Close bond remains for Hatzenbihler brothers

By ANNETTE TAIT

Like many farm children of their day, MJ and Ralph Hatzenbihler spent a lot of time together. The Hatzenbihler boys did chores together, rode horses to school together and generally kept themselves occupied.

Over time, all that togetherness wove a close bond. Sitting at Ralph’s kitchen table looking over old photographs, the men seamlessly pick up topics where the other left off, volleying the story back and forth without ever missing a beat. At times, they even finish each other’s sentences.

“Our parents emigrated, they were Germans from Russia,” MJ said. “My dad came over in 1900, my mother came over about the same time. They homesteaded in Oliver County in 1908, married in 1909 and the first of their 11 children arrived in 1911.”

The brothers will be honored next weekend during Old Settlers Days in Center as honorary Old Settlers.

MJ and Ralph—along with their sister, Elizabeth (Hatzenbihler) Haag, are the last surviving children of John and Barbara (Barnebald) Hatzenbihler. Ralph was their sixth child, arriving on May 6, 1921; MJ was ninth, marking his appearance on June 17, 1926. Named Monsaduis after his mother’s brother, the lengthy name was quickly shortened to MJ, a nickname he’s used ever since.

“We spoke German with our mother all the time,” MJ said. “I’d talk English to her, she’d answer back in German. Dad learned how to read English but never learned to write it.”

Ralph nodded. “I had to write letters for him,” he said.

When John and Barbara started their farm near Center, they got a quarter section from the railroad and homesteaded another quarter section, so started with a half section. Their neighbors did likewise.

“There were originally five or six farms there,” MJ said. “People couldn’t make a living on just a quarter section and moved on.”

Farms were already diversified, long before the term became a popular buzzword. Farm families milked cows, raised eggs and made sausage. They grew multiple crops to sell at market and for livestock. They grew their own vegetables for the table and to preserve for later use.

Ralph and Louise Hatzenbihler.

“People were self-supporting in those days,” MJ said. “We only bought things like flour and sugar, and sometimes some cereal. We baked our own bread.”

As boys, Ralph and MJ helped milk cows by hand, get the cattle in and fix fence. “I remember seeding with horses, with a 10-foot drill,” Ralph said. “We had four horses on there.”

“Never did know when school started,” MJ added. “We had to do our work first, pick corn and thresh. We’d go to school after that, usually two weeks or a month later.”

They rode horses to the schoolhouse, which was about four miles away.

“We about froze in the winter,” MJ said. “A lot of times, our lunch was still frozen at noon. The horses got icicles on their noses.”

According to MJ, school was “something I had to do.” Ralph had a different opinion.

“I kind of liked school,” he said. “The worst part of it was getting to school and getting home in the winter.”

“Some people liked it more than others,” MJ responded, smiling at his brother. “I was around too much and didn’t study.”

“Life wasn’t all work and no play. As boys, Ralph and MJ liked to go swimming.”

“I went swimming just about every day in the summer,” Ralph said. “There were some pretty good holes in the creek, but they’re all filled in now.”

“We’d go down there on the noon hour from school—caught heck from the teacher, too,” MJ added with a grin. Ralph and MJ completed eighth grade at the country school; Ralph took a couple years of high school through correspondence courses. Both men started farming.

“I was 14 years old, getting out of the eighth grade,” MJ said. “We worked on the family farm for four years before we got our own farms.”

Somewhere in between, each did a stint in the Army. Ralph started training in the heavy armor division at Fort Knox.

“We were on our way to Japan, about halfway across the ocean when they dropped the atomic bombs,” he said. “We kept on going, but we knew the war was over. We landed in Manila in the Philippines. From there we went to Osaka, Japan, then transferred to Kobe. We were there about a year.”

MJ’s Army experience came later. He was drafted after the war and spent his 13 months in the Army in Anchorage, Alaska, in the quartersmasters division.

Fate likely played a part in MJ meeting his future bride, Cecelia, at a New Year’s dance in Center. She was the first cousin to Marie Mosbrucker’s mother, and MJ is a first cousin of Marie’s husband, Wilbert. MJ and Cecelia were married the following spring, living briefly with his parents before moving out to their new farm, started with help from his dad.

According to MJ, the new farm was “out in the Yucca country.” The little town of Yucca, near where Martin O’grady’s farm is now, “was nothing but a cream station and a lumberyard.” They moved a little house onto the property, and MJ and Cecelia started raising cattle and grain, and kept chickens, a few milk cows and, “once in a while, a hog.”

