

Growing Up On The

Christ Schumacher, 91, shares boyhood experiences.



The 91-year-old retired farmer has had a full, busy, happy life. Christ Schumacher of Aberdeen, South Dakota has been photographed for LIFE Magazine, has had a South Dakota governor officially declare October 27, 1976 to be Christ Schumacher Day (his birthday), and has had the satisfaction of participating in the growth of the Dakota heartland.

The secret of his longevity? It's a question the wise, patriarchal gentleman is often asked, to which he modestly replies: "There's no secret, actually. Just follow God. Then you'll live a good life." Consequently, Schumacher likes life. It doesn't help to complain, he adds.

Throughout his 91 years, he has experienced a lot of living. He was born in Gluecktal, South Russia in 1886, and was three years old when he accompanied his parents, brothers and sisters to the New World—the vast, unclaimed Dakota Territory.

His recollections of that experience contribute additional insights to the pioneer period of this region. Like other struggling-immigrating families, the Schumachers worked hard—and survived.

"My father—his name was Wilhelm—came right away to McPherson County, and homesteaded three land claims between Eureka and Leola, South Dakota," Schumacher explained. He remembers his parents often talking about Russia. "The journey across the Atlantic took about two weeks. Schumacher was only three years old at the time of the crossing, and so he does not recall the difficulties of the long voyage—the painful Russian farewells, the Atlantic crossing, the trek from the New York harbor to the Dakota hinterland. His

Prairie

parents, three older brothers, and five older sisters immigrated with a group of other families from Gluektal. "My father was 40 years old at the time he left Russia, older than most of the other men in the group. The main reason we left Russia was my two older brothers were 18 and 16 years old—the age when they would soon be drafted into the Russian army. My father didn't want that to happen. Another reason we left was because the population of South Russia was increasing. My parents, older brothers and sisters thought there would be more opportunity in the Dakotas. Those were some of the reasons we left," Schumacher said.

When they finally arrived, one of the first things they did was to build a sod house. "It was a big sod house," he recalls, with a kitchen and two rooms used for sleeping quarters. The sod barn was about the same length as the house and was attached to the house's west side. The door and windows faced south, to utilize the warmth from the winter sun. "The windows were small, and didn't let in much light—or cold, in the winters. The walls were thick—about three feet," he said.

His father told him it took quite a while to build. First, they had to break up the sod with a plow, and then cut it up with a spade so it could be handled. Afterwards, lumber beams were placed on top for the roof. His father and older brothers trekked to the Missouri River to get smaller trees to use for rafters. Sod was then put over the rafters to complete the roof. The last step was to "plaster the walls—inside and outside—with a combination of clay, which we dug up, and straw.



Schumacher holds August 2, 1937 issue of LIFE Magazine which contained photograph of his father, Wilhelm Schumacher (wearing hat). Christ Schumacher is shown at top of page, looking at sheep grazing on the prairie.

The following is quoted from the article: "(Wilhelm Schumacher) chose his land, filed his claim and built himself a sod house with a shiplap finish inside. His first stove was of sod and stone built in the ground. His first farm tools were a yoke of oxen, a secondhand wagon, and a breaking plow bought on credit. His first trip to church services at a neighbor's house was made on a stoneboat driven by oxen . . ."

The article continues: "Forty-five years ago, Eureka was the 'wheat capital of the world.' At the farthest end of the new Chicago, Milwaukee & St. Paul Railroad, it became the funnel into which the wheat fields of the Dakotas emptied . . . So prosperous was their community that 32 commission houses had agents there to buy in the grain crop. With 42 grain elevators handling 4,000,000 bushels a year, Eureka became Milwaukee's most profitable station, with earnings of \$100,000 a month. Railroad expansion soon sapped the little city's trade, but it remains a thriving wheat community."



Birthday party in early 1950s:

First row: Mary Heupel (in wedding picture), Magdalena Haas, Barbara Koerner, Alice Klooz, Paulna Brandner, Emma Meier, Anna Klooz, Anna Rath.

Back row: Ida Schumacher, Christ Schumacher, August Heupel, Jacob Haas, Adolph Koerner, Reinhold Klooz, John Brandner, Karl Meier, Edwin Klooz, and Jacob Rath.

We smeared it on everything. When I was a little older, I remember my father had me re-plaster the house many times. It took about a week each time," Schumacher said.

