

Family farming in Emmons County



As a sixth generation North Dakotan, I've known about the Ryckman family — my family — all my life. My parents, Lawrence and Irene Ryckman, farm in Emmons County only a few miles from the original homestead of Fred and Mary Ryckman, and as a child we spent many holidays with our big family at the "home place".

And quite a crew we were, too. Most of my dad's brothers and sisters also lived on farms in Emmons County and though not all were married, there were always lots of cousins around. From one of those early family gatherings, a photo was taken of me, my father, his father, and his mother — four generations in a photo much like the oval-framed four-generation portrait of pioneer women in dark clothing which hung in my grandparents' home. Only years later did I realize that my grandmother was the young girl in that portrait of the four, darkly clad women.

In October, 1988 the descendents of the Fletcher and Lillie Ryckman family — my great-grandparents — gathered at the home place to observe the 100th anniversary of the farmstead. Some 600 family members and friends attended the reunion and celebration.

On June 11, 1888, the 25-year old Fletcher Ryckman bought his 160-acre plus homestead from the United States government for \$201.74. Fletcher was the son of Dutch immigrants to New York who lived in Canada before arriving in 1887 as part of the "Great Dakota Boom." When Fletcher died in 1936, his obituary noted that all seven children lived within three and one-half miles of the Ryckman home. Many of Fletcher's children and grandchildren are still living and working on family farms in Emmons County.

Which, it turns out, is rare today. In 1936 when Fletcher Ryckman's farm passed to another generation, the number of North Dakota farms was at its zenith. From the 78,000 farms in that day, the number has steadily declined to about 33,000 farms today. In the mid-1980s, the USDA estimated that, nationally, about 40,000 farmers a year were leaving the land for financial reasons.

In North Dakota, over 500 families have been recognized as having centennial farms and farming remains a way of life here that is handed from one generation to another.

Farming is mechanically easier now that it was when Fletcher Ryckman used a team of oxen and single breaker bottom plow to work his land. There's still plenty of physical labor, however. On the hottest day ever record-

ed in North Dakota, my grandfather was stacking hay. "Dad said he thought it was a little warm that day, but he didn't think it was that warm," my dad told me.

During harvest, everyone pitched in, all the while keeping a watchful eye for changes in the weather which would change a promising crop into a crop failure in mere seconds. As a youngster, I remember helping feed some of the harvest crews — tables filled with men — my dad, his brothers and my grandfather, and sometimes other relatives who were farming in Emmons County. When there was work to be done, it was done.

It was that willingness to do hard work, combined with practical and prudent people, that has been the secret to long-lasting family farms. Us kids learned early that when there was work to be done, it was done and there were always relatives and neighbors who were willing to pitch in. And if our family really didn't need something and couldn't pay cash, we didn't buy it.

During the Ryckman family celebration, the conclusion of the family history was this simple passage: "We hope to have the courage to face whatever the future has in store for us."

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