

Life on the Kansas Plains

The Sante Fe Trail west and the California gold rush brought with them the first Kansas outposts and probably the first permanent settlers after 1854. From 1817-1854 the state was part of the unorganized Indian Territory. It became a state in 1861 and was named after the Kansa Indians. One of its western outposts was Fort Fletcher which was later named Fort Hays in honor of General Alexander Hays who lost his life in the Civil War. Hays city was established as a town in November 1867. It's population at that time consisted chiefly of dance-hall girls, saloon keepers, buffalo hunters and gamblers. There were dance halls, a clothing store, grocery store and more than twenty saloons.

By 1874 it was discovered that Turkey Red Wheat could thrive on the dry western plains. The Mennonites who came to the United States from southern Russia are credited with bringing some Turkey Red Wheat in bags to Kansas along with watermelon seeds and mulberry seeds. The Turkey Red wheat was the first hard winter wheat introduced into central and western Kansas and for many years was the only wheat raised on the Kansas plains.

John George Urban, known as Hansjory after he came to the United States, was one of seven sons of John Jacob and Anna Marie (Reeb) Urban. Their sons were Joseph, John George, Michael, John, Adam, Jacob and Philip. Only three of these seven came to the United States. The other four remained in Russia and no one ever heard from them. It is not known whether they starved to death in Russia or whether they may have migrated to South America or Canada or someplace else. The three who came were Joseph, John George and Michael.

John George was born October 8, 1832, the second son of Jacob and Anna Marie (Reeb) Urban. He was born in Kamenka, Russia and migrated to the United States about 1879. He had two sons by his first marriage to Anna Marie Schaffer, Andrew and John. Then he married Anna Marie (Burghardt) Miltenberger, born June 1844. They had the following children: Margaret, Anna Marie, Magdalene, Catherine, Eva, Martin Elizabeth, George and Agnes.

Margaret was born June 18, 1869. She married John Degenhardt. She died February 18, 1943.

Anna Marie was born August 10, 1872. She married John Dome. She died February 16, 1957.

Magdalene and Catherine were twins, born shortly after their parents arrived in Kansas from Russia. They were born in a cave in the Smokey Hill River bank at Pfeifer Kansas. Magdalene is my grandmother. I remember the story my father tells about his grandfather Hansjory saying if they had stayed in Russia they would have only had one baby. Here in America, land of plenty, we have twins Magdalene and Catherine. They were born on August 24, 1879. They were baptized by Father Joseph C. Mayershofer. Magdalene married Casper Jacobs on 13 February 1900. George and Eva Jacobs, and Pete and Mary Briect were also married at the same ceremony. Magdalene died on April 12, 1962. At the time of

her death she was in a nursing home suffering from dementia. She was unable and unwilling to stay with any of her children.

Catherine married Adam Stegman. Catherine died February 26, 1965.

Eva was born January 6, 1882. She married John George Jacobs. Eva died April 22, 1918.

Martin was born December 28, 1883. He married Catherine Stegman. He died July 25, 1967.

Elizabeth was born April 14, 1886. She married Casper Schmidt and her second husband was Peter Basgall.

George was born August 27, 1888. He married Barbara Hartman. George died July 4, 1964.

Agnes was born in 1891. She married Peter Lell. Agnes died August, 1961.

As you can see from the span on time that these children were born, my great grandfather and grandmother Urban must have been quite healthy. When their last child was born Anna Marie must have been at least 46 and Hansjory would have been 59.

According to the book written about the Golden Jubilee of German-Russian settlements of Ellis and Rush counties, the first settlers of Pfeifer Kansas left their homes in Russia on October 1875. They were later followed in 1877 by a larger contingent from the west side of the Volga. Among them were Gottlieb Jacobs, Joseph Jacobs, Matthew Jacobs and Michael Jacobs, all of Pfeifer, Russia. They were among the original 13 immigrants who founded the city of Pfeifer, Kansas by erecting such buildings as their means would allow. Holy Cross church was built by the first settlers and opened on 14 September 1879. It was constructed of pine boards, rectangular in shape, about 40 feet long and 28 feet wide.

When arriving in Ellis County the immigrants were, for the most part, very poor. They exhausted all their resources on their long journey. The families who came with any large sum of money were the exceptions. In 1876 Ellis County was still practically all a vast unbroken prairie. At Victoria, the newcomers found the present railroad station and one other house.

