

## Comeau Farm Tour - July 14, 2018

Leo and Ann Comeau moved here in 1937 and rented the farm from Ross Richardson, who was the President of the Potter County Bank. Mr. Richardson had acquired the farm from the Federal Land Bank during the Great Depression. Prior to moving to the farm, Leo and Ann had lived with Leo's parents George and Elizabeth on a ranch near Forest City, where Phyllis was born. Prior to moving to the farm, they lived in a rented house in Gettysburg, while Leo worked as a mechanic for J.R. Quiett who owned the Ford Garage (Quiett Motors). George and Elizabeth had lost the ranch during the depression and George also worked for Quiett Motors as a salesman selling cars and tractors.

The younger Comeaus had purchased a house in Gettysburg, but Leo wanted to be a farmer and when the opportunity to rent the farm arose he grabbed it. By then the economy was starting to improve and he sold the house in town and used the proceeds (\$1,500) to purchase his first quarter section of land. Leo and Ross Richardson had a great relationship and after several years of renting, Ross sold the farm to Leo on a contract for deed for \$100 per acre.

The main structure of the house was just 24' X 24'. Phyllis was only two years old when they moved in. By the time I came along seven years later, a 12' X 12' addition was added to the east side of the house which included a kitchen with an eating area and a bathroom. The main structure consisted of a 12' X 24' living room and two 12' X 12' bedrooms and a full basement had been added. There was a coal bin for the furnace on the south side of the house and a cistern for our water supply on the north side, which held 2,000 gallons. Total living space on the main floor was a little over 800 square feet (we could fit four houses of this size into our Texas house).



In the beginning Mother would do the laundry in a wringer type wash machine and hang her wash on the clotheslines just north of the house. In the winter the clothes would freeze stiffer than a board, but she never bothered to wear a coat to take them off the line regardless of how cold it got. By the time I was in high school, she would take the laundry in baskets to the Laundromat in Gettysburg.

I also remember that she would gather the eggs from the chicken house wearing just a house-dress and an apron and she would return with her apron full of eggs. I also remember a really mean rooster that would chase me. He terrorized me all one summer, until my birthday when I got a Red Ryder BB gun as a birthday gift. After

## Comeau Farm Tour - July 14, 2018

that, whenever I walked of the house he would see me and run for the chicken house knowing I was going to shoot him. When Mother finally butchered him, he had tiny black and blue spots all over his body from the BBs.

The biggest problem of living here was the lack of water. All the water for the house had to be hauled from town, which became my job when I was old enough to drive. We had an old 1948 Dodge truck that we used for several tasks, one of which involved a 550 gallon tank. It would take four trips to fill the cistern, so we were pretty careful about our water use. We could never water the lawn or wash the car. There was a well, but the water was alkaline and not fit for human consumption.



My earliest memories of living here was waking up in the morning when I was about four or five and walking out to the kitchen in my pajamas where Mother was washing pint and quart milk bottles and lining them up on the kitchen counter, waiting for Dad to finish milking and separating the cream. Dad had a "milk route" and would deliver the milk and cream to a restaurant and some private customers in town on his way to work at the Ford garage. That was his routine seven days a



week, 52 weeks a year. No vacations, no sick leave, no personal leave. And when he got home at night, the cows were waiting to be milked again. You might get one day off a year to go to the State Fair if you could convince you neighbor to milk for you, but you would have to return the favor so he could go.

After Dad finish milking and brought the milk and cream he from the barn, Mother had to fill all the bottles and wash the separator. Mother had a one year degree from Northern Normal School ( Northern State University) in Aberdeen,



## Comeau Farm Tour - July 14, 2018

which qualified her to teach school which she did in a one room school one mile east and two miles north of the farmstead.

Fortunately, Quiett Motors was also a Case Implement dealer and Dad was able to rent a tractor and some equipment from them to start working the fields in his "spare time". He told me once that raised some wheat the first year, but there were no grain bins on the farm so he put it in burlap sacks and stored it in the haymow in the barn. Unfortunately the mice got into it and made quite a mess. After that Ross Richardson agreed to build a granary.

Dad was an excellent horseman and had a team of horses "Dolly and Daisy" that he also used for farming (planting and picking corn). Dad loved the horses and kept them around way beyond their usefulness. I think their harnesses are still somewhere up in the haymow in the barn. I can remember Dad using them to pull a sleigh with a hayrack in the winter sometimes. When I was in elementary school they bought me an old sway backed mare called "Babe". She was extremely gentle and patient with kids. When I was in High School she was bred to a quarter horse stallion and had a colt we named "Stormy", that I broke to ride. Leo was also a very skilled roper. I remember watching in amazement the first time I saw him lasso a steer in the corral.



As their financial situation improved, Dad was able to quit his job at the Ford garage and devote all of his time to the farm, which he loved. He bought a Model 8N Ford tractor from Quiett Motors. Grandpa George Comeau sold over 500 of these tractors in the Gettysburg community. George was stricken with polio in his youth and was handicapped. He walked with a cane and was never able to drive the tractors that he sold and Phyllis learned to drive.

