“THE PICK OF THE LITTER”: A BESSARABIAN GERMAN FAMILY REMEMBERS GROWING UP IN NORTH DAKOTA

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Eternity past and Eternity to come
Impinge on your life.
The ancestors gave you
Your existence and striving,
The descendants carry on
Your aspirations and yearning,
And between the two you ought
To preserve and enhance
What you have inherited,
A valuable link
In the unending chain.

— O. Kröpkin
(Trans. Joseph S. Height)

Here follows one family’s story in the larger human drama of the “unending chain.”

My great-grandfather, Gottfried Vetter II (1884-1952), the son of Gottfried Vetter I (1863-1924) and Otillie (Mautz) Vetter (1863-1919), was born in the ethnic-German settlement of Klöstitz, Bessarabia (then a part of the Russian Empire), not far from the Black Sea port city of Odessa. My great-grandfather journeyed to the United States with his parents and two sisters in April 1902. My great-great-grandmother Otillie’s parents—Phillip Heinrich Mautz (1837-1911) and Karoline (Brost) Mautz (1839-1908)—immigrated to the United States as well. In the case of the Mautz family, it is interesting to note that only one generation had passed between the migration from Germany to Russia and the migration from Russia to the United States.

The Vetters arrived at New York City by ship from Germany, passed through the inspections at Ellis Island, and took the train directly to North Dakota. They homesteaded about eight miles north of the present community of Coleharbor in McLean County.
Other Germans from Russia families settled in this sparsely populated area, including my great-grandmother Vetter’s family, the Hummels (along with her Heck grandparents). Like the Vetters, the Hummels came to America in 1902 from Klöstitz. The Vetters and Hummels were predominantly of the Lutheran faith, although some of them joined the Congregational Church in America.

In 1906, Gottfried II married Mary (Hummel) Vetter (1889-1955). To this union, sixteen children were born, fifteen of whom survived into adulthood: Albert Vetter (1906-1988); Otto Vetter (1907-1991); Elsie (Vetter) Gehring (1909-2002); Emil Vetter (1910-1992); David Vetter (1911-1970); Reuben Vetter (1912-1983); Hilda (Vetter) Sievert (1914-1959); Arnold Vetter (1915-1994); Wilbert Vetter (1916-1967); Gottfried Vetter III (1918-1964); Raymond Vetter (1919-2012); Odelia (Vetter) Sievert (1921-1991); Adala Vetter (July 1922-Aug. 1922); Benjamin Vetter (1924-2000); Estella (Vetter) Lindsey (1928-2003); and Kenneth Curtis Vetter (b. 1933).

In 1918, my Vetter great-great-grandparents sold out their farm to their son and moved to Lodi, California, where they retired and are now buried.

In 1942, my Vetter great-grandparents retired from farming and moved to Garrison, McLean North Dakota, where they are now buried. At the time of his death, Great-Grandpa Vetter had amassed over 1,200 acres of land, including the old homestead and the old Fort Stevenson, which is southwest of Garrison. After the 1950s, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers took all but 380 acres for the creation of the Garrison Diversion Conservancy. The windmill was all that remained of the original homestead.

For several years now, I have wanted to compile and edit the Vetter family memories, those stories from my maternal grandfather’s side of the ancestral tree (Otto Vetter, 1907-1991). Since many of their recollections might be of interest to those who are not members of this family, I felt it especially important to preserve these stories in some kind of formal publication, to put them on the public record where future generations will more likely find them, long after I have left the world stage. Perhaps that is the historian in me—to reflect on the past and imagine what the future might hold for us.

In many respects, I had the easy part in this compilation effort. Indeed, the family memories were already written down, and the photos were already taken. All that was needed was someone to put it together. Most of these records were given to me in the mid-1990s by my great-aunt Mrs. Stella (Vetter) Lindsey of Elk Grove, California. Unfortunately, she passed away in early February 2003, just as I was completing this project.

Of course, there was a whole treasure chest of interesting memories and wonderful photographs that could not be included in this compilation for practical reasons. But I tried to paint enough of a portrait for readers unfamiliar with the Vetters in order to let them catch a glimpse of what life was like for one Germans from Russia family settling on the North Dakota prairies one century ago. It was equally important for me at the same time to include some of those stories that still expressed some of the love, the humanity, and, not least of all, the humor of the Vetters, despite some of the hardships they experienced as immigrants and first-generation Americans.
One might conclude that the overall comprehensiveness of this particular collection of family memories stemmed from the Vetters’ crucial foresight to write down or record their stories during their family reunions, which were regularly held every two years. This reflective process began more than a generation ago. Indeed, much of the family history was preserved in writing during the late 1970s and 1980s, before most of the Vetter siblings passed away. It was these same written records that came into my possession about a decade later, when I was finally old enough to appreciate them.

At this point, it is best to let the Vetters speak for themselves. As editor, I only added some brief commentary and short insertions to the text, and I only occasionally took the liberty of making minor spelling, grammatical, and stylistic corrections in the text where I believed it necessary.

Elsie (Vetter) Gehring (1909-2002)

As one of the older Vetter children, Elsie offers a unique perspective about growing up on the family farm. She relates some fascinating anecdotes about local Gypsies, as well as some strange, ghostly encounters at the farm house:

I was born on March 25, 1909, on my Grandpa Vetter’s farm, which became my dad’s farm in 1918 when Grandpa and Grandma Vetter retired and moved to [Lodi] California. I was born in what we all knew as the summer kitchen. There we used to cook and eat in the summertime and also battled the flies. It seemed there were always a million flies around. When I was born, the summer kitchen was our parents’ bedroom. Ma and Dad lived with Grandpa and Grandma Vetter until after Emil was born [in 1910]. David was the first one born down at the other place [in 1911], about one-half mile south of Grandpa Vetter’s place. My Grandma Vetter was a midwife, and she delivered most of us older kids. I sometimes stayed overnight with Grandma and Grandpa, and when I would wake up in the morning, Grandma would be gone. Some neighbor had come to get her to deliver their baby. . . .

Grandpa Vetter had a mean bull on the farm. Our school was on Grandpa’s and later Dad’s land. One day the bull got out of the fence, and he must have heard us kids playing in the school yard during recess. He came bellowing down the road, throwing up dirt with his hooves. The teacher got us kids into the school house just in time. She slammed the door in his face. He was ready to come into the school house. He stood by the windows and bellowed and licked and slobbered on the window panes. We were all very scared. That day we stayed longer than normal at the school because we didn’t know where he was. He wasn’t anywhere around when we finally walked home. We stopped at Grandpa Vetter’s and told him what happened. He used to sic the dogs after the bull and whip him, but finally he had to get rid of him. . . .

On our way home from school we always liked to stop at Grandpa and Grandma Vetter’s house. They always had jelly beans and bread and jelly for us. One day when we stopped there after school, Grandpa had a new Model T Ford car. I think it must have been in 1915. I think it was the first one in the area. Naturally he had to take us for a ride. Grandma and I were in the back seat. Grandpa and one of the boys, don’t remember which one, were in the front seat. Grandma and I sure hung on to the side of the car. We thought the car was going too fast, like about 10 or 15 miles per hour. To us it was fast because we were used to riding in a buggy or wagon with horses pulling the wagon. We didn’t go far, but it was far enough for us. They called cars “fire wagons” in those days.

I used to go along with Grandpa Vetter when he hauled loads of wheat to Coleharbor to the grain elevator. He would argue with me all the way. I would say I wanted Cracker Jack when we got to town, and he
would say I wouldn’t get any Cracker Jack, but would get Jacker Crack. I would get my Cracker Jack with all those nice prizes, really thought we had something when there was a ring.

I used to have to miss quite a bit of school to babysit the younger kids when Ma and Dad went to town or Ma had to haul wheat to town. I sure hated to miss school. I would cry if could not go to school, as I really liked school.

I don’t remember the year we moved down to the other place. The house was about one-half mile south of Grandpa Vetter’s place, where we later moved after he moved to California. It was right next to the road that went to Garrison, but it didn’t have too much traffic. We could see quite a distance to the east, and if we saw covered wagons coming with horses tied behind, we knew it was a Gypsy caravan. My mother used to see that all of us kids were in the house. It was said that they stole children. Wonder what they wanted them for; it seemed they had enough of their own. They would always beg for food, bread, and even clothes. Our parents told us how this one Gypsy (Zigeuner in German) came to a farm, and the woman of the farm was down by the well, getting a pail of water. The Gypsy wanted the woman’s skirt, and the farm woman said she couldn’t have it. Then she asked for a drink of water, and the housewife handed her a dipper full of water. She heard this noise of something splashing around in the dipper, and it was a big black spider. The woman wanted to drop the dipper, but she couldn’t let go of it, it just stuck to her hand. So now the Gypsy said, “Now can I have your skirt?” She had to promise to give her skirt before the spider disappeared. This is supposed to be a true story.

Another story about Gypsies concerns our dad. Dad had gone to Coleharbor to do some shopping, and when he came home he was all excited. He told us how he had been robbed by a bunch of Gypsies. He was in the store, and this Gypsy woman came up to him to tell his fortune. For this, she wanted a dime. He opened his long snap-closing pouch (Geld Saak) and gave her a dime. She kept rubbing the dime and told him what he liked to hear, that he would be rich someday, etc. When she was done, she asked him to open his pouch again so she could put the dime in. Later, after he had purchased some things, he opened his pouch to pay for the things and discovered his money was gone. He tried to find the mayor of Coleharbor, nobody seemed to know where he was, but finally he was located. Then they started out after the Gypsies. They had gone toward Underwood. They caught up with them a few miles out of town, as the Gypsies had car trouble and they didn’t get far. By now the Gypsies had given up their wagons and horses and gone modern, as they were already traveling by car. Dad picked out the woman who had told his fortune. She came and stood beside Dad and told him he was mistaken, that his money was in his pocket. He put his hand in his pocket, and there was the money, but some was missing. Dad said he should have had the mayor make her give his money back. When she put the dime in his pouch, she must have taken out his money.

Every Saturday evening, Dad would sit down with us kids to teach us our Sunday school lessons, all in German. We had to learn the ABC’s in German, as everything in church was in German.

One New Year’s Eve, the big boys would walk from farm to farm after midnight and shoot the shotguns into the air. This was called “Das Neues Jahr Anscheusen” (“the New Year’s Shoot-Up”). Wherever they were at, people would ask them into the house and give some food and drinks. If they went to enough places, they would be feeling pretty happy by morning. It was scary to wake up at night to the sound of shotguns going off near your window. They usually knew where the bedrooms were and would stand close by the window and shoot. In later years, this custom was dropped.

We kids looked forward to the threshers coming. There would be many cakes and pies. It was nice to be in the kitchen to lick the cake and frosting dishes. It was the only time of the year we would get to eat catsup and cornflakes and other good things. During the threshing, the men would work in the fields
from sunrise to sunset. Before sunrise they would have to take care of the horses, and in the evening after threshing all day they would have to take the harnesses off the horses and feed them again. Many times the men didn’t get to eat until 10:00 p.m. They always had lunch in the forenoon and afternoon. The women never got to bed before midnight, then up again at 3:00 a.m. to get a big breakfast of fried potatoes and fried meat. The meat was usually pork that was butchered just before the threshers came. It was then hung down the well to keep cool, as there were no refrigerators or freezers. The threshers were usually around a few days a week, depending on how much work a farmer had or how big a crop he had. Dad’s threshing rig usually had neighbors helping, and then he would thresh for them. Some threshing rigs had help from far away, and the help would have to stay with the farmers in case it rained. And sometimes it rained for 2 weeks at a time, and they would have to feed them all that time. . . .

Otto [1907-1991] and I went to confirmation school together. We drove to Garrison in a one-horse buggy, about 9 miles, for two 2 weeks. On the way, we picked up Helen Hummel, now Helen Schott of Garrison. We left at 7:00 a.m. and got home about 6 p.m. We left our horse at Friedrich Mautz’s in Garrison. He had a barn by his house. We were instructed by student Pastor Kurt Schattler and were confirmed by retired minister Rev. Keller. This was in 1923. All this took place in Garrison. I can still speak, read, and write in the German language.