The immigrants had to first worry about building a shelter for themselves and their families. In some instances, the first dwellings were rude board tents, which were replaced, as the season advanced, by sod houses or dugouts. Generally most built sod houses. The walls were built of sod cut from the prairie. The prairie soil mixed with a goodly portion of straw made sunbaked bricks. Trees and saplings gathered on creek banks formed the rafters and supports for the roof which was made of plain boards covered with a layer of dirt several inches thick, firmly packed. The interior of the house usually contained two rooms. A small ante room containing the fire-place and cooking utensils, and a larger one which served as living, dining, and bedroom. In some cases the larger room had a wooden floor, though more often the bare earth had to serve this purpose.

The larger room contained the stove, which was used for baking and heating. The stove was so constructed that almost

anything combustible could be used as fuel including buffalo and cow manure. Only a few of the settlers could enjoy the luxury of a two or three-room frame house in the early days.

In 1892, the people of Pfeifer had a bumper wheat harvest of 25 bushels per acre and the price varied from 45 cents to 56 cents per bushel. In 1893 and 1894, two successive crop failures and a general depression set in. Black rust had hit the wheat and some families moved to other parts of the country.

A school was built next to Holy Cross church in 1897. The church was an imposing structure of native lime stone two and one-half stories high, paniced with a bell tower and a school bell and peaked with a cross. The Diocese at this time was without a Bishop which made it quite difficult to contract an Order of Sisters to teach. Lay teachers and Father Clemens made up the faculty for the new school. Early records of the school are not found, but we do know that the children remained in school until they passed all the readers. There was no graduation. Lessons were taught in German. Many of the boys did not go to school, as the parents felt they could learn enough behind the plow.

Due to the lack of education and the lack of social life, the young lads had time on their hands. They would gather together and get home-made beer and home-made moonshine, then mounting their horses with guns they would ride to Munjor or Victoria and raise a ruckus. They would shoot in the air, holler, chase girls, and get in fights with the community boys.

Word was sent to the pastor of Pfeifer, and he would try to straighten out these gangs of ruffians. Their parents usually took the part of their children. They were against education, and the Priest was just making life difficult for them. It wasn't true anyway, for my son wouldn't do such things was the usual response. The neighboring towns were not too friendly with the people of Pfeifer as a result of this. These "Bursch Bucks" as they were called by the good people of Pfeifer, and the people of the area, were delinquent, and instrumental in retarding the development of and enterprising community in Pfeifer.

On 8 August 1892 Michael Jacob gave his declaration of intention to become a citizen of the United States in Hays City, Ellis County, Kansas. He gave his oath of Allegiance on 28 February 1911, and became a citizen. On his petition he named his occupation as Railroad worker, then farmer. His birth date as 2 November 1852 at Pfeifer-Saratov, Russia. He emigrated to the United States from Hamburg, Germany on 25 October 1891, arriving at the Port of New York in the vessel St. Mary. At the time he left Russia Nicholas II was the Czar of Russia. (D1-D5)

Barbara Stegman was born on 25 December 1856 in Kamenka-Saratov, Russia. She married Michael Jacob in Russia. They lived in Pfeifer, Russia where they had four children, Casper born 3 August 1873, Kate 2 November 1885, Philip 20 August 1888, and Mary 29 May 1890. According to the June 5, 1900 census papers, Barbara and Michael could read and write but couldn't speak English. The children could all speak English. At the time of

the census they owned their own farm with a mortgage.

Michael Jacobs brother George served as a palace guard for the Czar for four years during the Russo-Turkish War. It was probably Czar Nicholas II. Michael's brothers George and Peter thought they were boarding ships to sail to North America but instead sailed to South America where they remained.

My grandfather, Casper Jacobs, was about thirteen when his family left Russia for America. The ship St. Mary left Bremen, Germany on 9 October 1891 and arrived in New York on 25 October 1891. After a three day train ride they arrived in Kansas on 28 October 1891. On his declaration of intention to become a citizen Casper gave his birth date as 3 August 1878, Pfeifer, Russia. He was 40 years old when he declared his intention on 15 August 1918. He gave his occupation as farmer and description as white, light complexion, 5 foot 10 inches tall weighing 220 pounds, brown hair and blue eyes. Visible distinctive mark of a scar on left leg. He became a citizen on 23 September 1923. At that time he had 12 of his thirteen children. According to the June 5, 1900 census Casper and Lena were married and living in the home of Michael and Barbara Jacobs.

