

# **Corroborating a Family Story**

(analysis using newspaper, oral, weather, and church data sources)

Craig Rhombs

<https://281connections.us>

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# Corroborating a Family Story

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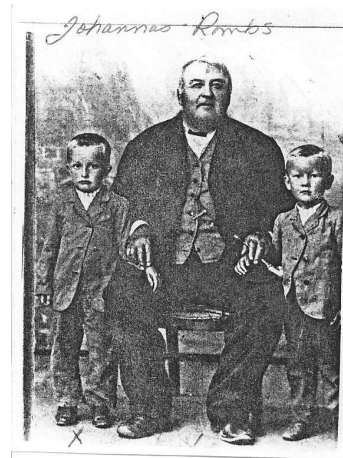
## Introduction

In what follows I try to lend credence to a story about my great grandfather Johannes Rombs and his family. The setting is March, 1896, about midway between Faulkton and Ipswich, South Dakota. It is one of the few patrilineal stories that I have. I hope that others can benefit from understanding the analytic techniques that I have used.

Here is a picture that includes the people to whom I attribute the story. I believe that it shows a weekend jackrabbit hunting party. My father (Robert) in is the “aviator” hat. His father (Joseph) is in the tilted beret. My father’s brother (Vern) is holding the rifle. Note that the local schoolmaster (named Gildersleeve) has a firm grip on my dad’s shoulder.



Here is a picture of which shows the uncle of Johannes Rombs. It is the only surviving photo that might show the appearance Rombs men around the last decade of the 1800s. Not surprisingly, this man’s name is Johannes Rombs. It was taken in Russia and has been confused for my great grandfather for some time.



## The Story

Barbara (Kessler) Rombs was Johannes’ wife. She was dying and on the day of her death the Catholic priest refused to attend. This angered my great grandfather, who transferred the family to a local Lutheran church, in whose cemetery Johannes and Barbara are buried. So, this is a Catholic to Lutheran conversion story with few details as handed down to me from my father, who I assume must have received it from his father.

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## Backdrop

Barbara Kessler and Johannes Rombs were born in the village of Selz, a predominantly Catholic village in the Kutschurgan region of South Russia. Their grandparents helped found this village in the first decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Barbara's ancestral family was from the Pfalz area in what is now Germany. Johannes' family was from Alsace/Elsass in the vicinity of Selz in what is now France. They were ethnically Germanic but must have had some French influence. Johannes and Barbara were German-Russians in current parlance. Much has been written about this group elsewhere. See for example the chapter devoted to the Kutschurgan Colonies in the book entitled Paradise on the Steppe by J. S. Height.

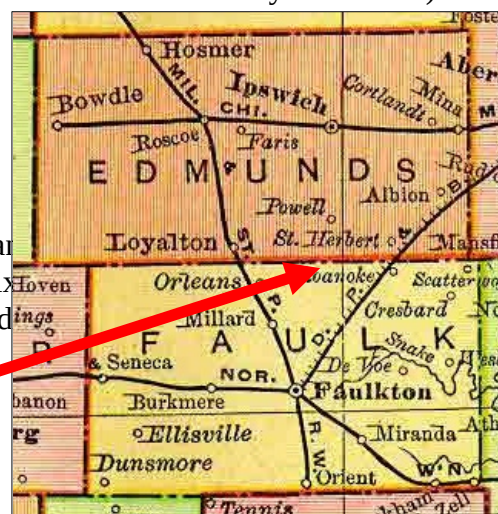
As best I can tell, Barbara was born in June of 1848 and Johannes was born in August of 1845. (There are multiple sources for the birth-dates, but these seem the most likely to me.) They were married in November of 1866, and they emigrated from South Russia in the Fall of 1884, along with their living children (Lulu, Caroline, Nicholas, Lizzie who was just over 1 year of age at the time). Sources of this information include the 1852 Selz Census, records with the Germans from Russia Heritage Society (GRHS), and a ship manifest from the SS Oder.