In those days, children worked as early as possible, starting with small chores around the house. Almost immediately when the Schumachers arrived in Dakota Territory, his three older brothers and five older sisters were hired out to other farmers who had settled here earlier. The girls worked in the houses and the boys on the fields.

When Christ became older—about 13 years old—he also worked with the threshing crews. He and the others cut the wheat down with scythes, put the

grain up in stacks, pulled two of the stacks together, and then pitched the bundle onto a wagon. "It was hard work," Christ said, "but we just expected it to be hard work. It had to be done, and so there was no reason to complain about it. We had no binders in those days."

Since his father was a carpenter in Russia, there were new things for him to learn about farming—especially on the Dakota prairie. At times it was very difficult. Many men became discouraged, and so did the women. It was lonely, and sometimes frighten-

ing—especially during times of sickness.

His father grew wheat, barley and oats. Soon after he arrived in the Dakotas, a man helped him out by giving him two sheep. "From that time on, we always had sheep on the farm," said Christ. "Mother spun the wool, and used it for such items as socks and gloves. She knitted everything. I always thought," he continued, "that lamb was the best meat on the farm. We would butcher a yearling, and it would last about a week. Then we'd butcher another."

Most people stored food in holes about seven or eight feet deep. The holes were then covered with rafters and then with sod. Some were attached

to the house while others were a distance away. But it was difficult to store meat during the warmer months. "If we butchered a chicken," Christ added, "we had to make sure we used it all the next day."

For the young pioneer children, it was a rare treat to go to town. "My father would go to Eureka once a week, usually on Saturday," Christ said, "but I didn't go that often until I was older. I remember the first time I went to town—to Eureka—was on the fourth of July. It was an exciting time. My father gave me a quarter, but I



Weddings were always the big social event of the year, and the festivities often involved a whole days' time. The wedding ceremony itself was usually in the bride's parents' house. After the ceremony, there often was a barn dance. The wedding picture above is of Christ Schumacher's first wife's sister, Mary Klooz and August Heupel. They later farmed west of Leola, South Dakota.



Ida Schumacher serves husband Christ Schumacher a cup of coffee in their dining room. They both have experienced, during their lives, big changes in the way of food preparation.

spent only 15 cents. Since there were no restaurants (or because we didn't want to spend any money in a restaurant), we brought our own lunch. But I do recall spending five cents to buy a mixed drink. It was lemonade and it tasted real good. (Mrs. Schumacher added that the lemonade was often referred to, in German, as "Juliwasser," or "July water.")

It was always an exciting time when we went to Eureka. "We would get up early in the morning and come home late during the evening." It was a treat because the children rarely ever left the farm. Church services, for example, were held at home or at a neighbor's house. So whenever an opportunity arose to go visiting, shopping, or to church at a neighbor's farm, it was a real family milestone.

"My father didn't have a buggy,"

Christ said, "and so whenever we had to do any traveling, he put a board on the rake so that about five or six people could ride on it. The others had to walk. It was great fun to ride on the rake for about three or four miles, going to the neighbor's house to have church services. About the only time we would go to the Lutheran church in Eureka was at harvest festival or mission festival times. Other times we went to a neighbor's house for church."

The only formal education the young Christ ever received was three months at an English-speaking school. "I never felt bad about not being able to go to school," Schumacher explained. "I had a good home, and good parents. They taught me many of the things I needed to know."

As a struggling pioneer family, there was no money for toys for the children. And besides, there were few toys—if any—to buy! Schumacher recalls that, as a boy, his parents would help him make horses and cows which were cut

out of paper. Those were the kinds of toys with which Christ and Jacob, his older brother by two years, would often play.

In 1909, when Christ was 24, he married Christina Klooz. Christina was also born in Russia, and came to the Dakota Territory when she was three years old. When they were married, neighbors helped them build their house and barn, located on a farm not far from Christ's father. Seven teams (with two horses in a team) went to Eureka to bring back the lumber.

Christina died in 1942, and Schumacher married Ida Rath Fischer in 1946. The couple now lives in a charming house in Aberdeen, South Dakota, surrounded by pleasant memories of full and productive lives. Mrs. Schumacher served us a delicious lunch of various cookies, bars and coffee as we talked about the past—the pioneer days of this beautiful Dakota heartland. One thought was suggested by both at several different times: even though there were periods of great difficulties, there were periods of great joy too—with people living simpler lives, perhaps, but also with people helping each other when assistance was needed. ■