Her father’s helper
Harriet Meyhoff, Oliver County Honorary Old Settler

By KATHY TANDBERG

Harriet Meyhoff was born in Center and lived there most of her years until this past winter. But at one time she probably knew as much about early day farming as many men.

The second child of Fred and Alma (Schmeling) Kuch, Harriet has deep roots in Mercer and Oliver counties. Fred was the third child of German-Russian homesteaders who settled near Krem. Today the Kuch family lies buried in the Krem Cemetery.

When Fred was a baby, the family moved to the Red Butte area near the Mercer and Oliver border. Tragedy struck the family and he lost first his father, then his mother. Orphaned at the age of 9, the boy learned hard work early on. He was taken in and raised by a family nearby in Hanover. Fred also worked various jobs around Center, where he eventually met his future bride.

Alma was the daughter of German homesteaders, Frank and Emilie Schmeling, who besides farming, eventually lived in Center because Frank was the Oliver County treasurer.

The couple married and began their family in Center. Harriet was just 2 when her parents moved from Center to the Schmeling homestead 10 miles south of Center.

When Harriet, now 84, was old enough, just like most farm children she took on her share of chores. The day came when those chores turned into field work for the young girl. Her oldest sister, Charlotte, did the "women’s work" alongside their mother, which meant with no other siblings old enough, she had to her father.

In those days it didn’t matter that she was a girl. Her father needed help and Harriet worked by his side. While the work was hard, it also gave her a feeling of satisfaction amidst the struggles of farming in the 1930s and '40s.

"Grandma had long moved to town by then. I was just like a hired man to my dad because I had no brothers who could do it.

Harriet remembers both the good and the bad about farm life on what could be a hard prairie. The bad, as she called it, include dust storms one after the other, insects, snowstorms and snowdrifts 12 feet high.

Her favorite times of day on the farm were evenings and the sunset.

"I’d put the horses to rest and we could go rest. Then the sunsets were pretty to watch as the sky changed colors in the night came,” Harriet said.

Looking back on those days, Harriet said what she thinks most about that time now is the summer work.

"I got out there with the horses, cultivated corn, raised the hay, picked the mustard, picked rocks and stacked hay,” she said.

The one thing she didn’t do was threshing. When that time came her chores turned to helping her mother.

"I always felt sorry for Mom. All that cooking for the men, packing the food up and hauling it out to them and setting it up,” she said.

While helping work the farm was important, her father also believed in education for his children. She walked to the Sunny Side School, just a mile from the farm, for eight years.

"Now that school has been moved and is on the courthouse grounds in Center,” Harriet said.

Next Harriet attended Center High School where she graduated at the age of 18. She pointed out that this was the end of her formal education, but it was also a new beginning as that’s where she met her future husband, Ervin Meyhoff.

"He was a boy who courted me in high school, I graduated with him,” she said.

Ervin was the youngest of 11 born to Oliver County homesteaders, Dick and Clara Meyhoff. While Harriet moved from Center to the farm when she was 2, Ervin was 2 when his parents left the farm and moved into Center.

The couple married Nov. 19, 1944, in the parade Saturday morning.

Harriet Meyhoff is one of six honorary Old Settlers who will be riding raising their large family. She and Ervin made it a point to attend all the children’s sports games and other events throughout their years at school.

"We were a sports family, even the girls,” she said.

Harriet and Ervin’s children are Michael Meyhoff, Sandra Weisgerber, Rick Meyhoff, Brent Meyhoff, Susan Hagel, Terry Meyhoff, Kim Willows, Bruce Meyhoff, Tammy Luneborg, Tracy Walker and Pat Meyhoff.

There are now 19 grandchildren and 15 great-grandchildren.

Sadly, Ervin passed away 20 years ago, shortly after he retired. Harriet said she’s been alone a long time, but misses him. Having her family near has helped.

"I’m looking forward to a long life, that’s what everybody tells me I’ll have," she said laughingly.

A long life is the reason for her move this past winter from her home in Center to an apartment in Bismarck where everything is taken care of for her and she said she doesn’t want for anything there.

"Since moving here my health has improved. It was the kids who talked me into moving here. They figured I needed a rest from my yard and house. I see now it’s a lot better, and I can still visit my home in Center," Harriet said.

With most of her family still living in the area, Harriet enjoys frequent visits from her children and grandchildren. She’s honored to represent both her ancestors and Ervin’s.

"It’ll be a nice day to be in Center and see everyone,” Harriet said.

Alma and Fred Kuch, married in 1923, celebrated their 30th wedding anniversary in 1953. The family, from left, are Charlotte, Alma, Frederick, Fritz (Fred) and Harriet. The caption on the back of the photo, written by Alma, who always had a sense of humor, states, "Don’t you like the new suit Fritz (Fred) has on?" Fred had just come in from the field in time for the celebration.