

Remembering 100 years: 1905-2005

PIONEERS:
The
Busch
and
Berning
Families
of
LaMoure County
North Dakota

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Some Photos and stories on the web:

MEMORIES OF RUBY (BERNING) FITZGERALD

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In the springtime planting would be the main concern. I remember especially cutting up potatoes for seed. There would have to be at least one "eye" in each hunk of potato. We had a cellar, no cement walls, but it was deep enough for storing potatoes without danger of freezing. Dad told us he had dug the whole thing by hand. It must have been a back-breaking job. I suppose the basement was at least ten feet square and six feet deep or more. Mom kept her canned jars of jelly and preserves on a hanging shelf. Also pickles and various vegetables. We learned to be wary of getting up potatoes for meals without a light, as it was known to happen that once in awhile one could grab ahold of a salamander in the dark bin of potatoes.

After planting and sprouting a very large patch of potatoes would have to be hoed. We would each have to do a certain number of rows each day. Then when all were hoed we'd start all over again at the beginning and do it again. At least two or three times.

First of all, in the morning Mom would make oatmeal or cornmeal mush with raisins or cracked wheat cereal. This happened after Dad had got up and started the big, black iron range with kindling and lignite coal. When he came in from feeding the animals, milking the cows and watering all the animals we'd all have breakfast with big slices of homemade bread and butter and all the milk we could drink.

As we got a little older and learned how, we'd help with the milking and also pumping the water. Oh yes, at least once a week we'd have pancakes with syrup and butter. Mom was a good cook. She cared about her cooking and took special pains to make it tasty. Made wonderful bread. Baked 6 or 7 loaves at least three times a week. Dad had nothing but contempt for store-bought bread.

Our dinners and suppers were very similar. Big meals of potatoes and meat and various vegetables. Dinner was at noon when Dad and whoever was helping in the fields came in. Supper was at six and in-between times a little lunch would be sent out to the fields.

After supper and chores were over we'd often play whist. We'd have sing-a-longs where everyone would join in to the accompaniment of a guitar (mail order from Wards). We always had lots of books to read.

Dad often referred to Franklin D. Roosevelt as the man who saved the farmers. I have no idea where they voted or even if they voted. Probably at a school house. Both Mom and Dad could speak and understand some German. I remember then singing Stille Nacht Heilige Nacht on Christmas eve. When there was an influx of German Russians at the Berlin Catholic Church congregation they spoke together in a foreign language that Dad could not understand, although he did try to converse with them. They

spoke English also which helped, but he said their German was very different from the High German that he knew.

According to Dad, his mother's father had been very poor in Germany, herding cows and living on black bread. I believe Mom's folks were better off. She and her people spoke Low German. I believe the distinction was north and south [Germany]. Both families left Germany because of the everlasting wars and conflicts going on over there. They wanted a better life.

I remember Dad saying that the Civil War started shortly after [the families] arrival in the States and that some of the men of the family went up to Canada to avoid jumping from the frying pan into the fire, so to speak. They had had enough of wars.

We bathed mostly with "sponge" baths. A big pan of water a bar of soap, wash cloth and towel. Start at the top and work on down. We kept clean. We studied hygiene in the schools. Sex and reproduction were big secrets, but living on the farm was a natural lesson in the facts of life. It was all around us. As I remember, people were mostly normal, except for a little overindulgence at some of the bars - only one each in Grand Rapids and Berlin.

Uncle Ferdie had a tractor. It was the first I remember. George drove it all day long. I believe he called it "poppin' Johnny". I believe he bought it new about middle of the thirties. Uncle Ferdie was quite mechanically inclined. I remember the big threshing machine he pulled into neighboring fields as well as Dad and kept the whole conglomeration of pulleys, wheels and belts running right along. He always had an oil can in his hands. He always made a sure to position the blower so that the chaff blew with the prevailing wind. Itchy stuff, that chaff.

We all got along well, although we did argue, especially about who did the dishes last. After my brother Gussie left for the CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] I helped Dad with outside chores. Every month a check came for \$25.00 from the CCC's. It was a godsend in those depression days.

We went to town to buy salt, sugar, and kerosene for the summer stove and the lamps. We went to LaMoure, Berlin and Grand Rapids. At least once a month there was a Farmers Union dance at Grand Rapids and we usually attended. Everyone bought a lunch and at the intermission all would sit and visit. The Farmer's Union would make the coffee. People would bring all the family and when the little ones went to sleep they would lie among the coats on the benches lining the dance hall, and sleep peacefully the rest of the dance.