I do not have detailed corroboration, but it is likely that they traveled with cousins and arrived in Ipswich, SD, which at the time was the end of the line for the railroad. They must have stayed for a while in Ipswich until acquiring land in Freedom Township (twp 120N, rng 69 W, 5<sup>th</sup> meridian) about midway between Ipswich and Faulkton. This land is the setting for the story.

My grandfather, Joseph, was born about one year after arrival in the US, and a final child (Kathryn) was born in 1887. So, in March of 1896, the household consisted of the following people.

- Barbara, age 47
- Johannes age 50
- Lulu, age 29 (probably not present as she had married Reuben House about 10 years earlier)
- Carrie, age 19 (about 3 years from marrying Bert Austin)
- Nick, age 19
- Lizzie, age 14
- Joe, age 11
- Kathryn, age 9

The associated image is from an 1895 map that shows Edmunds and Faulkton. A red arrow indicates roughly where the Rombs household was. In an appendix timeline of events in Johannes' life between immigration and his death



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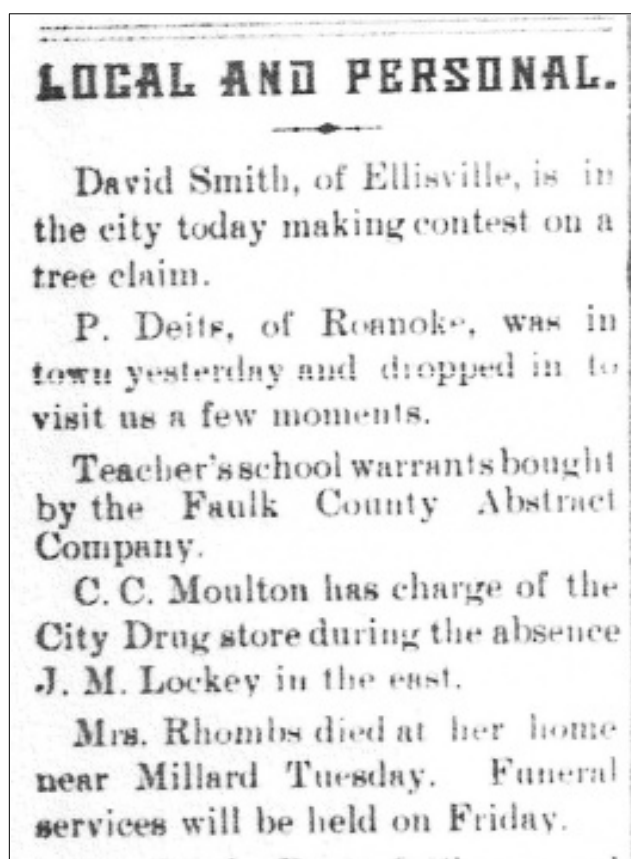
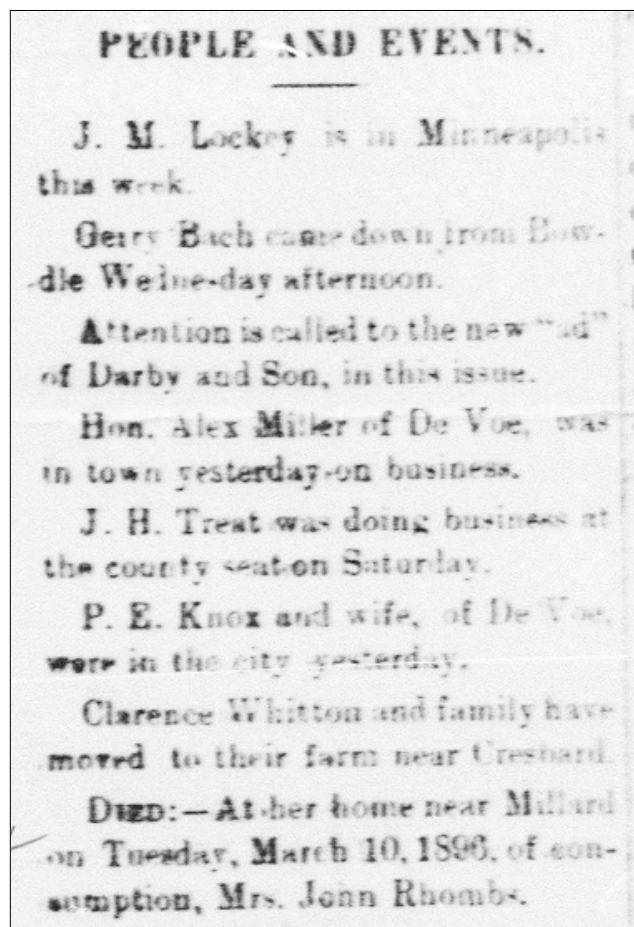
(analysis using newspaper, oral, weather, and church data sources)

