

31. Mathilda's Childhood in New Vienna

Now, my Little Dear One, let's turn our attention to more photos of scenes from my childhood. Even though my childhood was only fifty years before yours, mine was very different from yours. I grew up on a farm and you grew up in town. We had cows and pigs and chickens that we all had to take care of. You were born in town, near the church, so you really did not see farm animals very often. You were the fifth child of six children born in your family; I was the tenth child of fourteen born in my family; and your grandfather, my Johnnie, was the first child of eleven born in his family. Most of the photos in this section are through the courtesy of our cousin Fred, the *Dyersville Commercial*, and *Roots and Wings*.



Looking over New Vienna
Main Street New Vienna in 1910, looking south.

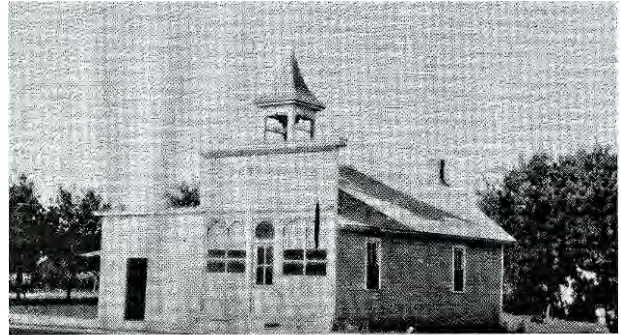
These two photos show New Vienna in 1910, the year that I was married at St. Boniface Church, with its high steeple visible for miles around. The photos were taken coming into town from the north side, so this is the view we had coming from our farm into town.

As we have seen, New Vienna was initially settled by a group of German immigrant families who were living in Ohio. These families had come to the area in search of farmland. New Vienna is famous for its St. Boniface Catholic Church, which was

established for the local families and is notable for its 200-foot high church steeple and its late 19th century William Schuelke pipe organ. This organ is one of the few original remaining Schuelke Organs. Except for an electric blower installed, it has been basically unaltered since installation. New Vienna lost 25% of its population between 1900 and 1910, going from 245-188 residents. Johnnie and I, Johnnie's parents and six of his brothers and sisters, my brother Joe and his wife and child, and most of the five families who lived around us in Bloomington were part of that exodus,

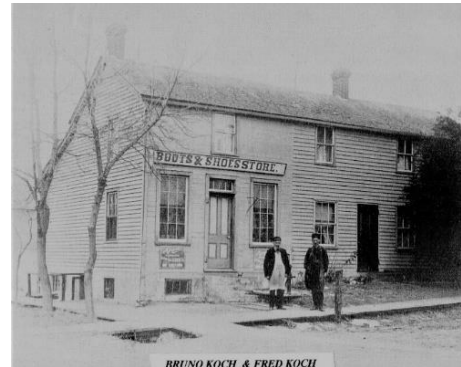
making up nearly half of the people who left New Vienna during those ten years. During the next 10 years, 1910-1920, New Vienna regained most of that population, going from 188 to 241 residents and slowly rising over the next 100 years to over 400 residents.

Here is the way the town looked as we entered it, and here is the old meat market turned into city hall.



Grommersch Meat Market building located on Market Square was purchased by the town in 1897 for a city hall, jail and fire department.

Here were two of my favorite shops: Rose Wessels Millinery Shop on Main Street and the Shoe and Boot Store and Repair shop that sometimes showcased new styles of pretty leather shoes.



Cousin Fred has provided some information about houses in New Vienna over the years.

The log cabins were often added on to as families grew, and some old frame houses sometimes had hidden log walls on the insides. Some of the cabins had a loft for extra sleeping space, but that also called for more heat in the cabin. Joe Herbers writes about the growing families, in *Roots and Wings*. The kids slept upstairs in kind of an attic, but they had to go outside to get to the upstairs. Many of these cabins ended up being a T or L shape as additions were made to the original structure.

