

EARLY LIFE ON “THE FARM”

As told to Loren Hettinger by Leona Lebsack Steinmetz, 2006

In looking back over a long life, there are many events and pathways that one can point to as being definitive in characterizing one’s outlook. But in my case, I always go back to my roots of growing up on “the farm” in northeastern Colorado, north of Proctor. I was born Leona Pauline Lebsack in Hastings, Nebraska on October 5, 1916 to Jacob and Katherine (Klein) Lebsack. I was the sixth in what would eventually become a family of ten children. The core of this family had emigrated with four young children in tow (Jake, Fred, John, and Lydia) in 1912 from Frank (now *Medveditskya* and near the *Medveditsa* [Bear] River), Russia. This village is located on the rolling hills of the steppe approximately 40 miles southwest of Saratov, above the fabled Volga River valley. Our family’s emigration was part of the large influx of people from the German colonies into the United States and Canada at this time.

Most of these Germans from Russia brought with them a wealth of farming knowledge, including how to grow sugar beets. This knowledge was the defining fabric of our family—a fabric woven with thick strands of manual labor. Until agricultural research in the 1960s produced single-plant seeds, beet seed sprouted into multiple plants, and a tedious job resulted to thin these lettuce-like sprouts to a single plant approximately every 6 to 8 inches in the row. Harvesting likewise was done by hand after the beets were furrowed out, by first a horse-pulled, then later a tractor-pulled disc. Each beet was manually picked up and the green tops chopped off with a long, machete-like knife, the beets piled in one direction the tops in another. The knives usually had a 3-inch prong on the front for snagging a beet to be topped. I think many of us had scars on the back of one hand from learning how to top beets. The beets were then loaded into a truck using a wide multi-toothed fork, until someone invented mechanical loaders--no doubt an ex-farm kid who was tired of shoveling. Eventually, the entire beet-harvesting operation became mechanized.

Many of the Germans-from-Russia had very humble beginnings in the United States, having brought very little with them in the relocation. My family first settled in Nebraska, as Dad had work on the Union Pacific Railroad. But farming was the ultimate goal, and the family moved from Nebraska to northeastern Colorado near Proctor, in May of 1917, and worked thinning and harvesting beets for John Hamil.

Dad always said I was born hungry, because Mom apparently did not have enough milk, and they both walked the floor with me to try and get some peace in the house from my crying. Finally, Mom poured boiling water from the teakettle, that was a constant companion of the coal stove, over saltine crackers and the mush was put into a cloth for me to suck. This seemed to help. I like saltine crackers to this day.

All of the family that were old enough worked in the beet fields, which left some of the children to take care of the younger ones. In one instance, Lydia, who was 5 years old, took care of Clarence, my slightly older brother, and me. I was about 8-months old at this time. The Hamils had given us a rambunctious puppy, but Lydia was afraid of it. So, one day she locked it in the shack with me, and she and Clarence started walking out to the field. Mom saw them in the distance, and knew something was wrong, so dropped her hoe and ran to the beet shack where I lay in a cradle, already bleeding from puppy scratches. On another day, Lydia decided she needed to be with Mom and took Clarence across a plank that crossed over a ditch of water. He fell into the water, but Lydia fished him out. She took him back to the house, took off his wet clothes, put a sheepskin coat on him and headed out to the field again, this time with no mishaps and no pants.

The following year our family moved to a farm north of Proctor. We started farming this place in the spring, and that was during the flu epidemic. Dad had gone to Proctor with a team and wagon to get supplies and came home late in the day, so sick he left the team standing in the yard still hitched to the wagon. Mom put him to bed and heated bricks in the oven, placing them in bed to ward off his chills. She then went out to take care of the horses, which included unhitching them from the wagon, taking off the harnesses, and putting the animals in the barn for water and feed. Dad was in bed for several days with alternating chills and fever. Finally he got better and was the only one in the family to get the flu.

After another year we moved to a farm one-quarter mile west of what would eventually become the home place. The frequent relocations were to try and farm better land, as many of the farms at that time were in

rocky, poor soil, and needed a lot of attention, including spreading and tilling in large amounts of manure (of which we had plenty--one of the benefits of a mixed farm operation). My only memory from this place is that small salt and peppershakers were left on the kitchen table. I stood on a chair to play with them and got pepper in my eyes. I then lay on the floor and cried until my tears washed the pepper out. My sister Rachel was born while we lived on this farm.

