The seed of hope, a Russian boy's dream

The Schlender Homestead

By Kathy Tandberg

The Schlender family homestead north of Golden Valley is a place that once existed in the hopes and dreams of the first family ancestor to immigrate to America, Adolf Schlender.

As a boy in Russia growing up along the Black Sea where owning land was impossible, Adolf knew that what he yearned for would never happen.

Later as an adult, he learned that far away in a land halfway around the world, there was a place where dreams such as his could be fulfilled, a place called America.

The U.S. Homestead Act of 1862 made dreams like Adolf's possible and though he was an older man with a grown family, he knew what he had to do.

In 1889, Adolf chose to take a chance on his dream. He journeyed to America with his wife, oldest son Gustave and the younger children. Their other grown children remained behind in Russia with their own families.

Adolf settled in the area north of Hazen called Krem, and then later Manhoven, where he died in 1898 never knowing if the rest of his family made it out of Russia. It wasn't easy to leave Russia where young boys and men were forced to serve in the army.

But Adolf's dream didn't die with him. He had planted the seed of hope in his children still living in Southern Russia. That seed had begun to grow and in 1899, Adolf II and his wife Sophia left Russia with their children, Gustave II, John, Adolf M. and Rosalia.

They came to America with Gustave I as their sponsor, first living with his family in Manhoven. The following spring of 1900, Adolf II filed a homestead claim for land north of Golden Valley, the first settlers in the area known as the Schlender School District.

There, not only did they farm thrive, but also their family. Heinrich, or Henry as he was known, was born in the district, presumably the first white child born in the community. Other children followed: Ida, Martha, Louise, Emma and Robert, who passed away as a child.

Adolf II was active in the progression of development in the area of Sofia. He was a religious man who not only cared about the education of his children and others in the area, but also was a shepherd caring for their religious welfare.

As such, Adolf II was Church, now relocated in the community of Golden Valley. Adolf II donated land where the church was later built in 1907 in the area of Sofia, just nine miles north of Golden Valley and down the road from his homestead. The church's beginnings include services that were held in the sheep shed on the Schlender homestead, as well as on the farms of other worshipers.

Adolph II passed away in 1934, five years after the death of his wife, Sophia. According to Henry's son, Melvin, who today lives on the original homestead, in the years before Adolf's passing, he made sure his children were settled into life with land nearby.

Henry and his wife Emma married in 1936, staying on the Schlender homestead. A little way from there, John was given 80 acres. Rosalia (Rehberg) was given land nearby. Further west was Gustave II, as was Ida (Schriefer).

"Grandpa bought out the places around him and so they pretty much all lived within nine miles of each other and they all managed to make a living. It didn't take much back then," Melvin said.

"You bought kerosene; you bought the tobacco, the flour and sugar. The rest you raised. You canned everything, even the beef."

Henry and Emma begin a family, with plans to raise their four children on the farm.

Melvin said his grandfather raised sheep, while his father raised more cattle, for dairy and beef.

But Melvin said, things don't always turn out as planned. Henry became ill and couldn't work the farm. He was 53 years of age when he died in 1953.

His children were still young. Norman was just 17 at the time, Schleider page 25

The Schlender family. Melvin Schlender's father, Henry, is the boy in black, front, center.
Melvin remembers how hard it was on his mother at the time, as well as his older brother Norman, who had to take over the place.

Norman worked the farm for a time, but like his father, he too, wasn't a well man and he had his first heart attack very early and had to leave the farm.

That left Melvin and Ralph to carry on the family homestead. The brothers made plans to expand. About the same time, two quarters of school land came up for sale and the brothers bought it. Then a neighbor died and they bought his place as well. Things were finally looking better for the Schlender family.

"Then Ralph got sick and by the time (the sales) were all settled, he passed away and it wound up with me," Melvin said.

All the early deaths in Melvin's life took a toll on the man. His heart was heavy with grief, but his faith is what got him through.

"In my life, He's always had a hand on me," Melvin said. "And Norman's boys, Melvin and Darwin, helped me out a lot."

Like his grandfather and father before him, Melvin has chosen a life on the land. When he married Fern Boeckel she was ready for the life that lay ahead. It's a life they have been proud to share with their children, Sherry (Walker), Scott and Jonathan.

The boys have worked the farm with Melvin over the years, with Scott and his family still living on the farmstead. Jonathan lives nearby. Both boys also have outside industry jobs, but still help their parents.

As grandparents, Melvin and Fern often babysit for the busy families. A typical summer day is from sunup to sundown.

"And when we babysit, they come out with us. That's when we have the joy, when the kids are here," Fern said.

Like his father and grandfather before him, Melvin is involved in the church that his family has belonged to since it was chartered in 1907. He continues to be active in civic matters and has served on numerous local and county boards and continues to do so.

The Schlender farming operation, like the inhabitants of the homestead, has changed over the years. Gone are the milk cows that even Melvin and Fern had for many years. Gone are the sheep, the chickens and the eggs. They still harvest crops of wheat, oats, corn and hay.

"The biggest thing today is cattle, mostly Herefords and some Hereford bulls. I cross-breed some, too, mostly with Black Angus," Melvin said.

As Fern and Melvin continue their work side by side, they continue to build the legacy they know will live on, now that they have seven grandchildren and one great-grandchild in the family.

"I said to them, 'Hey boys, take care of the place. You've go the best inheritance. A legacy to carry on,'" Melvin said.

The legacy is no longer a dream, the seed of hope planted so many years ago that began with the dream of a young boy in Russia.