Surviving a century via beef and skunks
The Christmann Homestead

By Chris Grossel

Albert Christmann most likely wasn't the teachers' favorite student. Albert was almost certainly well behaved. And he was in all probability a diligent student. But often, he stank. Like skunk.

"It didn't often sit so well with the teachers, but skunks were $2.50-$3 a piece then," Albert said.

While walking the one mile to school each morning, young Albert would check his skunk traps on the way to school that he had previously set along the creek. If he had one, he would shoot it and collect it on the way home later that day.

"I smelled good when I got to school, and smelled good when I came home," Albert said, smiling.

"I don't think that would pass now days," his son Randy added.

Albert Christmann grew up where the current Christmann farm sits - where William Christmann originally homesteaded in the winter of 1908.

William was born in south Russia, and immigrated to the United States as a young child. His family originally homesteaded near Pick City, then relocated to north of Beulah until he was old enough to homestead his own place in 1908. In about 1911 or 1912, William married Theresa, and over a span of 20 years proceeded to have 12 children. Albert was born second to last.

"Dad had to make sure Mom didn't run away," Albert said jokingly of his oft-pregnant mother.

Growing up, the William Christmann family raised mostly beef cows, but milked as many as 16 milk cows, which "didn't take long when each (sibling) would do two or three," Albert said.

"Everybody had their chores. Some milked, some fed calves, some carried feed, some cleaned the gutters."

Albert remembers that his sister Rose Mary and himself would have the job of herding the milk cows by horseback into the yard each evening to milk them. The family would then milk them again in the morning, and send them back out to pasture.

After some chores each morning, it was breakfast and the mile-long walk to 9 a.m. school, which was located on the south side of County Road 9. And it was during these walks that he checked his skunk traps.

"I think there were times I made more money in a day from those skunks than Dad did farming," Albert said.

As Albert grew older, his chore responsibilities increased to include chopping oats and barley, which he did for $3.50 per day, he said. Randy explained that chopping consisted of gathering the grain and tying it into bundles, and then stacking the bundles into a tipi for...

William and Theresa with three of their children on the Christmann farm, circa 1915.

See Christmann page 13

Albert and his late wife, Marcella, owned and operated the Christmann family farm for better of the last 60 years.

William Christmann, the original homesteader of the Christmann farm in the winter of 1908, took great pride in leading Hazen's parade on horseback each year.
Christmanns continued the milk, hog and beef operation until the mid-1970s, when they sold the pigs and milk cows. Farm is all beef production now, and they run just under 200 beef cattle.

"My wife always said that those were the happiest days she had when she could milk," Albert said of his wife, Mardella, who passed away last winter.

"Of course, that was after we got a (milking) machine."

"We talk more fondly of (milking) after they were gone," Randy said with a smile.

William and Theresa continued to be active in Hazen after moving from the farm, and Randy said that each year, William would take great pride leading the parade while carrying the American flag on horseback.

Randy, one of Albert and Mardella’s three children, lives in Hazen with his wife, Beth, and now helps Albert run the beef operation.

Randy noted that William bought the second ever rubber-tired tractor that was sold in Hazen, a Case. And it was that very kind of dedication to bettering the farm that set the Christmann farm up for a century of survival and sustained success.

That century-long dedication was celebrated this past summer, when the Christmanns hosted a reunion of about 75 family members from eight different states.

"Those days, there were no government programs you could go to for help. The boss of the family had to see to it that it worked," Albert said.

And it has worked for the Christmanns.

For all of nearly 100 years.