

GRANDMA SYLVA MODESITT

by
Scott Mills

This is the story of one woman's life on the Great Plains. It may not be the most glamorous, or the stuff of legends but to me it is the grand story of my family. My grandmother, Sylva Modesitt, has lived 98 years—a long life by today's standards—and if she doesn't stop moving from room to room we will have to tie her down. She does this on her own every now and then, so we're not quite sure which room to go to when we visit the apartment complex where she lives. She has lived in east central Kansas all of her years, not in one place, but in several towns. More on that later. We may as well start from the beginning so we know how she got where she is now.

Grandmother's father, John Eberhart, came to the United States as a small boy in the mid-1800s from Germany. His family settled in Kingman, Kansas, a small farming community west of Wichita. Grandma, the second of five children, was born Carmen Sylva Eberhardt on August 6, 1904, in Kingman. Pregnancy back then was difficult, she said, because not as many doctors were available. When the time came, one of the boys had to ride into town to get the doctor and bring him back, a trip which, at that time, took several hours.

Grandma's place on the farm was to help her mother raise the other kids, cook, clean, and tend to the home garden. The children had the jobs of milking the cows and taking care of the chickens. They only went to town for staples like salt, sugar, jars for canning, and other supplies to run the farm. They grew everything else they needed and had a smokehouse to store meat. She said it seemed at times that the women worked harder than the men.

The farm was 120 acres and Grandma said that a good portion of it

Scott Mills graduated from Emporia State University in December 2002 with a degree in business administration. The fact that he graduated from the same college as his grandmother is a source of pride for him. The reminiscences in this article were collected in August 2002. Unfortunately Sylva Modesitt died in December 2002. Her family misses her.

was covered with a thick grass that was at least waist high and stretched out as far as you could see. The only breaks in the sea of grass were the clumps of trees that grew near the streams. The neighbors were more than a mile away in any direction but the nearest ones all built their homes close to the center of their property so they were at least within riding distance for help when needed. The homes were situated in the middle of this forest of grass because the farm families operated the land as a small commune. They grew wheat and corn in different fields on a rotating basis. The neighbor men would pitch in and help each other, especially during planting and harvest time. Grandma said they had only enough money to buy one piece of equipment at any one time. The cost of equipment was shared by all the families and it was used by all.

At harvest time the real work started. Tending to the farm and animals kept the men busy all year. When harvest came around work turned into a community effort. Because nothing was motorized all the work was done by hand or by horsepower. The wheat or corn was cut and piled on huge tarps that had been sewn together from old flour sacks. These piles were then loaded on wagons and taken to the rail station where a representative from the grain mill would pay for the lot and ship it to the mill. After four to six weeks the train returned loaded with flour and meal, and Grandma's family purchased what they needed for the coming winter. They would return from town with the wagon loaded with 25-pound sacks that they had to carry up two flights of stairs to their storeroom in the house.

This reminds me that I haven't written about the house. Grandma said that they had a plain two-story home. The layout of the house was an important part of life on the Plains. The bedrooms were on the south and west side of the house so they would receive sun all day to keep them warm—especially important in winter. The kitchen was on the northwest side of the first floor and the dining room was on the northeast; the heat from cooking kept this part of the house warm. The family room, or parlor as it was called, was on the southeast side and had the fireplace. In back of the house was a root cellar where they kept the canned goods that were put up all summer long. Also away from the house was the outhouse; I don't need to elaborate on this. Because they did not have indoor plumbing all the water was hauled in from a pump outside.

Grandma said they understood that water was shared from a common underground source that they thought of as a large underground hole full of water replenished by the rains. These days we know it's more complicated than that.

After Robert, Grandma's oldest brother, moved out of the house, she said "Dad didn't want to haul water in by himself" so he went out and bought a huge tank and put it in Robert's vacated room. He then brought home a lot of pipes and ran them to the kitchen and outside, and thus the family became the first in the area to have indoor plumbing. A month or so later a windmill was erected to make life even easier.

Education back then took second place to everyday chores. Some of the children were not allowed to go to school because they were needed on the farm. Grandma said life for kids was much rougher then than it is now. She had to get up and do chores before she could go to school. The stories of walking ten miles to school uphill both ways had their roots in the school days of old. Grandma said she was lucky that school was only a couple of miles from the house. She attended a one room country school until she was seventeen. This only got her through the eighth grade. It took much longer to go through school because of the interruptions of farm life.

Grandma loved learning so much that she decided teaching children would be something she could give back to the community. She attended a very prestigious college, Kansas State Teacher's College in Emporia. She graduated in 1923 from what was at that time a two-year program, with her teaching certificate, and returned to the very same one room schoolhouse that she loved so much.

She was a very respected teacher and continued teaching until she met Charles Modesitt.

Charley, a lineman for Southwestern Bell Telephone Company, was a very outgoing individual. At the time he met Sylva he was running lines to all the rural homes through the area. One thing led to another, as love always does, and Charley and Sylva were married on March 12, 1927. His lineman job kept them moving around the eastern parts of Kansas, first to Wichita, then to Kansas City, then to the little town of LaCygne, and back to Kansas City. Telephone lines on a large scale were installed over many years. Grandma quit working as a schoolteacher

because of all the moving around, and became a full-time homemaker. She and Grandpa raised chickens and mink for extra cash to make ends meet. When they enclosed the pens with chicken wire they became the most modern poultry farmers in town.

They started their family in 1932, while they lived in Kansas City, where their first child, Wesley, was born. Southwestern Bell wasn't finished with Charley yet, so back to LaCygne they went. In 1935 Joan was born and they decided that they would stay in LaCygne. The town had a population of only about 100 people at that time.

She said that during the years of the early 1930s life was terrible. It was unbearably hot all the time and not much grew. Although they didn't live on the farm anymore the weather was still tough on Charley because he was outside all the time and would come home covered in dirt from the fields that seemed to be blowing away. On the family farm no trees were planted along the north side of the house to stop the wind and none of the windbreaks that you see today alongside the road had yet been planted.

When World War II broke out, Grandma went to work in an effort to do something to support two of her brothers who fought in Europe. She did this by working in a tent factory in LaCygne. Why a factory was built in this remote agricultural town is a mystery to her, but working there was the only thing she could do. This was the only job she held after being a teacher, and it ended with the end of the war.

After the war, she said, life was fairly quiet in LaCygne. The population grew to a whopping 550 people. The city council had to increase the size of the school to accommodate the new kids. The town remained an agricultural area and, as Grandma described it, it was much like Mayberry, the town from the Andy Griffith show. The Korean War put a damper on Grandma's picture perfect life in LaCygne. The town was spared the burden of factory work in this war effort, though, so Grandma sat this one out.

When Grandpa retired in 1968 they started their own migration around North America. Grandma and Grandpa traveled extensively around the U.S., Canada, and Mexico in the following years because they had spent their entire lives in Kansas and wanted to see more of the country. Over a period of eighteen years they visited every state in the

union more than once, including Alaska and Hawaii. When Grandpa passed away in 1986, Grandma settled down again in LaCygne. She still resides there today, though she's not quite as active as she once was.

Grandma now spends her time in the retirement apartment in town, moving when she fancies and keeping us on our toes. I guess she keeps moving because she can and because she lived most of her life in one area and doesn't want to stop moving just yet. She says that not much bothers her anymore—politics, the weather or anything else; she says it's going to happen anyway. She has seen a lot, from buggies to cars, phones in every house, television, to space travel, though we haven't introduced her to computers. She says "you just don't know where life is going to take you." She has seen more change in her years than we can imagine.