

# White



Digging and pushing cattle in a snowstorm.

# Roots

This is the third article in a five-part series, recalling the story of Karl Wacker, an immigrant from South Russia, who settled near Leola, S.D. in the latter part of the 19th century. The narrative is Wacker's own account, translated from German by his granddaughter Hilda Feickert Sperle, when she was only 15 years old. The preceding stories tell of Wacker's painful departure from parents in Russia, his arrival in Dakota Territory and eventual marriage to the beautiful daughter of another immigrant settler, and their problems and heartaches as they build a new life together in the New World.

The winter of 1881 and 82 was a long and snowy winter. We were still living near Menno, South Dakota. Before threshing was done, the snow came on October 15. In the evening, a strong wind came along and we had a blizzard. The next morning it turned clear and cold and the snow banks were as high as the straw piles! The day before the blizzard had been so nice and all the cattle were in the cornfield to clean up what was left after the picking.

I didn't think it was so cold so I prepared my barn for my 25 head of cattle, and then I started out to find them. But all in vain! They were no place to be seen. In a creek near my place I found five calves hidden in the deep snow. I managed to dig and push them out of the snow and drove them to a straw pile near by. By that time it was evening and I had to go back home. In the morning when I got to them again I saw only three calves, still trying to hide behind the straw pile, which by this time was almost drifted over. The wind had let up a little so I started out to get these home. After what seemed an endless task. I got these three calves home and then I went and dug till I found the other two completely buried in the snow. They were nearly gone when I found them but they both survived. Was that all I could find of my cattle? Where were the rest? I took my saddle horse and, knowing that cattle go with the storm in bad weather, I started with the wind too. I searched in woods and fields. In Menno I found out that they had been there overnight but had left

again in the morning. Again I started out, avoiding all the cornfields because they were all filled with snow. It was bad enough to travel the prairies and stubble fields! The snow was as high as the prairie grass and stubbles. It was slow traveling.

Three miles past Menno, Old Man X had one of my oxen tied up out in the open just where the cold north wind hit him. He was thin and shivering so I tied him behind a building and went to find the rest. Later I found them beside a cornfield, called to them and they recognized my voice and the pony and came to meet me. Not only my cattle, but my neighbor's cattle too and two of his ponies, each of which had a big lump of ice on his nose! I drove them all together except one of the horses—I could not make him get up and he died there, too.

I started home with my find and came to a cornfield about a half mile long and a young forest was planted at the end of it. There was no way to go around so I had to go through the cornfield. I tried to ride through but the pony could not make it with me on his back. The snow was so deep. So I got off and worked my way through the snow on foot with the horse following me. Then back again. Then I took my lead ox and drove him through in my path. Then the rest of the cattle finally, single file. When they were all through, we started for home again. What

happened to the ox that I had tied up? Oh yes, on the way back I took him along. Old Man X wanted me to pay him for keeping the ox but I had no money along so I told him I'd see him in Menno some day and even it up.

When I came to Menno again the store keeper, Jacob Schnaidt, asked me, "Karl, do you intend to pay Mr. X for keeping your ox?"

"Why yes," I answered. "I promised him I would."

But Schnaidt said, "No, give him nothing. He was here yesterday and told me that you had come and taken your ox and didn't pay him damage for the hay that your cattle, your neighbors' cattle and N's horses spoiled. That stock was all here behind the warehouse over night and in the morning about nine o'clock Mr. Swanton drove them off. That old man has no damage. I told him a lot of things. I don't think he will ask you for anything any more. But if he should, don't you give him anything!"

I saw Old Man X in town after that but he never spoke to me again.

After the first hard snow came nicer weather again and a lot of it melted yet. But the snow banks stayed all winter. I lived only two miles from the James River where there were lots of oak trees. Two of my neighbors and I bought some of this wood and brought it home for burning and for fence posts. The next snow came before the ground was frozen. The railroad was blocked and the train was delayed. The coal supply in Menno ran short and people demanded we farmers help out with what we had bought and stocked



Heading into town to sell firewood.

up in the fall. We farmers had earthen and brick straw stoves so we didn't need much wood. We didn't even make any fence posts out of it. Everything was sawed up for firewood and hauled into town and sold in place of coal. I earned good money as long as that lasted.

As a result of the delayed trains, the groceries ran short too. The store keeper had saved enough for himself to make sure his family wouldn't suffer. I had a big family, the smallest being the twins, and when my grocery supply ran low I told the store keeper that if he gave me the groceries I needed I would give him all the wood he needed. The deal was on and we were both satisfied. We had nothing extra but enough to live on till the train came again. Some of the poor people who had no money came during the night and got some wood to burn. The people who had money bid on the wood. They would bid each other up so that often we would get more than we would have charged for it in the first place. Others begged for wood and we gave it to them out of pity. It was a hard time. Oh, how glad everyone was when the train came to town again! It was only a branch line and had to wait till the main lines were open.

A lot of stock was lost that winter. In April the snow all went. The ground wasn't frozen on account of the snow and there was plenty of mud everywhere. The grass came up early but it was too wet to work in the fields. It was the 27th of April when I went out to drag the first time. It was altogether too late and too wet, and therefore the crops were only half.

Now this spring is so dry. (This was written in the year 1933.) But then,

there is time yet and I'm in hopes that rain will come yet as God is still living above us and will help us out again. For everything is at God's mercy. He hath kept us until now and will give us again what is good for us. Let us then pray for what we need and thank Him for it. And everything that He does for us can only be to our good.

