Schneider Township

Excerpts from Bassett, Chapter XXX, p 133-140, THE SAXON COLONY--CAME FROM SAXONY IN 1873--MADE SETTLEMENT IN BUFFALO COUNTY IN FALL OF 1873--CROPS DESTROYED BY GRASSHOPPERS IN 1874 --REMARKABLE INSTANCE OF ENDURANCE ON PART OF SAXON WOMEN.

Schneider Township in Buffalo County was very largely settled by emigrants from Europe and even at this date the names of quite eighty per cent of those residing on the 150 farms in this township indicate that the present occupants of the farms either came from Saxony, Germany, Bohemia or other European countries or are descendants of those who in the preceding generation emigrated from one of those countries to Schneider Township there to make a home.

Schneider Township, six miles square, lies on the divide between the Wood River Valley of the Platte on the south and the South Loup on the north. From the center of the township it is nine miles to Ravenna, on the Burlington Railroad on the north and fourteen miles to Gibbon, on the Union Pacific Railroad to the south. There are no running streams of water in the township and no natural growth of timber. The altitude is approximately two thousand one hundred feet and water in wells is found at approximately seventy feet. The general surface is rolling and somewhat broken. The soil is fertile and easily tilled and produces abundant crops. There are in the township at this date (1910) six schoolhouses and three churches but no village. The population is approximately five hundred and the valuation of property by the township assessor for the year 1909 $964,835.

In the valuation of property in the township it should be borne in mind that this valuation represents farm values only, the value of the farms and personal property incident to farming, as there are no railroads or village or city property within the township. The valuation of the township on a strictly farm basis indicates that the inhabitants are prosperous and as one travels over the township, the comfortable houses and barns, the well tilled fields, the groves of trees, the orchards of fruit, the abundance of well bred, well kept domestic animals, the comforts and conveniences on every hand are indisputable evidence that the people are contented and happy. The present prosperity attained by emigrants who came from a foreign country, without means, and making settlement on lands destitute of timber, without running water and from nine to fourteen miles from a railroad station having trading or shipping facilities.

The first settlement in this township was made by emigrants from the Kingdom of Saxony and for much of the history the writer is indebted to Richard Goehring, a member of the colony.

In the early '70s there were in the Kingdom of Saxony many people of the laboring class who looked with longing eyes toward the New World, where it was reported lands from which homes might be made could be had almost for the taking. Saxony was at that date densely peopled, having an average of approximately four hundred forty inhabitants to the square mile, being twenty-two times the number per square mile as has Buffalo County at the present time, or more than thirty times that of Nebraska as a whole, and because of the poor living and low wages paid in the over-populated factory districts many of the laboring class were anxious to emigrate, hoping thereby to better their financial condition. Many of these people had not the means to pay their passage across the water which separated them from these lands, and so they organized themselves into classes and agreeing to pay a stipulated amount, in some cases 50 cents, in others $1. per month, into a common fund and when the amount paid in was sufficient to pay the

transportation charges of a few of their number across the water the members raffled off the chance to be one of the lucky number.

The first members of the colony left Saxony April 5, 1873, and arrived New York April 19th. That was the year of the great April storms, as remembered by early settlers in Nebraska, the storm commencing Sunday, April 13th, and members of the Saxony Colony, crossing the ocean that week, recall that a terrible storm also raged on the ocean causing terror, sickness and great discomfort to those aboard the vessel. These members of the colony journeyed to Detroit and then into Northern Michigan, in the region of Lake Superior, where it had been planned to purchase a large tract of land to be subdivided into farms and also to establish on the tract, a village or other business and social center for the members of the colony.

A frost which came in the month of July, that year, in Northern Michigan, so discouraged the members of the colony that it was decided to abandon that location and seek another in Nebraska.