As a boy, one of Casper's childhood friends was Walter Chrysler. They spent many happy hours at the old swimming hole. Walter went on to Detroit and Casper stayed in Kansas to eventually farm. Walter Chrysler still has his homestead and museum in Ellis, Kansas.

Casper was an avid reader and could speak German, Russian, and English. Because of this he was made foreman on a line crew for the Kansas Pacific Railroad at the age of seventeen or eighteen. Most of the German-Russian immigrants could speak no english. The railroad needed bi-lingual people to give work directions. Casper probably formed some of his work habits at this time. From several sources I got the impression he liked to give work assignments to others rather than doing them himself. Each day he would find some excuse to go to town, such as taking the cream to sell or something. Most of the time he would meet with his friends and tell stories, play cards or gamble. Sometimes he and some of his buddies would go to Scott City, get carp and go around to sell them. At harvest time he worked right along with the rest of the crew though, usually driving the teams of horses drawing the header box for the wheat.

Casper and Magdalene had 13 children between 1901 and 1923. All of them survived to adulthood.

Rosa	26 February 1901
Alex	21 February 1902
Helen	23 September 1903
Armella	30 October 1904
Clara	30 March 1906
Edward	25 January 1908
Otillia	11 December 1909
Leo	18 April 1911
Albert	1 September 1914
Raymond	17 February 1916

Lydia 29 March 1918
Victor 7 January 1921
Irvin 26 December 1923

Kansas is in the geographical center of the United States. One of the most thriving business on the plains in the early days of the Kansas frontier period was buffalo killing and the sale of hides and bones. The sportsmen just killed, leaving the carcass to rot on the prairies. Next came the hide and bone hunters. Thousands of animals were slain. Albert remembers well going out on the prairie to pick up buffalo bones which were taken by wagon loads to Ellis. He tells about the huge stack of bones along the railroad tracks which was 10 to 15 feet high and approximately 150 feet long. A negro man bought the bones, loaded them on the train cars to send them back east for bone meal. The early pioneers picked up all the buffalo chips for fire wood. Later the women and children gathered cow chips and neatly stacked them in sheds for fuel in the winter to be used in cooking and heating stoves. Albert still remembers hearing his mother saying, "Go out and bring in a basket of chips so I can finish supper." The only trees were the few growing near creek beds and next to the wells on farms and a few in the cities.

Michael Jacob was a great fisherman, fishing mostly on Big Creek. They would use dough balls for bait, Pronounced "dew balls" by Michael whenever he would ask his wife to make up a batch. They also used worms and grasshoppers to fish. They would catch sunfish and carp there. Michael smoked a long curved pipe with strong tobacco. He drank good home brew including every Sunday after church when he would tap one of them. In spite of this he lived to be 88 years old. Barbara lived a long life also. She was a tall woman, almost six foot tall and rather heavy. Michael was tall but very thin.

Magdalena worked very hard to keep her brood fed and clothed. They ate a great many jack rabbits, many times ground up with salt pork. Homemade bread and noodles were a staple every day. They always ate meals together at a huge wooden table in the kitchen with long benches around it. She attended to their spiritual needs also. Every Sunday she would take all the children to church in town. Once a month she would bring them into confession on Saturday and they would stay at Grandpa Michael and Grandma Barbara's for the night. Every Sunday they picked up a block of ice at the ice house and went home to make ice cream. They usually had a special meal of duck or goose for Sunday dinner.

The Jacobs family had great propensity for having a good time in everything they did. They all entertained themselves by singing and playing musical instruments. Ten of the thirteen children played instruments. They had a organ in the living room that Armella and Edward played beautifully. The other musical instruments were left out all over the living room so they could pick them up and play at any given time. Albert remembers playing the "Zimbal" Dulcimer as a young man so when he found one in Kansas in the 1960's he bought it and started playing it

again. The musicians usually played their Violins, accordions, base fiddles, harmonicas, and guitars. Magdalena had a beautiful singing voice and would always lead the songs and harmony. Casper loved to dance, but he didn't play an instrument or sing.

