



# Backgrounds

## Part I

# Humble Beginnings

Story of a German-Russian pioneer family

The following are excerpts from a family history about the Woesznors who settled near Ashley in the 1890s. It is written by Leona Neu of Ashley.

Andreas Woeszner and his wife, Magdalena Stepper, were the parents of a son, Jakob, born September 12, 1866 at Beresina, South Russia. He was baptized in the Lutheran faith on September 18 and confirmed in Klostiz, 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 Heist; Andreas, who married a Miss Zelker; Fredrich, who married Barbara Prophet; Catherina, who married Fred Beglau. No records are known of these families except that Fredrich had a son, Jacob, who was married to Carolina Biederstadt and were the parents of Fred and Robert Woeszner of Ashley. Jacob and Carolina were residents of Ashley at the time of their passing.

they had dirtied Jakob's bed. His lot in life was hard as a youngster.

ON JANUARY 28, 1890, he married Anna Maria Biederstadt, the daughter of Frederich Biederstadt and Elizabeth Klamens. She was born in Beresina, South Russia, January 20, 1868 and baptized the day following her birth. Confirmation day was Palm Sunday, April 10, 1883 at Klostiz. Other members in her family were Karolina, Elizabeth, Frederich, Jacob, Samuel and Christoph.

Anna Maria liked nice clothes, and since the family was large she went to work for a wealthy family in the village of Eigenheim. 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 Woeszner and his wife, Anna Maria, left their families and homeland behind and started for the "Promised Land" in America. Arriving April 9, 1890, 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 also went. They traveled about 30 miles west across the hills. A spot near Coldwater Lake was a stopping place known as the Basye Ranch. The Woesznors went farther northwest about three miles where they settled on a quarter of land (Township 130, Range 67, Section 31 per deed). They were looking for land with rocks from which to build their first home. However, until they were ready to build, a

hole was dug and the wagon box was turned upside down on the hole for shelter. It was all prairie as far as the eye could see. We cannot imagine the courage it took to live outdoors in the month of April in North Dakota.

Living nearby was a relative, William Beglau, whose second wife was a sister-in-law of Jacob Woeszner. He helped them settle and make a home there. Beglau came to America earlier. He was married to ——— Fregien. She died and left two girls; they also died when very young. He then married a widow, (his sister-in-law) the former Mrs. Andreas Woeszner, brother of Jakob.

ON AUGUST 19, 1890 their first child was born. They named her Johanna. Christine was born April 26, 1892; Jacob on March 2, 1894 and Frederich on June 17, 1896. In 1897, a diphtheria epidemic crossed the country and the Woesznors lost three children at that time. Only little Christine survived. The following year, Johanna was born on October 19, 1898, followed by Martha on July 24, 1900, Jacob J. on August 18, 1902, and Bertha on September 20, 1904. After several years, Frederich was born on March 20, 1910. He was a blonde, blue-eyed little boy. The other children had all been dark-haired even though their mother, Anna Maria, had red hair. (Because of her red hair, the Woeszner family in the Old Country had treated her badly.)

They made their home on this place and built up the farm as the years went by. The house was built in 1907. It had a large kitchen, parlor, and two bedrooms which were small. The entry had two doorways—one into the kitchen (which was used daily) and the other led into the parlor. The reason for the latter doorway was that whenever there was a death in the family, the coffin was at the home until the day of the funeral. Thus a big doorway was needed. The house had three bedrooms upstairs. This house is still on the farm occupied 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 was set outdoors with a wash basin and towels for the fieldworkers to wash up before mealtime. The older girls had to do the food preparation while the younger children had to gather the fuel for the stove. This could be cow droppings ("misht"), wood scraps, corn cobs, or whatever could be found that burned.

MANY STORIES COULD have been told about the early days on the prairies, but no one seemed interested enough to listen and record them. All we have now are bits and pieces to put together.

One story was told of how, in the beginning, the family would gather buffalo bones on the prairie, take them to town and

trade them for food supplies. It would take several days to make such a trip. One time it was told that Grandpa Woeszner was gone for several days to get food when the only thing the family had at home to eat was wheat. Grandmother Woeszner browned it, mixed it with water, and called it coffee.

Since there were no older sons in the family, the girls had to help with all the field work or whatever had to be done.

Family portraits were taken to be sent back to families left in the Old Home in South Russia. Some of these pictures we still have to enjoy now. One time Frederich was not about to have his picture taken. So to coax him to pose, they handed him watches and money bags—until his pockets bulged. The older girls were out in the pastures, catching gophers, when they were called home to put on their best dresses and have their picture taken. At another time Jacob fussed because he had to wear knee pants. Most of the pictures were taken by door-to-door photographers. Often, blankets were used for background.

