Love of the life keeps her here

The Stern Homestead

BY WILLIAM D. O'DELL

For last 57 years there has been one constant on what was Steve Stern's homestead. That constant is his daughter-in-law, Shirley (Weigum) Stern, and her love of her family and the farming way of life.

Born north of Zap on a family farm, Shirley, 75, has lived on the Stern farm for 57 years after she married one of Steve and Katharine (Traxel) Stern's 13 children, Ray. The Stern farm, homesteaded in 1907, is about 6-7 miles south of Lake Sakakawea in Golden Valley.

While she does not actively farm, she helped raise her youngest son, Steven, farm the land until 2000, though she still has two of her own cows and buys calves every year. The rest of the land besides the original farm is currently rented out.

"It's all I've ever known in my life," she said about farming. Small in stature, Shirley seated in her kitchen drinks black coffee and nibbles on kuchen while telling the story of her family's farm. It is evident in her demeanor that she loves this farm that was homesteaded 100 years ago.

"I look at some of these places and they're vacant. It just bothers me. As long as I can keep doing it, I'm going to," Shirley added.

She began farming on the Stern farm shortly after she and Ray were married. Some remnants of that time still remain such as the threshing machine sitting in the front of the yard that was probably used for the last time in about 1963 when they bought a combine.

Throughout the farm's history, the Stern family mostly grew oats and wheat, which they threshed; corn was also grown for silage, chopped, put in piles and fed to the cattle. Shirley said when her husband was alive they had about 40 cows. Her son Steven purchased cows and rented land and pasture for awhile.

Shirley commented that they "practicaly milked cows year-round"; she said they milked about 18 cows when they got the milk machine. They sold cream until the cream was not bought anymore at which time they stopped milking except for home consumption. Like most farms at the turn of the century, the Stern farm was a self-supporting farm with much of the food for the family grown on the farm.

"In those days they basically raised their food. Otherwise, I don't think anyone would have survived even," Shirley added.

The farm was diversified into many different products including chicken, pigs, cattle and all the crops. When Ray was alive, they used the corn for pigs but not for silage. Shirley added that they still had pigs up until about 20 years ago.

"Similar to many farming families in the area, Steve and Katharine were both Germans from Russia. Steve immigrated in 1905 while Katharine immigrated in 1906. After their marriage in 1915, the couple lived and raised a family on their homestead until 1948 when the farm was taken over for a short time by a son-in-law before Ray and Shirley moved to the farm in 1950.

Steve homesteaded 160 acres to begin with and then purchased another quarter that had been homesteaded with 160 acres north of the farm and then two more quarters to the south. Throughout his life on the farm he was always a hard worker and a devout Lutheran.

In fact, St. Matthias Lutheran church was originally on the property owned by Steve and a cemetery still marks the area where the church was. The church was closed to N.D. Highway 1806 and the cemetery is located to the west of the Stern farm along the highway.

The cemetery is marked as St. Matthias Naesatz. Shirley explained that the church represented a community in the first half of the 20th century.

Unfortunately that pinochle passion was cut short in 1982 when Ray died. Shirley explained that Ray was feeding cattle and died on the tractor. She had went to church with her son Steven, and when they got home he went to look for his father and found him in a field.

After Ray passed away, Steven continued to farm the land with her until 2000 when he quit as well.

Shirley said she's been asked many times how long she's going to stay here and she replies "as long as I can."

Ray and Shirley (Weigum) Stern were married in 1950 and Shirley has been farming and living on the farm since then. 

Shirley Stern stands in front of the oldest building, her house built in 1921, on the farm homesteaded by her father-in-law, Steve Stern.