I remember Dad hitching up the team to the grain wagon and going to Grand Rapids to get loads of lignite coal for the winter. It was at least a ten mile round trip journey. Lignite coal was mined in western North Dakota. I understood that it could be easily loosened from the top of the ground. It was a "cross" between wood and coal. It

would come in huge chunks that when stood on end and hit with the blunt end of an ax would break in to many thinner hunks, and they in turn had to be broken so as to fit in the coal stove. There was a trick to burning it to get the most constant heat and that was to move all the glowing embers at the height of heat to one side of the heat box and then filling the empty side with fresh lignite. By the time the glowing embers started dying down, the fresh lignite would be starting nicely and so on and on. The best thing about lignite was it was cheap.

Whenever we went over to Busch's we'd have sing-a-longs. Usually Lucina would play the piano, Uncle Ferdy played the fiddle and George the Saxophone. We loved it. We sang "Shine on Harvest Moon" "There's An Old Spinning Wheel in the Parlor" "Rain, when you gonna rain again, Rain?" "Red Wing". Dad sent for a guitar from Ward's catalog (Mom's idea). It came with instructions and I learned to play enough to strumming along to many songs. Gussie was real good at it.

I don't remember any serious prairie fires. Dad would some times "burn off" a field of stubble. He was very careful of which way the wind was blowing. We'd all have buckets of water and burlap sacks handy to beat out any strong fires. Burning made fields much easier to plow. Usually as Gussie was "dragging" the field after plowing he'd find arrowheads. We also picked up several Indian hammers. Big rounded stones with a groove around the middle where it had been fastened to thongs and wood. In our pasture there were several hollowed out places that Mom and Dad said were buffalo wallows. They also spoke of coyotes and wolves around when they first came to Dakota back in 1906. They could hear them at night. Mom said the coyotes would sometimes try to lure the farm dog away at night, and Dad told about one evening almost dusk when he was finishing plowing for the day he looked back and saw four wolves following. Said it gave him the creeps.

We had kerosene lamps and lanterns for light. They seemed to cast a warm, cozy glow and we read many books and played many card games by their light.

We had many blizzards but none so bad that we couldn't get out to the barn to tend the animals or to the coal shed. Several times the road past our farm would be blocked with snow for weeks at a time. The mail would be left at a neighbors mail box about a mile away. It was a cold walk, but we'd bundle up. We would see pheasants sitting in the lee of a snow bank, frozen solid.

We received the LaMoure Chronicle once a week. Once a month The Dakota Farmer would come. During the summer months Tony Swanson from Berlin would stop by with Watkins products. He had a crate on the back of his car for chickens that farmers wives would trade for spices and flavorings.

I remember Gus had a write up in the LaMoure Chronicle when he made captain in the Marines during the 2nd World War. We thought it was quite an accomplishment in view of the fact he hadn't even gone to high school, and it wasn't until after the War and

his marriage that Gus got his G.E.D. and went on to become a printer in the newspaper business.

The neighbors all pitched in at harvest time. There would be at least four or five men beside Dad and all us kids helping to pitch bundles and shovel grain. As I mentioned before, Uncle Ferdy would have the thrashing machine and be in charge of keeping it going. We had some wonderful huge dinners then.

When we first moved back to N. Dak. in 1933 we had to get our water from Busch's until Dad had cleaned and repaired the well on our farm. He also bought a Hereford cow from Uncle Ferdy - we called her Brownie. I think Dad got a real good deal from Uncle Ferdy for her. Seems like it was around ten dollars, and she was always a good milk cow. The Busch's were always helpful good neighbors and relatives. I can remember some wonderful Sunday dinners that Aunt Rose prepared.

I think Dad took his grain to Grand Rapids. It was a little closer than Berlin. It was about a nine or ten mile round trip. When my brother Gus was home he'd ride along. I don't believe the grain wagon was covered. Dad would only take it to town when the weather was nice. Kept it stored in the granary.

The folks really never mentioned anything about other races. I suppose because there weren't any around. I never heard a racist remark at home.

The mail order catalogs were a godsend to the farmers families. They were our department stores, our wish books and finally wound up in the outhouse. It was always a day of great excitement and joy when a package would arrive in the mail from Sears or Wards. Sometimes if clothes or shoes didn't fit right they'd have to be sent back - reordered and then the waiting would begin all over.