That same year, in 1923, we had 2 tornadoes at our place. The first one was in June, and it wrecked the garage. It just lifted it up and brought it down on the roof; that just flattened it out. They built another garage at a different place. They finished shingling this garage on a Saturday, and on Sunday noon the other tornado came. It took the garage, the top of the barn, and one shed on the barn. The threshing machine was in a shed, and it broke it all up and turned the threshing machine upside down. The grain that was in the shed that was blown away all wet. The windmill top was embedded in the dirt in a field. The cream separator bowl that was in the garage was found about a mile away in a field. The car was blown down the hill. The hail ruined all our crops, but Dad had insurance. Dad lost his crops to hail 3 years in a row.

. . . We never ate butter or eggs in the winter time. In the spring, when the chickens started to lay better again and the cows gave more milk, then we would get eggs and butter again.

The mattresses on our beds were made of feather ticking filled with straw. In the fall of the year after threshing, they would take the straw out of the ticking and put clean straw in, and then this was placed on slats on the bed. With 3 or 4 sleeping in each bed, every time someone turned over, it was pretty noisy. They [the beds] were lumpy, too, till the straw was settled. There was no such thing as an inner-spring mattress or box spring.

. . . The flour sacks were used for dish towels, sheets, pillow cases, even underwear. I still remember my mother would pack up a bunch of clean flour sacks to take to Grandma Hummel’s place, where my great-grandmother [Dorothea (Zeifle)] Heck [1839-1934, born in the village of Beresina, Bessarabia] stayed. She liked to sew, so she made summer underwear for my dad. Grandpa Hummel would say that she was well again, as she had something to do. Ma would put them in a sack, and we carried them on a stick over our shoulders, like you see hobos carrying their clothes. It was usually me and one of my brothers. It was not unusual to see underwear with “Occident” [the flour sack label] still printed on them. There was no such thing as bleach to get out the coloring or print. The younger girls wore black sateen [a cotton fabric with a satin finish] bloomers in the summer and in the winter long-legged underwear. It was hard to get the black long stockings over them. The stockings would be all lumpy, and the girls always wore dresses. I sure hated to wear those long black stockings over my underwear.

. . . Our dad was a jack-of-all-trades. He could do anything. He was a farmer, blacksmith, shoemaker,
butcher, carpenter—you name it, and he could do it. . . .

Some strange, unusual, and weird things happened in the Vetter farm house. I know they are true because I was there, and will now describe them as I remember them.

The first one happened in 1919 at night. My mother was awakened by what sounded like all the doors in their house slamming shut. Then Mother and Dad heard someone walking up the stairs. They just thought it was one of the kids returning upstairs after using the outhouse. Then the footsteps started to come back downstairs, but after only a few steps down, the footsteps stopped completely. The folks got up to see what was going on, but when they got to the stairway, there was nobody there. I remember them coming to the bedrooms and asking if anyone was outdoors, and no one was. Then they took their lamps and looked under all the beds to see if someone was hiding under the beds. A few days later they heard that Grandma Vetter had died in [Lodi] California. I suppose they heard the news by telegram. Someone said if the folks had come right away when they heard the walking, they would have seen her.

The second unusual thing that happened in the Vetter farm house happened in 1924. We all heard this low moaning sound, especially in the bedroom where our folks slept. This was the same bedroom where our grandparents Vetter used to sleep when they lived on the farm before moving to California. This moaning sound seemed to go on for weeks, but we just learned to live with it, didn’t even pay much attention to it anymore. To discover where the moaning sound was coming from, Dad even sent one of the boys under the porch one day, as there was a hole under the porch where dogs could come in to get out of the cold. Dad thought there was a sick dog under the porch, although none of our dogs was missing. There was nothing under there either. It was such a sad moaning sound, but it sounded far away. Then one day we got word that Grandpa Vetter in California had died, and we never heard the sound again. . . .

When Great-Grandpa [Johann] Heck [b. 1839 in the ethnic-German village of Klöstitz, Bessarabia] died in 1914, they took us kids over to his house on Grandpa Hummel’s farm. They had him lying on the floor in a corner with a silver dollar on each eye. They tell me they did that to keep the eyes closed till he was buried. Such little things stay with a person. I was 5 years old then.

Our sister Adala died [in 1922] from having blisters all over her body. They took her to Dr. Stucke in Garrison, and he gave them some salve to put on her skin, but it didn’t help. She died when she was only about 2 weeks old. She was so cute with big blue eyes and dark hair.

**Emil Vetter (1910-1992)**

*Emil’s recollections are short, but like a good German, to the point:*

This is what I remember while I was growing up. I was the 4th of 15, but I never went hungry. The folks always had plenty to eat and enough milk to drink. If we didn’t like what Ma cooked, we went without until the next meal.

I remember looking forward to Christmas Eve. We would all pile in the sled and go to church. We each had a piece to say in German and then we all would get a sack with peanuts, candy and fruit. That was the only gift we got. There was no Santa Claus. Later on in years I guess there were gifts from Santa Claus, but not while I was growing up.

. . . I remember while I went to school, we had a man teacher, and one day he told us he was coming out to our place to talk to the folks. So we waited for him. When he came, we took him upstairs in the barn
where we wrestled him. When we got done with him, he went home and never talked to the folks.

When Albert [1906-1988] was still home, he gave me $5.00 to take all the kids along with me mowing hay, so he could load wheat to sell it to buy a car. The folks never found out about that.

When we were growing up, we had to cut each other’s hair, and also Dad’s hair. No one ever went to the barber shop. We also had to wear hand-me-downs, as long as they were fit to wear. In the summer, we usually went barefoot. Also in the summertime, we went either to Simpson Lake or used the water tank for our baths.

When I was 17 years old, I got to see my first movie. It was a silent movie with Charlie Chaplin. I’ll never forget that. I also remember my Dad always chewed on a toothpick, and if he didn’t do that, he whistled, usually a hymn.

**Reuben Vetter (1912-1983)**

*In 1982, Reuben wrote his life story as a member of the Vetter clan. It also seems that the native gopher population of North Dakota was rather happy and relieved when Reuben and his brothers finally grew up and left the farm, for reasons stated below:*

There was lots of activity in our family. We let no grass grow under our feet. The yard was bare in front of the buildings, and behind, too.

. . . I can remember the day I was baptized. We were still living in the first house, one-half mile south of Grandpa Vetter’s farm, and that is where we were baptized. Wilbert [1916-1967], Arnold [1915-1994], Hilda [1914-1959], and I were baptized at the same time. Wilbert . . . thought they were going to soap his hair. He said, “*Nid Saife, nid Saife,*” meaning “no soap, no soap.” The reason we were all baptized at the same time is because, for some reason, Dad didn’t go to church for a few years, so the pastor came to the farm, and all of us who had not been baptized were then baptized. Also at the farm that day were old folks Auchs and Grandpa and Grandma Hummel.

One day the phone rang while we kids were in the house. Mother answered and talked for a while, then Mother asked me if I wanted to talk to Grandma Vetter. That was the first time I heard someone on the phone. I couldn’t believe it was Grandma. She said they were going to town and wondered if I wanted something from town. I said I wanted “*Kinde un Krackes.*” It seemed candy and cookies always went together.

. . . We boys would know where every bird and wild duck nest was. Ducks usually had an odd number of eggs in their nest, such as 7 or 9. We would take one out to play a trick on the duck, but the next time we came to the nest, the duck had another egg out of the nest to make it an odd number again. . . .

Something all of us boys had to do at one time or another was to gather cow chips. We would take sacks and pick up the cow chips in the pasture, put them in the sacks, and take them home to burn in the cook stove. As I recall, there was no strong odor from burning them; guess it was like burning hay. Of course, the chips had to be dry before we picked them up.

When we were kids, we had a calf that would run with the horses instead of the cows. So we called it the horse calf. . . .

When I was 8 years old, Arnold, 6, and Wilbert, 5, it was our job to clean the manure out of the barn,
while the older boys were working in the fields. It was a messy job, and we used a wheelbarrow to wheel it out of the barn.

When I was 9 years old, I worked for Uncle Dave Hummel [1894-1959]. I would get so lonesome, and on top of that, I would get scolded for not cleaning the barn enough. When I was 10 and 11 years old, I worked for Grandpa [Gottlieb] Hummel [1869-1952]. I would get a box of Cracker Jack every day that I went out to herd the cattle. I also got a lot of new clothes.

In 1923, I heard my first radio broadcast. It was in front of the Coleharbor bank. Fuglie managed the bank until it went broke a few years later. Our dad had one of the first radios in the area. They would listen to WLS in the World’s Largest Store in Chicago. We would also listen to Sam and Henry, who later were known as Amos and Andy.

To cut down the gopher population, we would get paid one penny or so for gopher tails. The idea being that if we turned in the tail, we had killed the gopher. Actually what we would do is catch the gopher, but we wouldn’t kill it, just cut the tail off so that he might grow another tail. Pretty soon we were catching gophers without tails. So much for that idea.

Dad made an ordinary open sleigh to be pulled by one horse for us to go to school in. School was half a mile to the east of our farm. The runners were crude wood of some sort, not real runners, but they served the purpose. Otto [1907-1991] has a picture of 6 of us, including me, in the sleigh. It was given to him by Karen Christianson Franklin, who was the teacher at that time. She is the teacher who wrote “C A T” on the blackboard and asked me what it was. I’d say “kutz,” and everyone would laugh. The teachers must have had patience to teach English to all of us and to break us of the habit of talking German, our native tongue.

In the years 1923, ’24, and ’25, I’d buy Green River pop. It was the same as today, now called 7-Up.

... About 1917, Dad was in the hospital in Minot. Dr. Erenfeld was the family doctor. Albert [1906-1988] and Otto, although quite young, put in the spring crop. Dad gave money to Trinity Hospital at that time to help get it started.

Our dad always seeded sunflowers in with the corn, so we would have the seeds to munch on in the winter time. One fall, while hauling corn, we found a little nest of shelled sunflower seeds, and so we ate them. Found out later that the mice had stored them for the long winter.

In the evenings, we’d husk corn and have a party with a lot of people helping. If someone found a red cob, they could kiss a girl. Sometimes it was planted in front of a boy who had his eye on a certain girl.

In the early 1920s, we had lots of grasshoppers, and when we came home with the header boxes, the chickens would come running and have a feast catching and eating until the grasshoppers were gone.

Right after the spring seeding and the other work were done, it would be time to repair the fences. We would put posts and wire on the wagon and go around the fence line, repairing as we went. We used a post digger, a post mall, a wire stretcher, and of course some water to pour in the hole to make digging easier.

In the fall of the year, we would make sauerkraut in a wooden barrel. One year they washed my feet and legs and rolled up my pants legs. Now I was ready to stomp each layer of cabbage down, and I did that until the barrel was full.
Once in a while, during the summer months we would go to Minot. I especially remember one time we went in a cafe on main street in Minot. Dad ordered coffee, then he cut and served bread and summer sausage that he had brought with him. We ate as the waitresses stared at us.

In the fall of the year, I remember picking mushrooms. When the mushrooms were dried, the powder was brown and was used for humans and animals to stop bleeding. In the fall, it was also the time Dad would sit down with the Sears or Montgomery Ward catalog and order some good things. Some of the things he would order were canned pink salmon, pickled herring in wooden pails, and cured black olives.

Dad would hide his money in the threshing machine when it wasn’t in use. We played in that machine many times, crawling all over it. Funny we never ran across the money.

We shot skunks, too, but they weren’t edible, ha. No, we would render the fat, and it made good salve for healing man or animal.

Till we meet again, here is the German table prayer. It is the prayer said by most Lutherans of today. Wherever we go and a prayer is said, this is the one. It gives us a close feeling which our ancestors planted in us from the beginning. Today the prayer is said in English:

Komm, Herr Jesus,  Come, Lord Jesus,
sei unser Gast be our guest
und segne, was du and bless the gifts you
uns bescheret hast. have given us.

