Celebrating an immigrant's dream

By Kathy Tandberg

It was a cold winter day, Feb 14, 1911, when a young man from the Hebron area made his way cross-country southeast to Zeland, near the South Dakota border. He was headed to the home of his sweetheart, who waited for him to arrive before the sun came up.

Jacob Frey, 26, and Eva Berreth, 19, had a secret. They were going to elope.

As the family story goes, Eva sat by her bedroom window in her parents' home, watching for Jacob. When he tapped at the window, she opened it and quietly crawled out, and the couple slipped away.

From there they traveled across the border to Herred, S.D., and to the justice of the peace who made them man and wife. Following, they headed back to Hebron to settle into married life.

A German from Russia immigrant from Groissleben, Odessa, Russia, Jacob came to America as a child of 7 with his mother, Sophia, brother, John, and younger sister, Elizabeth.

The Frey family was struck by hardship even before their ocean journey began. While traveling to Germany, where they would board the ship for America, they were attacked by road bands. Husband and father, Jacob Sr., was attacked and killed by the bandits, dying from those wounds.

Sophia was suddenly alone with three children, but she had promised to fulfill the family dream and take their children to America. The new widow, traveling with other family members, agreed to marry another man on their ship.

The family entered America through Ellis Island in 1892 and then headed west. They ended up in Hebron, where more Frey relatives lived.

Life on the northern prairies in North Dakota was difficult in those days. When Jacob and John were 10 and 11, they were sent out to work as hired hands for area farmers.

The brothers set their minds to learning everything possible about their work. As soon as John was old enough and had enough money saved, he purchased a grocery store in Almont and Jacob began to work for him.

John went out again on his own to work as a laborer. He became familiar with farm machinery, including the new steam tractors. The knowledge led to a job working for the man who sold the machinery.

It is speculated that while traveling for that job, Jacob perhaps met Eva, who lived well over 100 miles from Hebron.

After Jacob and Eva married, Jacob fulfilled a dream he had for his future family - he wanted to become a landowner.

Shortly after their marriage he filed a claim for 80 acres of land near Hebron, through the Homestead Act of 1862. All they had to do to make the land theirs was to pay a small registration fee and live on the land continuously for five years.

The couple's grandson, Richard Frey, provided further details from family records.

"The story goes that they got to their land by wagon. After emptying it they turned the wagon upside down and lived under it until spring when the weather improved," Richard explained.

"Then they used the wagon to build a sodde."

After the five years of living and owning the land were over, Jacob came up with a new plan during a visit to the Bank of Hebron. There he learned, probably from the banker, that several acres of land in Mercer County just southeast of Zep had ended up in the bank's ownership.

"I don't know if the land was foreclosure or why it ended up there like that," Richard said.

The family does know the land had originally belonged to the railroad, so maybe the railroad no longer needed it or, perhaps, it had belonged to someone else.

Jacob quickly sold the Hebron homestead and purchased the acreage near Zep, land already, almost like a granary, but in bad shape. However, it would have to do for the time being.

When everything was ready for the family, Jacob and Eva loaded up household belongings and their three young children into a car. Eva drove the children - Elvis, 4; Thelma, 2; and Walter, 16 - to the new farm.

Jacob, with the help of friends and family, walked cross-country from Hebron through southwest Mercer County with their cattle, chickens, pigs, and sheep. In addition, he brought their machinery and everything else they owned to their new home in Mercer County.

The family settled in a new life in Section 29, Township 144, Range 29, eventually owning not only the northeast quarter but also the southwest quarter of land there. Jacob improved on the other building of sorts that was there, in addition to the granary.

Grandpa added a lean-to and they lived there quite a while, until 1931 or '72," Richard said. "He added a lot of lean-tos in those days, like a lot of people do.

Jacob built a new barn in the 1920s, which still stands today. He and Eva prospered, milking cows, selling eggs and chickens and Eva's home-made butter and cream, as well as garden products for many years.

The Frey family continued to grow to a total of 11 children: Elsie Schwabauer, Thelma Schwabauer, Walter, Arthur, Phyllis Yates, Gilbert, Florence Brueseman, Dorothy Simenson, Roland, Raymond, and adopted son, Armin. All were raised on the family farm.

This group of 11 has since grown the Frey-Simenson family into 39 grandchildren, 58 great-grandchildren, numerous great-great-grandchildren, and a few great-great-great-grandchildren. And the number keeps growing.

The public is invited to join the family of Jacob and Eva Frey as they celebrate 100 years of heritage Saturday, July 9, with a full day of activities that includes an evening supper. (See box page.)

Several generations of Frey family members will arrive to ring in this centennial, which will be held at the original farm location, where Jacob and Eva's daughter Dorothy still lives.

Dorothy and her husband, Allen Simenson of Kindred, bought the farm and its contents in 1958. The Simensons raised their family in the same house that Dorothy and Eva lived in, with a few additions that were added over the years.

Some have passed away a few years ago, but most of their children live in the area: Linda (Edwin) Kenneth, Richard, Larry, Russell, and Calvin. Richard and his wife, Aloha, also live on the family farm.

The Frey-Simenson family is looking forward to this celebration, though all but three of the original children have passed away. Armin just a few days ago.

It has been overwhelming, but I'm glad it's over," said Armin. "We're coming from Washington." Dorothy said. "Roland lives in Montana and is unsure if he will be able to travel.

Richard said family members are coming from several states, including California and Washington.

"We're celebrating the longest of times, because Grandma and Grandpa's dream: their ownership of land in the United States. It's a wonderful thing," Richard said.

Join the Frey-Simenson Centennial Celebration 1916-2016

Where: Public is invited to Frey-Simenson Centennial Farm Celebration
Where: Farm home of Dorothy, Richard and Aloha Simenson, 1051 County Road 11, 4 miles southwest of Zep.

Attend any or all of the events
8 a.m. - 10 a.m. - 5k run/walk at the farm
11 a.m. - 3 p.m. - Let the games begin horseshoes, boocie ball, hammerchogen and more
4 - 8 p.m. - Open House Social
5 - 7 p.m. - Supper provided for all by the family
5 - 9 p.m. - Music by Northern Lights