

# Backgrounds

## Loneliness Of Prairie Created Problems For Early Settlers

By David C. Fischer

Dakota Territory presented a harsh continental climate compared to the soft oceanic breezes of the Black Sea area in southern Russia—where so many settlers of Dakota Territory originated. Hot winds, crashing thunderstorms and blinding blizzards made some of the immigrants wish they had never come. If there had been money for the return trip, some would have gone back to Europe. Fortunately, fur coats, feather beds and homespun wool stockings served to withstand the severe winters.

Often the women cried because of loneliness. This was aggravated by the moaning winds and howling of the coyotes at night. The loneliness was especially dreadful when the husband was away working for 50 cents a day on some project at Ipswich. Since there was no one to whom they could talk out their feelings, they placed their faith in God and their own ingenuity to face whatever circumstance came along.

My mother told me, years ago, that when the children came, they enlivened the home and there was less loneliness.

However, along came beautiful sunny summer days in Dakota which made up for some of the shortcomings. Everything grew—wheat, flax and grass on which cattle thrived. Crops planted in the rich black soil ripened into abundant harvests. Gardens produced lush vegetables. Some of these were stored in homemade winter cellars. Thus, the pioneer housewife had the ingredients to develop excellent meals with the recipes brought from the Old World. The results were dumplings, strudles, bradwurst, liverwurst, borscht, plachinda (pumpkin tarts), berishka and big loaves of nutritious bread.

The abundant food banished the spectre of hunger which so often faced them in Russia. This new situation, in itself, was a gift of the New World. They could see opportunity through hard work and realize their dreams. Furthermore, there was also land for their children.

They hungered for religious services. There were no churches and so services were held in some sodhouse. According to one oldtimer, arrange-



Fifty miles was a long way when this photo was taken back in 1916. A good team of horses, such as Chip and Snip, shown above, were almost worth their weight in gold—at least in their owners' eyes! Enjoying the buggy ride are the late Mrs. Phillip Neuhardt (the former Martha Bertsch of Ashley, N.D.), the late Jacob Buchholz and Mrs. Tom Buerkley (the former Bertha Buchholz). Chip and Snip were standard-bred roadster horses, and were once owned by "Cash" Hammond, a banker in Ashley. The picture was submitted by L.E. Buchholz of rural Lehr, N.D. Note the native prairie grass and the prairie trail.

ments were made among the settlers for a signal. If a clergyman came along, a smudge fire was built wherever he happened to stay. On this basis, the neighbors gathered the next day for services. They traveled by whatever means—oxcart, on foot or a sled skid drawn by oxen.

When death made its appearance, a man in the community versed in the scriptures, officiated in the absence of the clergyman. Burial was generally made near a farm, and the grave was marked. Later, the little fence disappeared. Thus, there are a number of lost graves in the area.

Eventually, churches were constructed and cemeteries established. Some of these fell on section lines. Section lines in those days were not well known. (Consequently when high-

ways are constructed today, the surveyors have to locate the highway around the cemetery.)

Early schools were conducted in sodhouses. Teachers often were men from the Old Country who could speak some English. Parents bought and furnished the text books and necessary slates for writing and figuring. Learning the rudiments of arithmetic received strong emphasis. The feeling was this was necessary in dealing in the market. "Caveat emptor" (let the buyer beware) was the prevailing sentiment of the day. There were as yet no compulsory attendance laws and such schools operated for two or three months.

The stork came with the settlers. Since there were as yet no doctors, the midwife delivered babies in the

neighborhood. She knew when the stork should be due and prepared for the hurried trip. There are no statistics as to how many children those noble women brought into the world. Certainly some special recognition is due to honor their names. Among the many engaged in this service, I am able to name only one—Mrs. John Retzer, who lived with her family south of Ashley near the state line at the turn of the century.

Later when medical doctors came to the area, the midwives often assisted the doctors, remaining with the mother after the baby was born.

Some form of mail service was most necessary to the pioneers in this area. Congress saw this necessity and established post offices generally located on some farm. Stages operated from a town located on a railroad. Some of these early country post offices were Long Lake, Koto, Martel, Lowell, Jewell, Giedt, and Kassal. They played a vital role as a media of communication and served to keep settlers informed while living in the far-flung area.