

MEMORIES OF HOMESTEADING

My father had always had visions of homesteading on western land, as his father, a Civil War veteran, had homesteaded in south central Nebraska, near Axtell.

Congress had passed an act whereby a person could file on 320 acres instead of 160 acres, as before, so he and a good many others came to eastern Colorado and took up land. He wanted me to take it over, so in November of 1909 he and I came to Sterling, Colorado where we transferred the homestead over to me.

I had until April in 1910 to start my living on the place, so my father and I came to Akron on the train that month and he helped me build a shack on a hill of S $\frac{1}{2}$ -29-2S-51. We got into Akron on an early morning train on the Burlington and as I looked south from the old depot I could see nothing but prairie, no buildings in sight, not even freight cars and I thought, "what a desolate country."

We, my father and I, hired a man by the name of Ball to take what lumber and supplies we needed, to build our shack, and started south. We followed section lines some and angled southeast, passing a few places where people lived and quite a few homestead shacks. At about noon, and three miles in south of what is the baseline, we came to the Harve Resler place where we watered Mr. Ball's horses and got directions on how far we had to go.

I was pleased to know the Reslers in later years, but at that time I got to thinking, "this country is not for me." At any rate we got to the homestead location at about mid-afternoon when Mr. Ball fed his horses and we unloaded the wagon and ate lunch, then later Mr. Ball started back to Akron. There we were, my father and I, with a pile of lumber and a trunk full of blankets and some food, parked on a knoll which was later a pasture. There was not much in sight from here except the Ruhaak ranch, about 1 mile north and 1 mile west, and a few shacks to the north and east.

We slept that night under a clear, Colorado, starry sky. The next morning my father walked over to Ruhaaks' while I started a 10' X 12' house. I will say here that the Ruhaak family helped more in improving that area than anyone else. Most old ranchers resented homesteaders coming in, but they did not have that attitude.

My first 40 acres of farming was done by the Ruhaak boys with an old steam engine and a plow that they had on trial. That 40 was planted to corn since that was the usual crop on sod ground. One of the boys took us to Akron and in about two weeks my brother came back with me to fence my crop and finish with the building of the shack. We caught a ride back out as a lot of people were hauling supplies that year, some of them as far as 40 miles from Akron. After the fencing was done, my brother and I went back to Nebraska and in a short time I came back with my mode of conveyance---a bicycle. Then I could haul my drinking water instead of carrying it for a mile.

The Harrisburg post office and store, operated by Mr. Wilson, was about six miles west. I pedaled over there occasionally and sent with others for my mail and what groceries were needed. Mrs. Ruhaak was kind enough to bake bread for me. My only stove was a two-hole "topsy" which would burn wood or coal, or prairie fuel.

HOMESTEADING..... II

The corn crop was about shoulder-high and in good roasting ear stage. I was planning on having to cut it and shock it, by hand of course, and sell it for a few dollars. One morning I opened my door at about sun-up and behold I had my fenced field full of cattle and no corn. They had broken the wires from the ranch south of me and walked in. This ranch was operated by a company and had a manager. The next year it was purchased by Charles Campbell, a realtor in Akron, and they watched the cattle a little better, and I also kept better fences as this country was still considered as open range.

I went to Nebraska for the winter and came back in the early spring. I did this for three or four years. One spring when I came back, there had been a prairie fire which started over by the old location known as Elba. It got three or four miles wide before it was brought under control by people who came for miles around. They used wet sacks, dipped in a barrel of water. This Buffalo grass did not blaze very high, but kept creeping along the ground. Not much damage was done however, only the loss of the grass used for cattle grazing.

I shipped in a cement block machine and made blocks, some of which I sold. I made about \$3.00 per day at this and made enough for a two-room house of my own. Some people built houses of sod with a flat roof. I was getting acquainted with people and they were all trying to make a home in the west.

That year I planted some spring wheat and speltz and the yield was real good. The next problem was to harvest it and I found that Ed Purdy, who lived about three miles northeast, had a binder and he came over and cut it and I shocked it. The Farleys, over by Elba had a steam threshing outfit and came over and threshed it out as they did for others in the area. I had to haul coal from Akron for this operation. The neighbors all helped, as I did for them. I put the grain in this new two-room house.

By this time I had a good well, a windmill and a small shed made from baled straw which only lasted a few years. It was a long trip to a Akron to haul grain with a team and wagon. I usually went the 26 miles one day and back the next. I kept my horses in Mart Higinbotham's barn and stayed and ate at Mrs. Erb's, near the depot. She was a wonderful woman and a friend of everyone. That is the present location of the Layton hotel in Akron.

In 1915 I signed proof of residence and Woodrow Wilson gave me a deed to the farm. Many people who homesteaded at that time sold to someone else and pulled out, but those who stayed and worked hard came out all right. In 1916 I married a schoolteacher from Kansas whose parents were friends of our family.