The housing progression was from the cabin to the T or L shaped homes like the Pasker house, and then to the big square homes, which really didn't come in until the 1880s. The Pasker house is earlier. The Ts and Ls were popular because the second-floor rooms usually had windows on three sides (an arm of the T or L was just one room wide, which allowed for better lighting and cooling. A simple L is the Peter Meyers home. Often there were offsets on the first floor to fill in between the "arms" of the house that were often kitchens or porches (open and closed). The Beckman house is an example of an expanded T with offset and addition.

Some of these homes were built into hillsides, so there was a "walk in" basement level that could be used for cooling, laundry, etc. This also provided some light into the basement, and sometimes the family lived in the walk-in side of the cool basement in the summer months.

The change from the Ts or Ls to squares was linked to heating the home. Before 1880, most homes were heated with wood-burning fireplaces and the chimneys, which were on an outside wall. In the 1880's homes were heated with potbellied stoves (most burned wood, but some in town burned coal). With the chimneys no longer attached to a fireplace, the house could be around the chimney rather than alongside the chimney. I think the Freking house is a very early example of the transition to "central" heating.

But as the families grew and more space was needed, the large square homes like the Freking house became common. They allowed for four bedrooms upstairs and a center hall or stairway. The Klas farm house and the Althoff farm house were built about 1885 and are the large square style with the hall way in the center. I think they were some of the first in the area. Both previous houses burned, so there was a need to build a new house. As farmers grew more prosperous, some of the homes became very large, and exteriors of the houses became very ornate with gingerbread trim and even dental block soffits, etc. The houses moved from being basic and functional, to being a source of pride and almost a display of wealth and success in the new land.

The next big housing change came about 1920's, with the raised square homes with a side entrance foyer midway between the basement and the first floor. This entrance was used for "farm life", as it was three steps down to the basement to keep outdoor work clothes and boots and store eggs, and three steps up to the first floor. Basement windows also provided good lighting and the basements became more usable for laundry, food storage, etc. There usually was a "dark room" in the basement to keep potatoes, and wood burning furnaces were installed as the beginning of "central heating". The stairway to the second floor was U-shaped (three steps up, landing, three steps up) and over the side entrance. It led to a central foyer on the second floor and the four bedrooms and sometimes a bathroom, as indoor plumbing was included in this more modern home. Another U-shaped stair with a landing led to the attic.

Individual families, of course, adopted and adapted design elements to their needs and choices. The Heinrich Segbers home built in 1869 was a very early example of a large square home, and it was noteworthy in that it was brick. The Henry Sabers new home built before 1885 was a modified L-shape, with a small mud entrance under the porch of an otherwise large square brick home. We have seen both of these houses, as well as the 1920 house of my grandparents. Here are more homes from the late 1800s showing the design elements Fred discussed.



Albert Pasker Sr. Homestead in Dixon Settlement



Peter Meyers Family about 1910



Beckman House



Ferdinand Freking home 1910



Frank & Catherine Klosterman home



Housewarming for Schlichtes

Farming was, of course, how we made our living, and it was an extremely important part of our lives. So we will look at a good number of photos about farming life. Our farms provided not only the food we ate but the money that bought the other things we wanted in life, like new clothes and shoes, new farmland, new machinery, new homes, new furniture, electricity, indoor plumbing, telephones, and automobiles, for example. Farming was very hard work, but it could

also be fun and even humorous. Here is a comment from Fred: "I loved my grandmother's stories, because the best part was often in an answer to a question of mine. One time we were in the yard by the old corn crib. The corn crib had a rather steep stone 'bridge' on both ends. The crib was elevated somewhat, and built into a hillside, as the fattening floor for the hogs was underneath the crib. I asked her about the bridges, and she said they were there so the farmer could drive through the crib with a wagon. She explained that the mules pulled the wagon load of corn up into the crib on one stone bridge so they could unload the corn into the 'cribs' on either side of the aisle, and then the mules could go forward and pull the empty wagon out the other side. She mentioned that sometimes the mules would get stubborn and lay down in front of the entrance, refusing to pull the heavy load of corn up the bridge. I asked her what they did then. She said, 'we put a hot potato' under the mule's tail.' I suppose this was a very quick, practical solution, as they always had potatoes and they always had the wood-burning range going in the kitchen. But the story has always given me a chuckle."



