Albert Bauman: Man of the Prairie

American’s whom were born during the early twentieth century and matured between both World Wars during the era of the Great Depression have been referred to by journalist Tom Brokaw and many others as the “Greatest Generation.” This classification seems fitting considering the obstacles of poverty, lack of education and discrimination that faced many within this particular generation early in their lives and the prosperity and improvement in quality of life that was followed within their lifetime. While various generations within the United States have been identified, classified and labeled by sociologists, historians and other experts based upon each generation’s particular qualities, demeanor and distinguishing characteristics; many seem to view “The Greatest Generation” as being steadfast in their work ethic, humble, polite and gracious towards others. “They faced great odds and a late start but they did not protest.”¹ While these observations remain as generalization and do not certainly pertain to all individuals of this or any specific generation they do remain relevant towards many individuals including Albert Bauman, a member of the “Greatest Generation.”

Albert Bauman was born November 28th 1909, the son of Otto and Mary (Brecht) Bauman on a rural farmstead near Dodge, North Dakota approximately one mile south of the Fort Berthold Indian Reservation. Albert was raised in a Lutheran household with eleven siblings; six brothers and four sisters, Albert being the oldest of all of the

children.² Despite Albert’s parents settling within the “German Russian Triangle”³ an area within North Dakota that is predominately composed of families of Germans from Russia that homesteaded and settled within central North Dakota, there is never any specific mention of this aspect of his heritage within his records of genealogy or recorded interviews. Upon a closer review of his immediate lines of kinship to both the Bauman and Brecht families it appears that Albert’s family were likely descendants of the “Reichdeutsche” Germans that remained within central Europe instead of the German from Russia lineage of “Volkdeutsche” whom relocated during the eighteen and nineteenth centuries to areas within modern day Russia and Ukraine.⁴

The Bauman’s were originally from the Hamburg area of Germany but decided to move to Brazil went the nation opened up for homesteading. The Bauman’s left Germany in 1878 and remained in Brazil until 1882. During this period in 1880, Albert’s father was born on a remote homestead near the Amazon River. The Bauman family eventually migrated out of the region due to the harsh climate and possibly being a Protestant minority alongside the indigenous peoples of the Amazon and the Catholic dominated Latin American. The Bauman’s had extended family in La Sueur, Minnesota where he farmed 640 acres of land eventually to be bought out by the Green Giant Vegetable Company. Eventually the Bauman family relocated to Webster, South Dakota before settling near Dodge, North Dakota. Despite the limitations of Otto Bauman’s education, he was able to read in a competent manner and was skilled in arithmetic he was only able

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² Germans from Russia Heritage Collection, *Dakota Memories Biography Form, Albert Bauman* (http://library.ndsu.edu/grhc/dakotamemories/2008/bauman_a/bio_form.pdf, 2008)
⁴ Timothy J Kloberdanz, "Volksdeutsche the Eastern European Germans: Hungry for Land, Hungry for a Home: North Dakota's 'Other Germans.'” In *Plains Folk: North Dakota's Ethnic History.* (Fargo: North Dakota Institute for Regional Studies, 1988)119
to obtain an education to the fourth grade and was later employed as a farmer and mechanic. Albert describes his father as introverted, socially reserved and a strict disciplinarian of the household.\(^5\)

Of Albert’s maternal lineage, the Brecht’s were originally from the Black Forest region of Germany near Manheim. The family arrived in the Hebron, North Dakota area in 1885 by train. Unfortunately, Albert’s grandmother died while giving birth to Albert’s mother. Albert informs us that she was raised for a few years by the neighbors until Albert’s grandfather remarried. Albert describes his mother Mary with great contrast to his father and highlights her compassion, kindness and faith. Albert states that “he cannot recall her ever raising her voice toward anyone.”\(^6\)

For the Brecht’s and Bauman’s, the opportunity for prosperity within the Great Plains of the United States was an opportunity to escape the various political, religious, economic and social realities that existed within Germany and Brazil. “From 1878 to 1890 the population of North Dakota increased by more than 1,000 percent- from an estimated 16,000 to 191,000. In a dozen years the boom had brought farms, towns, newspapers, schools, churches and settled ways of living to an empty grassland.”\(^7\) Soon after the arrival and settlement of both the Brecht and Bauman families within this region of western North Dakota; both of these families began the process of homesteading upon the prairie. As the both Otto and Mary matured they soon courted, married, made a new home for themselves and had a son, Albert.

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\(^6\) Albert Bauman. *Photo Album Tour by Cassie Ptacek*.

