

Early Days of South Dakota

The early pioneers suffered miserably during those first, bitter-cold winters. Wrote Opp (with a delicious sense of humor): "At the time, we didn't know we lived in 'The Sunshine State.' "

Part II

By Daniel D. Opp

In Part I of the Opp family saga, Daniel D. Opp described his impressions as a young boy when he and his parents arrived at a near-empty and lonely frontier—the prairies of McPherson County during 1884.

Opp's account resumes in this issue with his telling of the family's first harvest.

IV.

Now the time had arrived for making hay, which was put up in a short time, but was by no means easy work. That was especially true of many women, who had to lead the oxen all day long by a rope, while the husband sat on the machine (pro-



Shocking grain by hand was a widespread harvesting practice on Dakota farms as late as the 1940s and 1950s.



The Opp brothers in their Sunday-best attire in 1907: Seated (l. to r.) are Jacob and Daniel. Standing are John, Henry, Christ, and Fred.

vided that he had one!). Those unfortunate people who had none had to cut their hay with a scythe. The harvest, on account of much rain, was rather late. Everything was cut with a self-rake, which dumped the grain on the ground, where it had to be tied by hand. It was hard and disagreeable work. Those machines were better adapted for cutting flax which did not have to be tied.

The time had come for threshing, but with what? That was the burning question for many farmers. Some, who had horses, had begun to tread out the grain with them, and others attempted to thresh their flax with oxen, but soon discovered that there was too much of a loss by that method.

However, there was one shimmer of hope. The harvest was good

in 1885, and the new settlers were much encouraged, despite the obstacles which seemed sometimes to overwhelm them. In a bold decision, Val Mettler, J. Nies, and Peter Wittmayer decided to buy a threshing machine. Christ Maier also bought one.

And those two machines did all the threshing.

In the meantime, the immigration had let up. Still, a few came and settled among the others. The new arrivals were more fortunate, for they were taken in by the earlier settlers until they had their homes finished. As far as one could see, all were sod homes, which were nice and warm in winter and cool in summer. Since there was but little plowing to be done in the fall, bones were gathered and stones

dug out in preparation for spring breaking.

The prairie grass was dry by then. Day and night, we had to be on guard against the much feared prairie fires, which kept us awake many a night. In the day time, the fires were not so frightful. But during the night, it was like looking into an endless sea of fire, which, driven by a strong wind, hissed and crackled as though possessed and controlled by a legion of demons, against which there was no restraint.

We often battled helplessly against those raging elements. Sometimes, when we thought we had protected ourselves from one side, the wind would suddenly

Opp Saga

Continued from Page 13

change, and then, coming from the other direction, would destroy everything in its path. Only in united effort did we succeed in saving some pasture back of a plowed field. Many a hay stack became prey to the ravaging flames.

It was fortunate our sod buildings were fire proof. Otherwise, they also would have been consumed by the relentless blaze.

Often it was said, "If only a snow would come and put an end to the fires."

But winter set in late in 1885. There was neither frost nor snow until the middle of December. Christmas came, but we celebrated in name only, for of nuts and other delicacies, nothing was to be seen. The momentous year of 1885 finally drew to a close and we entered the new year of 1886:

*But without the bells ringing
And without the choir singing
Only the children's wish of a
Happy New Year,
Was the parents' joy and cheer.*

Since Valentine Mettler had become quite an extensive farmer requiring a stronger man, I hired out to Chris Burrer for \$75 a year. The winter was not severe, and at the beginning of April, we could begin field work. Everything was sown by hand and naturally required more time than it does at present.

Spring in 1886 was very dry, and the breaking up of the land was rather difficult. Because of that condition, not as much flax was seeded as had been planned. On account of the continued drought, the crops began to suffer—and the upland produced no hay. But in the low places, there was an abundance of grass.

I will now relate about an accident which happened at that time.

The Burrer family had two small children, a girl five years of age and a boy of five months. On the first of July, we began to cut hay—and on the following day it was dry



Horses provided much of the power in 1941 when gasoline and machinery were in short supply.

enough to be raked. In the afternoon, I was to rake hay with one ox, and Mr. Burrer was going to do the cutting. In order to save time, Mrs. Burrer, with the two children, insisted on going along into the field to cut grass.