About this date Doctor Schneider, after whom Schneider Township was named, arrived in the United States and was chosen president of the colony. Doctor Schneider was a native of Saxony and was traveling in Egypt when the colony was formed and left Saxony. It seems that Doctor Schneider conceived the idea that important results might be accomplished by means of such a colony and abandoning his Egyptian trip, came to Michigan and was chosen president of the colony; he was without means and not a good financier and it does not appear that either as an officer or individual he was of help or benefit to the colonists. He came to Nebraska with the colony in 1873 and departed in 1874.

The first members of this colony arrived about October 1, 1873, and lived out of doors on the south bank of the Loup River, opposite the mouth of Beaver Creek, until the first sod house could be built. This sod house was built on section 4-11-14 on a claim taken by Fred Winkler. These members of the colony had no teams to begin with and carried the rafters needed for the sod house on their shoulders from the Loup River, a distance of about five miles. These rafters were necessarily strong, heavy timbers, as they supported a roof made of sod and dirt. Also it was necessary to dig a well and this was no small task; the distance to water was seventy feet. The well was dug four feet square and the dirt hauled by by [sic] means of a windlass made of cottonwood limbs, using one pail and a rope. Richard Goehring did most of the digging of the well and relates that he was in constant fear and especially when deep down in the well the pail of dirt went swinging on the rope to the top. It is estimated that in digging such a well about forty wagon loads of dirt would be removed, or more than two thousand five hundred pails full of dirt drawn with the windlass, some of it from a depth of seventy feet from the top of the ground. Two sod houses were thus built and two wells thus dug, the second house and well on section 10 and completed about December 1, 1873.

All the wood used the first winter had to be carried from the Loup River and in order to economize in the matter of fuel and because there was no time to build other houses before winter came the following spent the winter of 1873-74 in the first sod house on section No. 4, the size of this house being about 16 by 24: There were two married couples, Mr. and Mrs. F. Winkler and Mr. and Mrs. Gust Schieme. The single men were C. W. Grosser, Richard Goehring, Wm. Freyberg, Chas. Muerbe, F. Reinhold, Julius Weigel, Carl Kaeupler, Doctor Schneider and Felix Ziehr, in all thirteen persons. Also after a short time Otto Gumprecht and family and Mr. Kappler and family camped at the same place as part of the colony.

Early in the spring of 1874 began the work of building other sod houses by members of the colony and the digging of wells also. About the only timber available at that date for rafters for

sod houses was on the north bank of the Loup on section 16 (a school section) and Richard Goehring recalls that all day in the month of March he with others waded back and forth across the Loup, waist deep in icewater, carrying rafters for the sod houses, these timbers being later carried to the claims in Schneider Township.

One-half of the lands in the township were railroad lands and only eighty acres could be taken under the homestead laws by the members of the colony and many of the members took pre-emption claims of 160 acres, the law permitting 2½ years to elapse before final payment of $2.50 per acre must be paid and after payment for the pre-empted lands members of the colony took homestead claims of eighty acres. The Goehring family took claims on section 12 and Wilhelm Fischer on section 10.

When grass had started in the month of May, some members were able to purchase ox teams and cows, and those not able to purchase a team exchanged work so that the sod was broken and crops of corn and potatoes planted and especially large gardens, planted. Every member of the family labored to the end that food might be raised for the support of all. If not able to own or hire a team to plow the land with, it was turned over with a spade and every possible acre thus prepared planted to some useful crop. Mother Earth was kind and as the season progressed and the month of July came there was promise of abundance from the corn fields and gardens of the Saxon colonists. Late in July the ears of corn began to show with their tassels of silk; the early potatoes were of good size; from the gardens came in plenty onions, beans, radish and like vegetable; there was an abundance of pasture for the one or more cows which strained at the picket rope and whose every want was cheerfully looked after by members of the family. There was a pig or two, sometimes tethered out by one leg, to graze, or in other cases confined in a pen whose fence was a deep ditch with an outer wall of sod and the pig fed with weeds, succulent and appetizing, pulled from among the vegetables in the garden; a flock of hens, some of whom escorted a brood of chickens, roamed over the prairie and lived on the fat of the land, the countless insects whose home was the prairie. There was laughing and singing, happiness and contentment among the members of the colony for surely their lines had fallen in pleasant places and a competency for the future seemed already assured.