### Analysis

In the following sections, I present the facts that I have found that seem to have bearing on the story.

### Newspaper Records

Barbara's death was noted in two local papers. The images that follow came from the South Dakota State Archives (specifically Virginia Hansen). The one on the left is from the "Faulk County Times," pg. 3, March 12, 1896. It indicates that she died of consumption on March 10, 1896. The right image is from the "Republican Record," pg. 8, March 12, 1896. This indicates that she was buried on Friday, March 13, 1896. These dates will become important later.



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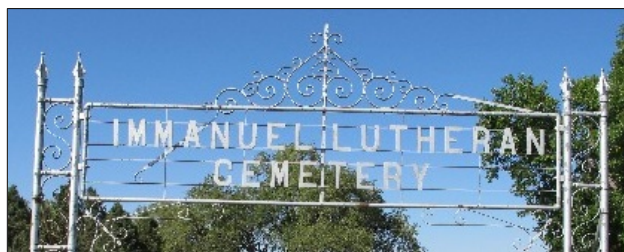
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### Cemetery (burial site)

The burial site for Johannes and Barbara is in the Immanuel Lutheran Cemetery, near Wecota, South Dakota. In the image of their headstone here you will note that the years of birth for Johannes and Barbara is different than what I have stated above. I believe that the headstone dates are wrong based on other evidence.