In the meantime, Mr. Burrer was to help me make the first round, raking with the ox, so that after that I could do the raking alone. I protested against such a procedure, and said the horses should be tied to the wagon until we had made the first round. I further stated that if we would all go away from the wagon, little Elizabeth might run into the tall grass, and would be exposed to the danger of having her feet cut off.

But Mrs. Burrer insisted on cutting the grass, and, finally, I had to submit to her demands. We then drove away from the wagon.

Since we began to rake on the outside of the field, Mrs. Burrer had the inside and shorter field in cutting. Consequently, she did not have to drive as we did to get back to the wagon. I led the ox by a rope, while Mr. Burrer sat on the hay rake. But my thoughts and eyes constantly rested on the child.

When Mrs. Burrer approached the wagon, I noticed that the child ran into the tall grass. I immediately let the ox go, running and yelling for all I was worth. Mr. Burrer followed me. On account of the constant calling, the horses suddenly stood still, but it was too late. The dreaded accident had happened.

When I arrived, the child fell over the sickle into my arms. Alas! One foot had been completely cut off! Her other foot was partly cut off!

Hastily, the horses were hitched to the wagon, and the sorrowing Burrs rushed Elizabeth to the two-mile distant Peter Wittmayer farm, where Mrs. Wittmayer applied emergency bandages. From there, they took the child to the nearest doctor, who lived at Ipswich.

I and the five-month-old infant remained in the hay field. After I had somewhat recovered from my fright, I discovered that my ox, with the hay rake, had already gone home. Then I took little John, who had been commended to my protection, and carefully carried him to the empty house.

V.

After I arrived at the house with the little one, I put him to sleep and then took up my work again. But I was very much embarrassed and greatly perplexed when little John awoke and demanded more than I could give him. In order to become master of the situation, I carried the infant a mile to the home of Mr. and Mrs. C. Maier. There the baby was well taken care of until such time when his father could take him to his mother at Ipswich, where Mrs. Burrer had to



Sons of John and Elizabeth Opp in 1940s. Front row (l. to r.): John, Calvin, Allen; back row: Reuben, Otto, Edmund, Rudolph.



Rare homestead photo north of Hosmer, South Dakota, in early 1900s, belonged to Carl Martel family. One of the buildings (by the barn) functioned as a post office and store for rural settlers.

remain for six months during the slow recovery of the unfortunate little Elizabeth. It was a sad time for all. Mr. Burrer drove to Ipswich twice a week to look after his own.

In the meantime, harvest had come again. The crop was very small in 1886. Not much had been planted.

But Mr. Burrer and I worked as much during the night as we did by day during that haying and harvest season of 1886. We got up as early as two o'clock in the morning, and by the bright moonlight, we went out into the field to get the hay.

I also learned much about the exasperating art of cooking during the six weeks Mrs. Burrer was in Ipswich. Through trial and error, I actually became quite an accomplished cook, and I am proud of my cooking skills even to this day. Despite our meals occasionally having a burnt taste, yet we did not criticize each other, but tried to convince ourselves that we wanted

our meals just so—and not otherwise.

We always cooked what we liked best. When Mrs. Burrer, who was also a very good cook, returned home, how she prepared this and that meal no longer was good enough for us. But when Mrs. Burrer cleverly made the proposition that she would go out into the field, and that one of us should stay at home and do the housework, we soon changed our minds. We waved the proposal aside with a loud no-thank-you-very-much. The coffee we made three times daily was quite enough for us.

Threshing was soon finished. The little there was of wheat and flax was hardly enough for Mr. Burrer to pay the doctor bill. On account of Elizabeth's accident, my father remitted one-fourth of my wages. Therefore, my daily average for the entire year was 17 cents.

Yes, those were hard times for the Burrers, as well as for me. But they have surmounted all that long

ago and are now sleeping the sleep of the just. It is peculiar that those hard times now remain as a sweet memory. I hope these lines about the times of the pioneers will be of some interest to the reader.

With the approach of autumn, the greatly feared prairie fires started again. The danger, however, was averted by a barrier in the form of a giant snowstorm on the night of November 21st. Without hardly an interruption, the snowstorms continued until Christmas. Nearly all of our sod huts were well covered with snow—so that again "Santa Claus" could not find us. Even the Milwaukee Railroad Co., which had extended the line beyond Roscoe, was compelled to discontinue its work because of the early severity of the winter.