Alice and I built up the buildings as they are now. The year, 1917 or 1918, was a rough one due to the flu epidemic. Alice and I got by rather lightly, but other families had a harder time getting over it. There were a few deaths. With only three doctors in Akron, they could not get around fast enough. I will say this, they were out day and night.

The Ecks, Kinnisons, and the Beamans were all down and Mr. Eck asked me to take his new Model T Ford with side curtains and get George Mann to go with me and go after Dr. Kaylor in Akron. The ground was covered with snow, but not deep, only in spots. Since there were no roads, but just trails, we took scoops and put tire chains on and started out. As we got closer to Akron it was easier going.

HOMESTEADING..... III

Dr. Kaylor got his medicine bag and put on his fur coat and cap and got in the back seat. We got to the Eck place about dark, and some of the close neighbors came and got some medicine. The doctor stayed overnight, but early the next morning we took him back to Akron where others were waiting to see him. I don't know when the doctors got any rest during this time. They certainly were not out for money, but to be of service to the people.

We did as the others did, milked cows and sold cream and eggs to buy our groceries. When we had wheat or barley to sell, it meant cash. There were a few Model T trucks by this time so we could go to Akron with a 50-bushel load and back, all in the same day.

A school district was organized and a small school was built about three miles northeast of our place. It was built mostly by donated labor and it was a matter of cooperative effort. That was where our daughter got her schooling. The Eck family, the Kinnisons, the Alts, the Gates, the Alfred Ruhaaks, the Phelps and the Beamans' children, all attended school here.

Mr. Eck and I bought a header and cut wheat and barley in the neighborhood. We traded work with each other. To the southwest of us were a few people from Missouri which centered around the Jefferson family. They established a Sunday school called, Bethel Union, and we attended quite often. Sometimes riding a motorcycle which I owned. Later we had a Model T Ford with no top.

Along about in the 1930's many of the oldtimers had sold out and gone. Some of the land was purchased by outsiders and some by neighbors. The method of farming had changed considerably, tractors and larger machinery and more summer fallowing was being done. It did not pay to plant corn and it is now practical to raise wheat, small grains and feed crops.

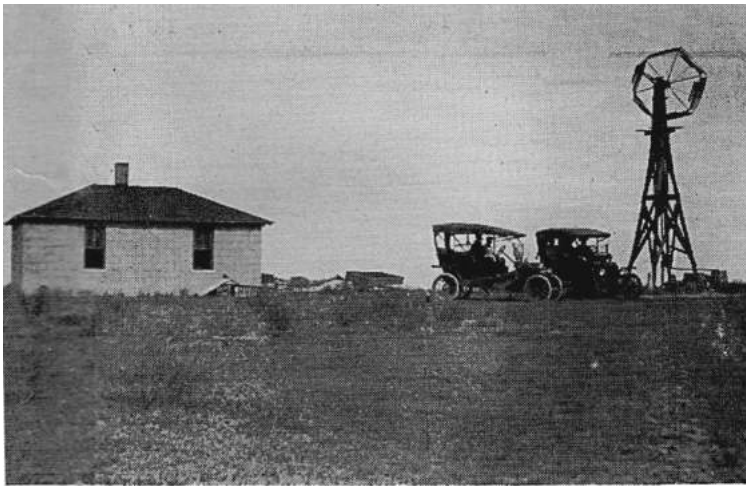
Wheat and cattle are the basic crops. By 1960, just a few are left, who homesteaded in 1909-1910. It is still a grand prairie country and my feet are deep-rooted to it.

----- Raymond L. Sergeant.

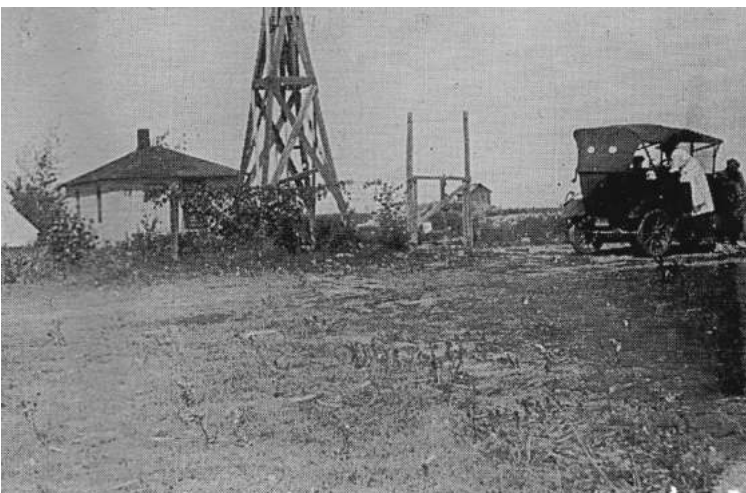
Compiled in January, 1968.



— 1910 —



— 1916 —



— 1920 —



— Harvesting in the "30's" —



— 1940 —



— 1950 —