

Biography of Jacob Fey, born 1874 Pioneer of 1888, McIntosh County, Fredonia, North Dakota

As one of the WPA work projects during the Depression, field workers were asked to interview and document the biographies of many of North Dakota's pioneers. This is the biography of Jacob Fey, born in Neu Elft, Bessarabia, who came to North Dakota in the late 1880s.

Jacob Fey was born at Ackermann, Bessarabia, Russia on March 22, 1874. His parents, Philip and Katharine Fey, were also born at Ackermann. His father was born November 5, 1841 and his mother December 16, 1849. Jacob Fey had five brothers and five sisters. His mother died in 1881 when he, the pioneer, was six years old. His father later married again, this time to Mrs. Triechel, also of Ackerman.

Mr. Fey's father was a farmer at Ackermann, renting some land from one of the large land owners. The land was seeded to flax and wheat. With this they weren't able to make more than a bare living. Mr. Fey's father did not want to continue this way in Russia. He wanted to become a landowner and be independent.

When Jacob Fey was fifteen years old, his father and step-mother decided to go to America, where some friends, Christ Meyers, had already settled. These friends wrote telling them about homesteading in America. To Philip Fey, Jacob Fey's father, this seemed to be just what they had been looking for. It didn't take the family long to dispose of their property through a public auction. They realized enough money through this sale to buy the passports for the family of seven who were going to America.

There were, besides Jacob Fey, his father, mother, a stepbrother, Christ Triechel of Kulm, ND; two sisters, now Mrs. Carl Meidinger of Lehr, ND and Mrs. A. Koenig in Montana; and a brother, Philip Jr., now of Kulm, ND.

Philip Fey hired a neighbor to take them to Odessa, Russia. The exact date of their leaving Ackermann, Russia, Jacob Fey cannot remember, but he does know it was sometime during May, 1888. It took about one day to reach Odessa, Russia by wagon. At Odessa the Fey family boarded a train which took them to Bremen, Germany. They reached Bremen, Germany in about four days. Here they had to wait for a few days for their ship. As Mr. Fey was only fifteen years of age he cannot recall much about such things as tickets, who the captain of the ship was or the ship's name. Mr. Fey Sr. did not have much money and consequently the Fey family traveled steerage. They had rather a calm crossing and Jacob Fey enjoyed the trip inasmuch as it was his first trip by boat. The food served on board ship consisted mostly of meat and soup.

Ten days after leaving Bremen, Germany, they reached New York City. Here they took a train for Ellendale, Dakota where their friends were located. The trip from New York to Ellendale took about four days.

At Ellendale they were met by Christ Meyer and Jacob Nill, who, knowing they were coming, came to meet them and take them out to the German-Russian settlement, about thirty-five miles northwest of Ellendale, Dakota. This settlement consisted mostly of

German-Russian immigrants from Ackermann in Bessarabia, Russia. There were, including the new arrivals, Wirches, Meyers, Nills, Hauffs, Feys, Bartels, Grafs, and Flegels. Upon arriving at the settlement, some of the Feys stayed at Nills, while Jacob and Philip Fey and Christ Triechel stayed at Meyers.

Jacob Fey's father soon decided on which land he wished to file. This was on the SE quarter of Section 22, Township 131, Range 67, McIntosh County.

Building a home wasn't very difficult as the neighbors helped and in two weeks the house was completed. The house was entirely of sod except for the roof which was of lumber purchased at Ellendale, Dakota. The house was 16x32 feet in size. It had two rooms, a bedroom and a kitchen. A cook stove was purchased at Ellendale. Most of the other furniture was made out of the lumber left over from the house. There were three benches (for chairs), a cupboard, table, three beds, all made by the men of the Fey family. These beds had no springs or mattresses, but only boards for springs and straw ticks for mattresses. Another stove was built for heating. This stove was made of clay and was size 5x4x4 feet along the wall in the bedroom. It had about a two foot opening in front through which the fire was fed. Hay was the only fuel they had for both the stoves.

After settling in their new home, the Fey family started working their land. By this time it was July and they were, of course, unable to seed anything that year, but they did break up twenty acres of land to be seeded the following year, 1889. They also made sufficient hay to last them for two years. Some of this hay was later taken to Ellendale where it was sold for \$3.00 per ton.

Soon after moving into their new home Mr. Fey made a trip to Ellendale with a neighbor to purchase his farm machinery. He purchased four oxen, a plow and a mower. Later he purchased a wagon. The price of the purchase is not known.