Due to more heavy snows, we had a late spring in 1887. I was

Opp Continued on Page 16

Opp Saga

Continued from Page 15

working for Val. Mettler again, and we started field work on the 12th of April. Mr. Mettler and John Knapp had gone to Roscoe to meet Rev. Edward Schaidt, who had come up from Menno to preach the following day on Easter Sunday. Schaidt was the first Reformed minister to preach a sermon in McPherson County. He opened the services by singing Hymn No. 109 of the Reformed songbook. The service took place in my father's sod house.

After Easter, field work was carried on with might and main. Whoever was able to move had to

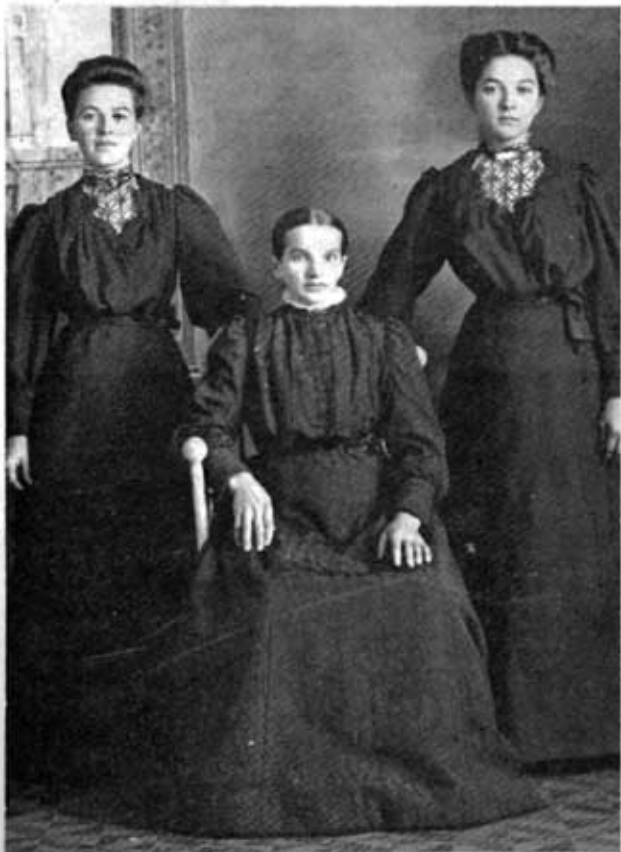
help get the seed into the soil as soon as possible. The soil, due to much winter moisture, was in fine condition. Much land was broken up again and seeded to flax, but in the month of May, a dry spell set in. In June, the drought and the ever increasing heat were so great that the flax did not come up. The wheat fields looked bad, too. On the upland, there was little hay, due to the fact that the prairie had been frequently burnt over and, as a result, the growth of grass was scant. But in the low places, where snow water had gathered, we could cut hay.

In this connection, I want to mention that during the first years, we had to contend not only against the elements of nature, such as

storms and fire, but also with men of other nationalities. I will repeat a true story as it occurred.

My employer, Val. Mettler, I, my father, my brother Jacob, Jacob Meidinger, and his brother-in-law, Karl Fink, now living northeast of Eureka, went about seven miles north from here into the hills, where there was still much government land to make hay. Thus it was that we crossed the line about a mile into North Dakota, where we found a very good hay field. Since it was located in McIntosh County, Val. Mettler drove to the land office at Hoskins, located several miles west of present-day Ashley, to investigate whether or not that particular land had been taken up.

He was informed it still was government land, and so we immediately went to work with three



TOP: When William Job signed up to go off to war in 1918, his mother begged him to get a photograph of himself before he left. Fortunately, World War I ended just before Job was to depart. He was 18 at the time of this photo.

LEFT: The beautiful Opp sisters in early 1900s: Rosina (Meidinger), Katherina (Newharth), and Christina (Wittmeyer).



Noon lunch out on the field—a welcome break! Left to right: Christ Schock, Bob Krueger, and Reinhold Retzer in early 1950s, resting by horse-drawn wagon.

machines to cut grass. The following day, when it was dry, it was raked and set up in coops.

