

# COVER

STORY

## Grandfather With 93 Grandchildren Says It's Good Thing He Likes Kids!

What's it like having 93 grandchildren?

"Well, sometimes it's a good thing I don't hear good," chuckled Joseph Vetter of rural Linton, North Dakota.

Vetter, approaching 80, is one of those rare individuals who combines a dry, quiet sense of humor with every situation in life—along with a good deal of common sense. Neighbors and family often refer to him as the "Patriarch." It is a name rightly deserved. Not only does he provide leadership and guidance to his offspring in the Biblical sense of the word, but he also furnishes unique familiarity to history itself.

"My grandfather was born in 1840," he explains. "We were very close, and

Joseph Vetter with grandchildren (some were not present for this photograph). He has 47 grandsons and 46 granddaughters. Photo was taken July 4, 1975, and he is holding Magdaline, whose birthday is also July 4th.







What was the most revolutionary event Joseph Vetter experienced during his life-time? Vetter thought for a few moments, and then answered: "Clearly, it was the coming of electricity. It changed our lives. It wasn't just electric lights, as most people would think at first. Electric power completely changed the way we lived, the way we farmed."

## Views About Overplanting, Surpluses

he often told about his way of life—both in South Russia and also in the Dakotas when he came here as an immigrant with my father."

Of course, that way of life is very much different from today's. The modern, highly functional farm Vetter lives on today with his son, Ben, and daughter-in-law and their children is a far cry from when it was the homestead of his grandfather and father.

**S**till, in retrospect, the life he led at the turn of the century offered a great deal for individual growth. There were no radios or television sets emitting electronic barriers between himself and his God. The family unit was all-important. Its solidarity, resourcefulness, ambition and intelligence were the difference, sometimes, between life and death.

"As a child, we used to seed our grain by hand, just like my grandfather did when he was a young man. We dragged it with oxen, and used sickles to cut it," said Vetter.

He also remembers making the family's own stove. "It was called a backoven," he said. "We made the oven out of blocks, a mixture of clay and sand. The blocks were brick-sized. We used the same kind of blocks—except they were bigger—to construct buildings. But the backoven, we used only in the summers. In the winters we used a



Vetter has long been a photography buff. In his younger years, he even developed his own film. Many of his pictures are compiled into photo albums, a pictorial record which traces his family's history back to the turn of the century.





Joseph Vetter and Veronica Wangler on their wedding day on October 17, 1921. She wore a dark blue wedding gown, the custom at that time. Joseph met Veronica on October 31, 1912. He and his father and uncle did custom threshing for a neighbor—and Veronica helped with the cooking for the threshing crew. The meals were delicious, and Joseph kept that in mind. Although Veronica did not know it at the time, the best way to Joseph's heart was through his stomach. Years later, he met Veronica again. It was at a play, and she was performing. She was a good actress and singer—and this pleased Joseph very much. In September 1921, he asked her to marry him. She replied: "Why not! You are an organist and I like to sing. So I think we could get along nicely."

cast iron stove, and, of course, dried cow-chips for fuel. As a boy, I remember gathering those cow-chips. There was no timber around for wood, and so there was nothing else except the cow-chips. We had to collect it before rainy weather, of course. It was stored in the sheds."

Vetter was also quite familiar with the production of *mischt*, that old-time German-Russian formula for survival during the incredibly cold winters of the late 1890s and early 1900s. "We hauled out the manure from the barns in the winters—about 20-inch piles of it," continued Vetter. "Then we tramped it down, cut it with spades, and then set it out to dry, then we'd bed the cows down with straw in the barn. The straw would be a part of the manure when we later hauled it out."

When Vetter farmed, he recalls the hay needles in the fields as being a prickly nuisance. The hay needles would penetrate his pants and scratch his legs. His solution was to paint his pants—that kept the needles from coming through.

Joseph met the girl he married on a farm about six miles away from his own farm. On their wedding day, she wore a dark navy blue wedding dress—the custom of that time. During later years, when times grew tough in the drought of the 1930s, she cut up her dress to make dresses for their daughters.

The couple had 13 children. "But we always had enough food. We didn't have to worry in the 1930s," he said. "Of



**PHOTO ABOVE:** The Vettters with their 13 children. Front row (l to r.): Christina (Mrs. Clemens) Gross of Napoleon, N.D.; Veronica and Joseph Vetter; Anna Mary (Mrs. Frank) Fetting of Kintyre, N.D.

Second row: Leo Vetter of Bismarck, N.D.; Adam of Linton, N.D.; Sister Josephine of Hankinson, N.D.; Elizabeth (Mrs. Markus) Wald of Bismarck; August of rural Linton; Wandelin of Linton.

