



Century Farm Applications

Copyright Notice:

This material may be protected by copyright law (U.S. Code, Title 17). Researchers are liable for any infringement. For more information, visit www.mnhs.org/copyright.

In May, 1976, the Minnesota State Fair sent invitations and application blanks to all county registers of deeds, county agricultural extension directors, and local county historical societies, and every newspaper and radio station in Minnesota asking to help find the farms in Minnesota that have been continuously owned and operated by the same family for 100 years or more.

The purpose of the program was not a publicity gimmik or a "thing" to do for the Bicentennial, but an honest effort to discover just how many descendants still farm the same land as their pioneer ancestors did.

The Minnesota State Fair is a likely place to undertake such a program. The State Fair, or more appropriately, the Minnesota State Agricultural Society, was organized in 1854 as the Territorial Agricultural Society. Ever since then, it has carried the theme "A Showcase of Minnesota Progress". Farmers, homemakers and manufacturers have brought their best to the fair not only to compete for prizes, but also to provide impetus for others to make a better effort whether it be in growing corn, raising livestock, baking bread or building safer farm equipment.

Qualifications for the century farm recognition were:

- 1) the farm must be at least 100 years old according to the abstract of title, land patent, original deed, county land records, court file in registration proceedings, or other authentic records.
- 2) continuous family residence on the farm is not required but ownership of the farm must be continuous.
- 3) family is defined to include the following: father, mother, uncle, aunt, brother, sister, son, daughter, first cousin, and direct-in-laws (father, mother, sister, daughter or son-in-law).
- 4) farm must consist of 50 or more acres.

The statistics found at the end of the report will indicate the response from around the state.

Additional information was also requested on the application blank: 1) from whom was the farm purchased? 2) How many acres were in the original parcel? 3) what was the cost of land per acre? 4) Where was the first owner born? 5) Where did he live prior to moving onto the farm? 6) Was this a homestead? 7) Did the first owner farm the land? 8) Did he engage in any trades or occupations other than farming? 9) Is the original home or any portion of it or other original buildings still standing or in use? 10) When was the present home built? and 11) What are the farm's major crops or products?

Some related information was also requested--such as pioneer stories concerning the farm and the area around it. Most farmers did give that related information. Many came back to the State Fair with family histories, photostatic copies of legal documents, pictures, eulogies, a page from a town or county history book, newspaper articles, and commemorative brochures. It is the related information that is dealt with in this report.

By Karen A. Humphrey
Project Coordinator

Final Report
written by Karen A. F. Humphrey
1976

In the beginning of the century farm story in Minnesota we find people who had a clear view of themselves and their hopes for making a living from a wilderness that had been untouched by axe or plow.

Those people who came to cultivate the Minnesota farmland were immigrants from 22 different nations--from France and Belgium, Norway, Denmark and Sweden, Ireland, England and Wales, Germany and Prussia, Poland, Yugoslavia, Czechoslovakia and Bohemia, Saxony, Luxembourg, and Holland, Scotland, Switzerland, Austria, Canada, and South Russia. A total of 834 present day Minnesota farm families' ancestors were born in those countries. Another 124 Minnesota pioneers were born in several of the United States.

The mixture of opportunity, individual desire, the hope in freedom and the heritage of their native lands molded rural Minnesota. The impact of these founding grandfathers and grandmothers is still felt in the modes and manners, the accents and Christmas customs, the family reunions and church suppers that color the Minnesota landscape.

The descendents of Vaclav Smisek, Stonegrim Stonegrimson, Gottlieb Gabbert, Eugene O'Hern, Erick Flaskerud and all the others have preserved the family stories and legends. They are worth keeping. They tell a personal history of leaving a homeland and domesticating a frontier. The following are some of the best of those sent with the century farm applications.

Peter and Brita Larson's son Lewis wrote of the leaving of the homeland. The year of his writing is 1930 when he was 70 years old.

