



**LOOKING TO THE PAST TO FIND OUR FUTURE:
THE HISTORY OF VERA RUSSELL PETERSON**

**By
Lori Gerken**

On a warm, summer night in 1908, a baby was born in a new world and let out her first cries. Vera Russell Peterson was born on June 25 in a soddie, ten miles from the nearest doctor. Her father, Henry, had gone to town to get a doctor, but returned too late. Vera was delivered by her aunt in that little sod house almost a century ago. She was the younger of two children born to Henry and Lillie Russell, who lived on the prairie in Hoxie, Kansas, in Sheridan County.

The Russells were a pioneer family. When Henry was two, the family traveled in a covered wagon from Iowa to western Kansas. Their first house was a dugout with a fireplace on one side and the roof level with the ground. One day, someone left wagon tracks on the roof

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as they drove by. Lillie's mother and father emigrated from Germany and England when they were very young. Her father was a soldier in the Union Army during the Civil War. Henry and Lillie were married in 1904. Vera's older sister Beulah was born in 1905.

When the Homestead Act was passed, the Russells decided to homestead 160 acres in Kansas. This seemed like the perfect opportunity for Vera's family but they only lived there for five years. "In 1909, we sold out and came back to Arkansas. In 1910, we moved to Miami County, Kansas."

Vera and her family moved thirteen times from 1927 to 1982. Most of these moves occurred when she was very young. When I asked Vera why her family moved so often, she didn't have a reason. It just seemed like the right thing to do. Many times they moved to be closer to family, on whom they depended for moral support in hard times. At other times they moved because of a lack of opportunity. Each place they moved to promised them something better, but soon they found out that the new place was not really any better. Vera remembers that life during these times was very difficult.

Vera's father's life was very hard and grim at times. Henry was a farmer. He also worked as a railroad man, riding the railroad each day to inspect the tracks. He took this job to supplement the family's farm income. Henry farmed with a horse and plow, and raised sheep, cattle, hogs, and chickens. Around 1910 or 1911, Henry lost all of his hogs to cholera, a blow that devastated the family. Henry also survived malaria and diphtheria, while some of his siblings did not. "The doctors didn't know how to cure diphtheria and in three weeks, [we] had lost Will, Bessie, and Sadie, ages 14, 4, and 6, and also my Grandfather Linthicum." Vera grew up with the same attitude as her father: "God may give you obstacles, but he wouldn't give them to you if he didn't think you could handle them."

The majority of Vera's childhood memories weren't from the prairie but from Beagle, Kansas, in Miami County where they moved when she was two years old. Vera was a wild and free spirit. She ran off every chance she had. One time, she ran off to a pasture down the road. She didn't remember how she got there, but remembered

knowing that someone would come and find her. She never worried about getting lost.

Vera's main role in the family was to round up the cows after supper. With 120 acres of pasture to search on foot, this was no easy task! She always wished for a pony to ride, but never had one. The only horse she could ride was a workhorse, which wasn't all that thrilling. She also helped her mother with supper and carried water and lunch to her dad and her sister Beulah in the fields. Everyone in the family had a role that was crucial for a life on the farm.

In Vera's spare time she would cut weeds and pick up rocks to earn some money. She spent all of her hard earned money at a fair for soda pop and rides. These were the only luxuries she had and she worked very hard for them. When Vera wasn't helping on the farm, she attended school through the 9th grade. "I may not have finished school, but I learned my studies well and completely. I don't know if many children these days learn their studies as well as we did back then." Many times, she and Beulah would ride the workhorses to school because the creek was too flooded to walk through. Once they reached school, the horses turned and went straight home! They never got lost along the way.

Life on the farm wasn't easy, but it was very simple. There wasn't much time for fun and games. Vera's mother knew this, and tried to make their lives as fun and normal as possible. They had to be creative with their fun. One Easter, Lillie used a cat to make paw prints on the newspaper and told the girls the Easter bunny had been there. They knew better, but it was a nice gesture. One winter when the snow was deep, her dad used an old wagonbox to make a sled. He used bent tree limbs as runners. He filled the wagonbox with straw, hitched two horses to it, and took the children for rides. They stayed warm with heavy quilts on their laps. They rode at night into Lane, a nearby town, to see the stores decorated for Christmas. Vera described this occasion as one of her best memories of her childhood. "The folks couldn't afford much, very few farmers had money for luxuries, but we always had plenty to eat and warm clothes. I am glad we grew up appreciating what we did have and taking good care of it. The depression years during the 1920s and 1930s would have seemed much harder if we had

been used to getting everything we wanted – the way many children are brought up now.”

In 1918, Vera’s mother Lillie bought an organ so the children could learn to play. Vera took lessons from Elsie Peterson, who was paid 50 cents per hour. Elsie’s brother Glenn would sometimes bring her to Vera’s home in a buggy. This is how Vera met her husband of almost 54 years. Vera married Glenn in April of 1927 after a courtship of 3 years. They are the parents of 2 children, Don and Nina.

Vera described her memories of the Great Depression during the 1920s and 1930s. “Times were tough, but we always found a way to make it.” She says that she doesn’t remember being “that bad off” because they were poor before the Great Depression and poor afterward. Nothing had changed. Everyone was poor. They had always been poor and didn’t realize that the economy was slowing down. She didn’t realize that the United States was in a depression until someone told her. “When you live on a farm, you live off the farm,” she said. They grew their own food and milked cows. Glenn worked as a mechanic for many years to supplement the farm income. “You couldn’t just make it off the farm,” Vera said. Crop prices were at an all-time low during this time and farming was not profitable. Glenn continued to farm so the family could eat.

In 1943, the aircraft industry was booming. Sixteen years after Vera and Glenn were married, the family moved to California, where Glenn went to work in the aircraft shipyards. They sold their home and everything they had. “Isn’t that crazy?” Vera asked. “We just packed up everything we owned and moved out to California. We had family there, but had no idea what we were getting into.” They only lived in California for three years before moving back to Miami County.

When I asked Vera why they stayed in California for only three years, she just shook her head. She does not know why. She only knows that Miami County was home to them. They moved wherever they thought they could better their lives. Vera explained that California was the place to be during the War. The aircraft industry was thriving and a lot of money was to be made there. When the War was over, the jobs were over also. I believe this may be the reason they moved back to Miami County in such a short time.

Vera has spent the rest of her life in Miami County, enjoying her children, grandchildren, great-grandchildren, and great-great-grandchildren. She didn't talk very much about these years. She only states that "Life was good for us here with Glenn until his passing on December 29, 1980." Vera continues to live unassisted in an apartment in Paola, Kansas. She credits her long life to good eating, good family, good work, and good religion. She is truly a gem in every way. At 94 years of age, her mind is still as sharp as ever.

We can learn a lot from our past. We need to appreciate those who lived through the hardships we call the Depression, the War, and others. Vera knows she has lived a very full life. She was eager to share her personal stories with me because she's my great-grandma. But even more, she wants others to know what life was like before computers, cars, and televisions. Life was much harder then, but in many ways it seemed easier because people didn't live in such a fast-paced world. They took each day as it came and lived it the best they knew.

With the help of those who have first hand experience, we can learn about our past and learn from the mistakes made. What good do the Depression, World War I, or World War II serve us now, if we don't learn from the mistakes made? We must look to the past to find our future. Only then can we fully understand what our country has been through and what future it holds.