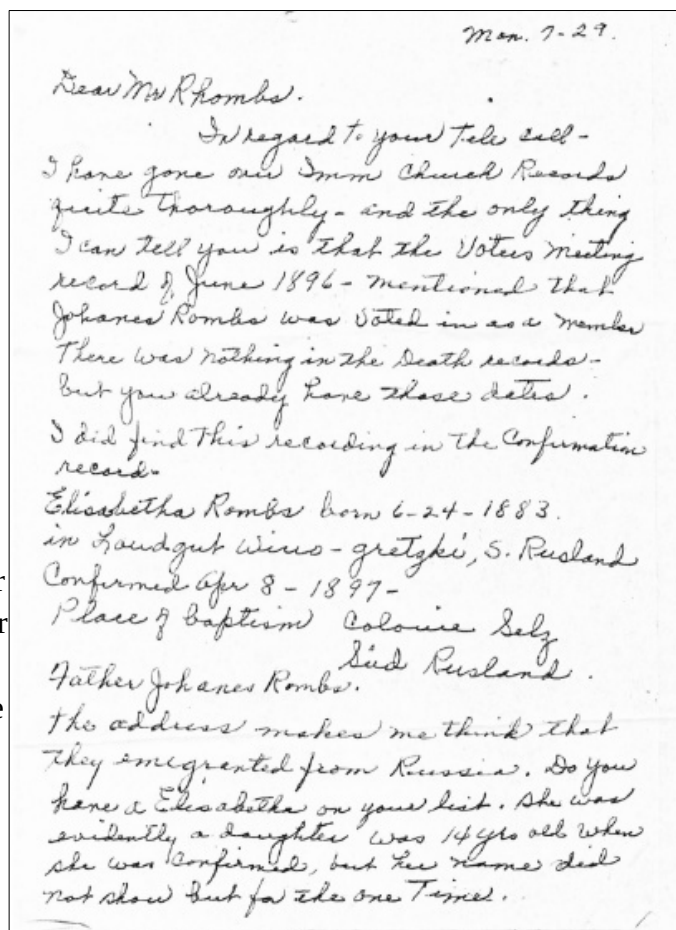
### Church Records



My father and I visited the Wecota area one summer and attempted to discover Immanuel Lutheran Church records for the Rombs family. We were concerned that they might be lost since the original church had recently burned. We did not find the records on this trip, but we did make contact with a church member who forwarded our research interest to another member. That member (Anna White) responded with a nice letter that included the following text that confirms when the family joined the church (i.e., 1896).

Important items to note are the following.

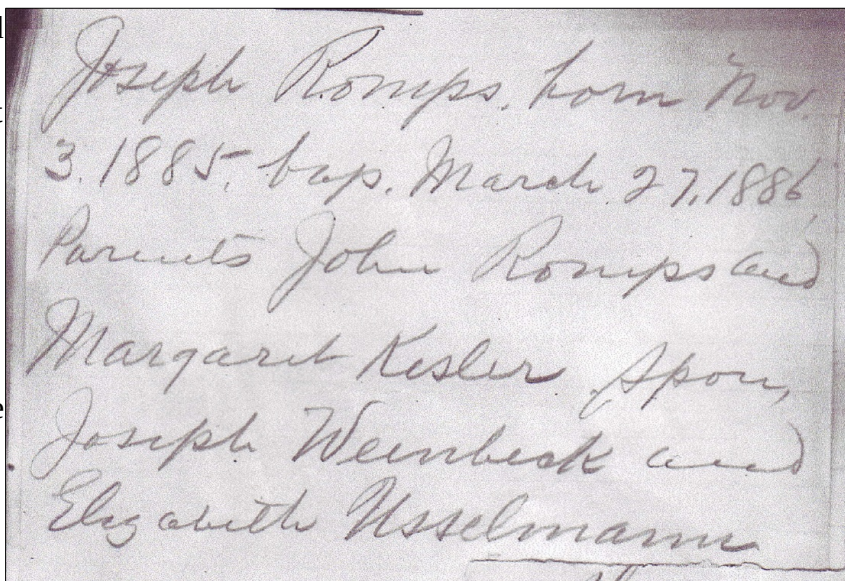
- Johannes was voted into the congregation in June, 1896.
- Immanuel Lutheran had a confirmation record for Lizzie (Elisabetha). It indicated that she was born on 6/24/1883 in Langut Wirro-Gretski, Sud Rusland, baptized in Colonie Selz, Sud Rusland, and confirmed on 4/8/1897.



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Years later I was able to find a record of my grandfather's baptism at Holy Cross Catholic Church in Ipswich. It was written on a scrap of paper by the priest before he started making entries in the official book provided for recording such things. This establishes the family presence in Ipswich associated with the Catholic church and among cousins during the winter of 1885-6. It also indicates that Barbara's full name may have been Margaret Barbara Kessler, but that has not been established. It may simply be a mistake on the priest's part.



Joseph Romps, born Nov.  
3. 1885. bap. March 27, 1886  
Parents John Romps and  
Margaret Kessler Spou,  
Joseph Weimbeck and  
Elizabeth Hesselmann

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## Weather Data

NOAA (noaa.gov) provides online access to historical weather data for many places in the US (and elsewhere). The nearest such place to the Rombs household in 1896 is Aberdeen. In this case there are records that date from 1893. They can be accessed using the following url.

