Early Days of South Dakota

Part IV

The Dry Years

One of the toughest years was 1890. It was a total failure. It was so dry that most of the seed did not come up. And then the settlers (especially the newcomers) started to lose their farms.

By Daniel D. Opp

Calvin Opp taking an oil can to oil a few parts of an early binder, later commonly replaced by the pull-type and self-propelled swathers. Earlier, the binder replaced the horse-pulled header. This photo was taken during war years of early 1940s.
In the first three parts of Early Days in South Dakota, Daniel D. Opp vividly describes his own joy and frustrations as he arrived as a boy at the vast prairies of Dakota Territory in the 1880s.

In this final installment of the series, Opp records some of the despair he and others felt during the traumatic 1890s:

**VIII**

As I have previously mentioned, in 1886 we had very good times. However, we know that after good years, poor crops usually follow. That was the case the ensuing year.

In 1888, many of the first settlers, who had no horses, bought some. No longer did they have to hitch an ox team to the hayrake or sled to drive to church, as they once had had to do. But horses were high, from $400 to $500 per team.

Those who could pay for them were fortunate, but many were not in a position to do so and could only pay one-half of the purchase price, depending more or less on the security they could offer. If the horse dealer agreed to it, then they not only took the horses, but also the proved up pre-emption claims, 160 acres of land, into the mortgage, the papers running from one to two years.

The year 1889 produced little in crops. Prices were low, as they are at the present time [Opp wrote this journal during the drought-filled 1930s], and the debts for horses and other items often could not be paid. The creditor had to be satisfied with the interest and such part of the principal as the farmer could pay.

We now pass over the year 1890. The winter was dry and cold, with only a little snow. We did not have many cattle to feed, and our work was quickly done. Whenever we wanted a little enjoyment, we hitched up a pair of three- or four-year-old oxen, which were broken for driving. They were quite wild and had to be caught and trained, which we enjoyed immensely.

Since I have told about the training of steers, I will relate about a true event, which happened at that time east of Leola:

A farmer of advanced years and

Opp Continued on Page 14
Opp Saga
Continued

They were ready to go, and they went much faster than they had expected. The steer made a mighty jump and dragged his teammate with him until John finally halted everyone, hastening to his father to release him from the yoke.

“No, no,” replied the father. “Release the steer first. I will lie perfectly still.”

Similar events like that happened quite frequently.

But now to come back to my subject again. Spring came as usual, and everyone helped put in the seed. Everyone tried to put as much as possible into the ground, for all were confident that we would get a better crop than in the previous year.

But the spring, like the winter, was dry. Most of the seed did not come up. The breaking up of the land had to be discontinued on account of the drought. There would have been no object continuing the work, because the flax could not have come up for it just would not rain.

Thus it was the entire summer. One day like the other. Nothing but hot winds. And the heat was almost unendurable.

As a result, of course, everything dried up. The year 1890 was a total failure.

Many farmers received neither wheat nor potatoes. For the first settlers, it was not quite so serious, for some of them had several head of cattle to sell. The price was ridiculously low, but the necessities of life were also low.

It was hard for those who had just settled here a year or two earlier—and for two years had no crop.

Many men walked 150 miles to look for work. But usually there were more workers than work. They were advised, however, to remain and that the other workers would be changed so that all might earn a little. Yet after three days, when it was their turn again, they had nothing left of what they had earned, because what they had earned just about covered their board bill. They worked for a big threshing outfit.

Despondent and discouraged, they returned home to their families, who for some time had been without bread.

Compared to the present, those really were hard times. The present times are not so bad that we have to go hungry, for we have always had enough to eat, only we cannot do as we would like to.

IX

In 1890, the poverty of many people was so great that it cannot be described. In the fall, the creditors demanded their money, but since most of them did not have any, they took away all they had. The horse dealers also demanded their money or else what they had pawned.

After much begging and pleading, an extension was given on the condition that another great quarter of land was placed in the mortgage, or, sometimes, even the entire property which the debtor possessed.

It actually happened that a pair of horses was sold, on which the debtor had paid nearly the full amount. The horse dealer not only took the horses away from him, but also two quarter sections of

Sometimes the harvests were good. Sometimes they were bad.
Roy Spitzer on tractor.
Opp Saga
Continued

Children of Daniel D. and Katherina Opp

By Terry Ulrich

Daniel and Katherina Opp's children were Emil D. Opp (1894-1964), married to Elizabeth Pierce; Christina Opp (born in 1896), married to Walter Pischke, and living in Robbinsdale, Minnesota; Julius D. Opp (1897-1967), married to Kate Burckhard, lived in Leola, South Dakota; Magdalena Opp (born in 1900), married Earl Mewing, and resides in Aberdeen, South Dakota; Ida Opp (1903-1979), married Harold Baumgartner, lived in Denver, Colorado; Reinhold Opp (1906-1910); Helen Esther Opp (1911-1985), married Emanuel Lehr, and resided in Hosmer, South Dakota.