Let's look once more at this photo of the Honkomp Homestead in New Vienna in 1904, because this photo tells us so much about how things were then, during my childhood. In 1904 I was thirteen years old and would have been doing my part to help in the threshing process. We see that in the center of the photo is the Steam Engine, puffing away as it provides the power for the threshing machine on the right. This photo was probably taken to memorialize the important event of the purchase, or rental, of that steam engine for the threshing. We see on the left of the photo the large barn with a ramp leading up into it, for the transport of oats into the barn or of corn into the cribs above the hog fattening floor below. We also see the mules or horses standing there with a wagon that could be carrying corn but was probably carrying oats on threshing day. On the right of the photo we see the huge and cumbersome threshing machine itself, with one chute to take the straw up onto the tall pile and a smaller chute to send the oats into a wagon for transport into the barn. There is probably a wagon of oat shocks behind the threshing machine that the two men are throwing on to the threshing machine. On the far right of the photo we see the windmill that

pumped all the farm water up from the well deep in the ground. We see the weathervane pointing in the same direction as the smoke from the tractor, so presumably, the chaff from the threshing process would be blowing away from the workers, not into their faces. In the far distance between the threshing machine and the barn we see the tall church spire. Notice the styles of farm clothes. The women wore dresses even when helping with the farm work like threshing or milking the cows, and some still wore wooden shoes. All the men would be neighbors and friends and perhaps some hired hands come to help with the threshing as the threshing machine went from farm to farm during threshing season. Let's look at a few more photos of the threshing process because of its importance. Here is some descriptive information from Cousin Fred:

“The tractor in front of the picture below is powering a long belt that drives the threshing machine. The large pile is the straw pile formed by the threshing machine. You can see the spout leading up to the pile that blows the straw out of the machine. Most farms had a ‘straw lot’ near the barns where the straw pile would be formed by the threshing machine. The pile would be close enough to make it convenient for moving straw into the cattle and hog barns for bedding. Often the cows had access to the straw lot so they could lay on the straw around the pile in winter, and sometimes might even eat some of the straw if there was new seeding (clover) in it. The wagon on the left with the horses is the oats wagon. You can see the spout coming from the threshing machine moving the oats to the wagon. On the right side you can vaguely see an empty wagon with small wood rails. This was the wagon used to haul the bundles from the oat shocks in the field to the threshing machine.”



“Sometimes, the bundles of oats would be hauled to the threshing site ahead of time so they could just be pitched into the threshing machine. I think this happened when they were short of workers, or when they were running short of time and needed to speed up the process.”



This photo shows stacks of oat bundles at the threshing site. At the end of threshing, the stacks would be gone and there would be a straw pile there instead. The oats would be in the bin in the barn. Threshing was hot and dusty hard work, and sometimes the chaff seemed to clog up your throat and stick to your sweaty arms. Usually the farmers would stop at the tavern on their way to the threshing site to pick up beer for the harvesting crews.

The photo below right is Clara Schwers Buddle shocking oats in preparation for threshing day.



Waiting with a load of bundles of oats for threshing on Clem Schwers farm.



The photos below show more threshing scenes.



The threshing machine was extremely heavy and had to be transported carefully on roads. Some of the wooden bridges were not strong enough to support the weight of the machines. The photo on the lower right shows Joe Pasker's and John Mescher's Rumley Oil Pull and threshing machine breaking through the bridge going west out of New Vienna.

