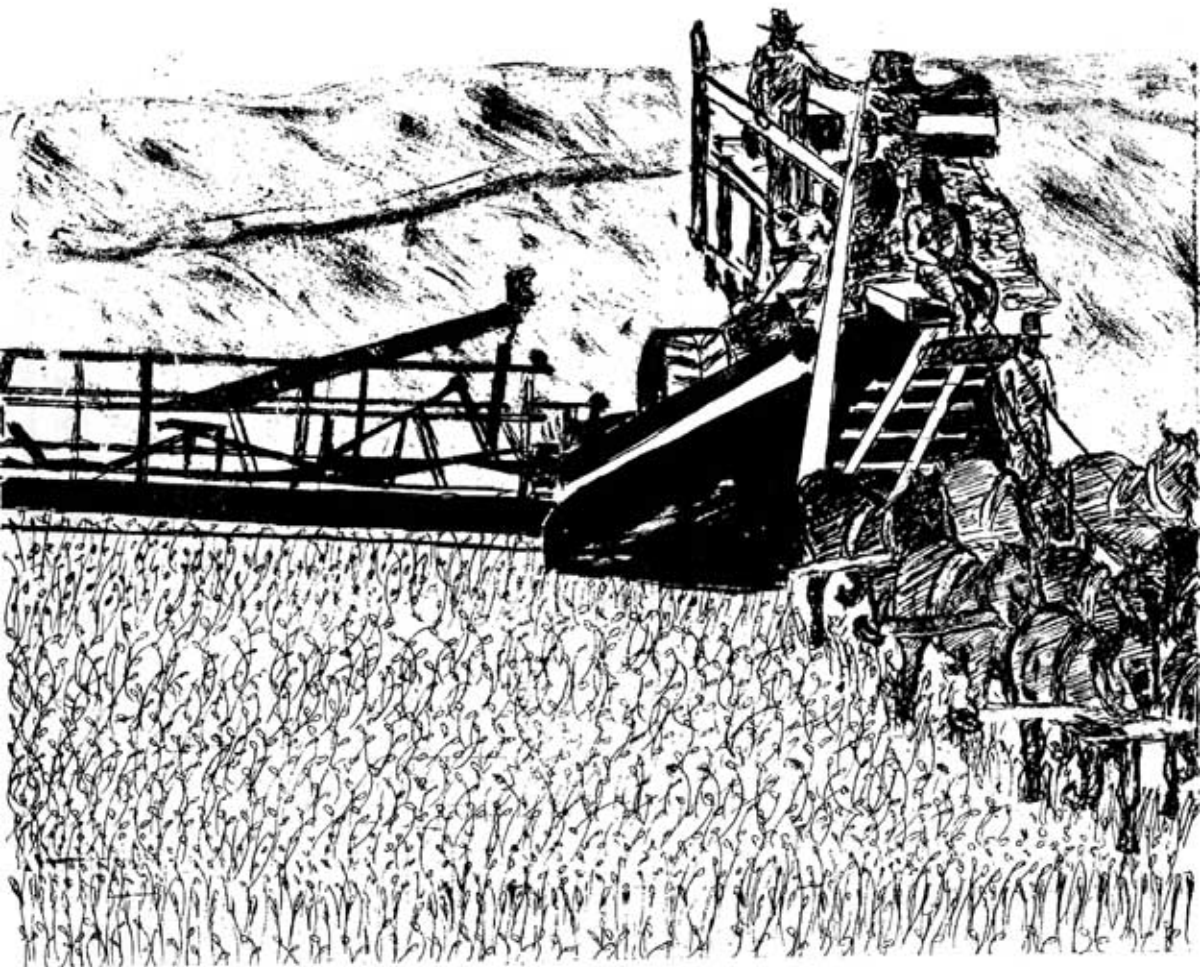


White



The harvests in McPherson County, S.D. were big. It was wonderful!

Roots

This is the fourth article in a five-part series recalling the story of Karl Wacker, an immigrant from South Russia who homesteaded near Leola, S.D. The narrative is Wacker's own account, translated from German by his granddaughter Hilda Feickert Sperle when she was 15 years old. Wacker's story clearly describes the conditions many pioneering families encountered as they built new lives in the wild, grassy expanse called the Dakota Territory. The story resumes after the problems he faced while starting a new farm.

