Mina – pioneer woman of courage, strength

The Fisher – Martens Homesteads

By KATHY TANBERG

Much has been written about the men who braved the Atlantic for a chance at freedom and new life. Many came alone, some came with families.

But what of the women who came with a husband, not with parents, but with no one to protect them? They faced an unknown land, a country thousands of miles away from everything they held dear and familiar.

They were women of true courage.

Such was the plight of Dunn County homesteader Mina Martens Fisher, who filed claims for land in her own name as a single woman in 1909.

Her farm, located on the plains near Hallday, is still in the family today, owned by Mina’s grandchildren.

The stories of this true pioneer woman are cherished and shared here by Mina’s family, including her daughter-in-law Cora Fisher, granddaughter Jane Bauman, Golden Valley, and grandson Dale Fisher, Hazen.

The following includes excerpts from Mina’s journal written late in her life.

Mina’s American story begins in 1903 when she was a young woman of 17. She and her sister Hanah, 18, were beginning the journey of their lifetime. They were headed for America.

Mina: A little about your mother and dad to my three children, Irene, George and Helen.

I was born in Sulzarden, Germany, near the North Sea in a small town. Mother and Dad (Henry and Helen Martens) raised eight children...

In the year 1903 Hanah and I decided to leave our country as war was facing us and poor people like us, we were just slaves, $25 a year after eight years of school and age of 14 years we had to work on.

A plan was laid out before the girls left Germany. They were to go to relatives in North Dakota, seek work and send money for passage for the others to follow.

Mina: We left with a steamer, Kohlin. We were 14 days crossing the Atlantic Ocean from Bremen to Baltimore. From there with a train to Taylor, N.D. We had an aunt and uncle living there, as through a neighbor of theirs that had sent us the money so we could come.

Mina: We took together $150 for the trip and we had to have each $25 in cash (required by immigration for those entering America from other countries). We came third class. Must say the eats were poor but thank God we enjoyed our trip. We had only one small storm that lasted about four to five hours.

We lost a small child on our ship. They traveled first class but they were buried on the third class side so went over to see it. They say a few words from the Bible and let it down in a blanket with some heavy weight on it. The law is they can keep them when near land, but was about in the middle of the ocean.

My aunt had a small house, one room downstairs and the upstairs where we all slept, so we did not stay long.

Mina was the youngest of the sisters, the boldest. With neither of the women afraid of hard work, Mina soon found jobs for both of them.

Mina: The first one that came (with a job), I let Hanah go, $8 a month and I got $8 a month a week later. I wanted to work for English people and got my sister another job and myself too for $12 per month. So we heard nothing but English.

I must say we both worked very hard and said as soon as we pay this man back and have plenty to go back, we would hit home, but as we read our minds. As soon as we had the money together we let two more coming from Germany, my sister Helen and brother Wilhelm, 6 and 14 years.

My oldest sister (Hanah) got married and three of us made the money for the rest to come... We stayed there three years until the year my dad and mother and four children came.

Mina: I was making $20 a month in Montana at that time... My brother liked it better in North Dakota and worked for a farmer and my sister stayed closer to me, working both in Fort Keogh. I was over and learned her to cook and bake...

Now in America, Mina’s parents lived in Taylor for a year and then in 1907, their father, Henry, filed a homestead claim for land located about 5 miles southeast of Hallday.

It has not been said how the decision was made, but in 1909, Mina filed her own homestead claim for land about a mile from her parents’ farm.

Mina: Now to make my story short. I took up a homestead near to my father’s homestead and in 1910 I married a nice young boy. He was 28 years old and I was 24. In 1910, July 20 we were married.

The nice young boy Mina wrote of was Alton Fisher, a young man born in 1882 at Madrid, N.Y., who had an urge to travel west. His first stop was at Gilbee but not liking it there, he moved on until he found Hallday.

In 1906, Alton filed a

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George and his young son, Dale, take the team out to cut hay, 1940.
come from a farm across the river near Plaza, took her place beside George doing the work. She took Mina’s place stacking hay, milking the cows and doing whatever was needed.

“I tell you, you couldn’t sit down for a meal. Before you got done at the table, you had another job,” Cora recalled.

From dawn to dusk, besides milking and stacking hay, Cora gardened, canned meat and chickens, hauled chickens into Dickinson and sold eggs at the local market.

“You wonder how you ever done it. I told one lady that sometimes the only time I got any rest was when I milked cows,” Cora said.

Mina retired from farming in 1941, moving into Hallday to care for her aging mother. George and Cora continued life on the farm, raising a family of six, Dale, Darlene, Donna, Frohlich, Pick City; and Alton, Dennis and Georgia Schulz, all of Bismarck.

When the children were old enough to help, they had their chores as well. Dale, who had left the farm for a job in the mining industry, continued to help his father on the farm until George could no longer do it.

As long as it was possible, Dale tried to please his father when it came to getting him out into the fields, if for awhile.

“Dad didn’t want to quit farming, but he really could no longer do it. Dale had to put him in the tractor. He always said I’m going to die right here. It’s where I was born. And he did,” Darlene said.

“He basically would run the tractor and that made him happy,” Dale said.

Darlene and Dale share their mother’s memories of hard work on the family farm.

“We worked hard but had a lot of good memories, too. I always said I’d never marry a farmer because we worked so hard, but I did,” Darlene said.

Darlene’s son, Delon Bauman, now farms part of Mina’s homestead.

As a young man, Dale didn’t have farming in mind as a career. He left the family farm to explore outside employment. Later, he and his