Some memories that Albert has of his childhood are moving from the small town of Ellis, Kansas in 1919 at the age of 5 or 6 to a small 2 room cottage adjacent to a 1/2 section of land his father had purchased. This land was still prairie. His parents built a 4 room house on this property which became their home for the next 10 or 11 years. Like all farm families, his dad turned over the sod of about 1/2 of the acreage with a sod buster and horses and planted wheat. This was their means of livelihood. They had about a dozen cows and milked them right out in the pasture or by the windmill. They also had about 20 horses to farm with. One of the highlights of his boyhood was plowing the fields with about 5 sulky plows, one right after the other.

They attended a one room school with all grades together. It was located about 1/2 mile from the Jacobs farm. The children all walked through their pasture to school along with some neighbor kids. There were about 5 families that belonged to that district. 12 to 15 kids and 1 teacher for 8 grades. The school house was about 10x15 with a pot belly stove right in the middle of the room, and an out house out back. In later years as they went back to the old homestead, they found the house and farm buildings all gone, with only traces of the foundation left. The little school house took its toll from the 1930's dust storms. The ceiling had fallen down from the weight of about 8 inches of dust in the attic.

Harvest time was very important. The various crops grown as cattle feed were harvested. Vegetables were canned and preserved. The fall butchering was done, meat preserved, lard and butter rendered, and a supply of soap made. I remember in my childhood seeing my grandmother making lye soap with lard in a huge iron kettle in her back yard.

Large groups of men including vagrants riding freight trains from the east, were hired to harvest the wheat crops usually starting the last week in June and lasting for two to three weeks. It took more than family to run the machinery at harvest. The walls on the Jacobs granary were filled with poetry, paintings and stories. Many of the vagrants hired for the harvest were well educated men, including teachers, artists and businessmen. Times were tough and there just was no other work for them where they came from.

The women and children had their hands full cooking meals and doing the other chores around the farm during harvest. Three big meals were served daily. Two lunches, one at mid-morning and one at mid-afternoon, were served daily. These lunches were taken to the fields by the women and children with old dobbin hitched to the buggy. Schnapps was served before meals and lunches.

A water keg filled with fresh water every morning and noon was replenished at lunch time and kept cool by pushing it under

the wheat stack. Later on people built ice cellars in which they stored ice cut from the creeks and rivers in the wintertime to use in the summer.

There was great progress and prosperity after the First World War. Society made a great change. Cars were invented with speeds up to 65 miles per hour. No one dared to go that fast. The wage scale took a climb from 10 cents an hour to 50 cents an hour. Radio was a luxury. The theatre went from silent movies to talking movies. Although for the farm children movies were a luxury they could not afford. Things were being streamlined, and the era was called the "Streamline Age". Tractors were replacing horses. Machine power began to replace man power. Magdalena even got a gas powered washing machine. It was forever breaking down but one of the boys, Leo mostly, would always take it apart and get it running again. Casper bought his first Model T about 1924. Albert's uncle bought a Reo. Oh, how Albert loved that car. His father would rather drive the Model T than repair it, so he always had a man from town come out to overhaul it. Watching him started Albert's interest in repairing cars. After learning more about mechanics, he would play tricks on his father such as turning the coils around. For quite some time, his father didn't catch on to why the car was missing.

In 1928 or 1929 Alex Jacobs and his wife Pauline moved back from Wisconsin and bought a farm near the folks. He bought a tractor for farming and Casper had the combine. One time while Alex was milking a cow out in the barn, a Kansas tornado came through and lifted the barn up away from him. It left him sitting there still milking the cow while everything else blew away. After the Depression started in the late twenties and early thirties, banks went broke, people lost their jobs, and farmers could not pay their taxes. Everyone was on the move looking for jobs. Alex eventually lost his farm because of the draught and depression. In desperation he moved back to Wisconsin with his family. This time they stayed.

