The following are excerpts from a family history about the Weesner family, who settled near Ashley in the 1880s. It is written by Leona Neu of Ashley.

Andreas Weesner and his wife, Magdalena Stepper, were the parents of a son, Jakob, born September 12, 1886, at Berezina, South Russia. He was baptized in the Lutheran faith on September 18, and confirmed in Kotsiu, South Russia. All history of their life in Russia has not been found or recorded. They were also the parents of Dorothea, who married a Hasst; Andreas, who married a Miss Zelker; Frederick, who married Barbara Prophet; Catherine, married Fred Blagau. No records are known of these families except that Frederick had a son, Jacob, who was married to Carolina Bierstedt and were the parents of Fred and Robert Weessner of Ashley. Jacob and Carolina were residents of Ashley at the time of their passing.

From what we know, Andreas S. died when his son, Jakob, the grandfather of Leona Neu, was three years old. His older brother took him in and provided for him until Jakob was 15. From then on he had to fend for himself. He worked for a family in the Berezina area. No free time was allowed to working people. He told us that in order to keep busy he had to move rock piles from one place to another. His sleeping quarters were in the cattle shelter among the stalls to keep watch over the horses and prevent stealing. In the morning, the horses had come so close that they had dirtied Jakob's bed. His lot in life was hard as a youngster.

On January 28, 1886, he married Ann Maria Bierstedt, the daughter of Frederick Bierstedt and Elizabeth Klamens. She was born in Berezina, South Russia, January 19, 1886 and baptized the day following her birth. Confirmation day was Palm Sunday, April 10, 1883 at Kotsiu. Other members in her family were Carolina, Elizabeth, Frederick, Jacob, Samuel and Christoph.

Ann Maria liked nice clothes, and since the family was large she went to work for a wealthy family in the village of Eilegenh. There she learned to cook and entertain more elegantly—and could get better clothes. After living in America she was often called upon to be the personal attendant for the brides in her neighborhood—and her experiences helped her now.

After a few months of married life, Jakob Weesner and his wife, Anna Maria, left their families and homeland behind and started for the "Promised Land" in America. Arriving April 9, 1889, their destination was Ellendale, North Dakota.

They arrived at Ellendale with few belongings. They purchased a wagon and supplies, a horse and an ox. Some of the relatives, who had arrived earlier, had homesteaded in McIntosh County. So that was where they went. They traveled about 30 miles west across the hill. A spot near Coldwater Lake was a stopping place known as the Saxon Ranch. The Weesners went further northwest about three miles where they settled on a quarter of land known as the Bierstedt Ranch. The Weesners built a family home and a barn on the property.

The family lived in a large, wooden, rectangular house. The house had three bedrooms upstairs. The family lived in the downstairs rooms. The family occupied the roof by the Edwin Neu family (Leona's sister, Estella). A summer kitchen was built west of the house. It had two large rooms. One was the cooking area and the other was the dining area.

The use of a second house was to keep the big house cool and clean in the summer since the cook stove was the only means of heat for cooking and baking, summer and winter. A bench set outdoors with a washtub and towels for the fieldworkers to wash up before mealtime. The older girls had their own food preparation while the younger children had to gather the fuel for the stove. This could be cow droppings ('melted'), wood scraps, corn cobs, or whatever could be found that burned.

Humble Beginnings
Story of a German-Russian pioneer family

Farm home of the Jakob Weesner family. This is now the home of Edwin and Estella (Weesner) Neu.
Jacob J. and corn cultivator.

hills, protected by a fence.

JACOB J. GREW up as the only boy in the family and was catered to by his sisters—that is until little Frederick came along. In 1917, an epidemic of diphtheria hit close and several of the children became sick again. A doctor was called when the home remedies would no longer help, but it was too late. Little Frederick died in his mother’s arms. She prepared the little boy’s body for burial while Grandfather went to town to make funeral arrangements and buy a coffin. The family was quarantined for several weeks. At the day of the funeral, the parents and family members living at home could not enter the church but had to stay in the entry. Those married and not living at home could enter for the funeral. The family dog also showed his grief and loneliness; he stayed with the coffin until it was taken away for burial.

Grandfather Woesner told us that one time when a group of New Year’s well-wishers came to their home, one man became so excited about the occasion that when it came to shoot his shotgun into the air, he instead held the gun up to the window and shot into the bedroom wall! The shot just missed Grandpa’s feet as he was getting up to let the group into the house for a treat. The hole could still be seen a few years ago when Edwin and Estella lived in the house.