With money from the sale of hay and the sale of buffalo bones picked up on the prairies, the Fey family was able to get through the first winter (1888-89) without suffering. The first two years buffalo bones could be found in considerable quantities. Jacob Fey, his father and his two brothers were able to pick a wagon load in two days. These bones were sold at Ellendale, Dakota, where they brought \$8.00 per ton.

In October 1888 the entire Fey family made a trip to Ellendale, where they purchased enough staple groceries to last them through the winter. They had been told, by the people who had lived in Dakota during previous winters, that driving 35 miles with a team of oxen and sleigh was next to impossible. At Ellendale they purchased sugar at \$3.50 per 100 pounds, coffee at 10 cents per pound and flour (of the cheapest grade) at \$1.00 per 100 pounds. They also bought gingham and denim to make into clothes. The first suit Jacob Fey purchased in America cost \$5.00. Flour sacks, too, were utilized by the family and made into shirts and blouses.

The first winter that Feys were in America was not as severe as they expected, but being unaccustomed to severe cold it seemed bitter cold to Mr. Fey. The well was three-quarters of a mile away from the farm and it was almost impossible to reach the well during the

blizzards, of which there were many. Snow drifts were 10 feet deep. The cold weather did not last as long as Feys expected, and there was an early spring.

Mr. Fey does not remember where his father bought the seed for planting that first spring or the following years. His father seeded the land to flax, but in 1889 very little rain fell and the crop was a total failure.

That fall, with no crop, the family was faced with starvation. The money Philip Fey, the father, had brought along from Russia was all gone. In September 1889 Jacob Fey and his father finally obtained work at Edgeley with a hay baling crew. Jacob Fey was only seventeen years old at that time and does not remember the names of the men with whom they worked. They worked at baling hay for two months. Each received \$20 per month. While working they slept and ate in a barn-like shanty at Edgeley, Dakota, which they were allowed to use rent-free. For food the two Feys ate, mostly, rye bread and tea. They slept on blankets on the sod floor. They had no stove in the shanty as food would have cost money and they needed every cent they could save in order to buy food and clothing for the family during the winter that was to come. The trip to and from Edgeley was made on foot by Jacob Fey and his father.

After returning home, they took four loads of hay to Ellendale. This they sold for \$3 per ton. Adding the money received from the sale of the hay to the wages they had earned at Edgeley, they were able to buy 1000 pounds of flour, 100 pounds of sugar, some coffee and other necessities, such as salt and some pork. They also bought some dry goods to make into clothes.

A school was established that winter of 1889-90. The pioneers were too poor to build a school house, so August Schock gave them one room of his house in which the children could gather and study. Jacob Fey attended school for a short time that winter but he was badly needed at home, so after going a few days he quit. He was never able to attend American schools after that, although he could read and write a little. He had attended school in Russia and was able to read and write both the German and Russian languages. Mr. Fey does not remember who the first teacher was here in America. Text books were purchased at Ellendale by the pupils' parents. The subjects taught were reading, writing, and arithmetic. Among the eight pupils who attended the first school were the children of Fey, Schock, Meyer, Hauff, and Rott. The teacher received a salary of \$25 per month for a four month term. Although Mr. Fey cannot remember all of the schoolboard members, he believes August Schock and John Rott were among the first. A year or two later, a school house was erected in section 23, at a cost of \$300. The lumber was hauled from Ellendale by the settlers in wagons. Mike Kliebert did the carpentry work. The desks were also made by Mr. Kliebert. A cast-iron heating stove was purchased at Ellendale.

The people of the German-Russian settlement had no church in which to worship. They decided that until they could afford to build a church they would meet in each other's homes to worship in their way. Rev. Matsky, a Baptist minister of Eureka, Dakota, came out whenever he could. In summer he would make the trip by buggy, but in winter he was forced to use snow shoes. The distance from the settlement to Eureka was well over fifty

miles. Rev. Matsky received a salary of \$400 per year from the members of this congregation. As there were only four members of the church in the township they didn't build a church here, but in 1889 a Baptist church was built in the adjoining township. This was Twp. 131, Rge. 68. Mr. J. Meidinger donated the grounds for the church. This was in the NW quarter of Section 24. Lumber for the church was hauled from Ellendale. The congregation had no carpenter; they did all the work themselves and, when finished, the church had cost \$500. The interior of the church had rough benches built by the settlers. Besides the benches they bought some chairs and a cast-iron heating stove at Ellendale. The church was 30x40 feet in size, with three windows on each side. The members, as Mr. Fey can remember them, were Feys, Gohrings, Meidinger, Hauffs, Rotts, Meyers, and Nills. Rev. Matsky served the congregation for eight years and was then succeeded by Rev. Domke.