About the time we moved onto the new farm, my wife began to be bothered with asthma. After 16 years of torture for the want of breath, and after I had sold a lot of my property for doctor bills, all in vain, there being no more children to take care of since they had all married, we sold the rest of our belongings except the house and farm land and went to Salem, Oregon. There we stayed with one of my daughters for three months. Just during harvest time. The fruits had gotten ripe and we ate all we wanted, and it was a nice time that we spent there. The best fruits we both had eaten since we had left Russia.

But for Mother's asthma, neither the climate nor the fruit did any good. One day we smelled smoke but took no notice of it. There is often smoke in the air. But day by day it got worse and so did Mother's asthma. There was a forest fire not far away. When we found how big and widespread the fire was, we knew that it couldn't be stopped very soon. We also knew that Mother wouldn't last many more days in that atmosphere, so we hurriedly packed our things and boarded a train for Montana, knowing that the mountain air would be clean and good for both of us.

We started at seven o'clock in the morning. In Portland, Oregon, we

changed trains and by ten o'clock that evening we were in the high mountains. There the air was clear and cool, and my dear wife slept nearly all night. That was something that had not happened in many years. The next evening at 10:30 we came to Dodson, Montana. Ten miles from there lived my youngest daughter and her husband. Seven miles further north lived my two youngest sons and their families. I had notified them, and one of the boys was at the station to meet us. We were all very glad to meet again.

It had rained that day and it was too muddy to go home that night, so we stayed in a hotel in Dodson. Mother slept quietly again and by the next morning she felt rested from the trip and the asthma was gone.

Right after breakfast we left for the farm to our children and grandchildren who waited with open arms to greet us and make us comfortable. The grandchildren hadn't seen us before. We brought along quite a bit of fresh fruit. Oh, how glad the children were! And we were glad too! I think my son-in-law was gladdest of all. He ate and ate of the fruit until he had a stomach-ache and then some more. That night he couldn't sleep. The next day he could hardly walk. I pitied him,

but then he should have known when to quit!

We stayed there 13 months. The youngest son, Emanuel, rented the land he had in South Dakota and had a farm of his own in Montana. That spring it didn't rain, and so the seed he put in stayed dry and didn't come up, while in South Dakota there was a nice crop. Then his mother-in-law wrote him and begged them to come back, as there will be a big demand for farm workers. So Mother and I stayed on Emanuel's farm and he and his family packed up and came back to McPherson County, South Dakota again.

The day before they left we had a little rain. The next day it rained again and we had quite a lot of rain and the crops started coming up. That was about the same time in McPherson County when the barley and rye was getting ripe. Emanuel and his family arrived safely and worked all summer and earned lots of money. He got his share of the farm crop there and sold it right away. Then they came back to Montana where Mother and I had kept the farm, milked the cows and sold the cream. For this we got half the cream money.

I also had hired somebody to help put up the hay and cut the flax. It was just a wonder how fast everything grew. In the highlands flax and even some oats got ripe before frost. The first frost

WHITE ROOTS

Continued

came late that fall, too, in the beginning of October. Some people still got about one-third the usual crop of small grains. Potatoes were best. You could almost call it a good potato crop.

We have two married daughters in Canada. One is Mrs. Peter Berreth (Rosina) in Beiseker, Alberta. The other is Mrs. Jacob Kempf (Katherina) in Coderre, Saskatchewan. We went to visit them for three weeks. Then we had seen part of our children again, whom we hadn't seen for a long time, also our grandchildren, and rejoiced with them. They had received a large crop and had lots to thresh yet and the winter was near so we didn't spend much time visiting, but left them with their work and came back to Montana to what we called home. It was just during World War I and we had trouble getting across the border. They finally let us cross, but young men were not allowed to cross the border from our country to Canada or back.