Rosie married Alois Ruder and had five children. The children are Victor, Merillda, Noreen, Esther, Vernon, and Jo Ann. They lived on a farm just outside of Hays, Kansas. It turned out that oil was discovered on their farm so Rosie's later years could be lived in relative comfort. Alois had a son by a former marriage named Victor. He was the best man at my mother and father's wedding. He owned the car that was used for the wedding. It was a Terraplane made by Hudson. Young Victor Ruder used that car in later years to come up to Wisconsin and look for work. He didn't stay but left the car behind. I remember visiting the Ruder's on their farm and playing pool on a huge pool table they had upstairs in the large farm house. I was always afraid of uncle Alois because he shouted a great deal and didn't have a good word to say about many people. Aunt Rosie was a very sweet lady who put up with a great deal of grief in her lifetime. She is suffering from dementia and is confined to a nursing home. She does not deserve a fate such as this. We keep her in our prayers and thoughts and hope the Lord will call her

home soon.

Helen Jacobs married Paul Younger and had six children. Their children are Paul Jr., Lorraine, Marvin, Mildred, Harold and Carol. I remember going to visit the Younger family in Ransom Kansas where they lived. One thing many remember about aunt Helen is that she was always a lady. She made sure she had her makeup and jewelry on even when she was working out in the barn. Later our family visited Carol and her family at Ransom. She was close in age to me so we kept in touch. She had a friendly smile and a welcome for family and friends. Carol died of cancer at a young age. Aunt Helen also died of cancer by the age of 63. Marvin worked for dad for a short time when he came to Wisconsin. I remember his wedding to Jean when I was very young. He says the one thing he remembers about all those Wisconsin people is how much they went to church. Tuesday night devotions to Our Lady of Perpetual Help, and of course always Sunday Mass. Marvin is a retired fireman living in Denver, Colorado. His children all live in that area of the country also.

In June of 1932 Theodore Urban, son of Mr. and Mrs Andrea Urban, was the first priest ordained from Pheifer. He took the name of Father Alexius in the Capuchin Order. He is the first cousin of Albert Jacobs and the priest who married Albert and Mildred McMinimy.

The dust storms came in 1933 and continued until 1935. Ellis county was one of the worst areas in the "Dust Bowl". The skies would get so dark, that light had to be used in buildings. The dust would drift across the roads and pile up against the fences until it pulled them down. Had it not been for the stone posts, farmers would have lost practically all their fences. Visibility would be zero. Automobiles shorted out from the dust. Many people developed dust pneumonia.

After the dust storms, grasshoppers invaded the area. These wierd characters ate all the crops and even the bark off the trees. In 1938 the Smokey River flooded and this brought about more despair. The Government set up the W.P.A. (Work Progress Administration). The C.C.C.'s (Civilian Conservation Corps) was part of this program. This gave people jobs, and the necessary food and clothing to survive.

Edward had a serious illness when he was very young that caused some brain damage. He was always able to get along and even married and had four children. His wife died when the children were very young. He was unable to care for the children and they were put in an orphanage. As the children grew older Edward Jr. moved to Wisconsin and obtained a job at Riches Bakery, where he still works. Tom and Francis attended college with the help of Ervin and Lydia. Effa Jean was retarded and lived in a state hospital until her death. Edward lived with our family for some time in his later years. He didn't lose his ability to play the organ and piano and entertained many of his fellow patients in the home for the elderly in Oshkosh, Wisconsin where he spent his final years.

Albert Jacobs had attended two years of High School at the country school. He would get there either on horseback or pony drawn cart. When the family lost the farm in 1930 they moved into the Koerner Home south of Hays. The Koerner's had moved to Wisconsin to find work in the logging and paper industries. Albert and Leo helped build the Junior College in Hays. They drove a horse drawn cart to haul the stone for the buildings. After a year Albert went back to his junior year of high school at Shoенchen and then had to quit to help support himself and the family. First he worked for a rancher for \$30 a month which all went to support his parents and family.

Albert joined the C.C.C.'s early in 1934 when he was eighteen years old and stayed in the corps for two and a half years. He was paid \$30 a month. Twenty five of that was sent home to the parents and he was able to keep \$5 a month for himself. That was more spending money then he had ever had in his life. His first camp assignment was in Lake City, Minnesota. Each one of the camps had about 200 men in them. They put up their first tents on the 10th of April. There were about 4 to 6 boys per tent. They slept on cots and ate in a mess hall. The tents had no stoves in them. Albert's assignment was to drive an almost new Dodge truck and take the boys out to their work place. One crew loaded stone from the quarry and the other worked on spillway and erosion work. They stayed in Minnesota for six months.