Those contributing photographs for the four-part series were Reinhold and Claudia Retzer, Calvin Opp, Selma Lapp, Bill and Bertha Job, Helen Lehr, and Terry Ulrich. (Helen Lehr died in April of this year.)

At that time, many provisions—such as corn, flour, and clothing—were sent for the poor people from the southern parts of the state. But the poor received the least of it. Those who were best provided, who talk big everywhere in the world, they were the ones who were in the front rank and took the best away, while the poor and timid had to stand in the rear and look on.

In those days, there were prosperous, yes, even rich, people in the old home in South Russia, to whom the poor relatives here in America appealed in their distress. But their appeal died away without being heard. Yet not all, for some replied and said: 'Why did you not stay in Russia? You sought something better, and now see to it how you get along.'

By the same token, when the distress later was so great in Russia, and they requested help from the Americans, we did not

Roy Spitzer (left) pitching bundles into header box. In the 1950s, (right) these early pull-type combines replaced the old threshing machines.
Claudia Opp Retzer (LEFT) milking the cows in 1959. All the dairy cows had their own names; they were like pets. The first day the Retzers moved in a new barn (after the old barn had burned, and after they had been without one for about a year), all the cows came down to the closest fence by themselves. Every one of them was keenly interested in the new structure. It seemed as if they were moo-oo-st happy to have their very own barn again! (RIGHT) Daughter Sandy Retzer feeding a lamb in 1957.

think about their negative words and letters, but helped them to the best of their abilities, rendering good for evil and saving thousands in Russia from starvation by our help. In a proverb it is said, "Much can be forgiven, but not forgotten."

To all our misery another dread was added that fall, namely the report that the Sioux had broken out to massacre the white settlers.

That, naturally, caused great confusion, especially among the people living near the Missouri River, close to where the Indians lived. Hundreds left their homes with their children and all they possessed, fleeing in wagons to Eureka.

It was during the last days of November, at a time when many had slaughtered their hogs. Reports were circulated that many of the fugitives threw all of their meat, and even their flour, into wells so that it would not fall into the hands of the Sioux.

It was even reported that a family lost one of its children, who had fallen from the wagon in their flight, and although the mother begged and pleaded with her husband to turn back and save the child, the husband in his fright whipped up the horses and cried: "Forward, forward! Better lose one than all!"

(But I have my doubts that such a story is true.)

Many sent their women and children from Eureka by train to Aberdeen, while the men remained at home and awaited the things that were to come.

I also was on guard at home for the nights with my own.

In reality, there was not much to the matter. After the leader, Chief Sitting Bull, along with seven of his followers, had been killed by our soldiers at Standing Rock on December 15, 1890, the 7th Cavalry had only a short combat on December 28th at Wounded Knee, at which time the Indians were defeated and the war was over.

The Christmas holidays were a rather quiet and miserable affair, for as we did not live in luxury like so many of the present day, we entered the new year of 1891 with a heavy heart, wondering what it would have in store for us.

Thus we lived into the winter, and heavy frost held nature in bonds, the cold holding everything in rigid lifelessness. Nature mourned and the white snow seemed to enfold the corpse like eternal slumber.

Opp Continued on Page 18
Opp Saga
Continued

But when in spring the sun ascended and the balmy winds blew, when the lifegiver sent his warm rays over the hills and valleys, then the fetters of frost dissolved and the warmth of life penetrated man and beast, and, yes, even the depths of the earth, quickening the roots to new life. Grass and blossoms sprouted forth as a sign of hopeful fertility. All that had breath lived and moved and rejoiced in life. Even the songs of the feathered songsters arose again in tunes of jubilation to the creator.

That spring, many a farmer had no seed, and so the county commissioners at the time were compelled to buy seed wheat and distribute it among the poorest farmers so that they could seed their land.

In the early spring, we had only sufficient moisture in the ground for the seed to come up, but soon it was very dry again. Hope for a good crop faded.

But, when the need is greatest, help is nearest.