**W**e lived near Menno seven years, had only 160 acres of land there. I could not buy any more because it was too expensive. So I sold all my land for \$800 and bought 40 acres of level land seven miles north of Freeman, South Dakota. I lived there three years, raising hogs and small grains. One year I lost nearly all the crop through hail. The second year I had nearly 100 pigs. I had some about ready for market when a disease came among them and in a week 35 or 40 had died. I got medicine from the drug store and that helped, but the best hogs were gone. The third year I had quite a good crop; the price was good, too. I sold two-thirds of the crop in the fall and winter. Oats and seed grain I put upstairs in the house.

One nice spring morning my wife and I started for town at eight o'clock. We took the three smallest children along and the five older ones stayed at home. The oldest boy was 15 years old. The northwest wind came, and got stronger and stronger. At noon a prairie fire came along! I saw the smoke and started for home. I had seven miles to go and it looked to me as though the fire was approaching my home. A horseback rider came to meet me. Before he could say anything I

asked him how things looked at home. He replied, "Your farm is on fire!"

The wind tore up dirt and nearly blinded us, and at times I thought it would tip the wagon. I whipped the horses to their highest speed. "What of our children! All on fire!" These things went through our minds. After what seemed to me an endless ride, we came near enough to see my farm go up in flames! When we got nearer, though, to my relief, I saw the house was not on fire. It was made of stones and logs and no grass around it, so that helped a lot to save it. I raced my horses up to the well pond and unhitched and tied them to the wagon. The wind blew sparks over against the house—and the entry, which was made of wood, started to burn. I grabbed a new pail from the wagon and carried water and extinguished that!

**N**earby was a small barn that wasn't burning yet. In it was one of my best mares. I ran in and loosened her. She ran out and was saved. I looked around and was too late to see the big barn cave in and crash to the ground. In it was a mare with a ten-day-old colt. The granary burned too with a lot of property: a tool box with all my carpenter tools, two sets of harness, the winter clothes, several wagon loads of wheat, some flax and many other things!

I had two stacks of hay close together and a fence around it. The gate had been left open and all the cattle went in. When the children saw it, they had driven them out, all but a three-year-old steer. They couldn't

make him go out so he stayed in and burned, along with several pigs and 100 chickens!

I had insurance on my farm but only about one-fourth of it. The fire caused a great loss. The insurance company couldn't (or maybe didn't want to) pay me more. They said they were bankrupt. When everything was over and in order, I was \$500 in debt. I thought the debts were going to swallow me! Up to my neck in debts for the first time! What to do now!

I sold my land, 240 acres for \$1,500. And what else I had left for what I could get. The rest I loaded in a freight car and headed for Eureka, South Dakota.

**O**n a sunny forenoon the train pulled into Eureka and we started unloading our property into a warehouse and elevator. In a brave attempt to help, my oldest son Karl fell into the cellar and hurt himself. The doctor's aid and a few days' rest were necessary, so we took him and my wife with the rest of the children to a friend in town and went on with our moving. My brother's wife had a big house in which she lived (my brother had died a while before) and so we moved in with her. The third day Karl was lots better so we all went to live in a new home about 35 miles northeast of Eureka, again with relatives.

I took a file on a quarter section for \$300. I didn't make any debts, built a sod house and barn, dug a well and was fortunate enough to find an abundance of water.

After having moved onto our "sod" farm, I hired a man and started farming again. We had good crops and prices were good also, and soon we were on our feet again. I took cattle and fed them on shares and that helped, too. I took cattle instead of money on that. For six or seven years we had good crops and plenty of hay. There was a tract of land close by where hay-making was free because the land was so hilly and steep it was considered almost useless. So fate favored me again and I raised lots of cattle. Every fall I could sell a herd. In those days cattle brought much more than they do now. Well, everything looked bright once again and we were happy once again. Yes, I must say our Father in Heaven helped us in every way and I was very thankful. But it was not to stay so. There followed



Karl falls into cellar, injuring himself!



### I buy a new farm!

about eight years of drought. Wheat yielded only five to eight bushels to the acre and other grains grew scarce. A few times I got only the seed back again. Still with all my livestock I could get along pretty good. There was no want. As a result of the dry weather, the well water ran short and so I had another one dug. I had lots of trouble before that well was complete. They had to dig several different holes. One was 58 feet deep when they hit a rock and had to give up! The next was 80 feet deep when they hit a rock! So when they started the third one which was 108 feet deep when they hit water and fine sand! We put boxes (casing, or well curbing) down and tried to make it deeper but all in vain! It would always cave in! At last we gave up. I had to pay wages and didn't have water anyway. Now what? My neighbor had to sell his farm and leave. His water supply was large but the buildings were very poor. His other neighbor had offered him \$425 for everything. The farm consisted of 160 acres,



but he wanted \$500. I went to him and offered him \$500. The deal was soon completed and I started to move my buildings over—all except two which had to be torn down and rebuilt on the other farm. They were sod buildings, remember. The house and barn. It was lots of work and lots of loss. Still, since I am, or rather, was a carpenter that part didn't cost much but there was lots of other work. I sold 160 acres of my land for \$750 and paid this farm and had the rest left over to repair and fix up my "new" place.

**T**hat was 33 years ago. The place now belongs to one of my sons. During this time all of our children were married. Two sons and two daughters took files on land, 160 acres a piece. The third daughter could get only 40 acres. That was the last government land close to us. All the rest had been taken by the state, so there is no more land to file but lots of state land to rent or buy. ■