During that time, two men came every day toward evening with a buggy from a northerly direction. They usually stopped, were very friendly, and praised us for the good work we were doing, and then drove back again.

Naturally, we suspected no evil intentions on the part of the daily visitors.

After we had put up about 100 tons of hay, we were well ready to go back home for the night, which we did. When we returned to the field the next morning, a whole wagonload of that "robber bunch" had assembled, armed with rifles and other guns. Now they talked



Harvesting by both new and old methods was common in the 1950s. Trucks and horses get a lengthy work-out.

an entirely different and sharper language than they formerly had. The angry men claimed the land belonged to them and if we would not leave instantly, they would make use of their weapons.

Completely discouraged because of the hypocritical effrontery of the bunch, we drove away much faster than we had come! But we did not throw away our guns. The front part of a hay wagon was immediately removed, a seat was tied on it, and we hastened to the land office at Hoskins to see if a mistake had been made.

Again it was Val. Mettler (who understood a little English) who made the trip to Hoskins.

Again the answer was the same: "It was government land."

I believe it was John Wishek, Sr., who advised Mettler to file on the land in the name of some other party. This he did, and had the land recorded as a pre-emption claim in the name of his sister. The price was two dollars, for which a receipt

was given Mettler as proof of ownership.

In the afternoon, our fathers drove home to get provisions, guns, and ammunition. When they returned the next morning, a war council was held, and then the hauling of hay was resumed.

But soon after we arrived, we met a whole wagonload of the "robber band," armed to the teeth, who repeated their threat to shoot down anyone who would pick up another forkful of hay.

We were seven in number. Three were armed with guns and four with hay forks. Thus armed, we followed our leader, Mr. Mettler, to the wagon of those scoundrels. Our armed appearance gave them to understand that we planned no retreat.

Mr. Mettler waved the receipt under their noses and informed them, more by gestures than by

Opp Saga

Continued from Page 17



Making hay in the 1950s: Ludwig Retzer is on top of haystack, while Reinhold Retzer is running the loader.



TOP: Confirmation picture on June 2, 1918: Rosina Opp (Krein) on left, and Bertha Opp (Job).

RIGHT: William Job hauling barrels of seed in 1934 in wagon pulled by Kate and King (the Opps and Jobs always named all of their horses).



Who Was Daniel D. Opp?

By Terry Ulrich

The author of "Early Days of South Dakota," Daniel D. (Daniel) Opp, was born on July 10, 1872 at Gluckstal, South Russia, the son of Daniel and Katherina (Gohl) Opp. (His grandfather's name was also Daniel.) The Opp family came to the United States in 1884, settling in McPherson county, northeast of Eureka, South Dakota.

Katherina Hoff was born at Kassel, South Russia, on February 9, 1875, the daughter of Jacob and Magdalena (Ladner) Hoff. The Hoff's immigrated to this country in 1879, settling in the Tripp area (in South Dakota) and later moving northeast of Eureka. Katherina married Daniel on November 19, 1893, making their home on a homestead northeast of Eureka for a number of years until moving to a farm six and one-half miles south of Leola, South Dakota, where they lived until moving into Leola.

While living in Leola, Daniel was president of the city council, Leola mayor from 1927 to 1931, and McPherson County-treasurer for two terms. He started writing his recollections of pioneer years in the early 1900s and 1920s, finally finishing the story by 1934. His daughter, Helen, helped with the typing of the original manuscript (which is still intact).

Daniel died on December 16, 1956, and Katherina on May 23, 1962. They spent a long and happy life together, 63 years.

words, that we now were prepared to drive them from the property.

They evidently understood that the smallest attempt to molest us would result in the use of arms. Obviously, we had made a stalwart impression because our formerly insolent visitors hastily retreated. The war was won.

Now, that was by no means an isolated case. The German-haters frequently made such attempts, and not infrequently they were successful. Therefore, you young people, hold onto your morals and habits, which your parents have left you, frequently by courageous sacrifices. Honor your German mother-tongue, read German books (and the Staats-Anzeiger, which is a priceless adviser and guide in every way). □

NEXT MONTH: The prospects in the summer of 1887 appeared dismal: bad crops, no credit, empty cupboards, no shoes. What to do?