



Rogler place, April 1930



Rogler place, Wayne Rogler, June 1950

The Rogler Reality Show

By
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Many of us have a highly romanticized notion of what frontier life was all about. Even those of us still in the cattle and grass business here in the Flint Hills don't really have much more than a nodding acquaintance with hardship or discomfort. Watch modern cowhands checking cattle or fence, and you'll eventually catch one of them talking on a cell phone from the back of a horse. Some of us don't even use horses anymore. I check cows and calves from the saddle of my Kawasaki four-wheeler and come home at the end of the day to a hot shower and high-speed Internet. I know nothing about suffering.

I was asked to tell a few stories today about the Rogler family, who settled just north of Matfield Green in 1859 and eventually ended up managing the South Clements Pasture and other pastures all around and beyond the limits of your vision this afternoon—to the tune of 60,000 acres in the glory days. But right now I'd like to take you back with me in the opposite direction from the heyday when Wayne Rogler was a state senator and one of the most influential cattlemen in the Flint Hills and, for that matter, in the entire state of Kansas and beyond.

Let's roll back several generations to the gritty days that wore people down early, say about 1860, when the average life expectancy was a mere 42 years. For the sake of a modern context, let's call this *The Rogler Reality Show*. If you came to hear something pretty and nostalgic, you might want to escape to the Purple Coneflower tent before it's too late! But if you think you can handle a dose of Pioneer Reality, by all means, stay with me for the next 15 minutes as we take a fast and bumpy ride across about a hundred years of history.

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Welcome to *The Rogler Reality Show!*

If there are any men in the audience today in their early 50s (which back in 1860 meant that you already had a worrisome awareness of the Grim Reaper tripping on your heels), step into the shoes of Johann Rogler, an immigrant from Austria, and imagine you've just been rocking wretchedly in the cheap seats on a ship crossing the Atlantic for the better part of 3 months. This was before wine bars on the lido deck and Dramamine. So, now that you're finally on dry ground in Kansas Territory, you are coming gradually and bleakly to understand that the reason the ground is so dry (dry enough that your family could use the river beds as wagon roads to get here), is because you have inauspiciously arrived smack dab in the middle of the worst drouth and famine on record, bad enough that they're reading about you in the New York City papers.

You don't speak a word of English. You don't know a blessed thing about farming. At the back of your mind is a creeping dread as your oldest son, who came ahead to America with most of the family's savings to invest in land, gradually gets more high-headed and less compliant about sharing the homestead with you and the rest of the family as planned. Before long, you'll discover your concerns are well-founded and you will have to grab onto your bootstraps with arthritic fingers and start over on another homestead 2 miles down the road not too terribly long before your mortal odds catch up with you.

This is a true reflection of that time period in Chase County history and a glimpse into the seamy-sided reality of family politics, not just for the Roglers, but for many immigrants from many countries.

If you're a woman in your mid-40s in 1860, imagine that you are Johann's wife Catherine and you are responsible for scraping together enough food during this deadly deprivation to feed seven people every day—from your oldest son Charles, who is 24, to your youngest daughter Adeline, age 3. Much to your unrelenting consternation and grief, this family unit does not include your 14-year-old son John, who had to be left in Iowa as an indentured servant to pay off a large debt on the first piece of Rogler land claimed in America. You will die at the age of 66 without ever having laid eyes on your second-born son again.

This is the kind of reality that broke the hearts and spirits of pioneer mothers.

If you're in your late teens or early 20s in 1860, try to conceive of what it was like for Charles to get sent alone to a new country at the age of 16. German is the only language you speak and you have just landed in a multi-lingual melting pot. Most of the advice and directions you get from strangers are pure gibberish. And what is that smell? Pretend that your next deep breath will be taken in a foul tannery on the shores of Lake Erie. Your thin back aches and you're covered in blood and flies as you work at your first job skinning cattle. No air conditioning. No running water. No waterless hand sanitizer. Just a bunch of stinking carcasses full of lice and maggots.