Amen.*

Arnold Vetter (1915-1994)

In 1983, Arnold wrote his first installment of “Life on the Vetter Farm.” Interestingly, a few years ago by sheer coincidence I met and became acquainted with Arnold’s daughter Patsy (Vetter) Jacobsen, my first cousin once removed, when we both happened to be doing laundry at the same time in the basement at our Lincoln, Nebraska, apartment complex. She happened to mention to me something about her family in North Dakota (it was winter, if I recall). Since it always seems that I am related to a large percentage of that state’s population, I was quickly able to establish the family connection. Like Patsy, I was surprised to learn that she lived just two floors below me. Since that time, we have moved to different locations, but it is a small world indeed. It simply proves that one can often find German from Russia relatives most anywhere! In his rather unique manner of expression, her father Arnold fondly recalled this about his early rough-and-tumble years on the farm: “Reducing or halting our experience, sense of humor, cooperation, taking orders, and common sense in our juvenile years on the farm was like stopping a North Dakota snowstorm with a pitchfork.” I think we get the picture.

I had five brothers and two sisters older and five brothers and two sisters younger than me. That made me the hub of the wheel—the rest of the children were spokes radiating from the hub. Well, maybe that is not so. I was one of the gears that helped rotate the big Vetter machine.

A few things happened when I was five years old, before I started school. In the winter time, Wilbert [1916-1967] and I would bundle up with anything we could find to play outside. One nice cold morning while playing out in the yard, we came by the buggy and noticed the steel rims were white. So, Wilbert had to taste it. Then his tongue stuck; I came to the rescue. I didn’t know what the problem was until I had pulled his head back. His tongue was bleeding a little, so Mother smeared something on it. Maybe
goose grease. Then she wrapped it with a rag. It looked so funny, tongue sticking out with a rag on it. I didn’t dare laugh because at that time he was as big as I was. In a few minutes, the rag was gone; he was back to normal. One spring morning, Gottfried [1918-1964], Wilbert, and I were playing in the barn. We piled up some hay in the middle of the barn, and I lit a match to it. We had a nice bonfire going when our uncle drove up to the house. We stuck our heads out the front [barn] door to see who it was. About that time, Mother came out of the house to greet him and saw the smoke coming out of the barn. When Mother and our uncle came running, we left the scene through the back [barn] door and headed for the hills. We were captured not far from the barn. We learned a couple of lessons that year: When a child starts a fire, then runs from it, you get your rear end burned; and when licking a white layer on the buggy wheel, it’s not cake frosting.

One snowy winter day, Wilbert and I took off across the field to meet the older children walking home from school. After we met them, we all started for home against the wind and snow. That was more than we could face, and our older brothers ended up carrying us home. We were not heavy being their younger brothers. We must have received a lecture, because we never tried meeting them in the field again when it snowed.

When I was eight years old, I stayed with our Hummel grandparents. I took care of the cattle, etc. They had a big pony with a saddle for me to use. The saddle weighed about as much as I did. I managed to get the saddle on the pony every morning after feeding, watering, and currying him. Those were my chores before breakfast. I was in the saddle every day during school vacation in the summer. The next summer I had the same job with a new pony. Grandpa had bought a Shetland pony that I rode bareback. At harvest time that same summer, our two uncles operated two binders to cut the grain. Behind each binder followed a disc--our youngest uncle was on one, and I brought up the rear with a second disc. All units were pulled by four horses on each one. They gave me the slowest horses on the lot. Furnished with a whip to keep up the pace, I stood up to get the reach and power with my persuader, when I slipped and fell. When the horses stopped, one of my legs was wedged in between two discs. The other drivers lifted the disc, pulled me out, and then laughed and reminded me that the seat is more comfortable than the ground under a piece of equipment. One disc left a scar on my shoe when it rolled over my foot; otherwise, not a scratch on me. After that, I let the horses set their own gait. That fall Grandpa Hummel sold out [the farm]. When the time came to put the pony (Rex) on the auction block, I led and rode Rex before the crowd. I also made him lay down, so I could get on his back. When the final bid was made, the auctioneer called out, “Sold to Mr. Vetter for fifty-four dollars.” I didn’t even say goodbye. Rex and I went home. Once in a while, we would let him out in the pasture, then the neighbors would call to tell us our spotted horse crawled through the fence and was chasing their livestock. After having him for several years, we found him resting in peace. The family had a robe made from his hide. From the remnants, Otto [1907-1991] had long cuff mittens made. So, part of Rex was with us for a long time.

During those summers that I stayed with my grandparents, I learned to drive the Model T Ford and also a stick-shift car that our older uncle owned. During the harvest, I drove the horses pulling the header box wagons. A header is a reaper that cuts and elevates the grain into the hayrack-size box on a wagon. My uncles took me to the moving picture show (silent movie) once or twice a week. . . . I always had spending money, and Grandpa bought me a new wool-lined overcoat to show his appreciation for what little I did during the summer. The only other wool-lined overcoats that we younger boys had were what our parents bought for Albert [1906-1988] and Otto when they were small. Those coats were handed down till they came to Wilbert and me. We wore them kaput.

. . . At threshing time, it was we younger boys who hauled the wheat to town with horses and wagon. I didn’t mind because Dad’s credit was good in the stores. So after unloading, we would stop to buy candy, gum, cracker jack, etc. . . .
We had a bone yard in the pasture from livestock that had expired. Wilbert and I loaded all the bones on a wagon and hauled them to town, about twenty miles round trip. It took us most of the day, but we got over ten dollars, which we then divided among us kids. Those were the days when Dad paid us a penny or two for each gopher tail. There were times we snared or caught one in a trap, then gently removed its tail and set it free, hoping it would grow another one. The Vetter prairies were the only ones in the country where we could find live bob-tailed gophers not worth a penny.

Dad bought an eighteen-inch well-drilling auger. Before using it, though, a hole was dug close to the house, measuring four feet by four feet, about twenty feet deep. Then the drilling began. The auger was powered by one horse going around and around. After drilling down part way, they hit a rock. One of my brothers was lowered down the hole to get rid of the obstacle somehow. Days later the same thing happened. This time I was lowered down the hole in a bucket with dynamite, which I planted on the rock. After I was out of the hole and on solid ground, the fuse was lit. I’m sure the fuse was long enough to reach all the way out of the hole. They finally hit water at eighty feet, after many days of drilling, sweating, and lots of nasty words being used. I was one of the curious little spectators getting in someone’s way. A room was built over the well, which became the pantry, laundry, and washroom with a sink and water pump. All the water that was used in the sink drained into a fifty-gallon barrel, which hung against the ceiling in the basement. This supplied the water for the modern flush toilet in the corner of the basement. The waste traveled through underground sewer pipes to a big hole, which was dug in the back yard when this project was started, and served as a septic tank. The hole was covered with heavy planks.

Dad had carbide piped into the house and barn for lights. The carbide supply tank was underground in the yard between the windmill and sod barn. At night when the outside light by the front door was on, it could be seen from the town seven miles south of us. People driving north out of town could see our light and called it the “Vetter North Star”. . . . After a few years, when the carbide lights had served their purpose and became obsolete, brother Reuben [1912-1983] the engineer and brother David [1911-1970] as his helper used the carbide pipes in the house as a conduit and ran electric wiring through the pipes to the light fixtures. We now had electric lights. The energy for the lights came from several storage batteries in the basement. These were charged by a wind charger on the roof of our house. The on-and-off control for the charger was in the upstairs hallway.

Any time a piece of equipment quit functioning and repairing it got complicated, Dad would use his famous saying, “I wish the person that invented this machine would have dropped dead before it was finished.” Of course, he said it in German, and some words he used made it sound ridiculous. Too bad I can’t translate it better.

When working in the fields, we used grease off of the [Model T truck] wheel on our lips to keep them from getting chapped. We also used it on our leather gloves to keep them soft and waterproof.

The first time I rode an animal was when brothers Emil [1910-1992] and David were herding cattle on the school section or school land, which I imagine Dad had rented for grazing and hay. I was five or six years old at the time. They drove the cattle about two miles in the morning, and back again in the evening. This was on foot—no ponies. I went along a couple of times. Going in the morning, I kept up with the herd by walking all the way, but going home the boys would put me on a cow for the ride. I felt like a grown-up riding on that big animal. When I was at Grandparents’ farm taking care of their mavericks, my uncles would take me out in the barn, put a rope on a calf, place one of their big cowboy hats on my head (which was so big that it slipped over my ears and eyes), then put me on the critter and turned it loose. I was improving until one evening Grandpa caught us, and that was the end of the rodeo.
In later years at home, we rode everything, from calves to five-year-old steers. The older we got, the bigger an animal we would challenge. We talked Gottfried into riding a medium-sized hunk of beef one time. After two jumps, he got off the ground, mumbling something about “you can have your broken bones; I want my feet on the ground, not my head.”

. . . One time our parents went to town, and the older boys were gone, and the smaller ones were in school. It was a nice calm forenoon, and I was to burn a fire break around a big straw pile in the middle of the first field east of the farm. I couldn’t understand why they didn’t plow a break around the pile when they plowed all around the field. A few minutes later I started the fire, and it got out of control, and the pile caught fire. A wind came up and shifted from all directions. The fire burned to the end of the field, then jumped over into the pasture. That is when sister Hilda [1914-1959] came running with some water-soaked burlap sacks. There was a little bit of a straw pile in the pasture that was no good and older than we were, but we saved it. We had the prairie fire put out, but most of the field was burned when our parents came home. I guess Dad didn’t care about the straw pile. All he said was how nice that a whole field will burn by starting the fire in the middle of it. . .

. . . Doing any kind of work on Sundays other than regular chores was out of the question. A no-no. . . .

. . . The last disaster I witnessed on the farm was on a Sunday evening. It started in the afternoon while our parents and the young ones were gone. Just over four or five of us boys were home to do the chores and whatever. All afternoon into the night, it was lightning and rumbling. We all had the feeling that the worst was yet to come. We didn’t talk much or goof around as usual. We did the chores, then had something to eat and relaxed in the bunk house. There was a continuous illumination in the clouds, and the rumble got louder. We were standing by the door when the twister hit. Since the hemisphere was all lit up, even though it was dark outside, we could see the action. The wheel and tail of the windmill started whipping back and forth for a few seconds, then it rotated round and round in a horizontal fashion till the tower twisted off and tumbled. The storm was over. We had several small coops in one unit behind the house for the little chicks and turkeys. The wind had tipped the coops over, so the little birds were running, looking for a place to hide. We gathered all the little chirpers that we could find and put them in a wash tub, then set the tub on the oven door, which was still warm from supper time. What we had in the tub survived.

When I was about twelve years old, brother Albert and I were farming at the Fort Stevenson farm, doing spring work. Brother had to make a trip to town and left me in charge for a couple of hours. When the grain came up and the field turned green, there were two black strips through the field where nothing grew. That is where I forgot to put the drill in gear [for planting]. It looked funny and gave the neighbors something to talk about. It would have to be by the road so everybody going by could look down on those barren strips in the field. I think brother Al took the blame, because Dad wouldn’t allow anybody my age operate an all-steel wheel tractor pulling a plow, to drag and drill without supervision. Growing up on the farm, I learned to drive many things early in life, but driving oxen was not one of those things.

. . . During the depression in the 1930s, all we got was dust storms and thistles. When the thistles got big and dried up, they would break off at the base, then the wind would blow them against the fences. That is where the dust would settle and pile up like snow banks. One year there wasn’t anything to mow for hay, so we cut enough thistles to make two long hay stacks. That is about all our livestock got to eat that winter. Our milk cows were tied in stalls, and when we entered the barn and noticed a cow lifting its tail, we had to move fast to get away from the line of fire [bovine gastro-intestinal movements, in other words]. The results of eating thistles were the same as chewing feen-a-mints. In fact, most of the time, we used scoop shovels instead of pitchforks to clean the cow barn. When we got swatted with a cow’s frozen tail while milking, it was to remind us that they needed a combination diet. It was a mess without
straw or anything for bedding.