On a bright, sunshiny day, late in the month of July, 1874, at the noon hour the sun was slightly darkened, much the same appearance as precedes the coming of an eclipse; looking to the north, over the range of bluffs some three miles distant it was remarked that it looked as though we were to have an April snow squall such as sometimes comes in that month when the air is soft and balmy and when the snow flakes are large, melting as they reach the earth. It was the hour for the noon-day meal and all the family passed into the house and were soon in that keen enjoyment of eating which is the great boon granted to those on the sunny side of life, engaged in some useful occupation and to whom the future is bright and hopeful in anticipation. A member of the family going to the well for fresh water returned, hurriedly exclaiming, "come and see the grasshoppers and do look at the chickens."

Hurrying to the door it was seen that grasshoppers in great numbers were dropping from the air; at the first as a hopper alighted a hen would dash forward and gobble it up; then without stirring from her tracks she would swallow another and another until, her crop distended to an unusual size, she could hold no more. Then when a hopper alighted near the hen would cock her head to one side, stretch out her neck and by her actions seem to say, "can I possibly hold one more?"

At first it was not thought that the hoppers would do damage to the crops but it was soon noticed that in the cornfields near the house the stalks were bending almost to the ground with

their load of hoppers; that the potato tops, so rank of growth and dark green in color, were flattened to the ground; also that from the fields came a sound much like that made by cattle in eating coarse fodder and then it was realized that the hoppers were eating the crop. At once forth from the houses came the bedding and extra clothing and an effort was made to cover the most valuable of the garden, such as onions, tomatoes and the like. There was a gathering of dry hay and coarse litter and smudge fires started hoping to save by means of smoke some portion of the crop but all to no avail; the hoppers would eat holes in the clothes or bedding and crawl under and continue to eat the plants, and the smoke from the smudges of hay and litter proved of no practical benefit. When the next morning came there was not a leaf of cultivated plants left, nothing but bare stems of corn, potatoes and other vegetables and where the onions were there were saucer-like holes in the ground, the hoppers having eaten not only the onion bulb but to the ends of the roots as well.

Thus it was that the noon-day meal, began with the keenest of appetite and with feelings of peace, contentment, happiness and the brightest of anticipations for the future was never finished, for with the coming of the hoppers all else was forgotten in the vain attempt to drive them away, some rushing through their fields with whips and cloths, thinking thus to frighten the hoppers and save the crop.

With the loss of crops came the direst of forbodings and in place of laughter and singing there came a great burden of care and anxiety as to what the future had in store. Just how great the reaction, to what extreme in thought and feelings, from hopefulness to despair, the mental pendulum might swing in a crisis of this kind can possibly be illustrated by the relation of an incident which occurred but which has no connection whatever with the history of the Saxon Colony. The destruction of the crops completed and the excitement incident thereto had subsided, came the natural inclination to visit neighbors, talk over the terrible visitation and learn the extent of the grasshopper raid. In the cool of the evening, in company with the good wife, who sas always hopeful, we started on such a visit to a neighbor. It was necessary to drive very slow as the great swarms of hoppers which continually raised from the ground as the team procededed made it impossible to go faster than a slow walk. The particular neighbor had in view was a man of a deep religious nature, had helped to organize a church in his locality, was superintendent of the Sabbath school and until a schoolhouse was erected his house had been used for religious services of various kinds. Himself and family took great pleasure in gardening and were very proud of their garden that it being superior to any in the community. On this occasion there was no opportunity given for a friendly visit for we were met with such blasphemy and cursing because of the destruction wrought by grasshoppers as to make the blood run cold and very soon all thought of a friendly visit was abandoned and the team headed homeward. This neighbor lived for a quarter of a century or more in our midst, loved, honored and esteemed, no one more implicitly trusted both in public and private matters and yet he never resumed his former church relations or had further connection with a church organization. To make this incident complete in a historical way it seems well to also relate that the pastor of the church to which the neighbor belonged called a meeting of the members of the church to pray for their brother (the neighbor referred to), but the pastor himself forgetting the call, went fishing and the meeting was not held.