"My family left our province of Jamtland, Sweden when I was ten years old. Our trip began in the month of May. There being no trains in these days, our trip was made by foot, carts, and boats. We had to pass a part of Norway and also cross two lakes. In Between, we, or the women, rode in the wheel carts and the men had to walk. We finally arrived at Levanger, Norway. Here we visited the noted Dome Church. There is a story that Carl the 12th, of Sweden, kept his horses in this church when he tried to conquer Norway. From Trondheim, we followed the coast to the North Sea and across to Hull, England. From Hull to Liverpool, we traveled by train--the first one I had ever seen. After a week's stay at Liverpool, we were on the Atlantic Ocean. After six days, we encountered a storm that lasted 24 hours and caused a lot of excitement and disturbance among the passengers. Off the coast of Newfoundland we encountered large icebergs so the boat could travel only in daylight. Finally we arrived at the coast of North America, stopping first at Quebec, Canada, and then on by rail to Chicago. This was now the end of our journey and our ticket. My dad had \$350 in his pocket as we started life in America.

"At Chicago, employment was scarce and we were told that there was lots of work at Minneapolis, so it was not long before the whole party was again on the move. We arrived in Minneapolis on July 15, 1870. At that time it was a city of shacks, Swedes, Norwegians, saw mills, lumber jacks and soldiers, as it was still an Indian Reservation. We stayed at an Immigrant Home near Minneapolis for sometime until Father got work with the gravel crew on the railroad, which was building in a large way. Later Mother got work as a cook in a railroad camp, which lasted until Christmas when the construction work of the railroad ended for the season. That December we moved into Minneapolis where my father worked on a tunnel and my mother kept a boarding house for workers. The Mobergs [neighbors of the Larson's in Sweden who traveled with them to America] lived in Anoka but moved to Minneapolis at this same time. The two fathers also worked in a lumber camp.

"Six year old Erick Moberg passed away in the spring of 1871. In June we got a letter from Hans Nystrom, a former neighbor from Sweden who was already in Nobles County, telling us that there were homestead lands to be had and if we wanted some we had to come soon.

"When the Nystrom letter came we were all quite anxious, so Moberg and Father came to Worthington, or what is now Worthington (200 miles). They walked from Mankato (85 miles) as that was as far as the railroad was built."

The Larsons, Mobergs, and Nystroms are still neighbors--have been now for more than 100 years in this country, and more than 100 years before that in Sweden.

When the pioneers set out to claim their land, they didn't have much to move. Possessions listed by a Renville County settler, Frederick Kramin were: "a few crude tools and cooking utensils, a change of clothes, some seed, 50 pounds of flour, a little sugar and salt,

and fifty cents." All were carried in a two wheel ox cart from New Ulm to Renville County. Olmsted County settler, David T. Bernard, said his possessions were a wife, two sons, and twenty-four dollars.

The farmer who had just made his claim was hardpressed to provide shelter for the family. He couldn't wait for materials from a sawmill operator--there might not have been one for a hundred miles. Also urgent was the need to cultivate the land, plant crops, and establish a livestock herd.

Time was short for building a permanent home--money was even shorter. So, the pioneer relied on his own resources: manual dexterity and ingenuity to make due with materials on hand--sod, clay, logs, and sometimes only a hillside where the pioneer fashioned a dugout for his family.

Those first farm homes were the monuments of the times and the people who built them. When the land was

The Binger family of Flora Township, Renville County, tell of Peter Binger who arrived to settle their land in 1868: "A little sod was broken by hand, the first corn was planted by poking a stick in the ground and dropping in the seed. A little garden crop was planted. Then Peter walked to Mankato, did carpentry work in the summer, coming back in the fall by walking to St. Peter for what flour and groceries he could carry with him. In 1869, he worked on the homestead in the winter, building a log house about 12 by 14 feet, going to the river bottom to cut wood for fuel and logs for the cabin. That summer he again walked to Mankato to do carpentry work, returning to St. Peter for groceries in the fall and then home again."

One of the most difficult tasks facing the settler was clearing the land. In the eastern part of Minnesota, there was timber to cut

down and haul away, then stumps to grub and the land to plow. In western Minnesota there was endless rich virgin prairie soil, but with a covering centuries old. Normen and Doris Peterson of Fillmore Township, Fillmore County, sent along the reminiscences of Thomas Pulford, first family owner of their farm. Pulford writes of breaking prairie sod:

"After our own spring work was done, Father used to do the breaking for the settlers. From the time I was ten, I drove the breaking team, first for father, then when I was older, I did a great deal of breaking myself. I believe I did more breaking than any other one man in the county. I broke the greater share of Fountain township and I also broke much in Fillmore and Jordan townships.