... Dad was a philosopher, his wisdom and better judgment were honored with admiration by all his
friends, neighbors, and relatives, including Mother and all us children. Relying on the ingenuity of the
family, nothing was impossible. His motto was “Whatever anybody can do and charge for, my boys and I
can do it just as well in less time.” Dad was a mechanic, carpenter, blacksmith, cobbler, doctor, dentist,
butcher, veterinarian, and captain for his small army of boys. Mother was always busy with household
duties, plus raising children, cooking, baking, canning, and doing outdoor activities. Her outdoor
activities included raising a big garden, raising poultry, milking cows, searching for wood for the cook
stove, picking fresh vegetables for canning and selling. She was also a nurse with her own cure for most
anything, a teacher of discipline and cooperation. I wonder if she ever had time to relax. In the mornings
after Dad left to fetch the cows for the morning milking, it was time to get up and face another day.
Mother would call upstairs or wherever we were sleeping at the time. Instead of hopping right out of bed,
one of us boys would pick up a shoe and drop it to make believe we were getting dressed. When she
finished milking two or three cows, we would get our last call. This time there was no fooling around.
We were out and at it before Dad got done milking his share. I guess they were satisfied that we got up
and did our chores before breakfast.

Reducing or halting our experience, sense of humor, cooperation, taking orders, and common sense in our
juvenile years on the farm was like stopping a North Dakota snowstorm with a pitchfork.

Appearing in 1988, Arnold’s story “The Continuing Saga of Life on the Vetter Farm” suggested that he
had lived his childhood to the fullest extent. As he observed once, “I believe if you got something to do or
should do something now—don’t procrastinate, you might get penalized.” One might sometimes wonder
how he or his younger brothers Wilbert and Gottfried even survived life’s tumbles on the Vetter family
farm, but they were apparently tough survivors, with a scar or two to prove their worth:

... Growing up in the country, the children learn many important things before they even start school.
We could tell when the older children were coming home from school, and when it was time to go and
eat. We learned our directions, north from south, east from west, etc. We learned that the weather
traveled from west to east. Every time we strayed from the farm while playing, we checked the western
hemisphere for clouds. If there were any threatening clouds, we checked to see which way they were
floating and at what speed.

It was easy to learn how far a mile was or half a mile or even a quarter of a mile. Every section of land
(640 acres) is one mile square and usually a road on all four sides, so when you travel one direction, you
would come to a crossroad every mile.

Wilbert and I had the chore of getting the cows for the evening milking. Walking barefoot, we would
keep our eyes on the clouds, then check to see where the cattle were. That way we could figure out how
long it would take us to bring the cattle home by a certain time. After [age] 8, we had bigger jobs to
do, like haying.

When we started school at age six, we were old enough to help clean the barn. When we were eight years
old, we milked the cows, fed the livestock. We also gathered cow chips, but that was doing a favor for
Mother. In the summer, coal was not used in the cook stove too often. We took burlap sacks and picked
up cow chips in the pasture to burn in the stove. Mother baked more than a dozen loaves of bread twice a
week, plus three meals a day, so the chips saved her from searching around the yard for fire wood.

... Mother was used to us pulling dumb stunts, such as getting a tongue frozen to a buggy wheel and
starting a bonfire in the barn. I call it a barn fire. It could have been disastrous, but all turned out well, and it was funny years later.

... The chicken coop was attached to the east side of the barley granary with a lean-to roof sloping towards the north; the end of the roof was about six feet off the ground. We piled up some soft dirt, then jumped off the coop. Once Wilbert helped Gottfried up the ladder after talking him into jumping off the roof. He was scared, so he crawled to the edge of the roof to see how far it was to the ground. He looked, backed up, looked again. I was on the ground telling him not to worry about anything; that’s when his hands slipped. He came down head first. I helped him up, dusted him off some, then showed him the way to the house. Crying with a black dirty face and clothes, he wasn’t hurt—just mad at us. I believe if you got something to do or should do something now--don’t procrastinate, you might get penalized.

Those are the kind of things Mother had to put up with. I heard her tell somebody that she wouldn’t pay a nickel for another child, but she wouldn’t take a wagon box full of money for any one she had.

We had our own playground in the back yard. . . . We had bones from horses, cows, and calves’ knee joints. With these we could really play make-believe. . . . We made our own farm equipment and pulled them with our make-believe horses. We had a place for high jumps, long jumps, and pole vault. We also had a baseball diamond, regular size in the pasture behind the farm. I don’t know if Otto played at that time, but Albert played third base, and three or four uncles played on the team. Anyway, it was the Snow Township team, and it was several years before David and I started playing. I never played on our diamond because the pasture was plowed under or broken up after two or three years serving as a baseball diamond. Dad was sure proud of the diamond and the township players. He told everyone he met about the ball game at our place at least two weeks ahead of time. Maybe Dad was on the advertising committee. The players wore Snow Township uniforms; now that was class. We had to amuse ourselves with our homemade toys. Sticks, stones, bones, bugs, and reptiles including snakes were our toys. We also had each other to amuse ourselves. . . . Nowadays most kids need a houseful of toys.

... We were eating in the summer kitchen once when Kenneth [b. 1933], then about four years old, didn’t like what was going on, left the table and headed for the door. Dad said something, but that didn’t stop Kenneth. Dad took a stick out of the wood box, looked at Kenneth, never said a word. You should have heard that little fellow holler, “Ma, Ma, he’s going to kill me!” Dad turned, grinned and sat down. Kenneth went back and sat at the table till everyone else was ready to leave. He learned young that when Dad said something, he meant it. That was the only time I saw Dad pick up a weapon to use on one of his children.

... I’m glad I was a farmer’s helper for eighteen years. That makes me respect farmers even more. They are among the hardest working people, and they are in the healthiest profession in the world. The Rocky Mountains and the farmers are the backbone of this continent. No farmers, no population. Every time you buy groceries, remember a farmer or rancher made it possible for you.

Dad bought a set of boxing gloves about the time I became a teenager. Now instead of fighting bare-fisted during the day, we had to pound ourselves silly in the evening before playing baseball. We never were good fighters, but we sure learned how to defend ourselves. Also, Mother never had to take time off from her chores to nurse our bloody noses, cut lips, black eyes, skinned knuckles, etc., caused from bare-fisted fighting. I think Ray [b. 1919] fought in the Golden Gloves after I left home. He was a little too young for me to box while I was home. . . .

I was an experimentalist while helping Mother in the kitchen. Once I made a quart of rice wine, capped the bottle, and stored it in the attic above the kitchen. Don’t remember how many days or weeks before
we heard a shotgun blast above us. After a while it started to drip from the ceiling. I told Mother about the wine. She got a little perturbed, then made fun of me like she did when any of us kids did something stupid like adding liniment instead of vanilla to our candy mix. A couple of years later, the plaster came down from the spot where the bottle broke in the attic; must have been powerful stuff.

. . . Dad had a few bee hives in the garden to help pollinate the blossoms on whatever grew in the garden. Don’t know if we ever got any honey out of the hives. After a couple of years, Dad got brave and played with the bees without protection on his face. He got bitten many times. His face was swollen bad in some places. That discouraged him, and that was the end of bee keeping.

. . . One night Reuben took off, riding a horse to visit some neighbors. On the way home, he must have seen all kinds of weird things. When he got to our barn, he opened the door, took the bridle off the horse, chased it into the barn, and then threw the bridie in after it. He shut the barn door and headed for the house. He started walking, but gained speed as he was moving on. When he got to the fancy heavy wire fence around the front of the house, his speed was at his maximum. The gate on the fence was closed, and Reuben was lucky he wore a heavy overcoat, heavy cap with a bill and mittens. When he collided with that small gate, it was a quick reverse and roll over. The rest of the way to the front door was in low gear and mighty careful. Reuben did leave an imprint of his body on the gate, but was known to leave a good impression behind when silly things happened, such as when he was being chased by ghosts. Anyway, that is what he told us, and there was some proof on the gate.

. . . By the time we boys were fourteen years old, most of us were self-made barbers. One Friday or Saturday afternoon, I was cutting brother David’s hair. Otto had come home for the weekend. We were doing our barbering in the dining room. Otto came into the room complaining about his upset stomach. He was carrying an orange in his hand. I grabbed the orange, ran out the front door, jumped off the steps, headed for the little gate on the fence surrounding the front of the house. This is the same gate Reuben ran into when the ghost was after him. Usually when the gate was closed, we boys would jump the fence, which was easier and faster than opening the gate. The gate was closed, so I jumped over the fence with the orange in one hand and a comb and barber shears in the other. This time my foot didn’t clear the fence. I landed head first, and the shears went in under my skin on the cheek bone and penetrated my right eyeball. It didn’t hurt, but I knew something bad had happened when that jelly-like stuff rolled down my cheek. Otto and Dad took me to Garrison to see Dr. Stucke. I was bandaged and whatever could be done. Then we went home, cleaned up a little, picked up Mother, and took off for Minot . . . Dr. Stucke must have called Minot, because when we got to the McCannel clinic, two doctors were waiting for action. They kept me a week with an ice pack on my eye most of the time . . .

I could see fairly well [in that eye] when I got home, but three years later it was kaput . . .

. . . Not much to write about the depression years. It was work all year, seven days a week . . . There wasn’t much allowance for us kids in those days. We were lucky to get fifty cents. A little bit from Dad, and a little from Mother. That was it for another week. Dad made a barnyard loan to buy seed, gas, and whatever was needed for spring and summer. For collateral, Dad used the livestock--cattle and horses. The next year it was necessary to sell some cattle . . . Income from eggs, cream, and vegetables that Mother sold to the stores helped pay for clothes and groceries. I left home in 1935, rode the freight train to California in 1936. I only served half of the depression years on the farm, had enough of the dust bowl, dust drifts, thistles, and no money. It took hardy, fearless and persistent people to stay on the farm in those days. Some of them moved into town, but they all survived.

. . . I like to tell stories, but what I have written here are facts until proven otherwise.
Delia (Vetter) Sievert (1921-1991)

Delia went by several names, for reasons she explains in her childhood reminiscence dated from 1981. She also could never forget the harsh Dakota winters:

I was born at home, as were all the Vetter children, with a midwife or neighbor or even in one case our dad in attendance. In those days, home births were not registered with the state. It was not until 1941 when I was 20 years old that my birth was finally registered. Because I was now an adult, I had to have 2 documents to prove who I was. That is why I have 3 names on my birth certificate—Adelia, Odelia, and Otilie. Adelia is my registered name at the top of my birth certificate, Odelia was the name on my confirmation document, and Otilie came from my school records. Everyone always called me Tillie; now I go by Delia.

. . . I remember . . . when Stella [1928-2003] was little, before she was trained. Dad was holding her on his hip and she didn’t have a diaper on. Dad as usual was wearing his bib overalls with their big pockets. She had a bowel movement right into Dad’s pocket. I don’t remember what he said, but he changed his pants.

. . . In North Dakota, we had cold winters (30 to 40 degrees below zero) and blizzards that you couldn’t see the hand in front of your face. One Sunday afternoon Arnold [1915-1994] and Wilbert [1916-1967] went by horseback to visit a friend about 5 to 7 miles away. That evening when they were ready to come home, a blizzard came up so they decided to stay until it let up. But it didn’t let up until Tuesday. The folks must have been half out of their minds not knowing if they froze to death or what. All day long Ma would get on the phone and try to call, but the lines were down. She couldn’t get anybody. She kept trying to call all day and half of the night. She never let on how worried she was. She had a few tears in her eyes on Tuesday afternoon when they came riding home. Her prayers were answered.

