

The History Corner  
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## The Old Jacobson Homestead

For several weeks I had thought about making a return visit to the site of the old Jacobson homestead. The last time I had spent much time there was fifteen years ago shortly after an evening visit I had made with Ernie, and his sister Nellie in the small Central Hillside home they then shared. At that time I was gathering information about them, their brother Waino, and their parents, Matt and Minnie who in 1907 had purchased a forty acre piece of cut-over land just below Abrahamson Hill. By 1910 the Jacobson family had moved onto their new land in French River and it was the place that Ernie and Nellie called home for all their early childhood years. I remember spending much of that evening listening to Ernie's stories and paging through photo albums and old newspaper clippings with Nellie. The night was filled with talk of old days and old times, dances at the Nolte Store, fishing on the Little Knife River, the summer that Waino made a pet of an orphaned bear cub, and of course the Saturday night ritual of the smoke sauna.

When this morning broke cold and overcast diminishing my enthusiasm for any gardening, I quickly grabbed some pictures of the homestead I had gotten from Ernie years earlier, started up the pickup and headed off to see what changes the last several years had brought to his and Nellie's childhood home. Caleb, my son, climbed in with me. I was glad he wanted to go along.

We turned off the gravel road onto the muddy drive and parked next to the spot where the old barn used to stand. It, along with a number of other outbuildings, had been destroyed in a fire that had consumed several acres of land just prior to my first visit fifteen years earlier. I reached in the cab of the truck, retrieved the pictures from on top of the dash and showed them to Caleb. One photograph revealed Ernie, at a young age, stancing in front of the barn, a long building that lay covered under a blanket of snow. In the background of the photograph the old homestead could clearly be seen. In the picture the original hand hewn two-sided house displayed the two additions that Ernie said had been added about 1920. On the north side the addition contained the families living room, and opposite it along the south. The dining area, constructed so it could gather as much light and sun as possible. The house had escaped the fire fifteen years ago and was at the time of my first visit, though sagging and unused, still standing. I remember then being able to walk through the house, of seeing the hump in the middle of the floor that Ernie had said became noticeable soon after construction and that gradually grew bigger as years passed. I can still recall climbing the narrow staircase to the three small upstairs rooms that served as bedrooms for Ernie, Nellie and Waino and of looking out through broken windows onto fields that had already begun to grow trees instead of oats and hay.

Those old fields and pastures had been laid out along the northern edge of the forty and as we turned away from the rubble of what remained of the house we worked our way out into the labyrinth of trees that now filled them. I pointed out to Caleb where the edges of the fields had been, still clearly marked by the long rows of stone piles that could be found all along the property lines. I thought of the years of sweat and backbreaking work that had cleared this land. I thought of how the Jacobson's had picked these rocks, of Billy and Chub, their team of workhorses, dragging load after load, year after year, in an endless struggle to create enough cleared fields for planting. We followed the line of rock piles that led us along the edge of the field until once again we were heading back south. We crossed an open area of wetland and then climbed up a small hill where we came upon the remains of the old root cellar. The roof had collapsed and over the years a good portion of it had been filled with junk and garbage. I explained to Caleb how important root cellars were in the days before electricity and refrigeration. He listened for a while and said, "Dad, it sure would make a great fort."

As Caleb went off for further exploring I looked over the land that at one time had contained so much life and activity. It was not hard for me to imagine what it looked like then. I could envision the fields of potatoes Ernie planted, the large patch of strawberries Nellie tended, and the stacks of hay that provided winter feed for the animals. I thought of all the structures that once stood here, of smoke drifting from the sauna, the sounds of animals, of Ernie's accordion music filling the air. To me all that richness wasn't gone it had just slowly seeped back into this land.