"My team consisted of from five to seven yoke of cattle. One of my team of oxen weighed 4,000 pounds. The breaking plow was a heavy affair. It was made in Fillmore. The cattle were driven one team ahead of the other. There was one yoke for each team. A single chain passed between the oxen. The beam was 12 feet long with a mold board five feet long. The lay cut a furrow 26 inches wide. One man held the plow, the other drove. When two men worked together, they changed off.

"This part of the country at that time was covered with scrub timber. The man for whom the breaking was done cut off the highest timber and brushed the land. The breaking plow did the rest. I have cut through the roots seven or eight inches in diameter. The lay had to be kept sharp. There was a lot of power in those cattle."

The settlers did not always have immediate wealth and success. They hardly ever harvested much of a crop the first few years. Arthur Augst, Montgomery Township, LeSueur County, recalls the experience of his grandfather: "For several years they lived on rutabagas, cornbread, and wildlife. They had no salt to eat with the rutabagas because they didn't have the money to buy it. After they had other food, my grandfather could and would no longer eat rutabagas. They couldn't raise much the first years because ~~they~~ had to clear the land of trees and brush before they could plant anything. Birds threatened to eat the growing corn and the people had to stand guard to keep it safe. In the fall, when the corn was harvested, the ears were counted and so many set aside for each day's use so that they would have some until the next crop.

At one point when my grandfather felt his family would surely starve, a man came through the woods. He told them to pick the ginseng in the woods and he would buy it. The roots of ginseng have a medicinal value. This brought them money and they managed to buy a cow."

The settlers faced and usually lived through blizzards, tornadoes, drought, prairie fires, and near starvation. But the disaster that lasted the longest and was the most devastating was the grasshopper plague of one hundred years ago. It was called God's chastisement. George and Laura Skrove write of their grandfather's battle with the insect: "Martinus Skrove settled at Jackson, Minnesota after immigrating from Norway. He had hopes of a good wheat crop on the level, rich farmland, but the grasshoppers took all the crops--two years in a row. Skrove decided to move to Douglas County in 1873. His wife and baby came up by covered wagon in 1874. He planted his crops, again with high hopes, but the glittering, dark, huge cloud of grasshoppers had moved north and he lost his crop--another two years in a row."

Faribault County was hard hit by grasshoppers, too. But Marion Drake, Pilot Grove Township, remembers her grandmother telling of the end of the plague: "April 27, 1877, was designated by Governor Pillsbury as a day of fasting ^{and} prayer to Almighty God to relieve the people of the scourge. On the morning of July 20, 1877, a dense mass of grasshoppers rose and began flying away and disappeared from site. People responded with prayers of thanksgiving."

The oldest farm responding to the Century Farm project was one homesteaded by E.H. Whitaker. He came to Minnesota territory in 1846 from Kentucky, staked out a piece of land on the banks of the Mississippi in what is now Washington County. His Certificate of Register of the Land Office was signed by President Franklin Pierce. The land is now owned by Kenneth C. Whitaker, retired, who rents out the property.

Two more farmstead were settled before Minnesota was declared a territory. Charles and Rhea Stickney, Clear Lake Township, Sherburne County, own and operate a farm dating to 1848. The first owner, John Stevenson, made the farm a relay point for stage coaches and provided the overnight stop for the Red River carts going across his land. The Stickneys have preserved the trails and they show plainly through the untouched prairie sod.

The other farm, also dating to 1848, is in Washington County just a few miles from the Whitaker residence. Bob and Mary Rowe are the owners. A stylish brick home, built in 1880 and complete with cupola as an Indian lookout, graces the 120 acre corn and soybean farm. A spring below the home was a source of drinking water to the settlers.