Another time we had a really bad blizzard. Dad and the boys had to milk the cows. They tied a rope onto the house and kept hanging onto the rope while looking for the barn. When they found the barn, they tied the end of the rope to the barn. After they finished milking the cows, they followed the rope back to the house. Sometimes we’d have snow banks 8 feet high or higher. We kids would dig holes into the banks and make a snow house. We didn’t mind the cold, but I’ll bet if the folks had told us that we had to do it, we’d complain about it being too cold.

Whenever the folks went to Minot to do some shopping, the youngest kids got to go along. Ma would go to the grocery store to buy bread and bologna. Then we would go to the park and have lunch. To us that was such a treat to eat bakery bread and store-bought bologna. We didn’t need butter or anything else on the bread. It was almost like eating cake. As I mentioned before, Ma baked all our bread, and they made their own sausage. So to eat store-bought things was a real treat, and now to get home-baked bread and homemade sausage is as much of a treat as it was the get store-bought things then.

At Christmas time, we never had a tree. On Christmas Eve, we always went to church, and Ma would always be the last one out of the house. When we’d get home from church, our Christmas gifts would be laying on the table. Only the youngest kids got gifts, as they came from Santa Claus. Every year I’d get a doll.

There would be too much snow and [it was] too cold to drive to church in the car. So we would go by sled. In the morning, Ma would put bricks in the oven and by the time we were ready to go to church, they would be nice and warm. Hay was put on the bottom of the sled, then the bricks were laid on the hay. The sled had a bench in it where we sat and put our feet on the bricks to keep warm. The folks had a
horse that died, so a robe was made out of the hide. This robe was put over our heads, which made it nice and warm in the sled. The only person who got cold was the driver. I think the boys took turns driving the horses. Every once in a while they had to stop and clean the frost off of the horses’ noses. The steam from the horses’ breathing and the cold air would have frozen the horses’ nostrils shut.

The first radio the folks had ran on a car battery.

Finally, Dad and the boys fixed a battery charger that was driven by the wind. That way the battery kept charging even when in use. One evening a neighbor was there, and he couldn’t believe that a noise was coming from the box. He said there was somebody sitting behind the box and doing all the talking.

Our meal times weren’t very quiet. There was a lot of talking and laughing. Wilbert and I sat at the end of the table. One meal I had my mouth full of food when somebody said something and I started to laugh so hard that the food went down my windpipe. I almost choked to death. Wilbert hit me on the back, and I finally got my wind. Dad had a few words to say, like don’t laugh at the table. That didn’t stop us, but I made sure that I didn’t have my mouth full when I had to laugh.

We never got bored. We didn’t have many toys. We had to make our own entertainment. I think that made us closer to one another.

One time I asked Gottfried [1918-1964] to cut my hair. He said he didn’t know how. I said all you have to do is cut it straight on the bottom. So he started to cut. When he got to the other side of my head, it was way above my ear. By the time he had it straightened out, my hair was really short. Neither Dad or Ma said anything about my hair, but it was a mess.

Stella (Vetter) Lindsey (1928-2003)

Over the years, Stella played an important role by recording, writing down, and preserving precious family memories at various Vetter reunions. Here she provides a wonderful, detailed collection of her own childhood memories, which she saved for posterity in 1979. Especially memorable to children like Stella are the smells of the kitchen and the taste of homemade foods. Recalling much about the old farm house (how did so many kids live in it at one time?), she also had the special vantage point of growing up as the youngest sister among so many older brothers. She even had a couple of ghostly encounters on the seemingly haunted farmstead:

I REMEMBER: Going to church on Christmas Eve, usually in a sled, coming home to find that Santa Claus had left one gift and being thrilled to death over it . . . Hot bread fresh from the oven . . . Being told the Gypsies had left me . . . The way Dad whistled through his teeth . . . Picking and eating June berries at Vetter’s Grove . . . Milking cows and hating it . . . Getting a wrist watch for helping with the haying when I was 12 . . . Visiting Grandma and Grandpa Hummel in town and thinking surely God must look like Grandpa . . . Listening to Dad bring the cows home in the morning, he talked and yelled at them all the way . . . Ma teaching the daughters-in-law how to make homemade bread . . . Dave letting me sit on his lap and, better yet, letting me polish his shoes . . . All the brothers telling me fantastic stories, which I sometimes believed . . . Moving the kitchen equipment to the summer house in the spring and back again to the big house in the fall. During the summer months all the cooking was done in the summer house to keep the big house cool for sleeping . . . Homemade sausage. Butchering was always done in the fall, at which time many sausages were made. Butchering day was the only day we had fresh ground meat for hamburgers, which I liked. While everyone else was eating fresh liver and heart, I got hamburgers . . . Ordering all our shoes and clothes out of the catalog, and of course when the new catalog came, the old catalog was put to good use in the outhouse . . . Homemade wine, beer, and root beer. The
beer and wine was for the adults, root beer for the kids . . . Ma gathering everyone downstairs when the storms got bad . . . Watching the older brothers ride the steers in the old sod barn on Sundays, as soon as the folks left home. This was a no-no, but I never told . . . Ma cutting down one of her dresses for me because I liked the material so much . . . The quilting bees. Most of the women from the neighborhood would gather at one house and quilt a blanket. It usually took all day and sometimes into the night. The next week or so they would meet at another house and quilt that lady’s blanket. This was always a winter’s project . . . Dad’s snoring till the floor shook, but it always gave me a secure feeling, all was well as long as he was snoring . . . Great-Grandma calling me “little Mary.” I think she might not have been able to pronounce my name . . . Cracking watermelons over the knee, eating the insides and throwing the rinds over the fence for the pigs to eat the evidence . . . First day of school where I found out that I had a name other than “Sis,” and the teacher spoke English and expected me to do the same . . . The many visits to the aunts and uncles . . . I feel sad that I may never taste that wonderful homemade stink cheese again. It was made from cottage cheese. The cottage cheese was put in a clean towel and hung in a warm place till it was to the point of going bad. Then it was boiled. Mother used a cast-iron frying pan for this. While it was cooking, it turned a tan-brown color and stunk to high heaven. Only the cook would stay in the same room while it was cooking. After it had cooled, it had the consistency of the Velveeta cheese we now eat. There was no smell after it had cooled. Actually, it was very mild. The name came from the cooking process. Don’t know if it had any other name; that is the only name I ever heard for it. There is quite an art to making it, as the cheese had to cure at just the right amount of time.

By today’s standard, the house we lived in was small for the size of family our parents raised there. Two bedrooms upstairs--the boys’ room and the girls’ room. Our parents’ bedroom was downstairs. Besides the downstairs bedroom, there was a kitchen, dining room, and living room. The living room was not used in our everyday life. It was only opened up when special company came. The dining room was the main part of the house. We ate there, entertained there, listened to the radio there, and during cold weather the boys would even make ropes out of twine in that room.

There was a front porch and a back porch. Nothing much was kept in the front porch, but in the back porch there was a big pantry, a water pump that didn’t work because the well ran dry, and a sink. Mother washed clothes in the back porch in the winter time in an old hand-cranked wringer washing machine, but in the summer time the washing machine was moved outside, and the washing was done outside.

The rooms were all furnished with the bare necessities. The two bedrooms upstairs each contained two beds, a dresser, and a straight-back chair. Plus in the boys’ room there was a big wooden box for the boys’ underwear, socks, and work clothes. In our parents’ bedroom, besides the bed there was a dresser, a big wardrobe called a chifferobe, and a built-in closet. In the kitchen, the big coal- and wood-burning stove took up most of the room. There was also a kitchen cupboard and small table. In the dining room, there was a big oak china cabinet that must have been a beauty in its day, but by the time I came along, I believe every boy in the family had carved his initials in it. The table was also heavy oak, and I suppose at one time had enough chairs to go around, but in my youth there were only four chairs left, two on each end, and in front and back there were benches. In the corner there was the radio, which we listened to every evening. Although this was the room that was used the most, there were no recliners or soft comfortable chairs. In the living room, by far the nicest room, we had an organ that nobody in the family knew how to play, and also a leather couch and a china cabinet with curved front glass. All this was in excellent condition, maybe because the boys weren’t allowed in that room . . . Mother kept her pretty knick-knacks and some pretty dishes in it. There were also a couple of fancy chairs. In the middle of the room was a three-legged table that supposedly was able to answer questions by lifting one leg a certain number of times. I saw Reuben [1912-1983] and some other brothers use it once when I was quite young. They sat around the table with their hands on the table and asked it questions that could be answered by a number. Mother made them stop because she said it was the work of the Devil . . . On top of this table
Mother had a beautiful crocheted cloth and a big house plant. We had a full basement under the house--one end contained the furnace and coal bin, and in the other end there was the family’s pride and joy, an indoor flush toilet in one corner. This was only used in the winter time. In the summer, we had to use the outhouse. In the middle [of the basement] was the cream separator, and in the other corner was a big potato bin, filled with homegrown potatoes in the fall, which lasted us until the next fall when it was filled again. In and on top of the potato bin were shelves for the many jars of vegetables and fruit our mother canned every year. It seemed like hundreds of jars filled with all kinds of vegetables from our garden and fruit such as peaches and pears that were bought at the grocery store. Jam was made from choke cherries, buffalo berries, and wild plums picked at Vetter’s Grove at Fort Stevenson. The furnace kept us nice and warm on those cold winter nights and days. There was a heat vent for each room. The furnace was filled with coal at night and about five in the morning. Dad would get up and shake up the coals, add some more, then go back to bed. By the time we all got up, the house was as warm as toast. The coal was dumped into the basement through a special door or window in the foundation of the house. It was a dusty mess when coal was dumped. The coal dust seemed to go through the whole house.

In 1967, while in Garrison, we took Cheryl and Vikki [her daughters] out to the farm. As we walked through the empty house, they kept saying that the rooms were so small, and you know, they even looked small to me. Strangely enough, while living there it didn’t seem small or crowded. Not even the year newlyweds Ray [b. 1919] and Agnes and Dave [1911-1970] and Dorothy shared the same bedroom. A cot was put in the hallway for me. Kenneth [b. 1933] slept with the older boys, except on the weekends when one of the older boys would come home. Then Kenneth and I shared the cot. It just fit the hallway. To get into bed we had to crawl over the foot of the cot. During the summer months the older boys would sleep in a room by the garage. Now this was a room no woman in the family went into unless she had to. As far as I can remember, it had no windows or, if it did, it was small. On a hot summer’s day, if the door had been closed, you took a chance on getting asphyxiated if you just went barging in. To enter properly, you took a couple of deep breathes and tried not to inhale once inside. Inside was a strange odor combination of armpits, sweaty feet, dirty socks, and greasy kid stuff they put on their hair. The walls of the room had never been finished, just some black tar paper. The tar paper was ideal for the boys to chalk graffiti. In later years, someone put a shower in there, and things did improve a little.

The evening of January 19, 1933, stands out in my mind for two reasons. It is the earliest recollection I have of my childhood (I was two months short of being 5 years old), and it is the night Ma and Dad presented us with brother number 11. Some of the older boys were playing cards with some neighbor boys in the dining room, and I was watching them when Dad came out of the bedroom to make his announcement. I immediately ran into the bedroom, looked at brother number 11 and then ran back to the dining room. I asked if anyone wanted to look at him, but was met with complete silence. Nobody moved or said a thing. I was very disappointed in the unfeeling bunch and ran back to the bedroom. I was allowed to crawl in bed with Ma and brother number 11 (who later was named Kenneth), and asked a million questions. Do you have clothes for him? Where did he come from? The stork, I was told. I did have some doubt about the stork coming in the window when I saw all the snow on the outside of the window. A few nights later Dad went to Garrison to celebrate. Don’t know if he celebrated son number 11, number 16th child, or that this might be the last. Dad did not drink alcoholic beverages very often, and this is the only time that I know that he indulged too much.