The first raid of grasshoppers came in the last days of July, 1874, spring wheat (the only kind then raised) had been harvested and a portion of the oats. Oats not harvested were chipped off by the hoppers and thus lost. Not a large acreage of spring wheat was grown in the county at

that date, the average yield per acre being about twelve bushels and the price fifty-four to fifty-nine cents in December.

The grasshoppers undoubtedly ate of the native grasses and plants and of the leaves of native trees but however much might have been eaten of these native plants it was not noticeable. They much preferred to feed on cultivated plants which are more succulent than are native ones and all cultivated plants were stripped of their leaves and all growing crops destroyed. Onions were a profitable crop in the early settlement of the country, being raised with little labor on newly turned sod because practically no weeds grew and while the seed was expencive, one or more acres could be found on nearly every claim. There was nothing the grasshoppers seemed to prefer more than onions, and they ate them, tops, bulbs and roots.

The grasshoppers remained, as recalled, two days and disappeared as mysteriously as they came. About the noon hour they arose as if in answer to a command, and darkening the sun as on the day they came, flew toward the south. No hopper of the migratory kind remained nor were any eggs laid in the fall of that year. The migratory hoppers returned from the South in the summer of 1875. Their arrival was at a little later date than in 1874. Corn was far enough advanced that kernels had formed at the butt end of the ear and all corn harvested that year was ears having one or two inches of kernels on the butt end.

In the fall of 1875, the hoppers laid millions of eggs. The eggs were laid in the hardest of ground, traveled roads across the prairie. The hoppers would dig a hole about one inch in depth and deposit from forty to sixty eggs in a sort of egg-shaped sack glued firmly together and shaped like the end of a finger. In the month of April, 1876, these eggs began to hatch, the top eggs in the sack first and all at once it was discovered that the ground was literally alive with little black hoppers. Instinct seemed to lead them to gather and feed on the fields of wheat and oats and although, every possible effort was made to destroy them it seemed impossible so to do as there seemed no limit to their numbers. But just when it appeared that every cultivated plant would be destroyed by them and the destruction of all crops would be complete, that nothing in the nature of a cultivated crops could be raised, there came late in May a three days' storm, rain and snow, freezing temperature, and as all prairie had been burned over there was no protection for the young and tender hopper and all perished.

It is difficult to describe, in the limits of a brief historical narrative, the conditions and feelings of the Saxon colonists after the destruction of their entire crop by grasshoppers. The members of the colony were without financial resources, without credit, and still more distressing, were strangers in a land. All their available means had been expended in transportation charges from their native lands and in the construction of a habitation in which to live and their entire resources and reliance for the future were bound up in promising crops which were destroyed in a few hours' time by a swarm of devouring insects.

The barest necessities of life could not be purchased on credit, for it is a matter of history during this period that honest, industrious men were refused credit for even a sack of corn meal at a time when there was an utter lack of food in their homes for their families. Had it not been for the carloads and trainloads of food and clothing so generously contributed by the kind-hearted people of the eastern states for the settlers in Kansas, Nebraska and the Dakotas, whose crops had been destroyed by clouds of grasshoppers, the entire settlements in these states must have been deserted for a time until means could have been secured for another venture.

