

**LIFE ON THE GREAT PLAINS:
INTERVIEW OF RUTH REWERTS OF STAFFORD, KANSAS**

**By
Shannon Rewerts**

A German immigrant who was a tailor in New York came to Kansas during the westward expansion and moved to the Stafford region, right in the middle of the state, thinking that the sandier the land, the better the corn you would have. That is how our family homesteaded in the late 1800s.

As I interviewed my grandmother I could see that she greatly missed some things that happened in the past, but I also felt that she appreciated the fact that the world has changed. I had a great time interviewing her and I think she enjoyed the time also, being able to express feelings about what she and her family had experienced while living in the heart of the Great Plains.

My grandmother was born in Stafford, a small town of about 1500 people. Her grandfather built the house she lived in as a child and I grew up in the same house. The farmstead was settled in the late 1800s and passed on down through the generations. She and my grandfather got married in 1950. After a few years in Stafford, they decided to move out to Leoti, in western Kansas, where my grandfather grew up. They lived there for four years. At the end of those four long years, after three failed wheat crops, they moved back to Stafford and stayed.

Growing up and raising a family on the Great Plains, Grandma lived through many hard times, especially because her family was involved in agriculture. She was born in the 1930s, but said her family was far enough east that they didn't experience the nasty dust storms they had out west. She said they did have the hot, dry conditions with the wind, but it was not as bad as the big dust storms. She remembers

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that when she and my grandfather moved out to western Kansas in the 1950s, big dust clouds rolled in from Oklahoma and covered the town with dirt. They put towels and sheets over the windows and doorways to help keep out the dirt. After living in western Kansas for four years, my grandparents decided to move back to Stafford. The reason behind their decision to move was repeated crop failures due to hailstorms and also ongoing extremely dry conditions. She stated that they only had one good wheat crop and that was in 1952; this was typical among farmers throughout the Great Plains region in those years. After failing out west they moved back to be close to family and to help out on the farm in Stafford.

Agriculture was the way of life for my grandmother's family. She said they socialized with neighbors and only went to town on Sundays for church. Everyone depended on neighbors when something went wrong or they needed help. She thought that this is not always the case today, when people are basically on their own.

She said the Great Plains has changed over the years. When she was growing up many more farms operated and they were a lot smaller than they are now. Crop yields have gone up tremendously with the aid of new technologies that have become available to farmers. In western Kansas the farms were much larger than the ones around Stafford and you could go for miles without seeing a house. Land may have been miles away from the people who farmed it; she remembered that a quarter section of ground that my grandfather farmed was fifteen miles from their house. She had to take lunches out to my grandfather and she said that there were only two houses in between their house that the field. She always worried about what she would do if something ever happened to her on the way out to the field.

Immigrants came to western Kansas in the Garden City area and around Leoti mainly because of the development of irrigation. Grandma said that where they lived in the county they could not have irrigation because the water table was around one hundred feet deep. In the northern part of the county, though, they did have wells, so evidently the water table was not as deep in the northern part. In the 1950s the region was extremely dry, especially after 1952, and if farmers did not have other compensations such as cattle they did not

make it. When my grandparents moved back to Stafford they were back on the smaller-sized farm and experienced a lot more rain and humidity in the central part of the state. Most of the time in that area farmers could depend on a good crop.

She does not recollect stories told about the dirty thirties in Stafford County. They did have the dust storms come through but they were not as bad as they were out west, like her in-laws told stories about. She remembers when she was about six overhearing her dad say that they only had sixty dollars in the bank, and it really frightened her to know that was all they had left to live on for a while.

According to my grandmother, life was different out west than it was in the central part of the state. The towns were smaller, and people went to the closest church, regardless of denomination so they did not have to travel any farther. To see a doctor, they had to travel to Garden City, which was about forty miles away. She said that the people in western Kansas were nice. She did not know anybody in Leoti when they moved there except her in-laws. But after a time she became a Four-H leader, played the piano at church, and helped start a women's group through the extension service. She said she always felt more comfortable around Stafford, however, because she knew more people and knew the area better.

Stafford did not have any different ethnic groups that my grandmother recalls. She does remember signs being posted in town that Black people were not welcome and should not stop for gas or at restaurants; so they just passed the town by.

While she was growing up, education was a big part of her family life. Her parents wanted their children to go to school and to get an education so they could have a better life. Grandma went to a one-room school for her first eight years, typical among schools on the Great Plains and throughout history. She said you learned to concentrate on what you were doing since there were so many different classes in the same room. She had quite an adjustment to make going from country school to town in the ninth grade. Her ninth-grade class had forty students, compared to three in the country school. They had special classes and many different teachers when they jumped to the middle school.

My grandmother had planned to go to college no matter what; she did not know what she would have done had her parents not had enough money to send her. She said she was thankful for her parents' milking cows so she and her sister could go to school. She went to Kansas State University and lived in the women-only dorms while working on her degree in nursing. When the family moved from Leoti back to Stafford, she got a job at the Stafford hospital, where she worked until her retirement in 1995.

When I asked her what she thought about the Great Plains now she simply said, "I love it." She loves to drive to different places throughout Kansas because she likes the wide open land and being able to see for miles and miles. She said she likes to drive up to the family's north pasture because she can remember all of the beautiful sunsets they used to watch up there ever since that pasture has been in the family. Her family had worked hard and earned everything they had. She said it feels good to do something and be able to show it off. When I asked her about what makes the Great Plains unique, she said simply that it was the "wide open places and you can see forever." That is something that everybody says when they pass through the region, as long as people have been passing through. My grandmother hoped that the environment would lead to a better future for her grandchildren as she wanted to see them succeed to their fullest potential. She has many memories of the Great Plains that are sacred to her, and hopes that they will never be forgotten. She said she has loved the place and has no regrets over living here or over the experiences that she and her family had in their lives on the Great Plains.