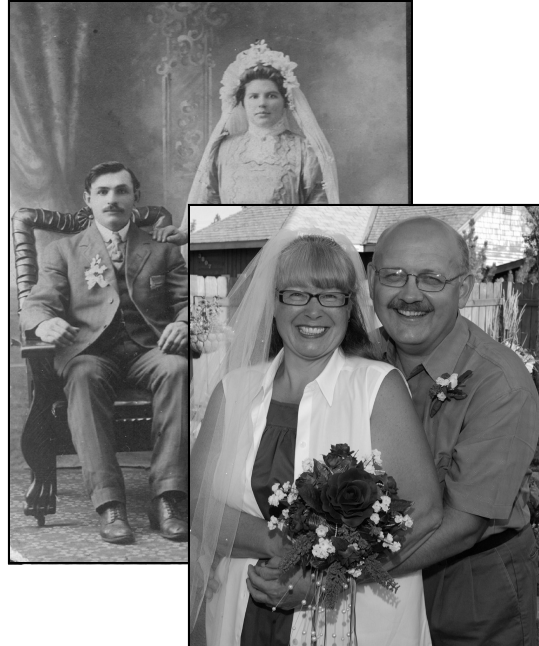
In the old country, on the day of the wedding the bridal attendants and family gathered at the home of the bride's parents to help prepare for the bridal procession to the church. The bride and groom led the procession through town as church bells rang and gun shots sounded. After the church ceremony, the wedding party and guests returned to the wedding house, and weather permitting, the reception took place in front of the house. At midnight the bridal couple was surrounded by their attendants for the unveiling of the bride (known as *Entschleierung*). The next day was known as *Rümpel*, where married people brought their wedding gifts, usually kitchenware and linen goods.

At our wedding, Saturday during the day was spent getting everything ready for the wedding. That evening we recited our own written vows and exchanged rings before a judge and 50 family members and friends in our backyard garden. After the ceremony, the reception started and continued until the wee hours of the morning. We chose not to observe *Rümpel* and instead served our guests a hearty breakfast. By noon our

celebration had come to an end, unlike that of our ancestors which would have continued into the night with more food, singing, dancing, and drinking.

Conclusion

The process of finding a marriage partner has changed dramatically since



Today's couples seem to find marriage a much more joyous event than our ancestors' photos show!

our ancestors' time. We are no longer limited in our selection of a partner based on where we live. Technology is now playing a significant role in matching couples who desire to get married, and most Americans get married at some point in their life.

Technology is also making the logistics of the wedding easier. The Internet is used for ordering wedding invitations, sending the invitations, and the posting of the wedding photographs for all to see.

The wedding celebration has changed as well, but some couples today are still trying to keep some special wedding traditions alive in their modern-day weddings.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau for the year 2007, men and women

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married mainly between the ages of 20-34, in contrast with our German-Russian ancestors who married earlier, between the ages of 18-20.

Today, just one out of five adults (22%) has never been married. Among those who have married, one out of three has been divorced at least once. This contrasts with our German-Russian traditions where divorce occurred only rarely. But divorce definitely did occur as both divorce and runaway husbands (or wives) are mentioned in obscure documents in the archives.

Archive records also show that in Russia, men and women with children often remarried within six months of a spouse dying. No doubt this was out of necessity to keep a farm and home going with only the manual labor used at that time. The records also show that often times the unmarried brother or sister of the deceased spouse would marry the widow/widower.

According to a recent report by The Wedding Report, Inc., on average, U.S. couples spend \$28,732 for their wedding. This does not include the honeymoon or the rings. I am positive that our ancestors did not spend anywhere near this amount on their weddings. And, following our thrifty ancestors' tradition, I can assure you that Rich and I came nowhere close to this amount for our own wedding!

Gayla Aspenleiter is a member of the GRHS Board of Directors, spokesperson and webmaster for the GDO RIG, co-editor of the Heritage Review, and is active in many GRHS committees. She grew up in Billings, Montana, but like her ancestors, has moved around many times looking for the perfect place to live. After her "love at first sight" experience with fellow German-Russian Rich Aspenleiter, she found the perfect place (and person!) and currently lives in Spokane, Washington.

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German-Russian Wedding Terms

Abbinden, Abschmücken, Entschleierung—unveiling of the bride
Banns—public notice of the wedding
Brautabend—farewell party for bride and groom
Brautkutsche—bridal carriage
Brautdiener—the bestmen
Brautfrau—godmother of the bride
Brautmädel—bridesmaids
Brautschau—bride
Brautwerber—matchmaker
Ehrenmütter—godparents of the bride and groom
Handstreich—formal handshake that sanctions the engagement
Hochzeit—high festival
Hochzeitsbitter—wedding inviter
Hochzeitsväter—fathers of the wedding
Kuppelsmänner—matchmakers
Liebeserklärung—declaration of love
Polterabend—farewell party for bride and groom
Rausbitte—calling forth
Rümpel—the day after the wedding
Süszholzraschpla—sweet talk
Tellerbitte—invitation of the plate
Wasserschütten—traditional custom of pouring of water to symbolize blessings of Heaven to be bestowed on field and home

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