Dad Jacob J. never said much about his youth. His school years ended after the fifth grade. Until then he attended Beresina School #3, about two miles northeast of the farm. Jacob J. was born Aug. 18, 1902 at the farm home and was baptized Sept. 14, 1902 by Pastor A. Meyries with Johannes Maier, Johannes Bertsch and Johanna Hein as sponsors. Custom was to have two men and one woman as sponsors for a boy and two women and one man for a baby girl. He was confirmed April 1, 1917 by Pastor H. Lechner who served the church at that time. It was Lechner’s first parish.

IN 1920, WHEN Jacob J. was a young man, he met Marie Sackmann. The occasion was when about 1,500 people gathered in Ashley to attend a promotional event—an airplane was scheduled to land there. Jacob J. gathered enough courage to ask Marie if he could take her home. So the romance began.

Marie was the daughter of Andreas Sackmann and Karolina Schlabz. Andreas Sackmann was born December 16, 1862 at Wittenburg, South Russia. His parents were Johannes Sackmann and Katherina Necker. Andreas Sackmann and Karolina Schlabz were married February 19, 1884. Karolina, the daughter of Jacob Schlabz and Susanna Dobler, was born February 5, 1863 at Beresina, South Russia. She grew up in Kulm, South Russia.

In 1891, they came to America and took up claim 11 miles east and south of Ashley (in Jewell District) and began farming. In 1910, when Marie was six, they moved to Ashley where Grandfather Sackmann operated a harness and shoe repair shop. He operated it until June 1922 when he traded it and the building to G.D. Grosz for land. The shop was located where the present Coast to Coast store is now.

Grandmother Sackmann liked to travel. Every so often she would go along with her sons and daughters for brief visits to the farm which she loved. Sometimes she became so homesick for the farm that she would take the train to the upstairs rooms in the Ashley home. The pastor happened to be there for dinner. Schleder refused to go any further, and so the couple were married there while the guests and friends were waiting at the church. Some called to ask what had happened to the couple. Young Bertha Woesner answered, "It’s all over!" (Das ist alles vorbei!) Being overheard by a sister of Frederica, the child was scolded for giving out the information.

Mom Marie was born on a farm in Jewell district, which is now owned by Andrew Sackmann. It then had a sod house which consisted of two large rooms as bedrooms, with a lean-to for the kitchen and parlor. The home was heated by the cook stove in the kitchen. Since the bedrooms were not heated, the feather covers were very comfortable on winter nights.

The sod houses were made of earth cut into squares with a spade and then dug up and laid in tiers. The walls were about two feet thick. The few windows were small, maybe two feet square, and then framed with wood. The sod blocks were piled up to the ceiling or roof. The roof beams were laid across the top of the blocks, and the roof boards had a slight pitch (higher in the center). These were also covered with sod. Later, wood was used for shingling the roofs. The sod walls were then plastered over with a clay soil (gumbo) mixed with water and straw and smeared over the sod blocks by hand. This had to be done every year as it washed off easily from rain and snow. The houses were cool in summer and warm in winter. The floors at first were the earth, packed and swept smooth. Later, wood floors were put in and painted, but the paint wore off in the areas most used. The popular colors were grey or orange. The inside walls were whitewashed with a solution of calcimine which was brushed over the plaster. It made it look white and clean. For variation, bluing, used for washing, was added to the calcimine for a light blue tint. The house may have been divided into two rooms with a sod wall for a partition. The oven was built into the dividing wall so that it heated both rooms. For more rooms, a lean-to was added. This was three walls with a slanted room added to the outside walls. Sometimes squares were made of clay, straw and water. These blocks were dried in the sun and then laid in tiers.

We are told that they were planning to have their wedding at Zion I, near the Woesner farm home. On their way to the church, they stopped at the Woesner home. The pastor happened to be there for dinner. Schleder refused to go any further, and so the couple were married there while the guests and friends were waiting at the church. Some called to ask what had happened to the couple. Young Bertha Woesner answered, "It’s all over!" (Das ist alles vorbei!) Being overheard by a sister of Frederica, the child was scolded for giving out the information.

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Part II will appear in the Winter 1980 issue.