<https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/cdo-web/datasets/GHCND/stations/GHCND:USW00014929/detail>

Here is an excerpt from a report for March, 1896. On the tenth there was about a 1.8 inch snowfall and a clear

U.S. Department of Commerce National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration National Environmental Satellite, Data, and Information Service Current Location: Elev: 1297 ft. Lat: 45.4433° N Lon: -98.4130° W Station: <b>ABERDEEN REGIONAL AIRPORT, SD US USW00014929</b>						<b>Record of C Observed</b> These data are quality be identical to the c Generated			
Year	Month	Day	Temperature (F)			Precipitation			
			24 Hrs. Ending at Observation Time		At Observation	24 Hour Amounts Ending at Observation Time			
			Max.	Min.		Rain, Melted Snow, Etc. (in)	Flag	Snow, Ice Pellets, Hail (in)	Flag
1896	03	01	3	-12		0.00		0.0	
1896	03	02	4	-10		0.00		0.0	
1896	03	03	11	-2		0.00		0.0	
1896	03	04	23	-12		0.18		1.0	
1896	03	05	36	0		0.75		3.0	
1896	03	06	18	3		0.60		2.5	
1896	03	07	15	-8		0.00		0.0	
1896	03	08	28	0		0.00		0.0	
1896	03	09	16	5		0.40		1.8	
1896	03	10	4	-15		0.00		0.0	
1896	03	11	3	-18		0.00		0.0	
1896	03	12	14	-28		0.48		2.0	
1896	03	13	28	-11		0.18		0.5	

transition to an abnormally cold period. On the day of her burial (the 13<sup>th</sup>), the low temperature was in fact -28 F. This is even extreme for South Dakota in March.

Global weather at this time can be investigated at the NOAA site as well. Using the tools there, you can find that the month of March, 1896, was in fact abnormally cold across much of the planet. See <https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/cag/global/mapping/189603> .





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All of this weather and climate data may be showing why the priest that Johannes summoned was unable or unwilling to attend Barbara's death/burial.

## Conclusion

Some things that we know about the family of Barbara and Johannes Rombs are as follows.

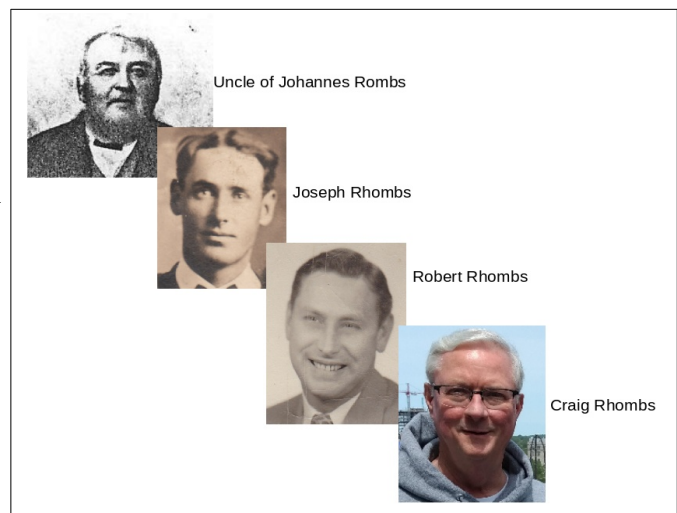
- The Rombs family was from a mostly Catholic community in South Russia before coming to the US in the Fall of 1884.
- The Rombs family was associated with Holy Cross Catholic Church (in Ipswich, SD) in the winter of 1885-6.
- Barbara (Kessler) Rombs died in March of 1896 in Faulk Co.
- Johannes was accepted into the Immanuel Lutheran Church, near Wecota, SD, in June 1896.
- The weather at the time of Barbara's death and burial was miserable, even by South Dakota standards.

None of this proves the veracity of the family story explaining the reason for the transfer from Catholic to Lutheran churches in 1896. Probably that can never be done. However, the evidence does support the story and gives it some believability.

Researching family history is only sometimes straightforward. Persistence is only sometimes rewarded with clear results. However, selective reinforcement can make us more ardent researchers.

## About the Author

Craig Rhombs is a retired "software guy," who has worked off and on since 1973 to collect family history information about his ancestors. His ancestors consist of Colonial CT settlers and immigrants from Scotland, Baden, Norway, and Russia. He is consolidating what he has collected at a website: <https://281connections.us> .