Fast-forward 7 years and you've finally written to your family back in Europe to tell them you've at long last (after a few missteps) fulfilled your mission to find land for the clan. You've been gone so long without sending them a word, they thought you were probably dead. Hell, you thought that yourself on more than one occasion. And now that you've traveled some 5,000 miles from your childhood home in Austria, your folks show up and start telling you how to run your farm and your life. You're jammed into a one-room cabin with your parents and four siblings, as tightly as a jar of pickled pig's feet. You've been on the move so long and working with your head down and one foot in front of the other, somehow you got to be 24 years old without ever kissing a girl.

You will, in fact, not marry until you are 33. The gentle woman you wed will go insane after less than a decade of marriage and try to kill one of your infant sons with a hatchet, hallucinating that he's Jesus Christ and she's doing him a mercy. Is it any wonder, then, that your light flickers out early and you die of pneumonia at age 52, the same age as your father when he was starting his new life in Kansas?

This is *The Rogler Reality Show*, with no commercial breaks.

But speaking of commerce, make believe you are Lawrence Rogler, who was 8 years old when his family sailed to the United States. Fast-forward to after the Civil War ended in 1865 and by now you're 14 and old enough to go to town for supplies. This usually means 40 or so miles to Emporia or even sometimes 150 miles to Leavenworth. You won't need a driver's license or gas money because cars don't exist yet, but you do need to know how to handle a team of horses and a wagon and keep your wits about you. You'll likely be hauling items to sell or barter,

so I hope you know at least a little about current prices and the art of negotiation. You need to carry food, a gun, flint & steel, and a bedroll, for this is not like running down to Price Chopper for hotdogs, buns, and a jar of relish. You'll be gone for several days to more than a week, depending on weather, your horses, the condition of the wagon, the length and variety of your shopping list, and the availability of supplies, not to mention the random spin of the roulette wheel of other possible hazards you might encounter.

The reality is that you can get a little goosey out there, a little panicky, especially when you attain the top of the next ridge and still all you see is more sky and grass and grass and sky. You learn to sing or whistle or you take up the harmonica just to occasionally knock the wild wolves of lonesomeness off your trail a few paces.

What of the young women? What was their reality? Step into the high-button shoes, if you will, of a person I mentioned earlier, who at 18 years of age traded in her secret dream of becoming an international opera star to marry the stoic Charles Rogler, a decade-and-a-half her senior. Say you're Mary Mariah Satchell of Cassoday, born in Indiana and now the new Mrs. Rogler. You are passionate and idealistic, some might even say, behind their hands, *high-strung* or *a little nervous*. Your new husband doesn't talk much, nor does he seem to have any give whatsoever in his rigid definitions and hierarchies of masculine and feminine roles in the family, which of course you have to find out the hard way, by testing the bounds. He spurns your offers of help with the manly tasks, never thinks to lend a hand with the household chores, and scoffs at your impractical dreams, although he loves to be an audience of one for your spectacular voice when you're of a mood to sing, which is less and less frequently as time goes by.

Much to your frustration and hurt, your spouse and his extended family speak German amongst themselves, leaving you to grasp at context clues, although you have no trouble picking up empathically on the undercurrent of dissension and disapproval in the family. Dutifully, you take up your household and wifely responsibilities. You produce a child every two years, like clockwork, like steps in a staircase. You bear five children in nine years, but things start to go a little haywire after the birth of the fourth, Henry.

You don't remember exactly when the weight of little accumulating

worries and woes set off the big avalanche. Maybe it was the afternoon the grasshoppers stripped every living green leaf and stalk from your vegetable garden and the young saplings in the windbreak and the crops in the fields as well. Maybe it was the day the incessant wind entered without knocking and the kitchen curtain dashed your delicate bone china teacup off the table and abruptly into smithereens as the baby wailed in terror. And you wept, too, as if the cup were a mirror in which you saw an unforgiving reflection of your own shatteredness.

