Farming strong into the sixth generation

The Keller Homestead

BY WILLIAM D. O’DELL

When Adam Keller first moved north to Mercer County from Trip, S.D., he was probably not thinking about his children's children's children's children one day coming back home to farm on the land he and his sons homesteaded more than a century ago.

However, Adam's great-grandson, Ivan Keller, 76, is seeing that possibility coming true as his grandson, Calab, has expressed an interest in coming back to the area after college to raise cattle on the family land where his father, Danny, and his grandfather still farm and ranch.

One of Adam's sons, Gottlieb homesteaded the land west of Coteau Properties Co. on Sept. 15, 1902. Two years later he married Emma (Fischer) in 1904. Walter (1906), Hilda (1907) and Ruby (1919) were born to this branch of the Kellers. And Walter married Katie (Becker) in 1928; their family grew with their children: Ivan (1931), Violet (1935), Judy (1945) and Larry (1949).

The current patriarchal head of the Keller farm, Ivan and his wife Irma realized there was some real history associated with their farm about four years ago.

“We talked about it that we should do something,” Ivan said.

“And then I got after you,” Irma reminded Ivan with a smile.

So the couple went through the process of verifying their centennial farm.

Irma explained that they went to the courthouse in Stanton where they were told that the courthouse had burned down once and lost a lot of records including the homestead records for the Keller farm. From there Ivan and Irma went to the Abstract office in Hazen where they were told to go to the state Land Department. From the Land Department, they contacted the National Archives in Washington, D.C., where they got a copy of the original homesteading paperwork.

After receiving a copy of the original homesteading paperwork, Ivan and Irma received a certificate verifying the farm as a 100-year farm from Roger Johnson, the N.D. Agriculture Commissioner, and the N.D. Department of Agriculture.

As for what happened those 105 years ago, Gottlieb only homesteaded one quarter with 160 acres and then eventually started buying up the quarters around him until he had nine quarters including three quarters he inherited from his father.

Of the original buildings, the only one that is still standing is a shop that was moved from the valley onto the hill. Ivan said he was unsure why the building was moved originally. He added that he had no idea what it was used for originally.

The area where the shop is now was where a chicken coop and a garage were built.

The house that Ivan and Irma live in was built in 1928, though there was also a summer kitchen that was built first. Their current home is the third home that Gottlieb had built.

Gottlieb farmed wheat, oats, corn and rye, and ranched shorthorn cattle eventually getting into Hereford ranching as well. The family also had dairy cow and sheep operations at one time.

Though Ivan and Irma have a copy of his grandfather's homestead papers, it took many weeks of communication including a call to the National Archive to get them.

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That was years ago that everything was diversified,” Ivan said.

And back in those days, you had to make do with what you had or improvise.

Since there was no dentist in town, Gottlieb served as the tooth puller for his children. He had a tooth-pulling device that Irma still has, which he used to pull his children’s teeth as he held their head under his arm.

“He was a real strong man. He put their head underneath his arm and he pulled their tooth for them,” Irma explained. “Can you imagine having your teeth pulled like that?”

Walter took over the farm from his father in 1948 though he had been farming with his father for many years beforehand. Irma explained that for many years Walter threshed with a threshing machine for the Keller farm and many other farms surrounding them. Ivan added that his father would sometimes thresh for five-to-six weeks “everyday but Sunday.” He said they would start in September and would thresh far into October.

Ivan’s father also had a reputation as a mechanic. When anything was ever broke down in surrounding farms, the farmers would bring their equipment to the farm for Walter. As Ivan grew older, he helped his father. Walter and Ivan worked on equipment for quite a few years.

“They sharpened plow laces and everything ... fixed cars and fixed trucks. They did all of that,” Irma said.

“There were no places. What he could fix he would fix for them.”

Ivan explained that he had thought at one time that he would become a mechanic, but his father broke his leg and he never left for school.

“At that point in time, agriculture was the thing you wanted to get into ... that’s where the money was,” Ivan added.

Ivan reminisced about farming with his father, “Dad and I raised hogs for a couple years ... you made more money selling oats for 50 cents than feeding it to the hogs.”

As for farming with his son, he said he’s going to continue farming as long as he can.

“When you get that in you once, that’s a bad disease. And you can’t find a cure for it,” Ivan said with a chuckle.

Of the 12 quarters owned by Gottlieb at one time, about half are still in the family after a couple were bought for mining. Ivan and Danny still raise wheat, peas, corn and canola as well as ranch Herefords and some shorthorns owned by Danny’s daughter.

Danny is one of four children of Ivan and Irma (Boeshans), 73, who were married in 1953 and had four children, Jacqueline aka Jackie (1954), Danny (1955), Debbie (1957) and Lori (1959). Danny and Deb have three children including Calab who plans to continue ranching on the farm.

And after six generations, the Kellers will continue to be a landmark in Mercer County.