Homesteader children loving life and the earth
Burt and Bernice Bornemann, 2010 Old Settlers Day honorees

By Kathie Tandberg

When Burt and Bernice Bornemann heard they were being honored among Oliver County's 2010 Old Settlers Day honorees, their first thoughts were of wonder.

Then they realized that with this honor, they are representing not only their life together as lifelong area farmers, but also their many ancestors before them — those who settled this land so many years ago as early homesteaders.

The very thought is something they are proud of. The very thought that they worked the same land that today mostly remains family land, and that they raised their children on this land as just as their parents and grandparents before them, holds special meaning for them.

Burt and Bernice were raised on neighboring family farms in Oliver County, both descendants from German heritage. Burt was raised on land homesteaded in 1884 by his grandparents, Christian and Elissa (Henke) Bornemann. Bernice was raised on land homesteaded by her grandparents, Henry and Marie (Frohm) Henke.

The Bornemann and Henke families have grown large over the generations and spread these deep roots into neighboring Mercer County and beyond.

Burt, 84, was born April 17, 1926, to Christ J. and Hattie (Wolff) Bornemann on a farm west of Hanover. The firstborn of the couple, he was still a toddler when his parents moved to his grandfather's homestead northwest of Hanover.

"I grew up with grandpa (Bornemann) around. I remember his horses used to get chewed up by him. He always called us 'blabbers,'" Burt said with a laugh, his eyes lighting up at the memory.

Burt attended the Hanover Parochial School, just two-and-a-half miles from the farm, with his three brothers, Donald, Dale and Larry. Larry still lives on the original Bornemann homestead. At first the boys journeyed to school with a one-horse cart. When the boys were old enough, they rode their own horse to school.

"Today they have three-wheelers, but we had horses then," Burt said.

Burt, his still abundant hair now snow white with threads of silver, recalled those early days with fondness. He described simple fun — swimming in a nearby stock pond with boys and girls from Center and Hanover.

"My grandma used to invite us in for cookies and milk, those big molasses cookies," he recalled.

Burt's memories of those days are clear. He remembers being a boy in the Dirty Thirties and how his father found a way to battle grasshoppers as thick as night by hauling a tank of kerosene on a trailer he made.

"It was 6 or 7 feet wide. He'd pull that with a team of horses and the (insects) would fall into the kerosene and die," he recalled. "I can remember seeing them flying through the air almost black against the sun. And I can still see thistles blown 12 feet high stacked from the wind.

When each son graduated from the eighth grade, their father gave each of them a half-section of land, 320 acres of their own. It was land, no buildings; those would be for each son to build when he settled down.

On a nearby farm, Bernice was born Jan. 23, 1929, in Bismarck, the youngest daughter of Herman and Lena (Brinkman) Henke. The older siblings, Raymond and Edna, were born in Minnesota where the family lived before coming to train in Oliver County in 1919 to join Herman's parents, Henry and Marie, who relocated to the county a few years before.

Bernice laughed as she said her name when born was Edna, but her older siblings didn't like the name so they always called her Bernice. It was many years later that Bernice still had businesses, and homes on Bismarck to officially change her name. Bernice grew up on her grandfather's farm close to Hanover. The same homestead is today owned by a fifth-generation Henke, Loren. Bernice and Burt recall those early days when Hanover still had businesses: a creamery and a John Deere dealership.

One of Bernice's favorite times on the farm was threshing. This was also one of the hardest times on the farm.

"I remember how threshing was a big deal. My dad was the top man on the threshing machine, I would help my mother. We didn't have running water then. We had a well by the house and it was my job to pump the water into pans so the men could wash up. Then we'd get their meals," Bernice said.

Bernice attended the same school as Burt, growing up as the girl on the farm next door. As children and teenagers they attended the same house parties, but she was younger and they didn't date. Then she said they "went together for four years before getting married."

Bernice and Burt married Sept. 18, 1949. Then he knew it was time to build up his farm on the land given to him by his father. He was 23 when he married and 23 when he began to farm his own land.

"We built the granary first, then the house, then the barn," Bernice said. Bernice, a petite woman with soft eyes said, laughing at the fact that the granary came first.

Remembering their days on the farm, Burt recalled what a worker Bernice's dad was, even later.

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"Her dad was a go-getter. He'd get me up at 3 a.m. to help him thresh," he said.

As the newlyweds began to build their farm, they also began to build a family of five children: Diane Heagle, Tim, Kay Augilar, Russel and the youngest, Karen Hintz. It was then, as a farm wife who got out into the dirt and helped her husband, that Bernice realized how special a homestead really was.

"To smell the plowed earth, that's when it held more meaning. When Burt got his own place, it really took hold, brought more meaning for both of us," she said.

Burt had terrible hay fever and working a farm had its hazards for him. His eyes and nose would constantly run. They stayed and worked their farm until 1978 when the sons took over the farm. Burt helped but when they moved to town he also began to drive school bus. Bernice also went to work at the courthouse and in 1990 ran for office and became the Oliver County clerk of court/register of deeds, a position she held until retirement a few years ago.

Though they sold the home place later, they still own the farm land. Sadly, the barn they built as a young couple burned to the ground just this January. When they spoke of the fire, the sentimental attachment to the place where they raised their family was evident as they grew quiet for a moment.

"We were just glad no one was hurt in the fire," Bernice said.

Burt and Bernice have remained active in the community and their church, St. Peter's Lutheran at Hannover. They taught Sunday school, ushered, served offices in league and sang in the choir.

Married 60 years now, they have 13 grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren, another reason they feel honored to be part of this year's Old Settlers Celebration.

"I think it's pretty special. We're privileged to be as old as we are and as healthy," Bernice said.

As for farming, Burt said he wouldn't mind farming nowadays with all the modern equipment.

"You push a button and it goes, the air conditioning runs and you don't get the dust all in your face," he said.

Sounds like the land of this multi-generational homesteader is still in his blood.