The Oil Pull was fairly common in the New Vienna area then. Basically, it was a power supply for a belt that drove the threshing machine. Although these were commonly called steam engines, they were powered by fuels such as oil. The machines had to be greased and oiled every morning. They were driven (very slowly) from one farm to another. They were very heavy and could be driven only on certain roads because bridges had to be able to support them.



The early tractors like these were at first just power sources for the threshing machine. They were basically an engine on wheels, self-propelled with a chain drive. The tractor on the right shows the wheel to pull the belt that drove the threshing machine. The rest of the work of threshing, like

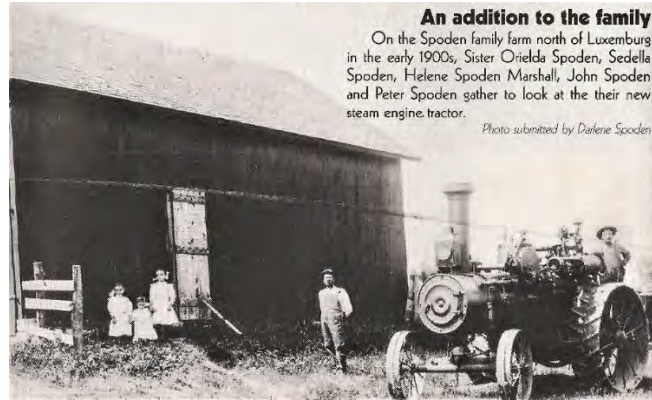
hauling the bundles and hauling the grain to the elevator to be unloaded into the bin, was still done by horses.



Our steam engine

Margaret (Spoden) Froehle and Helene (Spoden) Marshall pose with the Spoden Brothers new Nickelson Sheppard steam engine in the early 1900s on the Spoden family farm north of Luxemburg.

Photo submitted by Darlene Spoden



An addition to the family

On the Spoden family farm north of Luxemburg in the early 1900s, Sister Orielda Spoden, Sedella Spoden, Helene Spoden Marshall, John Spoden and Peter Spoden gather to look at their new steam engine tractor.

Photo submitted by Darlene Spoden

Here is the Spoden Steam Engine. The Spodens also ran a sawmill by Pine Hollow, where a lot of people had timbers. So they may have had an extra need (and income) for a steam engine tractor.

A threshing crew was quite large: one man to manage the tractor and belt, one to manage the oat chute, one or two to manage the straw chute and pile, several to bring the oat shocks from the fields or stacking area, several to load the oat shocks into the thresher, one to manage the horses or mules carrying the oats to the barn. Usually the women's job would be to

