A black and white life for the Laufs

The Lauf Homestead

BY JACKIE LONG

Cows have always roamed the fields of the Lauf homestead since before Elmer and Lucille Lauf, the current owners of the farm, were born. Waking up early to go out to the barn and milk all of their dairy cattle was something that became as familiar as brushing their teeth at the end of the night.

Elmer and Lucille have owned the Lauf homestead since 1956 when Elmer’s parents, Robert and Lea (Sailer) moved into Hazen. Over 50 years have been spent perfecting the farm to Elmer and Lucille’s style. Only a few buildings remain that Elmer’s grandfather, Robert Sr., had built when he first bought the land in 1893. The large barn still stands along with two greenery and the home Elmer was born in.

Robert Sr. and his wife Mathilda decided to settle in Mercer County after learning the land was up for sale. They purchased the farm in 1893. The couple came to the United States from Arzis, Bessarabia, South Russia. Four children were born to Mathilda by 1894 but a tragic disease, diphtheria, took all of the children less than a year after the youngest was born. Like any parents, the deaths brought a great depression on the household. But God gave the couple three more children after much prayer from Robert and Mathilda.

The only son, Robert, bought the farm from his dad for $20-40/acre for a total of 480 acres, Elmer said.

Robert and Lea had five children, four boys and one girl. Emil Lauf lives in Hazen and Iver Lauf lives in Bismarck while Elmer’s sister, Delora Kellar, lives in Pick City. One of the sons died as an infant.

“You wish the baby,” Elmer said although he was the youngest. Delora still had to work on the farm like her brothers but she was the only Lauf who was allowed to go to high school. She was also the only child to be born in a clinic that was located in Hazen, Motors is now located.

“They had a lady come in, like a nurse, for us,” Elmer said about his brothers and him being born in the sod house.

Elmer and his siblings would wake up early in the morning to start their chores, usually beginning with milking the cows by hand. By the time Elmer was 7 years old he knew how to make a cow give milk.

After the chores were complete it was time for school and the half-mile walk to the Knuckenberg School. The one-room schoolhouse had almost 20 children in it at a time. Once school was over for the day it was back to the farm again to once again milk the cows.

All of his siblings attended school up to eighth grade. The sons all had to quit school after this and helped out on the farm with their dad. Delora finished high school in Bismarck and stayed with her aunt and uncle who lived in town. Elmer wanted to attend high school because he was interested in the sports like basketball and football.

The German language was always used in the house by the Lauf family. Elmer doesn’t even remember hearing his grandfather speak a word of English. He would give his grandchildren a piece of candy and send them on their way with a German word of encouragement. Elmer’s parents spoke English but not very much while among their family. By the time Elmer went to school he said he spoke both languages about half of the time. But his teachers didn’t appreciate his native dialect.

“You’d get in trouble if you spoke it in school,” Elmer said.

Lucille’s parents also mostly spoke at home in German. The two continue their German dialect daily to keep the tradition alive. A few times during the month, Lucille and Elmer still go to “German coffee hour” with their friends where they only speak German.

When the farm was See Lauf page 16
sold to Elmer and Lucille after they were married in July of 1956, they decided not to build a new house right away. Instead a few additions were built onto their sod house. Wood was used as siding for the outside of the house and shingles were nailed to the roof. Since the only bathroom was outdoors or else a white pot for indoors when it was too cold, Lucille decided to add a small bathroom in the front of the house.

Cabinets were also built in the kitchen and the old coal stove was taken out with a new stove put in.

For almost 25 years, they lived in the small house with their only son, Brent, but in 1980 their current house was built. Elmer also had Quonsets built and grain bins plus additions to the old barn were made.

Every day chores had to be done like feeding pigs, chickens, cows, tending the garden and of course milking the cows. Lucille kept a garden that was half an acre until 2000. She has two smaller gardens now.

A surprise accident ended their tradition of raising dairy cows. On Thanksgiving Day in 1993 Elmer was pushing snow away from the loose-housing barn. A big snowstorm had been the cause of 33 inches of snow in front of the entrance to the barn. He was facing away from the barn and suddenly he heard a loud noise that he thought had been an airplane crashing.

“Here I turned around and the roof was down,” Elmer said.

The roof had collapsed with the sides falling toward the middle of the 50-by-50 barn. A few sleepy cows climbed out of the broken wood. It was difficult to watch as their cows climbed out getting cut along the way. The entire day was spent outside cutting off the power and rearranging the cows’ sleeping quarters.

“If I would have been in there in 10 minutes I would have been under it, with the cows,” Elmer said.

The next year the cows were sold to a buyer in Wisconsin but the memories of them will always last. One cow in particular had been a sweet animal that was always a delicate flower. Penny was her name and was always there to listen to her owners. When it was time to move from the milking station, Elmer would give the word and she would move.

“I miss my cows,” Lucille said.

Even though the land is now leased by a neighbor and their cows have gone to the cheese state, Lucille and Elmer have no intentions of leaving their land. The farm is all they know and since they’ve moved into their house, no more changes have really been needed.