Back in Montana, but useless, still. We had some more children in South Dakota whom we wanted to see and Mother's asthma was gone. Ever since we had crossed the high mountains she was able to breathe easy again, and we were both so happy and thankful to have her so well again. Thinking she was cured, we packed up and started for South Dakota again. In Garrison, North Dakota we made a short stop to visit my brother Christian Wacker. Then, on we went. In Wishek, North Dakota we stayed with my oldest son, Karl, for two days. Then he took us down to where the rest of our children were and still are. That is near Long Lake, South Dakota.

We found them all well and happy. And everyone—six families—demanded a visit. We were all so happy! First, because after a year and a half of separation, we could see each other again, and, second, everyone was overjoyed to see Mother so well again.

After visiting them all, we went to Wishek, North Dakota again and bought a house for two thousand dollars. This we thought would be better for both of us than a farm. The town was not large and our home was near the south end, so we could keep a cow, a few chickens and two pigs. That took up most of my time, while Mother could always find something to do in the house and garden. What spare time I had I spent in Karl's harness shop. They in turn did things to help us and make life easier for us.

The reason Karl was in town in a shop instead of a farm was this: when he was 17 years old we had a nice three-year-old pony that could not be ridden. He'd buck off anyone who dared to get on him. But Karl, determined to ride him in spite of his temper, fixed a device on the saddle



Karl Wacker enjoys sitting on the front porch, looking at his grandson Rubeen Wagemann's rabbit. Photo was taken in 1928.



Fred Wacker (son of Karl Wacker) at left is shown with his nephew, Fred Zenker. Photo was taken in 1932.

and bridle to keep his head up. It worked. He kept his head high, but the outlaw, finding he could not buck, threw back his head, rose up and fell backwards. The boy was lucky enough to fall to one side and so the pony fell only on his foot. Bad enough, though. It broke the bone above the ankle and splintered the bones above and below the ankle. Karl was laid up for six months, sick. No one could find what was wrong with him. So after six months of sickness and fever I sent him south to a well-known doctor. He had to stay there several months. When he came back he was well except for a limp that follows him through life. He could not do hard work so he

went and worked in a harness shop and later got a share of the shop. He also built a small store and in this I helped him. I always got a little pay for this according to the amount of work he had for me. Often I got more than I expected. Sometimes I would go and sit with the old men in front of the buildings and talk. I soon found out that not all is gold that glitters. I found out that these benches were gossip-benches. That didn't appeal to me so I soon avoided them.

Karl's business kept growing bigger and better and I helped him more and more in the shop. When he had a business trip to make, I would take his place until he returned. Soon he

enlarged his store and added some hardware to his other things to sell.

A

fter five years in Wishek, Mother's asthma came back and was very bad again. We blamed the city smoke for all her illness. Instead of clean, pure air coming through her window, which was nearly always open, there was always a little smoke with it. She could not stand this, so I sold our house for fifteen hundred dollars and went back



Illustrations by
Barbara B. Overlie

The farm house had stood vacant for some time. Once spic and span, it now was filthy and infested with bed bugs. Said Karl Wacker: "We went to cleaning the house first."

to the farm near Long Lake, South Dakota.

We had planned on moving in pretty soon with our furniture, but people told us we had better stay out a while yet. It was full of bedbugs, and so run down! There was a lot of work waiting for us in that house. We had left it so clean! My wife, though sick most of the time, always had everything spic and span. And we hadn't seen nor did we know what a bedbug was before this.

I was 69 years old then and my wife only three months younger, so farming wasn't a good industry to start. We went to cleaning the house first. The children helped us all they could.

Three times we fumigated and made sure everything was clean before we finally moved in.

In the garden south of the house I had planted many young fruit trees, and also some other trees for protection. West of the house I had planted several kinds of fruit trees, among them apple and plum trees. I had put a good woven wire fence around them when I had lived there earlier and had taken good care of them. But the renter kept pigs in the garden south of the house and tore down the fence west

of the house. It was a shame and hardly looked like the same garden. The farm land was worked, though, and in good condition. My own children farmed the land the first year and I got one-fourth of the crop. The second year Emanuel came and took over the farm. He came from Montana in the fall and moved in with us, with his family. There had been no crop in Montana so he thought he'd come to Dakota and stay with me again. The next spring he sowed the fields alone and Mother and I gave up working. We helped along just enough to keep us in good spirits and stayed there one and one-half years after they had moved in. ■