When I was six, I learned my first lesson in “do not trust older brother.” Ma and Dad were taking a nap one Sunday after lunch, when Ben [1924-2000] decided he was going to visit the Mautz boys, and did I want to come along. I was tickled to be asked, so of course I went. It’s about a 2-mile walk across the field and pasture. Well, when we got there, Ben took off with the boys, and that left me with nothing to do but walk home alone. What a shock when I got home and found nobody there. What was I going to do? My imagination ran wild with stories of Gypsies kidnapping me. I was saved when a small coupe
pulled into the farmyard. Inside were Otto [1907-1991] and Ione [Otto’s soon-to-be-wife]. After some questioning, I remembered that the folks had mentioned going to Simpson Lake where the Baptists were having a mass baptismal that day. Otto said he would take me there, and sure enough, that is where they were. The reason I remember how old I was is that Ione [who was a one-room schoolteacher at the time] remarked how well I spoke English. So it must have been the spring after first grade. I probably didn’t speak English all that well, but it sure made me proud that she said so.

... Ma handed out the discipline in the family, except once in a while it would be too much for her, and she would need Dad’s help. Dad was very easy going most of the time and didn’t notice the noise and bedlam caused by the kids. To call his attention to the kid who was standing on her head in the middle of the dining room table, Ma would say “Duddie” (“Daddy”), he then would notice the offending kid and say one word “Sis” or whoever the naughty child was. End of discipline, end of problem.

We all heard so much about the haunted house on the farm. It seems only natural that most of us had experiences that were never explained. My first experience happened when I was 11 or so. Sleeping in the boys’ room one night, I woke up to see a man in colonial [eighteenth-century] clothes sitting in the chair. Propping myself on one elbow, I looked closer and, yes, he was still there. I then covered my head, not to peek again, and soon fell asleep. This didn’t really bother me as much as what happened another time. Although we weren’t supposed to play in the wheat granaries, I liked to go in on a hot day and slide down the cool wheat. One summer day I was doing just that in the granary nearest the garden, when I heard this pecking noise, a steady pecking about every 10 seconds. It gave me goose bumps. It was not a noise I had ever heard before. I didn’t think it was a chicken because it was too steady a sound, but decided to check it out anyway. The granary was set on rocks, so it was easy to see under it. No chicken or anything else was under there, but the pecking noise continued. This went on for weeks, maybe even months. Don’t remember when it stopped. One day, I just realized that the pecking noise was gone. You could hear the pecking sound quite some distance away from the granary, but it got louder as you got closer to the granary. I never mentioned it to anyone. Wish I had. Maybe somebody knew what it was. Needless to say, I never played in the granaries again.

I suppose the Ma and Dad I remember must be somewhat different than what the older brothers and sisters remember. When I was 14 years old [in 1942], the folks moved to a house in Garrison and gave up active farming. Things were much easier for them, and they no longer had the worry and strain of raising a large family. By then only Kenneth and I were at home. Incidentally, this was a five-bedroom house. They did the best they knew how in raising their family, and I think they did a pretty good job.

The Early Years on the Farm: Assorted Stories from the 1987 Vetter Family Reunion

At the 1987 Vetter family reunion in Denver, Colorado, many family members participated in telling their memories of growing up in the Vetter household. Stella (Vetter) Lindsey (1928-2003) faithfully tried to transcribe the tape recordings of these discussions as best she could. Sometimes three or four people were talking at once. In any event, Stella noted later that she wished she could have added to her transcriptions “all the laughter and the warm feeling of togetherness” saved on the recordings at the time. In particular, Albert and Otto, the two oldest Vetter children, talked extensively at this family function. Over the years, I learned that my grandfather Otto had a lifelong fascination with farm machinery, especially the old combines. My grandpa Vetter’s recollections about the new farm technologies of the early twentieth century remained quite vivid in his mind. Nowhere was this more evident than at the 1987 reunion:

ALBERT [1906-1988]: As soon as we were old enough to do any farm work, we did it. By the time we were 9 and 10 years old, we could plow and drill. Everyone did their share. Our days started early.
When we first got up in the mornings, we had to take care of the horses. This consisted of combing, feeding, watering, and putting the harnesses on them. Only then would we go into the house for breakfast. After breakfast, we would go out into the fields. We generally came home for the noon meal, called dinner. Mother called us home for dinner by waving a white rag tied to a stick. At noon, we had two hours to eat, feed the horses, and rest. After that, it was back to the fields again until 6 or 7 in the evening.

Something happened to me when I was about 10, and Otto 9 years old, that will stay with me always. It was early in the spring and still quite cold, as Otto and I wore heavy coats. We were plowing in the field next to the mail box. It was almost quitting time. Otto was ahead of me, when we stopped our horses and were standing there talking. Our teams were apart, about 100 to 150 feet. We had five horses on each team, two in front and three in back. While we were talking, my team took off running toward Otto. I tried to stop the horses, but they ran over me, and I was caught in the shears of the plow. It was a two-bottom shear plow. One of the horses was a little slower than the others, so they kept going around in a circle. They dragged me around and around. In the meantime, Otto’s team took off for home. They got to just the other side of the mail box of Eman’s place. Our dad happened to see that, and he came out to see what was going on. In the meantime, those horses that were dragging me stopped. Then Otto came running over to me and grabbed hold of the plow where I was trapped. He lifted the plow off me. I don’t know how he did it. It was so heavy. A grown man couldn’t lift it alone. There was all that dirt he had to lift with it also. I walked home. Dad unhooked the plow and brought the horses home. I wasn’t hurt, just a scratch or two. What saved me from really getting hurt seriously was the heavy coat I was wearing.

In the evening, when we came home from the fields, we would feed the horses, take the harnesses off, and water them. Then we would go to the house for our evening meal, called supper. Soon after that it was bed time. We didn’t have to milk the cows when we worked in the fields. Usually Dad, Mother, and the younger kids had the job of milking the cows. This [field work] was generally around the first or middle of April. We didn’t go to school the full school term. We missed at least a month or two in the fall to help with the fall harvest, and in the spring we were taken out of school in April to help with the spring planting.

When I was about 11 or 12 years old and Otto a year younger, the two of us did all the spring planting, as Dad was in the hospital. . . .

OTTO [1907-1991]: The pigs would burrow under the hay in the barn. You would go tie up a horse, and you would step on a pig. I used to think they looked so comfortable. One year we had this gander that would follow Dad around the yard. Dad had a pair of overalls with a hole in them right around his thigh area. When he wore those overalls, the gander would stick his beak in a corner of the hole and hold on. Dad would pull him all over the yard. It was a sight to see. The geese were laying eggs at that time, and I guess the gander was lonesome.

Combines came into use about 1922-1924. Before that, they used the binder that would cut the grain and tied it into bundles. Then workers would go out and stack bundles into tepee shapes with the ears up. Then come threshing time, the men would go out into the field with the hay wagons and throw the bundles onto the wagons and haul them to the threshing machine. In the back of the thresher, the straw would come out, and on the side the grain would come out. There would be wagons there to pick up the grain and haul it away to be stored. Our dad and Grandpa Vetter had their own tractor and steam engine. They naturally had the first one in the county. After our crop was in, they would go around to the different farms and harvest for them. They would charge so much per bushel. Don’t remember what it was. In 1915, everyone had a bumper crop, and it took extra long to get everyone they had contracts with. They finished with all they had contracts with, but there were quite a few farmers that also wanted their
threshing done. They worked as long as they could before snow set in.

ALBERT: . . . When Grandpa Vetter moved to [Lodi] California in 1918, Grandpa Hummel bought out his share in the threshing venture. They had a good business going. They made good money.

ALBERT AND OTTO: Extra help would be needed at threshing time. Usually it would be neighbor men or boys who wanted to work. Sometimes it was necessary to recruit extra help besides the neighbors. Grandma Vetter would be the one to go to town to recruit helpers. Most of the recruits had worked for the Veters in past years, so it wasn’t hard to get good help. . . . Most of them liked to work for the Veters because they knew they would get a fair shake and good food. One year they had two guys who quit after a few days for some reason; we don’t remember. . . . After a few weeks, they were back wanting to work for Gottfried and Gottfried again. It seems no other place treated them as nice as the Vetters. Each worker came with their own bedroll, and they bedded down in the hay loft. At the next farm, they did the same thing. It was up to the farmer’s wife to feed these men. Usually twelve extra men were hired, so the farmer’s wife would have to feed these twelve, plus her own family. The workers ate first, then the women and children would eat. The field workers were fed five meals a day. The workers got up as soon as it was light, so they could get out in the field early. Since it would be a long day, they were fed accordingly. For breakfast, it was potatoes, homemade sausage, homemade bread, corn flakes, and much more, including pies and cakes. In the middle of the morning, we had a snack consisting of coffee and Kuchen (German coffee cake). The women would bring that out into the field. The machines didn’t stop for a break. We would stop for the noon meal. This was another big meal. Potatoes, meat, vegetables from the garden, cakes, and pies. Butchering was done just before threshing time, so there would be plenty of fresh meat to eat. In the afternoon, it was snack time again, and finally the evening meal. Another big meal of meat, potatoes, vegetables, and all those other good things. The wives were also rated by their cooking. If the threshers [field workers] didn’t like the food at a certain place, there was sure to be some complaining, but only among themselves. Nobody would insult the wives by saying anything to her. The women really worked. Not only did they have to cook and clean for all those threshers, they also did chores around the farm. The milking, feeding the animals, watching the younger children, and much much more. We don’t know when they slept.

. . . When we were little, we didn’t have toys. We made our own entertainment.

ALBERT: When we got older, we played quite a bit of baseball. We had a baseball diamond behind our house, which at that time was pasture land. Young men [including some of his younger Hummel uncles] from the other farms would come to play ball there. . . . We went all over the county to play ball. One time we played the inmates at the Bismarck state prison. They paid us to play there. I think it was $25.00 for the whole team. We got beat, but we had fun.

. . . ALBERT AND OTTO: On Christmas Eve, everybody went to church. The younger children participated in the program. We said out loud little pieces and sang Christmas songs. This was all in German. After we were confirmed, we no longer had a part in the program. . . . Santa Claus bought us clothes. Shirts, pants, underwear, and such that had been ordered from the catalog. Sears Roebuck or Montgomery Ward. We didn’t get toys.

. . . KENNETH [b. 1933]: When I was little, we did get toys.

RAY [b. 1919]: One Christmas, when I was about 5 or 6 years old, I received this truck. It was a wooden truck with a great big box on it. The box was supposed to be filled with little corn flakes boxes. That really impressed me.
ELSIE [1909-2002]: One year around Christmas time, our uncle Ed Vetter came to our house dressed in a sheepskin coat, only it was inside out. He was supposed to be Santa Claus. He had something over his face so we didn’t know who it was. All it did was really scare me.

. . . ALBERT: . . . One time, Otto, Emil [1910-1992] and I were in the barn hay loft. Emil jumped off the hay loft right onto a hay fork whose tines were sticking up. The tine went right through his foot. Otto and I went to help him immediately. We pulled the tine out of his foot. I don’t know if he even went up to the house. I always say I don’t know how we lived long enough to grow up. We did so many stupid things. . . .

OTTO AND ALBERT: When we were around 5 or 6 years old, the two of us decided to take a bath one day. This was still on the old place. Right below the water tank, there was a hog pen. Water would run over the water tank and down to where the pig pen was. The pigs would wallow in the mud. One hot day the two of us decided that this looked like fun. We took our clothes off and wallowed in the mud like the pigs did. You should have seen us when we got out. We stank to high heaven. There was a little of everything in there. . . . We really needed a bath when we got out. Don’t remember if we got a spanking. Think Mother was just glad we were still alive, although she may have had a little trouble recognizing us. We were just like two peas in a pod. Whatever one did, the other had to do, too. When one got into trouble, the other did, too. . . .

. . . ALBERT: Dad bought my first car for me. It was a ’24 Chevy. I traded that in for a ’29 Model A Ford. I don’t remember what the Chevy cost, but the Model A was between $700 and $800. Otto used that car for many years after I left home.

OTTO: We learned to drive by driving our grandpa Vetter’s car. Grandpa told me when I got older, I could do all the driving for him. He was my buddy. He moved to California [in 1918] before I was old enough to do all the driving for him.