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### Appendix: Thirty Years in the USA – A Timeline for the Family of Johannes and Barbara (Kessler) Rombs

Here is a sequence of events as best I can estimate from existing data sources. It was an eventful 30 years!

1. Late summer, 1884: sale of property in Russia<sup>i</sup>
2. October, 1884: travel to point of departure (Bremen) – parents and 4 children (Lulu (age 18), Caroline (age 9), Nickolas (age 7), and Elizabeth (less than 2 years old at the time))<sup>ii</sup>
3. early Nov, 1884: ship departure (assumes 2-3 week voyage. Bremen to Southampton to NY)<sup>iii</sup>
4. 11/22/1884: ship arrival in NY<sup>iv</sup>
5. late Nov, 1884: travel to Ipswich, SD (then Dakota Territory)<sup>v</sup>
6. winter, 1884 -1885: in Ipswich presumably with friends (like the Fischers noted below) and cousins. Schumacher and Usselman cousins may have been present.<sup>vi</sup>
7. May, 1885: work begins on pre-emption claim land in SE ¼ of section 9, twp 120N, rng 69W, 5<sup>th</sup> meridian (Freedom Township) See the 1885 Territorial Census for evidence that they had moved in 1885.<sup>vii</sup>
8. November, 1885: Birth of son Joseph (11/3/1885)<sup>viii</sup>
9. November, 1885: pre-emption claim filed with help of Karl & Martin Fischer, friends and neighbors in Selz and Freedom Township; naturalization first papers filed<sup>ix</sup>
10. December, 1885: homestead claim filed on SW ¼ of section 10<sup>x</sup>
11. 1885 +/- : Johannes takes out one or more loans against both quarter sections.<sup>xi</sup>
12. March, 1886: improvements started and residence eventually shifted to SE ¼ of section 10 in accordance with homestead requirements<sup>xii</sup>
13. March, 1887: Birth of daughter Kathryn<sup>xiii</sup>
14. August, 1887 : daughter Lulu marries Reuben House<sup>xiv</sup>
15. 1888 +/- : Johannes defaults on loan(s) and loses ownership of part (all) of the land to the loan company in Iowa.<sup>xv</sup>
16. April, 1892: naturalization finalized (second papers)<sup>xvi</sup>
17. April, 1892: homestead claim finalized – it is not clear who owns this land at this time.<sup>xvii</sup>
18. March, 1896: Barbara dies; family subsequently changes church affiliations and Barbara is buried in the Emmanuel Lutheran Cemetery near Wecota<sup>xviii</sup>
19. August, 1898: Johannes marries Mary Kastan. (a disastrous second marriage)<sup>xix</sup>
20. 1890s : At some point Elizabeth moves away from the family in Freedom Township and ends up working for an “abstractor” named James Johnston and his wife Lizzie. (See 1900 Fed Census entry for Elizabeth Rhombs.)<sup>xx</sup>
21. 1899 : daughter Caroline marries Bert Austin<sup>xxi</sup>
22. October, 1900: Johannes files for a timber claim on a large part of section 9 in Freedom Township<sup>xxii</sup>
23. 1900 Fed Census: Johannes still residing in Freedom Township with Joe, Kathryn, and Caroline (and her family).<sup>xxiii</sup>
24. June, 1902: Johannes formally divorces Mary Kastan.<sup>xxiv</sup>

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25. 1903 : daughter Elizabeth marries Clyde Thornburg (est. from 1915 SD census) <sup>xxv</sup>
26. 1900 – 1910 +/- : at some point during this period, Johannes moves into Faulkton <sup>xxvi</sup>
27. Aug, 1906: son Nicholas marries Mary Nelson<sup>xxvii</sup>
28. May, 1910: daughter Kathryn marries Alva Vinton <sup>xxviii</sup>
29. January, 1911: son Joseph marries Tena Thompson <sup>xxix</sup>
30. August, 1914: Johannes dies near Beebe and is buried in the Immanuel Lutheran Cemetery <sup>xxx</sup>