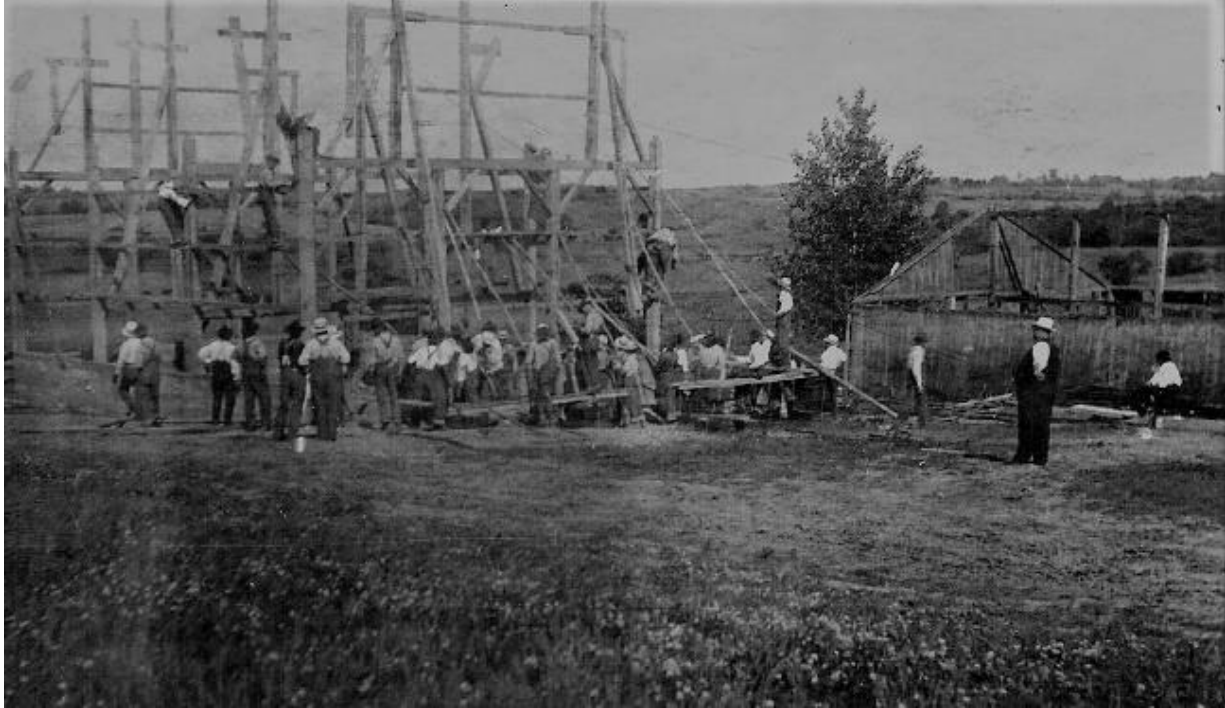
replenish cold drinking water for the crew and to cook a huge noon dinner, but if the crew were not large enough, women took their places alongside the men to make the threshing process successful. Although the Segbers and the Klas families were land neighbors, they did not "neighbor" for work such as threshing because it was a long a way to transport the heavy machines between the farms by road. Farmers "neighbored" with the farmers who lived on their road.



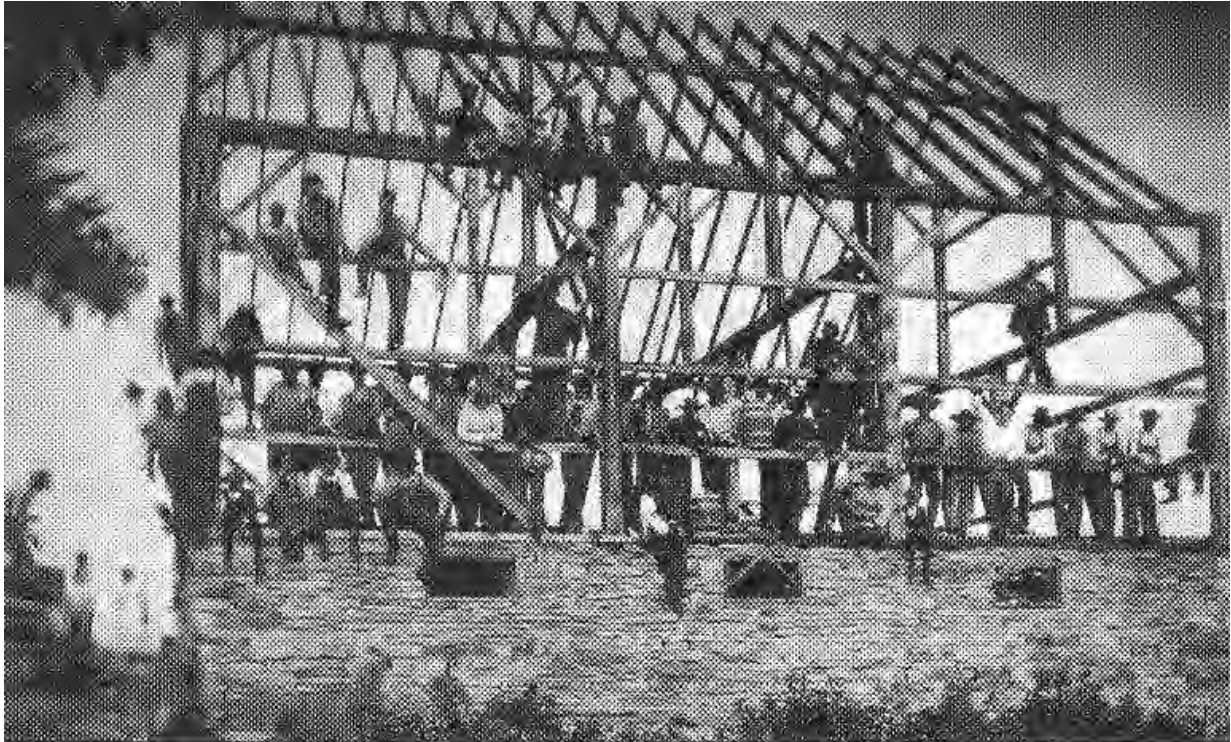
Here is Frank Rahe, hired to help with threshing at the Henry Klas farm.