\(^7\) Elwyn B. Robinson, *History of North Dakota* (Omaha: University of Nebraska Press 1966) 134
Growing up as the eldest male upon farmstead in rural North Dakota exposed Albert at an early age to the nearly constant cycle of repetitive, labor intensive and time consuming routine of completing a significant portion of chores. For many “there was no question of "if" or "whether" to help” was the daily reality. While the early American twentieth century is often referred to as "The Progressive Era” due to the sweeping social reforms, it was also a time in which the nation shifted from being predominately rural demographically toward being predominately urban. “At the beginning of the 20th century, rural America was the center of American life. It was home to most of the population and was the source of food and fiber for the Nation's sustenance and commerce. And most of its people were involved in producing that food and fiber. The typical rural community in 1900 consisted of a small town or village with numerous small farms within a few miles. Most people lived their lives and fulfilled most of their needs, economic and otherwise, within this community. They had little contact with areas beyond the community.”

For those upon rural farmsteads it remained a time in which both men and women were often segregated from each other while women primarily focused upon completing indoor chores and men focused upon the crops, livestock and other outdoor tasks. Despite the technological blossom that had resulted from the Industrial Revolution a century earlier and major advances that had been gained toward an improved quality of life; it seems that conditions changed little upon the prairie of the Great Plains of North America. Plowing, planting, harvesting and transporting crops to local elevators

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continued to be performed by teams of mules, horses and other “beasts of burden.”

Albert’s early chores included feeding and gathering cows, chickens, pigs, horses, cleaning barns, cutting, gathering and unloading hay and milking.\(^{10}\)

The American concept of being provided a free, quality, public education was an ideal of the Enlightenment that survived through agony of the American Revolution. As the nation began to grow the leaders of the new nation “set aside the sixteenth section from each township for the establishment of common schools”\(^{11}\) within the Ordinance of 1785. This simple but effective designation allowed for a centrally located school to be located in each township which minimized the travel distance for all students and faculty.

Despite these noble efforts, the overwhelming dependency upon child labor in terms of gaining another wage or toward maintaining the overall vitality of the farm often resulted in the education of children in becoming a secondary concern for many families. “In 1910 about thirty percent of farm boys finished six grade and less than one percent finished high school. Half of the teachers who taught in rural schools had never taught before—a situation that would continue into the 1930’s. Half of North Dakota’s youngsters attended one-room schools during the state’s first half century.”\(^{12}\)

Due to the lack of funding and facilities as well as only having one teacher; Albert describes the school room as being arranged by grade. Often times it seems that the “older” students that were often indentured to tutor the younger students during class.

Mornings were usually spent reading, followed by recess and arithmetic. Although the


methodology employed within the one room country schools may seem primitive by today’s standards it did satisfy the immediate educational needs and desires for most families within this rural region.

The 1920’s in North Dakota was a time of low commodity prices and political factionalism among farmers as well as the era of Prohibition. Although life was difficult for most North Dakotan’s during these years it did not compare to the hardships of 1930’s. “The state suffered immensely during the years of depression. Many farmers lost their land and those that survived paid a high price: falling land values, meager crops and unsatisfactory prices. Per capita income was less than half the national average. Tied to the one-crop economy (wheat), North Dakota fell victim to drought. Both depression and draught raved the state. Federal programs brought over $260,000,000 into the state meant survival, but almost 90,000 North Dakotans, their confidence shaken, gave up and sought greener pastures in California or Washington. Yet, those whom stayed won the battle.”

By February of 1934, Albert married Pauline Erdman in which they both began to operate their own farm near Dodge, North Dakota. To further supplement the couple’s income Albert was able to obtain work, constructing roads as part of the federal Works Progress Administration. As conditions and quality of life within America slowly began to improve; the United States lay victim of a surprise attack by Japan upon American forces stationed at Pearl Harbor in December of 1941. As the United States officially declares war on Japan, Germany and Italy to enter formally enter World War II, a sense of urgency to protect and defend America sweeps through the nation. As a thirty-two year old farmer with children, Albert however is granted a low priority status for military

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service by the local draft board. Although he would never wear a uniform, Albert did
serve a crucial role to the overall welfare of the United States in the roles of a farmer and
as a member of the local rationing board.\textsuperscript{14}

Unfortunately little available documentation surrounding his life following World
War Two is currently available to those whom did not know Albert personally. Albert
continued to farm and raise his children within the Dodge area of North Dakota and in his
spare time enjoyed fishing. Interviews conducted in June of 2008, reveal not only a good
physical appearance but also a keen memory and intense sense of humor for a man of
ninety-eight years of age. Despite Albert’s death on December 22\textsuperscript{nd} of 2009\textsuperscript{15}; one can
look back on many honorable qualities of yet another member of “The Greatest
Generation” that have passed on.

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Work’s Cited

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