We always had a telephone. It was a crank telephone. Everyone on the line had a certain number of rings. I think ours was two rings. You could pick up the phone and listen in on conversations. We very seldom did, but every once in a while it was fun to listen in. Of course everyone was pretty careful what they said anyway. If there was a reason for a general call, there would be a series of about seven or eight rings in a row. Mom said that when Halley's Comet was seen someone gave a general ring and said "the world will end at noon today." Created quite a stir. Uncle Ferdy kept the telephone lines in good repair. I remember one of several bad snow storms when the drifts piled so high that we could easily jump over the telephone wires alongside the house in the southwest corner by the trees.

Aunt Ceil and Uncle Frank Lange and Aunt Bertie and Aunt Julie came to visit all at one time. I still have a picture of all the group at a picnic at Grand Rapids Park. It was a lot of fun.

Mom & Dad never hit or spanked any of us, but with a "look" they could make you tremble. We could argue with Mom about whose turn it was to do what, but never with Dad. We always had birthday cakes and presents and spent the 4th of July usually at a picnic at Grand Rapids. When we were at the park, almost every Sunday during the Summer Dad would carefully open his old coin purse and give us each a nickle to spend as we liked. The nickle bought an ice cream cone or a bottle of pop or a candy bar back then.

We played card games, we jumped rope, played hop scotch, hide the button, hide and go seek, soft ball.

We only had a small herd of cows. We milked maybe five or six at the most. It took about fifteen minutes to milk a cow. I usually milked two.. They were tied up at a long wooden manger. They each had their own place and always went there. There were hay holes in the floor above when we'd fork down hay for the cows and horses. One year after a miserable hay crop Dad had to buy bales of hay and straw for the animals and it was of very poor quality.

Our neighbors to the south, the Seidschlags, would drop in every once in awhile to play cards in the evening. Quite often neighboring families would have evening parties for the young people. We'd dance and visit and have a lunch. Someone would play the violin or accordion. I especially recall the Quinlans and the Kaufmans. One of the Kaufmans was blind, but he'd play whist with marked cards and was very good at it. Everyone would have to call out the suit and number of the card they played and he could remember them all. The Seidschlags had a hired man who was blind also, and he could play cards the same way. His name was Chester Peck. He was also a very good guitar player. He could ride a horse very well - he'd keep snapping his fingers as he rode and could keep his directions that way. He helped with milking and other every day chores.

Dad's sisters sent us a battery radio along about 1937. We had to be careful how long we'd listen or the battery would go dead. I think it ran on a car battery. It was the first radio we ever had and I can still remember the wonder it inspired listening to music in that lamplit parlor so long ago.

I believe that Busch's got their dinner bell at an auction but whose I have no idea. Aunt Rose would ring it to bring in the men folk at noon time for dinner. When we'd go over to visit we'd ring it until certain looks would tell us "enough". Not everyone was as enamored of its sound as we kids were. Not continually anyway.

Miles and I met our first year in high school, but it wasn't until seven years after the war that we met again and decided to marry. We did not discuss it with anyone. We went down to Aberdeen and got married by a justice of the peace. My folks were quite upset about it. Perhaps five or six years later we had our marriage "blessed" by the church.

When the WWII came along an organization was formed to encourage girls to become nurses. It was called the Cadet Nursing Corps. The government paid for all expenses plus \$15.00 a month spending money. I saw it as a good chance to get an education as well as a vocation so I joined. It was a three year course and I lasted two years before I went home for vacation and met Miles.

The folks were good Catholics and were quite faithful about attending Mass on Sundays, except for some of the very cold days in winter. Then we'd all be sure and say the rosary to make up for missing Mass. Aunt Rose would sing, maybe she'd play the organ too, I can't be sure. We'd all sing the church songs up in the choir loft. There was an Altar Society that would meet once a month at the different members homes. Their lunches were neat.

The Berlin Church [St. Johns] had stained glass windows that had been donated by members of the parish. One of those bore the legend "donated by F. Busch and A. Berning".

When we were in high school my sister Rufina and I played on the girls basketball team. We won several trophies mainly for second place. The team at Verona always won first place. They were the best. We also played kitten ball in the spring and had competition with other teams.

The prairies are quite beautiful in their way. The sky is like a blue bowl with a panorama of clouds inside. The sunsets and sunrise are spectacular. Sometimes at night the Northern Lights dance from all around the horizon right into the middle of the sky. In the summer time wildflowers abound as well as all kinds of birds and wildlife. There is always a wind blowing and if you want to see for miles and miles its the place to be.