Third row: Benjamin of Linton; Valentine of Bismarck; Tony of Bowman, N.D.; John of Kintyre; and Joseph of Linton. Photo was taken about 1960. Mrs. Vetter died in 1963.

**AT RIGHT:** Photo of St. Joseph's Catholic Church in 1916, which was center for worship of the rural community east of Linton, N.D. On Nov. 3, 1954 the church burned down. It was a sad occasion for the small congregation. Joseph Vetter was in Linton at the time of the fire. He borrowed a friend's car so that he could rush to the church. He was so shaken by the fire that he went home forgetting all about his own car. Today, Vetter is a member of nearby St. Michael's, served by Fr. Michael Krank.





Joseph Vetter with his son, Ben, who has modern hog-producing farm. Barn has heated floors. Floors are specially constructed so that waste can be flushed away from 250 gal. water tank upstairs. Ben keeps baby pigs inside barn about six weeks, and then sells them when they're about 40 lbs. Currently, he has 21 sows and about 100 baby pigs.

course, those German-Russian women could prepare food for almost everyone out of barely nothing. But we were lucky. Our children were young. They didn't have to hire out to other people—as was the case with many families with older children."

Continued Vetter: "I was what you call a 'mixed farmer.' I had chickens, geese, ducks, cattle, sheep, pigs, and dairy cows. My father even raised peacocks! We planted wheat, barley, oats, and always raised a lot of potatoes—even though I never have liked eating potatoes very much. What I like is bread. In the old days, people didn't buy 10-lb. bags of flour. They'd buy 100-lb. bags. A typical-sized family would buy 1,000 lbs. of flour in the fall to get them through the winter. But we'd buy 2,000 lbs.!! In general, people ate more bread in those days. We usually had our flour ground at Temvik, Burnstad and Kulm. Now, we do some of our grinding at home—but only a small amount."

Vetter said they stored the flour in the attic. "The mice were crazy about it," he said. "But nowadays, people say mice can't live on flour anymore—too many chemicals and preservatives in it."

**I** he recalls the winters as being tough. However, people expected it. "If you were prepared for it, the winters didn't seem so bad," he said, sagely.

When asked more questions about the depression years, Vetter replied, "We were fortunate. When the de-





What better things is there than to ride a horse with a grandfather walking along?!

pression came, we had no debts, and so we could pull through it."

They "pulled through it" by more-or-less living off the land. The farm produced practically all of their food. They bought as little as possible. "We'd usually only go to town once a month," he said.

"In the fall, we'd butcher two pigs—to make headcheese. Then, before Christmas, we'd butcher about four more pigs," he said. Also, we usually butchered a beef before Christmas. We dug the beef into grain. Grain stays cold. But I suppose sometimes we ate beef too much—to get rid of it. The hams were saved for summer. They

were cured in brine, salted and smoked. The hams were kept in the smokehouse and granaries. Even the heat couldn't spoil the hams. Some of the other food we kept in wells. It was cool down there. That was our 'refrigerator.' "

**T**he Veters have long been milkers. "My grandmother milked until she was 75 years old. She milked two cows by hand. When it was cold, she milked inside the barn," he said. Vetter himself milked until he was 69. When he had a heart attack, he quit. Said Vetter: "One of my sons used to milk about three





Patrick Vetter, a grandson of Joseph, rides unicycle. Riding unicycle, horses, eating picnics are some of the highlights when all the Vettters gather at the ancestral farm, where Joseph Vetter still lives, every fourth of July.

cups full. He'd take it inside the house, drink it, and then go lie down under the table for a snooze."

The head of the Vetter clan has long been interested in politics. "My folks voted for Woodrow Wilson the first time he ran for president. But I don't think they voted for him the second time—even though Father usually voted Democratic. When Hoover was president, everybody soon got tired of him. Wheat went down to 25 cents per bushel. The government said: 'Food wins the peace.' Everyone planted—and so naturally there was a surplus. It's the same today. Over-planting causes prices to stay low."

**P**robably Vetter's favorite president was Franklin Roosevelt. "F.D.R. taught us a lot," said Vetter. "But he should have quit running for president after he had been in there for eight years."

Every fourth of July, the Vetter family gets together for a family reunion. It's a grand time. His descendants flock back to the homestead farm from far and near. "Every year we try to put on something different. Sometimes we eat chicken," he said. "But about seven years ago, we barbequed a beef outside in a pit. Then, another time, we roasted a pig. We've even had a parade—with buggy, flag, and bikes. We have a lot of fun together."

Yes, Joseph Vetter is quite a remarkable man. Maybe that's why his family is so remarkable too. ■