Just how the members of the Saxon Colony met this crisis in their affairs can best be explained by relating a few personal incidents which, in a general way, apply to all the members. In one family the only article of any value that could be disposed of was a gun and this two sons

in the family sold to George Meisner, living near Shelton, for $8, and with this purchased coarse shirts, overalls and coarse shoes and thus respectably clothed started on foot toward the East seeking work. At Grand Island one of the sons found employment with Fred Hedde and the wages thus earned went to the support of the family on the claim. For years all his wages went to the support of the family and the improvement of the claims and being a single man he was able to make proof on his own claim, one of the first homestead claims proved up on in Schneider Township. Later he married and became a permanent resident of Grand Island; has been in the lumber business in that city for many years, is the owner of two valuable business blocks; has served as county supervisor of Hall County for four years; councilman of the City of Grand Island for six years and is one of Hall County's most honored and respected citizens, and with a good substantial yearly income, Richard Goehring, a Saxon colonist in 1873, is spending the evening of his day in comfort and happiness.

Another instance illustrates both perseverance and endurance on the part of a member of the colony seldom equalled. Some months after the grasshopper raid there called at the home of the writer about the noon hour, a woman who after resting and partaking of food continued on her journey to Kearney, sixteen miles distant, the entire journey from her home in Schneider Township being twenty-eight miles. At the relief headquarters in that city she procured for her own and other families some food supplies which she placed in a basket carried on the head and shoulders. The next day about sundown she again called at the home of the writer, so exhausted that she could not, unaided, remove the basket of food supplies from her head and shoulders. When her shoes and stockings were removed, her feet, a mass of blisters, were so pitiable a sight that tears streamed down the cheeks of women of the family as they helped to bathe the feet and apply soothing and healing lotions. When the morning came a team was hitched to a wagon and the good wife asked permission of the woman to take her home. She declined and seemed distressed when the matter was urged, possibly feeling she could not afford the expense as she seemingly could not understand that the request or offer was not for hire but would have been deemed a pleasure and so assisting the woman to lift the loaded basket to her head and shoulders she started bravely forth on her twelve-mile journey over the bluffs to her home.

Mrs. Ernest Goehring, mother of Richard Goehring herein mentioned, was about fifty years of age when she carried that load of food supplies from Kearney twenty-eight miles distant, to her home in Schneider Township. She is now eighty-five years of age, is the owner of 160 acres of land in Schneider Township and while bowed with age and the result of a life of toil and privation is still able to assist in the household duties. Scores, yes hundreds of like instances might be related of privation, endurance, courage, fortitude and finally a large measure of success on the part of many of the most useful and respected citizens who left their homes in foreign lands and made for themselves and their families homes in our own loved lands, and a history of what many of them endured and of their measure of success brings more forcibly to our attention the truth of the sentiment first quoted, "Peace hath her victories no less than war."

In 1874 a survey was made with a view of establishing a village on section 22-11-14 in Schneider Township to be named Berg, but no village ever grew there although a postoffice named Berg was established at that point in 1874 or '75 with Friedrich Friedrich as postmaster. As recalled there was a mail route from Gibbon to Berg.

The members of the Saxon Colony were all of the Lutheran faith, 97 per cent of the inhabitants of Saxony being of the Protestant faith; there is a Lutheran Church with a large membership in an adjoining township. At a quite early date there was erected in the immediate

vicinity of Berg postoffice a Presbyterian Church and a Catholic Church. Schools were not established in the township ship until the '90s.

The names of the members of the colony as furnished from memory are herewith given: Gust Schieme and wife, Fred Winkler and wife, Otto Gumprecht and family, F. A. Kappler and family, August Weidner and family, Louis Weidner and family, Wm. Weber and wife, Wm. Fisher and wife, C. W. Grosser and wife, Ernest Goehring and family, Carl Rost and wife, and those unmarried, Frank Guenther, J. C. Grosser, Charles A. Muebe, August Schmidt. Carl Kaeupler, Fred Reinhold, Wm. Freyberg, Felix Ziehr, Richard Goehring, Julius Weigel, Louis Veit, Emil Veit. All those who remained accumulated property and established comfortable homes and those now living are spending the evening of their days in ease and comfort on incomes secured by industry and economy. --Dated June 23, 1910.