After a few years of milking the cows by hand, Leo purchased a Surge milker and built a small "milk house" on the north end of the barn. Eventually the farming operation was profitable enough to allow him to sell the cows and devote his full attention to raising crops and other livestock, including beef cattle, hogs and sheep. Mother always had two or three "bum lambs" that she would feed with powdered milk with a pop bottle and nipple.



## Comeau Farm Tour - July 14, 2018

I remember that 1957 was really good year. We had lots of rain and we had a “bumper crop”. Leo sold \$80,000 worth of grain that year, which was an absolute fortune in those days. That was the year he built the 40’X80” Quonset building and bought a brand new combine with a corn picker (two row) attachment for \$7,500.

I was thirteen in 1957 and spent a lot of hours working the fields. We were farming seven quarter sections of land and Leo’s farming strategy was a crop rotation of 1/3 winter grain (winter wheat and rye), 1/3 small grain (spring wheat, barley and corn) and 1/3 summer fallow. That would allow us to split our work by planting winter wheat and rye in the fall, wheat, oats, barley and corn in the spring. I would spend my summers cultivating corn, working summer fallow and windrowing the small grain. I did this every year through high school and college and continued until Joan and I were married in 1971. Dad’s favorite crop was rye, which some farmers considered a weed. But he knew he was nearly guaranteed a crop if he planted in it the fall on the summer fallowed ground. He counted on the rye crop to make the land payments. One year we lost the rye crop due to wind erosion, but he reseeded it to oats in the spring (the whole quarter section) and it started raining. The oats yielded 100 bushel per acre that year!

Each year Leo would pay attention to the weather west of the Missouri River, specifically in the Faith, S.D. area, which was prone to drought. If it looked dry over there he would plant a strip of sedan grass on the edge of one of our summer-fallowed fields. By September it had grown taller than the back wheels of the H Farmall. We would cut it and have someone bale it. Then during the winter when there was a shortage of feed west of the river, Leo and his friend Leonard Schekel would haul loads of bales to the ranchers with their old Dodge trucks and trade the bales for old ewes. They would leave early in the morning and return in time to load up for the next day, making one trip a day. The sheep were usually so thin that you could see their ribs. He would buy the old ewes for \$5 a head and after feeding them corn for six or eight weeks he would sell them for \$20.

Each year custom combiners made their way from Texas to Canada with stops in Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska and the Dakotas. Leo P. Jones from Stover, Missouri paid us a visit every summer with seven combines, seven trucks, two pickups and



## **Comeau Farm Tour - July 14, 2018**

two Airstream trailers. Jones was a high school principal and he would follow the harvest from the time school was out in the spring until it started again in the fall. He employed some of the best students from his school and several of them made enough money to attend college from their summer employment following the harvest. Although we had our own combine, Dad wanted the grain out of the fields as soon as it was ripe to prevent loss from rain or hail. Jones, with his seven machines would get the grain out of the fields in short order. I would sometimes drive a combine or truck for him while he was in the area. He offered to take me along to Canada with the crew one year, but Dad needed me on the farm. We also did some custom windrowing for neighbors who needed help.

Brad and Lori spent many summers at the farm and became more like a little brother and sister to me than niece and nephew. Of course, Grandma Annie and Grandpa Leo were always happy to have them. One year while I was teaching in Round Lake, MN I purchased a "Little Butch" mini bike at a local gas station and brought to the farm for the kids. Gas was readily available from Grandpa's pickup tank and they actually wore the engine out over the summer. I remember that Grandpa Rogers tried to revive it, but it was too far gone. So Dale traded it for a Honda Mini Trail 70, which has become somewhat of a family tradition. As soon as they were old enough, I bought Trail 70's for Brent and Adrienne and those old bikes are currently waiting in our pole barn for Addie and Leila.

Another source of pride is that our farm land near Hoven is land that was originally homesteaded by Anna's family and has been recognized by the state of South Dakota as a "Hundred Year Farm" having been homesteaded by Ole and Caroline Thompson, Ann's grandparents. While I was growing up, that piece of land was farmed by my Uncle Vern, Anna and Robert's brother. Vern was a "bachelor farmer" and lived with his mother, Tena Rhombs. During the depression, farming equipment was very hard to come by and was often sold on the "black market." Vern was desperately in need of a tractor and had an opportunity to go to a legitimate farm auction, where six farmers bid all the way to the top legal amount allowed by the government. So the auctioneers held a drawing and Vern's name was drawn. One of the other farmers followed him home and offered him far more than he had paid, but Vern needed that tractor!

I have many memories of Uncle Vern one of which was his talent on roller skates! Vern passed away suddenly of a heart attack while he was working out in the fields at the age of 52. Anna and her brother Robert each inherited half of that land from their mother, Tena Rhombs and that piece of land is still a part of our holdings.

Last winter Joan and I were watching our favorite TV show. We never miss "Blue Bloods". In this particular episode, the family was gathered for Sunday dinner. Commissioner Reagan, seated at the end of the table, said something to his family that I heard my mother say many times. He said "we brought you into this world,

## **Comeau Farm Tour - July 14, 2018**

you never asked to come here". Reagan followed up with "we owe you everything, you owe us nothing".

I want to thank all of you that could be here today. I hope you all leave here with a better understanding of how hard Leo and Ann worked to make a better life for all of us.