

Soller settlers face fire, other adversity

Written by Elizabeth Barrett
Friday, 05 August 2011 20:32 -



Germany immigrants find farmland, pasture in Platte Valley.

Doris Schluterbusch Soller, Bill Soller's new bride, probably appreciated her frame house in the Platte Valley instead of one made of sod.

In 1890, the newlyweds settled on 80 acres of land nine miles south and east of present-day Gothenburg that Bill bought from the Union Pacific Railroad.

Unfortunately, according to family history provided by Don and Bev Soller, the frame house didn't last.

"Ashes taken outside from the stove blew inside and caught the house on fire," Bev said.

Accounts, written by Don Soller's aunt, Dora Goldenstein, said Bill threw out a clock the couple had received as a wedding present, and a trunk, to save them from the flames.

Doris grabbed her husband's pants.

"The money from hogs he'd sold was in his pants," she said with a laugh.

Don (Bill's grandson) and Mike Soller (Don and Bev's son) and their families received a Pioneer Farm Family Award at the Dawson County Fair two weeks ago.

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They were honored for keeping 80 acres of land in the family for 122 years.

Because Doris and Bill's home burned to the ground, the couple built a soddie and added a bungalow.

Bev said the Sollers can trace their roots to a German town near the North Sea where William Soller worked as a whaler and farmer.

A son, Fred (Bill's father), immigrated to the United States around 1871 because of Germany's high taxes and over- population.



"He couldn't buy more land (in Germany)," Bev said.

Once Fred bought land in Wisconsin, he sent for his wife, Sophia, and their eight children.

The ship master was related to Sophia. As a result, she helped cook in the ship's kitchen and was given all the bread she could carry for her children once they landed in the United States.

While on the ship, Bev said Bill remembered gathering vegetables from the bins because of his small size.

"They'd pick him up by the seat of his pants and throw him in there," she said.

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After settling in Wisconsin, Fred died while loading logs. One slipped and broke his neck.

Sophia married the hired man, who had relatives in Nebraska,

and they moved to Otoe County.

Once grown, Bill was determined to buy land for himself and looked at some in the Platte Valley before traveling on to Oregon.

He returned, married, settled in the valley and began accumulating more land for farming and ranching.

One piece of family history tells of Bill and Doris seeing Indians camped on a hill south of the Soller farm.

Another tells of a one-mile toll bridge that crossed the wide, treeless Platte River. The bridge was well traveled by the Sollers when they took livestock to town to be shipped out by railroad.

In 1911, Bev said Bill bought the 80 acres on which one of Soller farms is located today.

Bev noted that Bill was one of the first farmers to irrigate in the Platte Valley and was instrumental in the building of the Thirty-Mile Canal.

“They flooded the land by diking the ditches with straw,” she said.

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The couple and their children raised corn, wheat, oats, barley, alfalfa, milo and prize-winning Herefords and horses.

The Sollers also took in children who needed a home, like former Nebraska Gov. Roy Cochran after Roy's mother died.

For awhile during his youth, W.G. Bryan—founder of Bryan Memorial Hospital in Lincoln—lived and worked on the Soller farm.

Bill and Doris retired and moved into Gothenburg in the 1930s. Albert Soller, one of Bill's sons and Don's father, took over the home place. He married Alice Sheffield of Gothenburg in 1941.

When Bill died of pneumonia at age 89 in 1950, the couple owned 720 acres plus pasture land and divided the property between their seven living children.

Another adversity, besides the fire, included a tornado in 1930 that took cattle and hogs sheds, corn cribs and the top from a new barn. It also carried a horse (that survived) a half mile away.

Albert said he “vividly remembered the blackness and roar of the storm and the immense pressure” on his body.

He outran the storm in a truck and helped his Dad and others unhitch and turn their horses loose.

“They were all unhurt and it missed the house,” Bev said.

In addition to crops and cattle, Albert raised buffalo for a time.

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Don and his bride, Bev (Nielsen) Soller worked most of their lives farming and ranching the family land and later turned operations over to their sons, Mike and Pat.

In the early years, Bev remembers Don feeding corn—with a scoop shovel—to hundreds of cattle.

Mike raised cattle and Pat farmed until health issues caused them both to quit. The Sollers now rent out their land but still raise cattle.

Don said it felt great to receive the award. Bev added she was happy the land has stayed in the family for 122 years.