That winter of 1889-90 was as severe as the previous one, but they were more used to it. Mr. Fey saw blizzards which lasted as long as six days. To relieve the monotony of winter, Feys would visit with the neighbors if the weather permitted. They had no newspapers or magazines, neither had they any books except the Bible. Hardly any mail ever came and, if some did, they were unable to get it until spring.

In the spring of 1890, Mr. Fey's father again seeded his land, but again this area was drouth stricken. They harvested no crop whatsoever. Feys would have suffered greatly that year (1890) but for the help of more fortunate neighbors. With this help and due to their own persistence they were able to hang on another year. With the coming of the year, 1891, their fortunes turned. That year they were rewarded with a bumper crop. Mr. Fey does not remember how many acres they seeded that year. Flax averaged eighteen bushels and wheat thirty-five bushels per acre. For the flax they were paid at Ellendale, 90 cents per bushel, while wheat was sold for from 25—50 cents a bushel. From then on things became easier for the Fey family even though prices for the farm commodities were low.

During the years 1889 and 1890 "Indian Scares" were frequent. Word would go around the settlement telling of a band of Indians on the warpath, but nothing ever came of this and people soon paid no attention to these rumors.

Prairie fires were a common occurrence at the German settlement. During Mr. Fey's first years in America there was a prairie fire every year, but none ever came near Fey's home so he cannot tell of any exceptional fire.

Blizzards in winter were often so fierce that a person venturing away from the house would have the greatest difficulty finding his way back again. The blizzards would last for a week at a time. The stock in the barn would go without water for as long as three days, and then, when the barn could be reached it was entirely covered with snow. Steps had to be dug down to the barn door. These steps were often so steep that the stock could not climb up. In that case water had to be carried into the barn. A hole was made in the roof of the barn through which hay for the stock was pushed down. A hook, attached to a long rod, was used to pull hay out of an entirely snow-covered haystack.

If Mr. Fey's memory is correct, August Schock was the first settler in Twp. 131, Rge. 67. He settled in Sec 23 sometime during 1886. The first couple to be married in the township were Mike Meyer and Margaret Heller. Mr. Fey cannot remember the date or details about the wedding. The first death in the township was that of a man named Bitterstedt. Among the Fey family's neighbors were August Schock, Christ Meyer, and Johann Beglau. They were all here before Feys.

In 1895 Mr. Fey left home to file a claim of his own. He selected the NE quarter of Section 27, Twp 131, Rge 67. Here he built a small sod house, size 16x30 feet. The house had four windows, two in each of the two rooms. Mr. Fey went to Kulm where he purchased a few chairs and a stove. All of the other furniture, consisting of a table, a bed and a cupboard, was made by Mr. Fey himself. Besides his house and furniture, he had two oxen, a walking plow and a wagon, all given to him by his father. As Mr. Fey left home in the spring he did not have much time to prepare his land and could only break up and seed ten acres. The land was seeded to flax and his first crop yielded an average of fifteen bushels per acre. He sold the grain at Kulm, North Dakota where he received about \$1.00 per bushel for it. Mr. Fey was a bachelor until 1898, when he was married to Christine Heller.

In 1890 Christine Heller of Bessarabia, South Russia, came to America with her parents, Fred and Barbara Heller. Christine Heller was born in Bessarabia, November 24, 1878. The Heller family settled in the township east of the one Feys lived in. Mr. Fey soon became acquainted with Christine Heller and on February 18 1898 they were married at Kulm at a simple wedding ceremony. Rev. Paul Burkhardt was the officiating minister. After their marriage, Mr. and Mrs. Fey made their home on Mr. Fey's claim.

To this union were born seven children. Mrs. Fey died suddenly at the Fey farm March 30, 1925. A year later Mr. Fey married again. This time to Mrs. Julia Grosz of Linton, North Dakota and that same year, 1926, they moved to Fredonia where they have resided since. Mr. and Mrs. Jacob Fey are of a religious nature and are members of the Fredonia Baptist Church.

(Source: The Collection of the State Historical Society of North Dakota, WPA Biography Project. Used with permission.)