. . . ALBERT AND OTTO: Our parents and grandparents never really said too much about life in Russia. They did say they were really sick on the ship bringing them to the United States. They were probably way down on the bottom of the ship, and all crowded together. In Russia, as in North Dakota, they made their livelihood by farming. The difference was that in Russia they all lived in villages and farmed the surrounding areas. Grandpa Vetter was considered a wealthy man for that time. Dad told us once that when they left Russia for America [in 1902], they had to go to Germany to take the ship that brought them to America. Before they left, they had to exchange all their money for American money. Grandpa had all these bills, and when it was exchanged, it was in a few big bills. Grandpa was really upset. Here he had all this money, but it didn’t look like much. He thought he was being cheated. He liked a big wad of money.

. . . ELSIE: I remember one time Grandpa [Vetter] came looking for Grandma with a shotgun. He looked under all our beds and even in a little closet. I know she would go by our place many times on her way to her sister’s place after they had a fight. Mrs. Eman was her sister, and they lived about one-half mile south of our place.

ALBERT: When we lived on the farm south of Grandpa and Grandma Vetter’s place, many times Grandma Vetter would walk by our place on her way to her sister’s. She might stop for a few minutes, but she never stayed. I guess she knew Grandpa would come looking for her, and she didn’t want us kids to see him so drunk and mad. When I was older, I was told that Grandpa was very mean to Grandma and did hit her. I never saw it, but was told by people who knew. Grandma was a nice lady. She was very easy going and was always good to me. I do know that Grandpa was very mean when he was drunk. He
would whip the grandchildren sometimes, but he didn’t abuse us. I don’t think he was mean to his children either, but one time he and Dad had some kind of a fight out in the field. Grandpa came home all bloody. I did see Grandpa quite drunk many times as I was growing up. Once was during threshing time. He was going from the threshing machine to the engine. The belt was running, and he was trying to steady himself by grabbing the moving belt.

ALBERT AND OTTO: We don’t remember too much about our Hummel grandparents when we were young. We didn’t see them very often. They were hardworking, quiet, gentle people. They always treated us nicely.

OTTO: Old John Walz liked to tell this story about Grandpa Vetter. At that time, they used to haul grain to Underwood. Whey they finished their business, they would have a lunch of sardines and crackers. This particular day a bunch of grain haulers and Grandpa were sitting around some barrels, eating their lunch when some guy came in and started to carry on something terrible. He called Grandpa all kinds of names, such as “yellow” and “coward.” Grandpa didn’t know what was going on, so when this fellow left, Grandpa asked some of the others what that was all about. He was told that apparently this fellow wanted to pick a fight. So Grandpa said call him back. He came back, and when Grandpa got through with him, this fellow left Underwood and never came back. Guess Grandpa took him down and beat the hell out of him. John Walz really liked to tell this story of this older man (he was around 60 at the time) beating up that young kid.

RAY: I remember Great-Grandma [Dorothea (Zeifle)] Heck [1839-1934, born in Beresina, Bessarabia]. I could never figure out why she had her own room off the kitchen in Grandpa Hummel’s house. Guess she lived with the Hummels after Great-Grandpa [Johann] Heck [1839-1914, born in Klöstitz, Bessarabia] died. What fascinated me was the way she always rolled the feather bedding up against the wall--to air out the bed, I suppose.

. . . OTTO: One time, one of our Norwegian neighbors came to our place really mad. It seemed some of Grandpa’s cows or horses had gotten out and were in this Norwegian’s field. He came into the yard in his buggy ready for a fight. He was carrying a shotgun. He called Grandpa a Russian S.O.B. Grandpa reached up into the buggy and took the shotgun away from him. Then he said to him, “You damn Norwegian, I’m going to hit you over the head with your own gun.” After that, everything was fine. “No problem, Mr. Vetter.”

At the 1987 family reunion, one of the more fascinating topics that the Vetters discussed was the matter of Germans from Russia “superstitions.” Ignore them, but at your own peril . . . :

OTTO: Grandpa [Gottfried] Vetter [1863-1924] used to tell us witchcraft stories about Russia. I don’t know how much truth there is to them, but they made good stories. I will tell them because they were stories that Grandpa told us. One story concerned our Grandpa Vetter. In Russia, the boys would sleep in the barn, which was attached to the house. While he would be sleeping, he would get “worked over” by someone or something. He would wake up in a sweat. He would be soaking wet. One night he came home and found his horse in a sweat, like it had been running for miles, and yet it was in the barn all evening. One night he was upstairs in the barn, when a little bird flew in. It turned into a woman right before his eyes. She came over to him, patted him on the head and told him she had bothered him long enough. Now she would leave him alone. I never knew what he meant when he said he had been “worked over.”

EMIL [1910-1992]: Old man Kempf had a horse with a disease on its hoof. He took the horse out before sunrise into the pasture. Then he marked the size of the hoof on the ground. He would then dig up the
sod, turn it upside down, and as the grass dies, the disease on the hoof would heal. The disease was called sweenie. One time Dad mentioned to one of our neighbors that he had to buy some more horses, as one of our horses had sweenie. The neighbor told Dad that our Grandpa Vetter could cure it. Grandpa must have then told Dad how to do it, because Dad cured that horse of sweenie. Dad would take the horse out in the pasture on a Friday morning before sunrise. He would rub the hoof and say some words. He did this every Friday for about three weeks, and the horse was healed.

OTTO AND ALBERT: One time our dad and Grandpa Vetter wanted to buy some land, but a neighbor got it first. Grandpa Vetter was so angry that he laid a coat over the door threshold and beat this coat with a stick as hard as he could. This was supposed to hurt the neighbor. He had to use a certain kind of wood or stick. Don’t know if anything had ever happened to the neighbor. Probably not. Sure never heard anything.

ALBERT: We had a horse that had some kind of ailment. I don’t remember what was wrong with it. It was a beautiful horse, and we didn’t want to lose it. Dad would go out early in the morning and rub the left shoulder of that horse. He did this for some time. Always at the same time of the day. He eventually cured that horse just by rubbing the shoulder and saying some words.

LUCILLE [REUBEN VETTER’S WIFE]: One time we came to visit the parents. Wanda [b. 1943, her daughter] had a ringworm on her finger. Ma took her aside, and we couldn’t hear what she was saying, but her lips were moving, and she took her finger and kept going around and around on the ringworm. The ringworm went away. If they did have magic powers, they used it for good, not evil.

. . . HOME CURES:

. . . OTTO AND ALBERT: We had a mushroom on the prairie that was used to stop bleeding in man or beast. The mushroom was dried and made into a powder. There were always some mushrooms hanging in the old smoke house. I heard that one time during butchering, Dad got a bad cut in his foot, right through the shoe. He put some mushroom powder on it and guess it healed all right.

ALBERT: The old folks had natural cures for anything, and most of it worked. In those days, they hardly went to a doctor. They either cured themselves or died.

. . . MEMORIES OF OUR MOTHER AND DAD:

EVERYONE: Our parents were really easy going. Not much would bother them, as far as what we did. We can recall only two times that we saw our dad really angry at two of his sons. That is not to say we didn’t get spanked when we deserved it. We must have provoked them to near the end of their patience many times. It could not have been easy to raise such a large family and still be in control all the time. Our dad was a great storyteller. He could tell us wonderful stories about his life as a boy in Russia. Unfortunately, we don’t remember many of them. He never forgot anyone’s name, and if the name didn’t come to him right away, he would stop his story until he remembered the name. We could always find our dad in Garrison on a Saturday night just by looking for the largest crowd of men gathered together. Our dad would be right in the middle, entertaining everyone with his stories. Both of our parents worked very hard on the farm. Mother would help in the fields besides doing all the cooking, baking, washing clothes, and everything else that went along with keeping a house. She was a good cook, and nobody ever left her table hungry. She was not one to complain. She just did what she had to do. We feel very fortunate that we had such good parents.

ELSIE: Our little sister [Adala] died [in 1922] from a rare skin disease. She had blisters all over her
body, and there was nothing our folks could do to help her. The doctor gave them some salve to put on her, but don’t believe it helped very much. She was 11 days old when she died. I remember at her funeral, the minister in his sermon really condemned our parents because the baby had not been baptized. He said our parents would pay for this negligence, like they would go to hell for that. I felt so bad for our mother and dad. First they lose a child, and then they are condemned for not having her baptized. Many people talked about this terrible sermon for weeks afterwards. I’m sure our parents had no idea she was so sick, or they certainly would have had her baptized.

RAY: I remember Dad saying in German, “Dues Kind doured me so” (“I pity or feel sorry for this child so much”). She would look at us with such sad eyes. Dad would feel sorry for her when she looked at him with those big blue, pleading eyes. I was only 3 years old, but I remember her well.

ELSIE: Dad did something once that really upset Mother. Dad got involved in a shell game at the Minot state fair. He kept putting out money, but never found the pea under the shell. Finally $30.00 later he won a china tea set. That was a lot of money in those days. Those dishes were really pretty, but they were never used. Mother kept them in the china cabinet. They are in Kenneth’s family now.

Rev. Kenneth Curtis Vetter (b. 1933)

The following is one of my favorites among the collected Vetter family memories. Great-Uncle Kenneth, now a retired Lutheran minister, wrote this classic reminiscence in 1979. Indeed, as his heartfelt story captures so well, his life has spanned the transition that the immigrant Vetter clan had made between Old World and New, between the traditional and what we recognize today as the “modern.” And as the youngest child out of fifteen, he was perhaps the “pick of the litter,” but at the end of the day, he concluded, all the Vetter children probably felt the same. Kenneth’s childhood saga as a German-immigrant son is presented below in its entirety:

What should be so difficult about telling what life was like growing up in a somewhat unique family consisting of immigrant parents learning a new way of life on a farmstead on the prairies of North Dakota? The task should be even easier when you are the youngest of the fifteen children who lived to become parents themselves. There should be a plethora of remembrances and feelings when you, as the youngest, shared the ideas, ideals, and lifestyles of three generations, instead of the usual two. As the youngest, your mother shared congratulations at your birth with her older sons and daughters, and your earlier playmates were your own nephews and nieces. As the youngest in the family, you were raised in a home where German was your native tongue and English was unknown until you began school at age five.

As the youngest in the family, you were imbued with the pioneer spirit that brought your parents to this country, and raised with the homesteaders’ industry that helped them tame the virgin prairies at a time when others your age knew nothing of that spirit or the countries of their ancestors, and were ashamed of the foreign accents that tainted their English conversations.

There you are—the youngest in a family influenced by the adventuring “old world” philosophies of your parents, living as a second-generation American who doesn’t know what it was like to live in a sod house, or break the virgin prairie, battle the grasshopper plagues, or even know what life was like when there was a depression and no crops because there was no rain. And because there was no rain—plenty of dust. You were born in the midst of all that. Because of the times you were a second-generation American who understood life more like a latter generation with their careless disregard for the sacrifices and hard work of their immigrant ancestors. Even your name is inappropriate to the situation. Your name should be Germanic. It should have been Hans, or Gottlieb (after your grandfather), but by the influence of your
brothers and sisters, it ends up Kenneth. Kenneth Curtis, with the German pronunciation Kenet.

So it is that I look at life through the eyes of three generations. The certain advantage, however, of being born the youngest to parents who were already grandparents, was that I lived with my parents in their “retirement” years, when both Mother and Father had more time for using the living room to sit around and visit friends. Because the body-breaking task on the farm from dawn to dusk was behind them. I was privy to those stories of life in Russia—including the sagas of witches and magic and hidden treasures left by the fleeing Turks. Fact or fancy, everyone agreed our father was an interesting “storyteller,” despite his strong German accent. Even our mother could never quite get as much excitement into her stories as did our father.

