

# Seventeen Children In Family: A Very Special Childhood

Ida Hagel had a very special childhood. She was one of those fortunate ones to come from a very large family—17 children in all. There are all kinds of humorous and unique incidents which occur, almost routinely, in such a large family; that was the case with Mrs. Hagel. She was one of the youngest children of Karl J. and Christina Bertsch, who once farmed about eight miles south of Venturia, North Dakota. Mrs. Hagel's childhood was so special that she recently completed a beautiful yellow and white quilt commemorating her parents, brothers and sisters.

The quilt, which took two winters to finish, consists of a total of 35 blocks. There is a block for each brother and sister, and also a block for her parents. Since it was a large family, the quilt is large too—108 inches by 118 inches. "Queen-sized," explains Mrs. Hagel.

Eighteen of the 35 blocks feature intricate needlework, giving the name

of the person, his or her spouse's name, and their children's names. Each block also has the design of the state bird of the state the brother or sister lives in, and also a design depicting his or her career. For example, one of her brothers is a rancher. The block depicting him includes a design of cows Mrs. Hagel has stitched. Another sister is a nurse's aid, and so that block includes a hospital scene. Another brother is in the U.S. Air Force, and so naturally the design describing his vocation is that of an airplane.

**S**ixty-two grandchildren are listed in the family quilt. "I would have had a problem if each one would have also had 17 children," laughed Mrs. Hagel.

Mrs. Hagel, who lives on a beautiful farm about nine miles west of Wishek,

North Dakota, said she likes to sew. Some evenings she sat working on the family quilt from 6 p.m. to midnight. She doesn't do much quilting in the summer-time, she added.

The Hagels raised five children, four girls and one boy. Their son, who had muscular dystrophy, died when he was 24 years old. They have another daughter who also has muscular dystrophy.

About her own childhood, Mrs. Hagel recalls several humorous experiences. One was the family had a problem on Sundays when it was time to go to church—they didn't have room for everyone in the car. The following excerpt is from an old article which appeared in the Wishek Star:

Christmas time was the only time they all went to church together. There were 17 children in the family, and with the parents, 19 were too many to get into the '24 Chevrolet or the bobsled. So the father and four or five



Families ran large in numbers at the turn of the century. But it was fun belonging to a big family, recall the children of Karl and Christina Bertsch. The Bertsches farmed about seven miles south of Vosturia, a small town near Ashley, North Dakota. The family had this photograph taken in 1938.

Front row (left to right): Martha (Mrs. Vernon Kramer) of Wishek, N.D.; Norman of Fargo, N.D.; Karl Bertsch; Leonard of Galthersburg, Md.; Christina Bertsch; Jonathon of Huron, S.D.; Ida (Mrs. Edwin Hagel) of Wishek, N.D.;

Second row: Hulda (Mrs. Pete Hagel) of Wishek, N.D.; Deborah (Mrs. Alvin Krause) of Lodi, Calif.—deceased; David of Lodi, Calif.; Esther (Mrs. August Arlt) of Ipswich, S.D.; Emma (Mrs. Alfred Wangen) of Boise, Idaho; Lydia (Mrs. Gust Zimmerman) of Lodi, Calif.;

Third row: Gideon of Meridian, Idaho; Andrew of McLaughlin, S.D.; Asoph of Lodi, Calif.; Aaron of Fergus Falls, Minnesota; Timothy of Lodi, Calif.—deceased; and Martin Bertsch of Ashley, N.D.



Displaying a family quilt she made telling about the 17 children of the Karl and Christina Bertsch family is Ida Hagel. Mrs. Hagel and her husband, Edwin, live on a farm west of Wishek, North Dakota. The quilt lists each family member, his or her spouse's name, the names of their

children, and the family member's profession. Illustrations depict the state where the person lives along with other noteworthy characteristics. The quilt's colors are light yellow and white.

of the children set out early, maybe half to three quarters of an hour, to walk the two miles to church. "Dad always walked," one of the older daughters said, "so that as many as possible could ride to church." For church services other than at Christmas time the children took turns staying home. The father wore a sheepskin coat and scarf without which he never ventured out of doors in the wintertime.

Hulda Hagel, a sister of Ida Hagel, recalls memories of Christmas at home with a big family. Rising at 6:30 a.m., it was up to her and her sisters to

get the little ones dressed and the dishes done. One of the older brothers, either Andrew or Martin, whichever one stayed behind to drive the car or harness the team, helped get the children ready. Along one wall was a long bench, and it was here that Andrew, like a second mother, lined up the children, or placed in a row underneath, all the shoes. The mother never left the house without tidying up even to straightening the chairs in their places. She was the last one to leave the house. By the time they reached the church in the car, or more often by bobsled, those who had gone

afoot were warmed up and waiting and all 19 filed into the church to fill two rows.

On Christmas eve all of the children, all except the very little ones, even the big boys, spoke pieces. Mrs. Bertsch had taught some of them German pieces. After receiving their Christmas bags of candy and calling out Merry Christmases, the family hurried home.

Church was the Baptist Bertsch-Station Church, so-called because at least

Leonard Bertsch loved to ride his horse when he was a boy. Note the old car parked under tree. Beside it is a hand-crank washing machine.



The farm produced nearly all the main food items. In those days, a large family was often an economic asset, rather than a liability: there were more people to work, thus enabling bigger projects to be accomplished. Ida Hagel said that one of her uncles, who lived in Canada, had 21 children.



PHOTO AT LEFT: Karl and Christina Bertsch on a sunny afternoon. One of their daughters recalls that the two enjoyed making Christmas-time fun-filled occasions. Mrs. Bertsch would fix special bags of candy, fruit and nuts for each child.

ABOVE PHOTO: All the children slept in one bedroom furnished with five beds. In the winter-time, it never seemed to get too cold—there were too many sharing a bed!



The Bertsch family has had family reunions throughout the years. The photo above was taken in 1956 at the time of Karl and Christina Bertsch's 50th wedding anniversary.

## “We Children Always Looked Forward to Christmas”

15 Bertsch families made up the group. “It was nearly all Bertsches,” Hulda Hagel said. The church, located seven miles south of Venturia at the South Dakota line, is closed. The Pastor was the Rev. Frederick Alf.

The children all looked forward to Christmas although it was a meager one in the way of material things. There were no new Christmas dresses or suits, only those worn for Sunday best. There was no tree and there were no real gifts. Upon her return home on Christmas eve, Mrs. Bertsch went alone into her bedroom, pulled out a box from under the bed, and brought each child a sack containing nuts, a little candy, maybe an apple, and a cookie or two which the girls and their mother had baked the day before. The sacks were treasured and hidden in secret places, to be looked into often and a “goodie” picked out. In a short while Mrs. Bertsch called, “Get ready for bed” and they went up to a one-room bedroom furnished with five

beds. It wasn't too cold; there were too many sharing a bed!

The family rose early Christmas Day. There were the chores to do and always the floors must be scrubbed on Sundays or special days before the family left for church. The father gave each child money to put in the collection, even if it were only a penny. They returned home to a pork dinner, they butchered their own, maybe with dumplings or strudel or nipfala, and there was always plenty. “Mother or Father asked the blessing,” said Hulda Hagel.

It's because of memories like those that made Ida Hagel decide she just had to make a family quilt. It was the first quilt she had ever pieced together, too. After the quilt was completed, one of her brothers offered to buy it for \$175! Not too bad an offer for a beginning quilt-maker, she said with a laugh. ■