A barn raising was another time in farming life when many hands were needed. The two photos we see next illustrate how many men were needed and how labor-intensive a barn-raising would be. Nevertheless, with good planning and enough materials procured, a barn raising could be accomplished in a day. The cost of building a barn was the cost of

building materials, the cost of a carpenter, and the cost of food and drink for the neighbors who helped, plus, of course, a willingness to be a good neighbor in return.



A note from Cousin Fred: "The next photo was taken in 1912. Cement came into common use for foundations about 1900. For example, the foundation for the new church at Petersburg (1904) was made of cement with the ground-up stones from the earlier church. So I'm thinking the barn below may have been a new barn built on an old foundation. Rebuilding barns was fairly common. The weeds around the foundation also may be a clue that it was an older foundation. Or, maybe they didn't know how to make a foundation that tall with cement, as most foundations were below ground level. It looks like there might be a vehicle on the left side, which would also support the 1912 date."



Here are more old farming photos: Frank Freking plowing and tilling his farm with his tractor.





Cutting and binding soybeans on the Greg Vaske farm. Soybeans were a "cash crop", as they could not be fed directly to livestock on the farm. Hay, corn and oats were the common crops grown in the New Vienna area to feed the horses, cattle, hogs, and chickens found on a typical family farm.



Early combine on Lansing farm. Ari, Jerome, Katherine, Vernon and Rose in background. Joe Lansing on top of combine.



John Sudmeier hauling corn. The wagon sideboards made an easier target for the pickers as they tossed the ears of corn into the wagon.



Load of corn

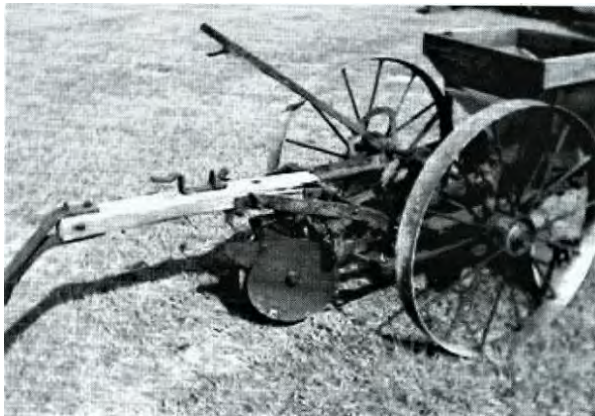


While the photo on the right has been labeled humorously "not enough horsepower" (the horse and cow seem to be jointly pulling the sleigh on runners), the cow is actually only walking alongside.



As new farming machinery became available, farmers who could afford to buy the machines would do so to reduce labor and time and increase profit. The combine shown here, for example, harvested the oats in one trip across the field and saved the time formerly spent on cutting, binding, shocking, hauling the bundles and threshing the oats. Joe and Laverne Lansing also used the combine to shell corn.