## End notes

- i The time of sale of possessions in Russia is a guess.
- ii The details of travel from Russia to Bremen is speculation, except that ages of children are believed to be accurate based on “established” birth dates.
- iii The departure date for the SS Oder’s trip is an estimate. It is established that they were on the SS Oder from Southampton to NY. I have not been able to determine for sure that it actually started in Bremen or if they transferred from another ship in Southampton.
- iv Ship Manifest - <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:QVSV-3FB5>
- v Again, the details of travel from NY to Dakota territory are unknown. Train transportation certainly was used on at least the last leg of the journey. At the time of arrival, the railroad terminated in or near Ipswich.
- vi How they spent the winter of 1884-1885 is unknown.
- vii Land Entry Files (NARA – personally acquired copies) and 1885 territorial census ([https://www.ancestry.com/sharing/18038310?h=bd811d&utm\\_campaign=bandido-webparts&utm\\_source=post-share-modal&utm\\_medium=copy-url](https://www.ancestry.com/sharing/18038310?h=bd811d&utm_campaign=bandido-webparts&utm_source=post-share-modal&utm_medium=copy-url))
- viii Baptismal Record for Joe Rombs (private, from Catholic church records in Ipswich, SD)
- ix Land Entry Files (NARA Entry Files No.13933 and 4709 – personally acquired copies)
- x Land Entry Files (NARA Entry Files No.13933 and 4709 – personally acquired copies)
- xi Probate Records from the Faulk County Courthouse (personal copies)
- xii Land Entry Files (NARA Entry Files No.13933 and 4709 – personally acquired copies)
- xiii 1900 Federal Census: "United States Census, 1900," database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MMRQ-N4R> : accessed 1 December 2019), Mildred B Austin in household of John Rombs, Enterprise, Millard, Saratoga, Sherman, Freedom & Pulaski Townships & School, Faulk, South Dakota, United States; citing enumeration district (ED) 370, sheet 9A, family 85, NARA microfilm publication T623 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1972.); FHL microfilm 1,241,549.
- xiv From tree published at familysearch.org: <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/details/LL7G-DF1>
- xv Probate Records from the Faulk County Courthouse (personal copies)
- xvi Land Entry Files (NARA Entry Files No.13933 and 4709 – personally acquired copies)
- xvii Land Entry Files (NARA Entry Files No.13933 and 4709 – personally acquired copies)
- xviii newspaper article (personal copy)
- xix Private copy of Marriage Record filed in the Faulk Co. Courthouse.
- xx 1900 Fed Census for the residence of James Johnston, showing Elizabeth Rhombs as “servant.”
- xxi Inferred from 1900 Federal Census: "United States Census, 1900," database with images, FamilySearch (<https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MMRQ-N4R> : accessed 1 December 2019), Mildred B Austin in household of John Rombs, Enterprise, Millard, Saratoga, Sherman, Freedom & Pulaski Townships & School, Faulk, South Dakota, United States; citing enumeration district (ED) 370, sheet 9A, family 85, NARA microfilm publication T623 (Washington, D.C.: National Archives and Records Administration, 1972.); FHL microfilm 1,241,549.
- xxii Land Entry Files (NARA Entry Files No.13933 and 4709 – personally acquired copies)
- xxiii 1900 Fed Census - <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MMRQ-N4R>
- xxiv Private copy of court records from Faulk Co. Courthouse.
- xxv 1915 SD Census: <https://familysearch.org/pal:/MM9.1.1/MMHR-QVN>
- xxvi The details of the move are unknown. That the move happened is shown by comparing 1900 and 1910 fed census records. - see <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MMRQ-N4R> and <https://familysearch.org/ark:/61903/1:1:MPX4-NXD> .
- xxvii SD Marriages: Ancestry.com. *South Dakota, Marriages, 1905-2017* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2005.
- xxviii From Ancestry.com. *South Dakota, Marriages, 1905-2017* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2005.
- xxix Personal records and Ancestry.com. *South Dakota, Marriages, 1905-2017* [database on-line]. Lehi, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 2005.
- xxx death certificate (personal copies)