The next year we moved to the home place--later to be known to this day as "the farm," which is located 3 1/2 miles northwest of Proctor near the intersection of County Roads 56 and 65. At first it was an unkempt weedy yard. The weeds and trash were raked up and burned. Mom tossed potatoes into the fires, and after they had been burned black, we kids ate them, and thought they tasted great! Mom baked bread for the family twice a week. If any old bread was left it was given to the ducks and chickens. She often soaked it in water for the ducks, and often as not there was a group of her hungry children ready for a treat as well.

We had a large brown dog at this time, named Kaiser, who was very gentle with us children. As well as being weedy and unkempt, the yard was infested with flies that chewed the edges of the dog's ears and its nose. Mom put axle grease on these areas to try and help him. This remedy was applied quite often, and seemed to work. In any of these more domestic situations, Mom had to take the initiative, as Dad was too busy, and was hard-nosed about survival of the fittest, except that he had a soft spot for the horses.

About this time, a rancher was pasturing Hereford cattle on the beet-tops that had been left in the field. This was a common practice, and the tops and any beet parts made good feed. When the rancher wanted to move the cattle out, one cow had a new calf. The rancher didn't want to be slowed while driving the cattle, and gave the calf to Dad. I was elected to help Mom teach the wild calf to drink milk from a bucket. She held the bucket and pushed the calf's head down, while I put my fingers into its mouth for it to suck and to give it a taste of milk. It bucked and bawled, so we fought with it for several days, but finally won. This calf grew up to be one of the milk cows, but never lost its wild roots. Clarence was the only one that could milk it, and had to snug it to a post with a rope and use hobbles. Dad finally sold it, and we were glad to be rid of this wild range cow.

Jake, as the oldest kid of the family, was always the boss. One time he dunked me in a stock-water tank. We usually wore one set of overalls all week, so I had to stand in the sun until they dried. Clarence, who was several years older, liked to talk me into helping him, and for a time I would go with him to herd the cows in a weedy pasture with numerous jackrabbits. We were there all day, so carried a pail with lunch and jars of water with us. I think lunch consisted of crackers and sausage. We would take the cows back to the home place at dusk, but coyotes would often howl by then, and I was afraid they would get me. Clarence tried to take my mind off them late in the day by building a small farm with corrals out of jackrabbit "pellets," and we would line them up into squares and rectangles and use small stones for animals.

As was the case in the pasture, our entertainment consisted of simple things, such as making mud people after a rain and putting them on top of fence posts. Mud balls were used to try and knock them off. Another game was to walk the top board of the fence around the corrals. However, we were no match for a set of twin-boy cousins that could run the top board of the fence like circus high-wire artists, and were more daring than we were in the game of fence tag. A slip, and skinned shins were one of the more genteel risks of this game. A Sunday afternoon visit after church by this family was characterized by one of the parents hollering out the door of the house, "Get off'n there before youse kill your selves!" We would then go play in the hayloft of the barn for a while.

As I grew, I was given more responsibilities, such as taking water or lunch out to the adults and older children working in the fields or taking care of my younger sisters, Emma, Rachel, Freda and Ernestine (Ernie). I remember taking a pail with food though a wheat field out to where the rest of the family was working. I was just tall enough to see over the wheat, but a dog went with me and had to bounce up occasionally like a kangaroo to see where it was going. Before I left for the return trip, Jake gave me some chewing tobacco and dared me to hold it in my mouth all the way home. I was smart enough to realize halfway back that he would never know, and finally spit it out, after feeling somewhat queasy.

One of the chores for us girls was to milk the cows, which we named for fruit, such as Peaches, Plum, and Cherry. Even Dad started using these names. Peaches was a lazy cow, and would stand by the fence in the shade. I gradually got her used to my weight, holding onto the fence just in case she decided to run away. But she was too lazy to get excited. Peaches seemed to like the idea, so eventually I rode her home from the pasture as we got the cows in for milking.

Of course, one of the main jobs for all of us was to help out with beet harvest, and we five girls and Mom topped 45 acres of beets one fall in 3 weeks, which even Dad thought quite an achievement. Lydia by now was old enough to do the cooking and would leave the field to prepare the noon meal, which we called dinner, and then in the late afternoon to prepare supper. My older brothers, Jake, Fred, John, and Clarence, as well as two hired brothers, John and Ted Dobler (Ted would become Lydia's husband), helped with the topping, and then loaded the topped beets into trucks with forks to haul them to Proctor to the beet dump. Any small beets and soil that ended up in the load were screened out and then conveyed back onto the truck as "tare." Anyone not waiting for the tare, or missing the right location to receive it was considered a real rookie.