On the evening of May 21st, we had a soaking rain. From that time on, there was no lack of moisture the entire summer. The weather was favorable so that we harvested a big crop in 1891. That raised the spirits of the farmers considerably. It also rained much in the fall, and the farmers were able to plow all of their land.

The threshing season was prolonged, because there were only a few machines. We finished threshing on the 10th of November and pulled our machine home the same evening.

It was in due time for the next morning we had a real snowstorm, which steadily increased. We had a hard winter before us. That was no agreeable task for us because we had much wheat to haul to town. Frequently, 30 to 40 sleds, loaded with wheat, would be seen, one following the other, on the way to Eureka.

I also went to Eureka every day, if possible, until Christmas. By then, my time was up with Valentine Mettler, for whom I had worked the past year.

I previously mentioned that in 1891 we had a good crop, and that the soil was in good condition for 1898. Due to favorable weather, we also had a good crop in 1892.

That year many "headers" were bought. My father also bought one for $180, although we had eight horses, yet four of them were too young, and so we had to hitch four oxen to the header for the harvesting of the big crop.

Horses were very high at that time. Those who had any took the best of care of them. Every farmer endeavored to have the nicest horses. For that purpose, the best full-blooded stallions of different breeds were bought.

Horse breeding increased to such an extent that by 1915 it had reached the highest point in the northwest.

But what has become of the noble horse on which our fathers greatly prided themselves? Yes, not only the men, but also the feminine gender took pleasure in the proud steeds.

When a man drove into a yard

Neighbors (TOP) moving a hay stack in the 1940s. Hay making (BOTTOM) at Calvin Opp's farm in McPherson County in the summer of 1951.
with a pair of fine horses, and asked the parents for the hand of the daughter of the house, he shortly received their consent. But how they have fallen, the proud steeds, of whom so often some of the great poets have sung in inspired words! They had to surrender their rank to make room for a dead tin box, so that the guides may strut about on good roads. Though if, in spring, the soil is too wet, and the roads too muddy, then the half-starved horses are good enough to do the hard work!

It is a fact that many horses are deprived of the necessary feed so that gasoline can be bought for the gas steed. Yes, it is a deplorable picture when you see some horses at work these days, especially if you remember how faithfully they served the first pioneers.

We will now go back to 1893 and 1894 when we had a small crop, in 1895 a little better, in 1896 and 1897 fairly good crops, but in 1898 a total failure. From 1899 to 1908 and 1909, we had fairly good crops—very good the last two.

Prosperity could readily be observed for wherever one went, new churches and schools were built. In the farmyards were to be found large homes, barns, and granaries, which were neatly painted either red or white.

Indeed, there was hot competition among the people. Everyone tried to outdo the other. The ascendency of the farmer’s weal became noticeable in industry everywhere. Cattle breeds were improved by full-blooded breeds where cream could be sold at a good price. From time to time, more corn was planted and more hogs were raised. It truly could be called mixed farming. The farmer was no longer entirely dependent on wheat.

A failure as we had in 1911 did not have any effect. From that time on, we had fairly good crops so that, whatever the price, many farmers not only became prosperous but attained riches as well.

Out of that wild prairie a home and a land had been created, in which milk and honey flowed. The prairie states tasted success up to the calamitous war of 1914-1918. At that time, America coveted honors, which, however, left a sour taste in the mouth. But that was not enough. The hypocritical prohibition was forced upon the neck of a free people and country, putting the stamp of hypocrisy upon honest citizens.

Other problems emerged. Business stagnated. The entire nation was brought to the brink of ruin. To use a nice expression, it was called a “depression.”

That is like pressing a man who is in a situation where he cannot go ahead, and then pressing him with a still harder kick from the rear. Yet there are people who look upon “prohibition” as progress for our nation. Indeed, it would be laughable if it were not so sad.

Before we come to a close, I want to say that much has been written lately about pioneers. But if you want to know who those pioneers are or were, then go to the cemeteries. Most are buried there. As a testimony, you can read their monuments. They did not reach a high age. Only a few attained an age over 50 or, at best, an age of 60. Death was the usual reward for the burden and work they experienced during the 1880s.

Therefore, the Lord has called them away early so that they might not see so many things which they built up by the sweat of their brow now trodden under foot. Yes, they have gone to their reward, but they still live in the memory of those who knew and have sung with them:

Of the days were dark and dreary,
On the long pilgrimage of life,
By all the grief made faint and weary
And many a heartache, caused by strife.
They have passed on through tribulation,
And the time of distress is o’er,
To the Lord be praise and adoration,
Who was their Helper evermore.