During this time Albert and a friend, who played a beautiful harmonica, hitched a train to go to Wisconsin to visit some of the Jacobs girls who had moved there looking for work and husbands. They jumped from boxcars to flatbeds 4 feet away. One time they had to crawl under the train to dodge the law. They were riding on top of a boxcar when they spotted a tunnel coming up. Since Albert's friend was familiar with hitching trains he told him just to stay down below the brake wheel on the top and he would be ok. He was scared to death but did survive the ordeal. They visited the relatives and then hitched trains to get back to camp.

In September a convoy of Army trucks moved the camp to Ashland Kansas stopping overnight at Fort Riley. They stayed in tents 20 miles north of Ashland, where they were building a damn. Their first job was to build barracks for the winter. These barracks housed about 40 men each. The city girls from Ashland would come out to camp to see the boys and listen to Albert and friends play guitar and accordion.

His new job at this camp was to take the mess sergeant into town six days a week for rations. There were two grocery stores in Ashland. They would buy quarters and halves of beef and all other rations. His other job was to pick up the mail at the post office each day. Mildred McMinimy worked at the courthouse and was also going to the post office each day. Somehow they timed their trips and always seemed to manage being there at the same time each day. They would go to barn dances together with friends. Albert courted Mildred for two years. He was the only

one in the camp with transportation. When he'd take the boys into town to the movies they'd sneak around and date. All that time he was looked upon as a outcast by her family because he was Catholic and she belonged to the Christian Church. Albert asked Tom McMinimy for her hand in marriage and was told it would never work. The C.C.C unit was transferred to Orbanland, Kansas in January. Albert stayed in two more months and got out in March.

After leaving the C.C.C's he worked for Frank Hensley on a truck farm. He lived on an open front porch, listened to the coyotes, and lived on watermelons, beans and rice. He would watch the coyotes eat the ripe watermelons and always wondered how they could pick out only the ripe ones to ruin. He smoked Bull Durham Country Gentlemen. There was a lot of prestige having that cloth pouch with the tag hanging out of your pocket.

Albert and Mildred were in love and nothing was going to keep them apart. They went against her father and mother's wishes and got married anyway. Andy and Nora Degnon were good friends of theirs and they helped them. Nora made Mildred's wedding dress. They were married in the stone house about seven miles south of Hays by a cousin, Father Alexius. They had their reception in the little stone house and it was also their honeymoon home. The Beiker boys played music for the reception they had for family and friends. One of the Beiker boys owned a dulcimer which first acquainted my father with that instrument. Mildred's sister Bessie was the only one from her family who attended the wedding. Her Mother had a stroke shortly after the wedding and was unable to communicate much after that.

Albert and Mildred moved into that 10x18 cabin on Hensley's truck farm after the wedding. The cellar was loaded with mice but Albert fixed it up the best he could before the wedding. He painted the bedroom baby blue and the kitchen egg yolk yellow. They lived in that house for over a year. He worked on the farm and for a Ford dealer as a mechanic for \$40 a month to earn a living. He got his Model A by working off the amount of \$40 for the car.

Their first daughter Annette was born at home. Mrs. Hensley was a midwife and helped out with a difficult delivery. At one point she had Mildred lay on an ironing board for her back. There was a doctor in attendance also. When Annette was six months old they almost lost her. Her intestines were blocked off and stopped any digestion. They put her in a Model A and drove 40 miles at fifty miles per hour to Dodge City where a Surgeon operated and saved her life. Doctors to this day cannot believe the good work and delicate surgery that was preformed that many years ago.

One day in 1938 Ray Jacobs, Albert's brother, came down to the truck farm and said he and Julia were pulling up stakes. Albert asked where are you going? He answered, Wisconsin, and we're leaving in a day or two. They loaded everything they had. A sewing machine Mildred got from her mother, two chairs, and a baby crib and headed for Wisconsin with \$18 to \$20 in their pockets and a little bit of food. It took them \$15 worth of gas

to come from Kansas to Wisconsin. They traveled 40 miles an hour top speed for 2 to 3 days to get there. Sometimes they pulled off the road to sleep for a while. When they arrived in Wisconsin Albert's sister Armella and her husband Alex Sanders fed them a very welcome meal. They stayed with other relatives for a few days while Albert looked for work.