Many stories of encounters with Indians have been passed down. Some tell of Indians asking for food and shelter. Robert and Blanche Stoffel, Murray County, have heard this story several times: "Several bands of Sioux Indians made camp in the tree claim on the Northwest corner of the property homesteaded by great-grandfather Ole Olson. The Indians remained camped in the tree claim leaving only to get water from the farm well. They never caused any trouble to the Olsons and their friendship was strengthened when the Olsons gave them baked goods, milk, poultry, and fresh venison. The Indians loyalty and friendship was tested by the Sioux uprising of 1862. At this time, marauding bands of Sioux including the ones camped at the homestead, swept through southwestern Minnesota, raiding ^{and} killing as they went. To insure the safety of the Olson homestead, the Indians marked the trees to indicate that this homestead was to be bypassed and left unharmed. The Olsons heard the passage of the Indians as they traveled east on their rampage."

And there is this story passed down to Victor Michael Zeiher, Jessenland Township, Sibley County: "A man all dressed in furs because of the cold was sitting by a creek. An Indian, barely dressed, came along. The man dressed in furs asked the Indian how he could stand the cold. The Indian asked the man, "Your face is not wrapped in furs? Your face cold?" The man replied, "No." The Indian said, "Me all face."

The Minnesota settlers were involved with the people written about in history books. Jesse James and his boys figure prominently in two century farm families. James and his men are reported to have watered their horses on the Ralph Magnuson farm, Leon Township, Goodhue County, before the bank robbery in Northfield. Later, James slept in the old house on the Kenneth and Hazel Brase farm, Meriden Township, Steele County.

Home~~r~~Barrick of Ellsworth Township, Meeker County, writes about his grandmonther Julia Kennedy Barrick, and her encounter with Chief Little Crow: "My grandfather, Nimrod Barrick, had been gone for several days, hunting game for the winter, I suppose. Little Crow and two of his braves held my grandmother in the cellar (still on our farm) as a practical joke until they saw grandfather coming through the woods to his home. Grandpa always said that Little Crow was a practical joker."

Richard Sipon, a Faribault County land-owner circumnavigated the globe with Commodore Matthew Perry and was with Perry when he concluded the first treaty between Japan and the United States in 1854.

Mary Breman Thielan's grandfather settled a tract of land in Minden township, Benton County. Father Francis Pierz, founder of the missions to the Chippewa, stayed at the Breman farm many nights.

The Benedictine Fathers offered mass for the area settlers in the Bremen home.

Steven and Joyce Hedeem's great-grandfather, Eric Jonason, was a preacher from Jamtland, Sweden. His greatest interest was to find a church whose members might be from his homeland. Jonason and his companions traveled by covered wagon from McGregor, Iowa, to Goodhue County, Minnesota. Jonason then walked many miles before he came across the Vasa Lutheran Church, organized in 1853 by Swedish immigrants. The pastor of the church was none other than Eric Norelius, the missionary, educator, and leader of the Lutheran Church movement in Minnesota.

By the time the first settlers were ready to "retire" from farming, a plan had been formulated by many families to insure the well-being of those first senior citizens. Those plans were called life support agreements. This is one such agreement prepared by Fredrick Oftedahl, a Norwegian immigrant to Blue Earth County who bought 100 acres of land at \$15.00 per acre. Nels Oftedahl is his son.

"June 11, 1878; acknowledged by Nels Oftedahl in Blue Earth County, Minnesota, before A.R. Pfau, Notary Public.

"Nels T. Oftedahl has this day purchased of Fredrick Oftedahl and Tore Oftedahl the and agrees in consideration thereof to pay and deliver to Fredrick and Tore Oftedahl \$70.00 each year during the term of their natural lives and \$35.00 to the survivor of them during the term of his or her natural life and 30 bushels of wheat each year or 15 bushels during the life of the survivor each year and to keep two milch cows for the use of said Fredrick and Tore, and 10 cords of firewood ready for the stove and delivered at the place of residence each year, to furnish feed for one hog each year and keep in proper repair the dwelling house now located on the premises aforesaid, and furnish team and conveyance for them to go to town when necessary at least four times each year and have the use of 1/4 acre of land next and adjacent to their said house for yard and garden, and in case he shall sell the land aforesaid to pay said Fredrick and Tore if they so desire to bring this contract to an end the sum of \$1000, and the value of the house occupied by them, and until said sums are paid by the purchaser of the premises on such sale to them, they shall have and hold a lien thereon for such sums in full."