As the family grew, so did the little house, expanding to hold MJ, Cecelia and their 10 children who lived—five girls and five boys. They lost a baby boy, Keith, who passed away at the tender age of 6 months.

Ralph also started farming; his place was about a mile south of their older brother Jack’s farm. The boys farmed together, sharing in the work and the cost of the machinery.

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"We were close enough to farm together," MJ said. "We'd help each other out, get the crops in. If one place was too wet or something, we'd work on one of the other places and come back to it."

They took cattle down to Sanger to put them on the train, and sold wheat down at Harmon.

"Ralph took it down with the wagon, with two horses hitched on there," MJ said. "And the reminiscing began in earnest." "We had an outhouse," Ralph recalled, "and we'd haul about 15 tons of coal for the winter."

There was no indoor plumbing of any kind: water had to be pumped and carried into the house from the well. "Our old well that we used all the time was about 180 feet down," he said. "We never run that well dry."

They used an electric wind charger to generate electricity. A windmill converted wind power to electricity and used 16 storage batteries to produce 42 volts of power.

"It ran electric lights, a deep freezer and the washing machine," Ralph said. "And we had an old time telephone," MJ added. "At first it was hooked on to the fence line. When it didn't work, we'd have to go along the fence line to figure out where the wire was broke." "It would be funny," Ralph added. "Everybody would be listening in. We'd say 'get off the phone,' and we could count them as we heard them hanging up."

"Ralph's place—the house east of Center—never had a basement," MJ recalled. "We dug one out. He had a horse that would go down in the basement, we'd fill the scrap and then the horse would haul the dirt out. We used the tractor a little bit, but mostly we used the horse. We called him Buster."

"We put a furnace down in the basement," Ralph said. "We used coal space heaters before the furnace was put in. You'd get out of bed and the floor was so cold, you'd stand on one foot for a while, then the other foot for a while."

"At the home place, the water would freeze in the reservoir on the stove," MJ added. "You'd have to [fire up the stove to] thaw it out before you could use the dipper to get a drink of water."

Ralph farmed until 1985, then built a house in Morton County and went to work for the Farmers Union. He worked 13 years hauling gas before retiring in 1979, the year his wife, Margaret, passed away. He married his second wife, Louise, in 1984.

"I gained six more kids when I remarried," Ralph said. "Louise had three girls and three boys, so now I have 11 children, seven girls and four boys."

MJ farmed until 1981, when he turned 55. "Thirty-two years is a lot of rock hauling," he said. He sold his place to Larry Doll out of Bluegrass, but kept his 2-ton truck and hauled coal for schools and some of the dairies. He later sold the truck to Wilbert Mosbrucker, whose son-in-law, Keith (friends) Vitek took over the coal hauling.

MJ also owned The Corner Stop—now The Corner Express—for a few years. "It was only a gas station when I bought it," he said. "We added the convenience store when the grocery store [in town] closed down for a while."

He and Cecelia moved into Center in 1982, where they enjoyed visits with their children, grandchildren and even a few great-grandchildren. They both liked to go fishing, and each had their hobbies, enjoying retirement together until Cecelia passed away in 2008.

When asked about the "good ol' days," the brothers both listed simple pleasures as the things most lacking in the present time. "I miss that you knew your neighbors—you'd visit with your neighbors in those days," MJ said. "Most farmers these days don't know their neighbors."

"Somebody would play the accordion, we'd dance until the wee hours of the morning," Ralph added. "We used to have parties, visit the neighbors and play cards."

MJ picked up the ball and continued. "We rode horses to the neighbors," he said. "Nobody had any money, everybody was broke. We made our own fun, played ball, done a lot of fishing."

The brothers still play cards and go fishing. "Haven't had much fishing weather this year, though," MJ said. "Ralph's got to a pinochle club and goes out to the truck stop to visit with old friends."

Even so, neither has gone too far from his farming roots. Ralph still has a garden. "Planted tomatoes the other day, and the radishes are up," he said. "MJ has coffee with friends when he's in town and "not making sausage. I make a lot of sausage."

Sounds like the Hazenblihler boys are as close as ever and still pretty self-sufficient.

MJ Hazenblihler, while he was stationed in Anchorage, Alaska, with the U.S. Army.

The "custom cab" on this old John Deere 4G was made from part of a 1920 Chevy car. The modification was made before tractors were built with cabs already on them.

Ralph Hazenblihler on a transport ship heading toward Japan while in the Army during World War II.

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