Other elements of farming life included planting and harvesting potatoes, a task much more important than you would at first imagine because the potatoes had to be stored in the root cellar and last for a whole year; butchering hogs every winter, which was usually another cooperative effort where the farmers came together and helped each other; and raising chickens for eggs and meat. Here are photos of a potato planter, skinned hogs hung on the pole, and raising chickens.



Boeckenstedt women and children with chickens.



milking outside in the summer

Milking cows and taking care of them was, of course, another very important part of farm life because it had to be done twice a day, morning and night. Many families milked the cows outside during the summer when they milked by hand. The cows were almost like pets, and usually very tame. It was a lot cooler milking outside than inside in the hot summer months.



Comment from Cousin Fred: "Farm families often had one very tame and gentle cow (and usually old!). The cow was used to teach kids to milk. I remember my aunt saying once that as an adult, the old cow they all learned to milk on kicked her and she landed right under a heifer (young cow). Not good. These kids look young, but the caption for the picture says the two kids and all their siblings learned to milk their cow, Fatty." Horses also had to be cared for daily.



Comment from Cousin Fred: "The lyric of 'Over the river and through the woods, to grandmother's house we go, the horse knows the way to carry the sleigh' is much more glamorous than the actual sleigh or sled ride. Some people in town may have had sleighs or "cutters" as they were commonly called, but most farm families had two sets of rather large runners. In the fall, when they were finished

picking corn, they moved the grain wagon from the wheeled 'running gear' to the runners, and that became the sled. According to my mother, they put straw in the wagon, and then everyone sat with their backs to the sides around the inside of the wagon and pulled the horse-hide blanket that covered

all of them up to their chins. The horse-hide blanket, of course, kept them warm and dry, but also didn't get soaked, as the hide was waterproof. My mother's oldest sister, born in 1908, recalled having heated bricks under her feet on the sled-wagon. My mother was the fifth child; by that time, they probably had enough 'people warmth' under the hide blanket that they didn't need any extra heat source. My mother also said that when they took the sled to school, they always brushed all the straw off their clothes before they went into school. They didn't want to be known as kids who came into town on a sled instead of with a car. Guess it was something like 'came into town on a load of wood!' Buggies were too fragile for the deep snow on the unplowed country roads and buggies were often pulled by lighter horses. The old farm horses were reliable to plod on through the snow with a sled." Here is a nice example of a courting team of horses with a buggy:



Out courting

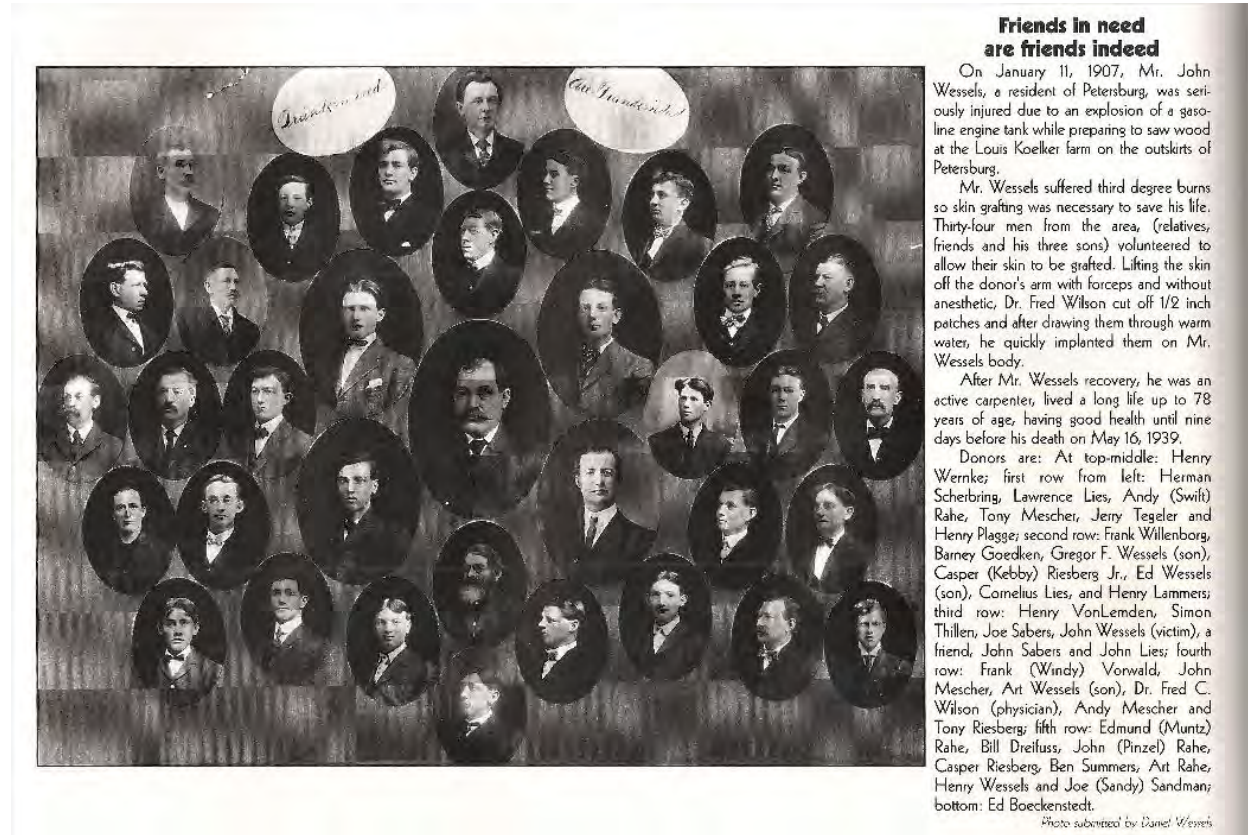
Nick Lucas, on the right, and Mike Lucas, on the left, are shown in a two seated carriage with a "courting" team of horses, not to be mistaken as work horses. Note that the driver is on the right, not on the left as you would see today. 1908

It wasn't long, of course, before the age of the automobile changed transportation forever. The following photo shows a town celebration in nearby Dyersville in 1912, called the \$1,000 Day because the town usually awarded \$1,000 in prizes through drawings, raffles, etc. It is quite amazing to see so many automobiles already in 1912!



\$1,000 Days in Dyersville, August 28, 1912

The next photo is one of my favorites, Little Dear One, because it demonstrates amazingly the true spirit of neighborliness that prevailed in those days. This photo actually hangs in the Heritage House Museum in New Vienna. A lot of our relatives by blood or marriage contributed skin for the grafting: Casper (Kebby) Riesberg, Jr., Henry Lammers, Henry Von Lemden, Joe Sabers, John Sabers, Barney Goedken, John Lies, Tony Riesberg, and Casper Riesberg. Nine of the 37 men who donated skin were our relatives.



When distant cousin Jack Henkels was asked how families during the depression years of the 1920s and 1930s survived, he responded with this summary of pioneer living:

They were descendants of strong pioneer stock, who had taught them the strength of faith and perseverance. They were able to produce most of their own food right on the farms with their orchards and gardens. Their farms were diversified by producing dairy, grain and meat products. By farming together they had less costs for labor and equipment. They produced their own seeds, natural fertilizers, and field work "fuel". They usually had access to a timber for fuel, fence posts, and building materials. They also had cornhusks and goose feathers for mattresses and pillows. They came from a heritage that was thrifty and efficient, with little waste. They recycled clothing through the family; many younger children were in their teens before they had "store-bought" clothing. The last stop for clothing was when it was converted into rag rugs or quilts. Sometimes they took on extra jobs such as butchering, wood cutting, etc. for others to pay off debts in kind rather than cash, and sometimes older children were able to "hire out" as cash income for the family. Entertainment was inexpensive and usually was a trip down the road or across the field to enjoy the company of family or neighbors.