It is now the 3rd, 4th, and 5th generations living on these twelve hundred century farms. During these commemorative years of our nation's birthday, the grandchildren of the pioneer farmers in Minnesota have been remembering and commemorating also.

In 1972, the Lowell and Elnore Lindelands sent Christmas letters to friends on the 104th anniversary of Lindeland ownership of a farm in Medo Township, Blue Earth County. The letter read:

"Whether it be 1868 - 1926 - or 1972, the
greeting from the Lindelands at Christmas remains the same--
'May the joy of our Savior's birth
be yours to enjoy now and forever--'"

Then followed pictures of the three homes that have been on the Lindeland farm opposite pictures of the three generations:

"Ole Gabriel and Gretta Josdal Lindeland
Benerth G. and Louise Manthe Lindeland
Lowell B. and Elnore Ahlborn Lindeland"

William and Ann Srsen, Somerset Township, Steele County, published a commemorative brochure in 1975 in honor of 100 years of Srsen family farm ownership. The brochure includes this anecdote about the first Srsens:

"Karel and Catherine Srsen and their six children arrived in New York City on July 3, 1875. Their long journey brought them from Dhoua Trebova, Czechoslovakia. The first night in America was spent in a small hotel. The next morning they awoke to the banging of firecrackers and the noise of Independence Day. They were frightened and worried to think they had come to a country which sounded as though it might be fighting a war."

A recent reunion held on the Donald Breeggemann farm in Louisville Township, Scott County, brought 750 people "home."

More than holding family reunions, more than reprinting the memories of the pioneers, more than bringing out dusty family pictures to hang on the living room wall, the grandsons and granddaughters of Minnesota pioneer farmers are contributing to their community and state. Those actively farming are also actively involved in farm organizations, school committees, county commissions, town boards, church councils, and programs for Minnesota's youth. Those who have left the farming to brothers and/or sisters, have become presidents of banks, professors at universities, school teachers, nuclear physicists, doctors and nurses, and museum curators. The list is long and varied. Even longer is the list of accomplishments that rural Minnesotians have made to this "state that works." That is the most lasting legacy to the pioneer farm men and women, ^{who} began by turning the soil.

Historian Theodore Blegen concludes the first edition of MINNESOTA A History of the State with this paragraph. It is also a fitting ending to this account:

"Whatever the sum total may be of the achievements and and contributions--or of the foibles and mistakes of Minnesota --those who developed the state are the thousands of men and women whose lives figure in that total. Because of them, the people, the state's yesterdays are legacy on the one hand, prologue on the other. Of Minnesota--if the many actors in its past could speak--they might paraphrase Aeneas of old and say, 'Part of it we are. We are the people who built Minnesota.'"

Karen Humphrey

SOME FINAL STATISTICS:

Total number of Century Farms: 1,177

County with the most Century Farms: Fillmore, 77

Counties responding to Century Farm program:

Yellow Medicine	Wright
Wilkin	Watonwan
Washington	Waseca
Wabasha	Todd
Swift	Stevens
Steele	Stearns
Sibley	Sherburne
Scott	Rock
Redwood	Rice
Renville	Pope
Otter Tail	Omsted
Norman	Nobles
Nicollet	Murray
Mower	Morrison
McLeod	Martin
Meeker	Mille Lacs
Lyon	Le Sueur
Lac Qui Parle	Kittson
Kandiyohi	Jackson
Isanti	Houston
Hennepin	Grant
Goodhue	Freeborn
Fillmore	Faribault
Douglas	Dodge
Dakota	Cottonwood
Chisago	Clay
Chippewa	Carver
Brown	Blue Earth
Benton	Becker
Winona	

Birthplaces of Minnesota Immigrants:

Sweden - 92	Norway - 279
Denmark - 19	Germany - 256
Belgium - 3	Poland - 7
Ireland - 72	Canada - 14
England - 14	Wales - 7
South Russia - 1	Scotland - 15
Switzerland - 8	Holland - 4
Czechoslovakia - 14	Yugoslavia - 1
Saxony - 1	Austria - 5
Luxembourg - 10	Prussia - 5
France - 2	Bohemia - 4
United States - 124	

Number of farms owned by people with the same surname for more than 100 years - 687

Number of farm families living in homes of which all or part are more than 76 years old - 435