The farmers often had contests to see who was harvesting the most each day or hauling the most loads to the dump. Uncle Dave Amen, who lived on the next farm to the north, had a hired man named George Mc Bride, who was always teasing and doing crazy things. He would go along to the beet dump and shovel the tare out on the way back to save time. So, we would see this truck zooming along the road past our place with dirt flying out the back and this man shoveling like crazy. Dad would always just say, "What a *hunyuk!*" This term, in our Russian-evolved German, was the equivalent of "idiot."

In addition to milk cows, we always had chickens for eggs as well as for meat (stewing, roasting and frying). Mom would mark the chicks so she would know what hens they came from by clipping different numbers of notches from their toe nails. Dad's work always came first however, and if he hollered for help, she had to drop everything and run outside. This caused several accidents. Emma, who was about 5-years old, helped out by taking the scissors and snipping off several of the chick's heads. Peeling potatoes and being called outside later resulted in Ernestine (Ernie) cutting the forefinger on her left hand which bled all over the potatoes, cellar floor, and gave her a crippled finger.

However, Mom, with help from us girls, always did her housework, baking, sewing, and cooking as well as the field work, such as listing or planting and cultivating beets or corn. In all of these chores, my recollection is of her in a long dress and an apron, even while driving a team. For a while we had a horse named Prince, who was anything but, being very skittish. One exciting incident occurred when Mom was listing corn behind Prince and the implement hit a rock, which caused her to be thrown off the seat in front of the implement. Prince uncharacteristically stopped, looked back to see what was wrong, and Mom was able to get back onto the seat, talking calmly to the horse hoping it would not run, and only had some bruises to show from this near miss.

Whereas Dad was very pragmatic in his approach to work, Mom was less so, and was kind to the animals. While listing corn, she would often lift the depth one notch up on the lever to be easier on the horses, especially on really hot days. This was after Dad had set the depth before going off to another project. I think in this case to help the Pyles, our neighbors, put in concrete check dams in the irrigation ditches. Later there was a rainy period and some of the corn was not sprouting. Dad was crawling along trying to figure out why some was rotting, and said, "I don't know . . . where I planted, the seed is rotting, and where you ran the lister it is coming up already!" She finally confessed to raising the depth on the planter.

This concern and passion to treat the animals well was evident other times, such as when a large boar ripped into the chest of our saddle pony. Mom had me help her hold warm oatmeal poultices to the pony's chest to draw out the infection. She told me, "Pigs are dirty animals!" The pony survived with two long scars on its chest, and I think the boar was eventually made into sausage. Mom gave the same care to a horse called "Babe," who tangled with barbed wire, and cut its back leg to the tendon. Mom treated the wound for several weeks, but the horse continued to work from then on with a stiff leg, and we all felt sorry for it.

Dad in his passion for the horses would often kick the chickens out of the barn and horse stalls and try to discourage them from roosting there and making a mess with their manure by dunking them in the stock watering tank. The chickens didn't seem to learn from this lesson of being caught in the barn, or at least didn't pass the word to others. Dad also did not have an affinity for cats, although we had plenty to control mice and rats. Ernie and Freda, as the youngest of the family, often used the kittens as dolls, and would have them in a baby buggy or cradle. They knew enough to put the kittens in a bedroom out of sight when Dad came in for dinner (lunch). Of course all of them had names, but I only remember "Thesby."

These are some of my memories growing up on the farm. Although we worked hard, and this was very much expected of all of us kids, we also tried to make our chores fun. We remained into our teens and adult lives very close-knit, visiting each other as often as possible, sometimes going on outings together, to Loveland, for example, to pick pie cherries in the orchards with our own children in tow. Our children, grandchildren and great or, in some cases, great-great grandchildren still meet for reunions, and this is by now quite a tribe. Some of these reunions occur at "the farm" which is still in the family, and is a place that brings all of the family together more than any other.

By now, 2006, there are only three of us left: Rachel, who lives on the farm; Freda, who lives in Minnesota; and me in Greeley. Jake, the oldest of the family, who was born in Frank, Russia--the one who would try anything at least once and tempted fate so many times--passed away in 2003 at the age of 96, having transgressed through the eras of horses, automobiles, jet airplanes, and space travel. Well, I guess all of us went through this transition. In looking back, these memories are bittersweet, as it is a time lost now, yet these memories are steeped in nostalgia as thick as the sugar-beet syrup Mom used to cook for us on the cal stove. I remain very fond of all my brothers and sisters, Jake, Fred, Lydia, John, Clarence, Rachel, Emma, Freda, and Ernestine, and the lives we shared in humble beginnings, developing a thriving farm in the "sticks," as our children say, in northeastern Colorado.