We do not know much about the growing-up years of the Woeszner family. Memories of little Frederich were told of how he used to start saying his prayers at night at the bottom of the stairs—and by the time he got to the "amen," he was at the top and quickly into bed!

Writings, found on the granary walls years later, were almost like a diary telling who had gathered where and the like. Also found on the granary walls were records of grain yields, bushel markings of grain cleaned for spring seeding and the dates when spring work started.

PROVIDING FOR a family in those years took many hours of work. Grandmother Anna Maria would spin all of her own yarn to knit stockings, mittens, caps or whatever else could be made of wool. Her spinning wheel was found years later in the attic of the garage among oil cans and other old items. (I took the spinning wheel to my house, had it repaired and re-finished it. It is now a treasured lamp stand in my home.) Few other belongings which were brought from the old home were kept. A carpenter's plane was among Leona's father's tools.

Grandmother Anna Maria was a very ambitious woman. If anything needed to be done in the house or on the farm, she had the idea to do it, and often did it herself, even if it meant knocking out a hole in the wall for a window. She went to town, got the window frame, and installed it herself. This is how her daughters remembered her best.

Grandpa Woeszner was a kind man with a big heart for everyone. Since the Lutheran church was built about a fourth mile northeast of the farm, the pastor came, left his team of horses and went with the Woeszner family to church. He also had his noon meal (noodle soup was traditional) with the family before going home. The cemetery is still there on the



Farm home of the Jakob Woeszner family. This is now the home of Edwin and Estella (Woeszner) Neu.





Jacob J. and corn cultivator.

hill, 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, another epidemic of diphtheria came along 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 Woeszner 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 house 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 Johannas Maier, Johannas Bertsch and Johanna Hein as sponsors. Custom was to have two men and one woman as sponsors for a baby 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 Schlabsz. Andreas Sackmann was born December 16, 1862 at Wittenburg, South Russia. His parents were Johannes Sackmann and Katherina Necker. Andreas Sackmann and Karolina Schlabsz were married February 19, 1884. Karolina, the daughter of Jacob Schlabsz and Susanna Dobler, was born February 5, 1863 at Beresina, South Russia. She grew up in Kulm, South Russia.

**I**n 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 go to the upstairs rooms in the Ashley home, look to the east towards the farm, and cry. Often she would take the train to Ventura for a day's visit. Since many of the relatives had moved to Montana, she would also go for visits there. Grandpa Andreas and Marie would do the best they could in her absence.

Born to the family were: Christine on August 30, 1884, who married Gottlieb Kessel; and Johannas, born July 14, 1886, and married Magdalina Nagel. After their move to America, Fredricka was born on March 4, 1892. She married Jacob Kessel. Susanna was born November 23, 1894 and died 3½ years later. Jacob was born November 11, 1896 and died at the age of 7. Susanna, who was born August 11, 1899, was raised by the Schulz family and married Fred Fink. Martin was born February 6, 1901 and married Christina Maier. The last child born was Marie on July 18, 1904. She married Jacob J. Woeszner (Leona's parents.)

**SUSANNA WAS** raised by her aunt, Fredricka Schlabsz, who had married Johann Schulz in 1887 but had had no children. On August 27, 1894, while threshing, Johann stepped through the wood on the thresher, caught his leg in the machine and was badly mangled. He was taken to the house but died from the wound. That same year, on December 20, Fredricka married Johann's brother, David. To further ease her heartache, she took the baby daughter of her sister, little Susanna.

On November 21, 1913, while David Schulz was repairing a windmill on a tower, the hired girl went to the windmill to get water. He called down to her not to start the mill, but because of a storm, she could not hear him. When she started the mill, it swung around, throwing David off. He was injured from the fall and was taken into the house nearby (now the home of Milton Schauer near the courthouse in Ashley). Fredricka was called but he could not speak to her. He died shortly afterwards.

**FREDRICKA'S THIRD** marriage was to Andreas Schedler on November 25, 1917.

We are told that they were planning to have their wedding at Zion I, near the Woeszner farm home. On their way to the church, they stopped at the Woeszner home. The pastor happened to be there for dinner. Schedler 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 Woeszner answered, "It's all over!" (Das ist alles vorbei!) Being overheard by a sister of Fredricka, 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.

**Part II will appear in the Winter 1980 issue.**