Some of the events our parents experienced in Russia have even become a part of our family’s nomenclature, as we were often referred to—and referred to our children—as “du Ginsberg.” Sometimes we were designated a “Ginsberg” affectionately, sometimes teasingly, and sometimes angrily. During more than one of those stories I discovered that in the village of Klöstitz in [Bessarabia] Russia the local village retardant’s name was Ginsberg. Therefore, whenever any of us did something not so bright, it was suggested we stop being a “Ginsberg.” We used it on each other to tease one another about one’s abilities.

What, therefore, should one tell of life in a family like this? I can’t tell of the homesteading, or the “dirty thirties,” because I was not of that generation (despite my own children’s ideas, sometimes). Having heard the stories of life in Russia, I could perhaps relate stories unknown to others, except, perhaps, to our sister Stella. Unfortunately, however, I don’t remember them that well, and certainly not in detail as did our father. Hindsight and wishing have created a desire that I could have recorded those stories as well as all the genealogical information our mother had tucked away in her mind about both sides of the family.

What shall I tell? If I know the telling of family histories, the people in them, including ourselves, always come out bigger than life. Our parents, in retelling our history, somehow became faultless creatures, and we paragons of virtue. I am certain that, in the retelling, the cold North Dakota winters will be brushed over with a warm tropical breeze, the dust, grasshoppers, and heat of summer will be glamorized, and our parents elevated to sainthood.

What I want to remember with you was that Gottfried Vetter and Maria Hummel were flesh and blood human beings with their faults and foibles, just like the rest of us. They could be hard and angry as well as soft and loving. They could be fun and carefree as well as sad and serious. Our parents could have many “old country” ideas about sex roles that didn’t fit the times in which they lived. (How often, I remember, chuckling to myself as I observed Mom and Dad walking together the few blocks from our house to downtown—with Dad always about 6 paces ahead of our mother.)

I must admit, however, that my purpose is not to find fault with our parents. Even when I was growing up and going through those difficult years of my teenhood, I rarely felt I had bad parents or that I was unhappy with them. Only once in my pre-teen years do I remember feeling sorry for myself and wondering, as many children do, if I might not be their real son and was, in reality, adopted. A few moments of sober contemplation got me over my pity rapidly. All it took was the realistic shock that with fourteen children already in the family, why should my parents want to adopt another?

Basically I remember both parents as very caring parents. Some of this, I am sure, is because I was the “baby” in the family and, therefore, became somehow special for them (notwithstanding the fact that I was so cute and well-behaved—but then I said I wasn’t going to make them or me look bigger than life). I am sure that with fourteen others ahead of me, they had finally learned the art of parenting (perhaps with
eleven more children, Hilda and I could finally get the knack of it).

I don’t want you to believe that I never gave my parents reason to be, if not angry at least, disappointed in me. (One of my sisters-in-law indicates she remembers when I was six years old that my mother was to have said about me in German that she, my mother, should have drowned me when I was born. Fortunately my sister-in-law misunderstands ethnic-German/Russian humor.)

I know that our father was often disappointed in me and always expressed that disappointment with a nod of his head, a disappointed look on his face, and a repetition of “Ach! Kleiner! Kleiner! Kleiner!” [“Oh, Little One!”]. It was not until I was fifteen or sixteen that I realized that my name was Kenneth, not Kleiner! Kleiner! Kleiner! Perhaps by then I had stopped disappointing him.

Generally, however, I remember our parents as being very easy people with whom to live. There certainly was suspicion, such as the time as a senior in high school when our mother scolded me for turning on the lights and being so noisy in the kitchen when I came in at night. (That old chiming clock always betrayed the hour of my arrival). Out of consideration to her complaints I began arriving home, turning on no lights and quietly groping my way upstairs to my bedroom, only to be confronted the next morning with “Why did you sneak in last night? Had you been drinking?” After some days of this kind of suspicion I finally reverted to my old habits of clambering through a brightly lit house. At least Mother knew that I was above board and sober.

There were many times when I saw our father disturbed by some problem, usually by some mechanical failure. I remember those times when some piece of farm equipment would break, and Dad would fuss and fume trying this thing or another, trying to fix it. I was always certain that he spent a sleepless night, but the next morning he would get up and start rummaging through the junk pile or heating up the coal-fired hearth to bolt together or hammer out a cure for the ailing machine, the inspiration for which he discovered in those sleepless hours.

Machines were our father’s nemesis. He could work with children, cows, horses, chickens, but machines baffled him. One night, returning home hours after their bedtime (it was not so much that I was coming home late, but rather that they were accustomed to retire early), I found Dad sitting, ashen-faced, at the kitchen table waiting for me. Our parents had gone to visit “die Leute” [“the folks”], which was the title they gave to our grandparents. Coming home, the car gave them trouble from the start and could not be convinced to cooperate any further than one-half block from the only grandparents I knew, the Gottlieb Hummels. They had walked home, across town (not that much of a jaunt in our little town), and Dad could not sleep until that stubborn machine was working and safely home. I diligently trudged through the snow and across town (it was, after all, not that late). I had suspected that it was just a matter of being chocked improperly and flooded out, which must have been the case. (This was only the second of two cars that our father owned while he and I shared this earth together). The 1939 Ford started without a complaint, and Dad rested comfortably, knowing that surely I could fix that which he little understood.

Our mother bore the pain of disappointment with us, her children, the deepest and the longest. There were the many times I knew that my actions must have pained her, and yet she said nothing or made only fleeting, almost humorous references to it. But perhaps in her experience of raising all those brothers and sisters before me, she had learned the subtle knack of letting one stew in the juice of my own conscience. At least I knew she knew, and I really hadn’t gotten by with anything. Perhaps we could fault her for not confronting us with our wrong doings at the time.

The pain of our actions, I know, stayed with her, so that even in the years close to her death she confided in me some mistrust she had for some in our family for “stealing” truckloads of wheat on several
occasions years before, while our parents were away from the farmstead; selling the wheat in Coleharbor, pocketing the money and then covering the truck tracks by pulling gunny sacks over them. Or the disappointment she felt when she gave one of our brothers a sum of money to contribute to the church in their name so that the yearly church record would show a contribution, only to discover the money was used for their own expenses (or pleasure), and the record showed that this family had again contributed nothing for the year. (Indeed, “keeping face” was an important point for both our parents, and one’s standing in the church led the list). No doubt our mother may have shared with my brothers and sisters her disappointment in me—which is probably my loss for her failure in not sharing that disappointment with me directly and immediately.

My recollection of our parents was that both were very even-tempered people. I know that in comparison to them, my personality is quite explosive (just ask my children), despite the fact that someone once said that if I were more relaxed, I would be a corpse. I can never recall our mother losing her composure (not even when she was to have made the comment about “drowning at birth”). Only twice do I remember our father angry—and then he was so angry that it was funny and sad. The events that brought about the anger, as my mind recollects, concerns one of our brothers who had fallen into the habit of going to dances, visiting the establishments where they dispense a frothy brew, and had been coming home later and later (or is it earlier and earlier?) after dancing and drinking on Saturday night. One particular Sunday morning (already past milking time), this member of the family came walking across the field after another young neighbor, who also liked girls and brew, dropped him off on his way home. The lateness of this homecoming, the unsteady gait of his walk, and the smell of brew was too much for our father, and he sent him off to retrace his steps across the field to the highway—sending the prodigal [son] off.

The humorous part of the incident was that our father had lost all sense of rationality and became so enraged with our brother’s actions that he kept muttering something about “hanging that ______.” Dad went down to the barn and came back with the necessary equipment to accomplish his threat. In his hand, he carried a one-inch rope (used to hoist wagon loads of hay into the barn’s hay loft). A rope the size of a woman’s fist would hardly make an appropriate noose for “hanging.” Even to my young mind, there was a bit of irony to the situation, as I watch my father struggle with this heavy and cumbersome weapon of revenge. Fortunately (more for my father than the errant brother, who could have suffered from a hernia), my older brothers were able to reason with our father until clear thoughts returned. Our brother went on his way, trudging across the plowed fields, totally unaware of the humor and tragedy transpiring within the shadow of the creaking windmill.

The only other time I remember our father being upset beyond limits took place at nearly the same place in our farmyard, but years later. This crisis was precipitated when yet another brother had been asked to go up to the summer pasture, northwest of the homestead near Elsingers, because a cow had given birth to a calf, and he was to bring them home—the calf a recipient of a free ride on the back of a wagon. The horses were harnessed and hitched to the wagon, and our brother was off to the rented pasture. When he returned, however, he came with only the offspring. The mother was left in the pasture, and became the point of dispute as to what had indeed been communicated. Before dumping the calf off in the yard to turn the wagon around to retrace his steps to the summer pasture, our brother must have said some things that our father felt no good German son should ever say to his father. I was out of earshot by this time and did not hear what our brother said to our father. All I know is that it was no longer an argument about the nature of the previous communication. While my brother was taking the horses and wagon down the lane, our father strode into the blacksmith shop and began to rummage through the pile of metal plates, angle irons, and other assorted scraps saved for some special repair jobs. Finding the proper bar, he emerged with the determined look to back up his words that he was going to “teach” this particular son a “lesson.” Again, cooler heads prevailed, and my older brothers took the iron from our father, piled him
into the back seat of the brown “Model A” and went after the wagon and its driver. I assume the conversation on the road was more constructive. At least our brother returned with his skull intact; and happily the mother cow and her offspring were reunited.

In reflecting back to those years when I was growing up with our parents, there were short periods when I sensed a “generation gap” (which transposed three generations). There was a reluctance, for instance, to invite friends into our home because our living room furniture was antiquated (but now treasured as collectors’ items). I remember especially the sofa which made into a bed and was probably the place of birth for all sixteen children born to our father and mother. Even though the sofa was still in perfect condition (why should it show wear?—our living room on the farm was used only when the pastor or some greater dignitary came), but its leather (genuine) seat and backrest, its wooden armrests certainly were out of style in the late 1940s.

I remember, too, my sensitivity about my father’s dress. Somehow his bib overalls always betrayed his past as a farmer. I can even recall the day when I stopped being “ashamed” of a father who wore bib overalls. I had earned my Eagle rank in the Boy Scouts and had received the publicity and rank in local ceremonies in the winter. The next summer, however, the Boy Scout Council held special ceremonies at a camp to which the parents were also invited to be honored. We drove to the camp in the afternoon for the ceremonies at a campfire that evening. It was an occasion for me to wear my Scout uniform, our mother her best dress, and our father . . . Well, he wore his bib overalls. When the three of us were called before the groups of Scouts, leaders, and other parents, I remember the startled look in the District Representative’s face. It was a look of pride as he saw this older couple being honored with their teenage son. It was then that I looked upon those bib overalls in a different way. That, after all, was what life is all about. It is not what a person wears, but what he or she is. My father and mother were the best example I have ever found to this day for a symbol of love and caring. What more could I want? My parents made me feel that with all those brothers and sisters, I—Kleiner, Kleiner, Kleiner—was the “pick of the litter.” I would imagine that if you ask my brothers and sisters, they feel the same way about themselves. But then, that’s the nature of our parents’ love. We were all special—“the pick of the litter.”

Endnote

* The editor provided the English-language translation of this prayer.

The Gottfried Vetter II Family of McLean County, North Dakota, ca. 1932 (from top left to right): Albert, Hilda, Otto, Elsie, Emil, David, Reuben; (from bottom left to right): Odelia (Tillie), Raymond, Benjamin (Ben), Gottfried II, Estella (Stella), Mary, Arnold, Wilbert, Gottfried III. The youngest of the “litter,” Kenneth, is not born until 1933.
The Gottfried Vetter II Family in Garrison, McLean County, North Dakota, ca. 1950 (from top left to right): Albert, Otto, Elsie, Emil, David, Reuben, Hilda, Arnold, Wilbert; (from bottom left to right): Gottfried III, Raymond, Odelia (Tillie), Mary, Gottfried II, Benjamin (Ben), Estella (Stella), Kenneth.

Immigrants Gottfried Vetter II (1884-1952) and Maria (Hummel) Vetter (1889-1955) in Garrison, McLean County, North Dakota, 1943.