You are only 27 the first time they take you to the Topeka State Hospital for the insane, but lo and behold they send you home when they discover you're pregnant with your fifth child and they deem you a little steadier on your feet. Not long after little Jennie is born in 1879, your husband has you committed again, and with only a few brief interludes of respite, you will spend the next three-and-a-half decades—in short, the rest of your life—in hospitals and sanitariums. In fact, you are in the state hospital in 1888 when your husband dies, effectively leaving your five children without parents and you without any kind of anchor.

This is the reality of mental illness long before the nature and chemistry of post-partum depression or schizophrenia were more clearly and compassionately understood. Sadly, by some quirk of genetics or other predisposition, one of your three daughters, Emma, will follow in your heavy footsteps, hospitalized for insanity at the age of 22, living in the same state hospital as you for a decade or more and eventually dying after 62 years of institutionalization, cloaked and all but invisible in the folds and shadows of family history.

This is grim, I know, all this Pioneer Reality. So let me tip the scales a little in the other direction, which is exactly what happened in that next generation of the Roglers, despite such troubled beginnings. I'm not prettying things up to make you feel better—this is what really happened.

If I were a psychiatrist or social worker asked to look at the circumstances in the family and lay some odds on which of Charles and Mary's five children would be most likely to carry the weight of trauma and despondency into the next generation, I'd pick Henry, the infant whose head, according to family tales, his mother was prevented by a hairsbreadth from detaching with a hatchet not long before she was legally declared insane and he reached his first birthday, the more or less

motherless boy whose father died when the lad was just 11. Henry and his younger sister Jennie were looked after by Aunt Adeline, their older siblings, and a string of hired help—Minnie Schrupf, for example, and the Fisher girls, one of whom, I kid you not—get this—one of the Fisher girls married a man named Trout and ironically went to live on the old Broiles place. This is the kind of humorous detail Henry would have delighted in telling you, chuckling as he fed Russell Stover candies to his fox terrier. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

I reckon the resilience of the human spirit is akin to the native force of the artesian well drilled in 1922 up on the Selves Ranch. Picture the family's surprise when the well had enough innate pressure to pipe the pure, vitalizing water to the second floor of the house without a pump! Imagine you're Henry Rogler, born in 1877. Impelled by some energy or grace you cannot name, you grow up to defy the gravity of your circumstances.

You inherit your mother's ear for music and her eye for beauty, but not her thin skin. You inherit your father's heart for work and his head for business, but not his dim outlook. Your Aunt Adeline cultivates in you an unquenchable zest for lifelong learning, research, and experimentation. And God only knows where you get your graceful athleticism, your irrepressible sense of humor, your love of practical jokes, and your twinkling-eyed generosity.

You will become a state representative and senator and the first in the state to be awarded the designation of Kansas Master Farmer. You will nurture and expand your family's homestead and name it Pioneer Bluffs in honor of the legacy of equal parts foresight and hindsight, aspiration and perspiration, longing and loss upon which your own success is so intimately hinged. You will watch your four children grow up and out in four unique and productive directions and your oldest son Wayne will eventually oversee 60,000 acres and 15,000 head of cattle on a thousand hills, including this one on which we have gathered today. You will live to see your 70th wedding anniversary and to tell 95 year's worth of stories that span an incredible era stretching from before the Flint Hills were tamed by barbed wire to men traveling to the moon in less time than it took in your childhood to get to Leavenworth with a team and wagon.

This is the last dose of reality I have for you today: You cannot stand upon these Flint Hills without being knee-deep in the stories of pioneers. And deeper still are the stories I cannot tell you— 10,000 year's worth of human ebb and flow and habitation. If you put your ear to the ground, you may hear the voices in the land. I know I do. And the truth is that only a few of the stories are likely to match up with our romantic notions; the rest are fraught with pitfalls and punctuated by brutal losses and grounded in the reality that, if you offer your life to these Hills, they will seize it and use it as compost to nourish the coyotes, the vultures, and the tireless grass.



The Roglers and Applegates go Fishing

All images are courtesy of the Pioneer Bluffs archive. Pioneer Bluffs is open to the public and more information can be found on the web at www.pioneerbluffs.org