

“We Lived There Ourselves for Forty-some Years”

Lives Spent on the Iowa Prairie

EMMA THOMASCH



From left: Barbara Rosford, Velna Kolodziej, John (Dick) Schild. Not pictured: Sandy and Betty Moffett

Editor's note: Betty Moffett's essay "My Prairie" in Volume II, Issue I of Rootstalk inspired one of our Developmental Editors, Emma Thomasch, to research the experiences and perspectives of those who have been living in the region for years. To do this, Emma decided to conduct a conversation, excerpted below, with residents of the Mayflower retirement community in Grinnell, Iowa, where Betty and her husband, Sandy are new residents. Emma wanted to hold this discussion with the Mayflower residents because she sought to hear the experiences and perspectives of those who have been living in the region for years. For many in the U.S., the prairie is just a flyover

region, with the large squares of fields passing beneath the plane without it registering that this is a home to so many people, and—beyond its presence as a landscape—that there's a personality to this region. Emma's intention was to host a conversation—in which Betty and Sandy themselves were participants—in which residents could share their perspectives on and experiences concerning this region. Anne Sunday, Independent Living Activities Coordinator at the Mayflower Community, invited Mayflower residents to meet with Emma if they were interested in discussing the prairie and their experiences.

VELNA: I was born in Chicago, lived all my life in Chicago, and in the suburbs after I first married. And um, Illinois is a prairie state, too, but it's a different prairie state. Here it's immediate, if you're living in Grinnell, the prairie is immediate. In Illinois, I could travel—we eventually moved to Oak Park—and we could travel, for instance, to the Morton Arboretum where they re-instituted a prairie; they took a space and brought it back with a lot of work. And of course, Illinois was a tall-grass prairie, and it's interesting because they had a map there, showing how much of Illinois had been a prairie, and how much prairie [there is] now. But I always loved it, to go out and walk around. We came [to Grinnell] just a year and a half ago. My son lives here, and my husband has dementia, so they knew I had to be making a change soon, and the Mayflower is the right place. But the prairie here is different, the glacier created a different type of prairie in Illinois, it scooped off all the dirt from Wisconsin, dumped it in Illinois, and left it flat. So it has its own kind of beauty, you know? Here, I don't know if people realize it, but the Earth here is wrinkled, it didn't smooth out the wrinkles here. You come in to Grinnell from I-80 and you go up and down this way, if you take 10th street or 11th street, you go that way, and it's just fascinating to me. I don't think people that have lived here a long time think it's so fascinating, but I do. And I can go to the end of 10th street and watch the sun set, and it's just an entirely different experience. As I say, it's immediate. I can decide [during] an afternoon “Well, I'm going to wait until sunset and just drive out there,” I don't have to make a big, big plan. And the lake out here, and all kinds of birds, which I would like to go out and just park my car and sit there sometime and watch the birds. So it, it's very immediate.

ROOTSTALK: Have you had much involvement with or exposure to the land around here?

VELNA: My son [...] called me the other evening and he said, “What are you doing?” and I said, “Well, I'm eating my leftovers.” And he said “Are you busy?” and I said, “Well this isn't too interesting, what is it?” So on his way home he saw pelicans. And some time ago [his wife] said she saw pelicans, and he said, nah, but he found that there are pelicans. So he said, “Do you want to go look at them?” So he came and picked me up and we went and parked the car and waited at the bridge there...As we were there, we could see from far away that they were coming, because they don't just fly right down, they circle, and they circle, and they circle, and they land. They're great big birds. And we saw an otter, and some kind of crane.

BARBARA: You were at Rock Creek, weren't you?

VELNA: I was at Rock Creek. And they spend a lot of time out there. He picks me up and we go out. They're very fond of nature. And they go around to a lot of these conservation areas... they're very interested, so it's interesting to me. And I liked doing that sort of thing around where I lived [in Oak Park].

BARBARA: I was born and raised on a farm in Iowa. Then I married a farmer of good fortune, and he has a Century Farm, so it's been in his family for all these years, and we lived there ourselves for forty-some years, and we're very interested in supporting and maintaining that heritage, the Century part of it. We've been real interested in conservation on the farms, and I still own them and work with managing them.

ROOTSTALK: How were you involved in the farming?

BARBARA: My husband and I were team workers, you might say, because I worked off the farm as well as helping him. I was able to drive the truck and the tractor and help with some of the chores and things. However, I was more the “Mom” and

raised the vegetable garden and worked off the farm.

ROOTSTALK: Did you tell me how much land you have in your family?

BARBARA: Right now, I own 160 acres.

ROOTSTALK: And who farms that now?

BARBARA: I have a hired renter.

ROOTSTALK: Did you use conservation techniques on your farm? Does your renter?

BARBARA: As an owner, you're responsible for instituting them, and then you expect your renter to help maintain them. I did a big government project where you did a lot of laying some of the land fallow and tiling big areas out, and so that's a government project, and my renter mows it and takes care of it. So we work at it together.

ROOTSTALK: And your children, are they involved?

BARBARA: No. My two boys are in farm-related careers, one with seed corn, and the other is a John Deere tractor technician. So they have farm connections and have interest in the farm. And the oldest one even owns some property near me. But they're not active in my farming operation.

ROOTSTALK: So, really, you spent your whole life on a farm.

BARBARA: Yeah. My parents were really supportive of making sure that we children had education that would help us to survive in the event of whatever, so they encouraged me to get post-education from high school. So I was a registered nurse, and I worked thirty years here in Grinnell at the hospital, and traveled between the farm and here every day...our kids learned to work and

do on the farm; they were involved.

DICK: I was born about 35 miles northeast of here. My ancestors came from Germany in 1832 and went to Pennsylvania, and they left the women there, and the men came overland to Iowa to our area and took hatchets and marked trees where they wanted because Iowa was not even a state [then], it was just prairie. And uh, then they went back and got the families and [got as far as] Freeport, Illinois. The President talked them into staying in Freeport; there was a few people there and [they were] enlarging that area so that they [would have] enough inhabitants there that they could justify running a railroad. And so they stayed seven years there [but they still wanted] to go back, the men, to Iowa. So they sold the land and then came here... They took the money that they made off that out there and put their name on several thousand acres of land, and maybe more than a couple of thousand of acres. It actually ended up in two counties, because there were no county lines, they just went to it tree by tree. So I'm the fifth generation on that farm, and when I was in high school, I was very lucky to have a vocational agriculture teacher who was a farm boy, but he was probably 35 years old, and [he started us] in 1935 to start raising hybrid seed corn as a project in school ... The second year we had a bad rain and the corn washed out and I got to thinking "Well, there's gotta be a better way," so my [agriculture] teacher put me in touch with a man in Washington, DC, with the Agriculture Department there, and he said that we should contour and I'd never heard of such a thing; the neighbors all called it "detouring."

VELNA: What year was it you started this contour plowing?

DICK: I plowed my first furrow in 1935... with a team and a walking plow. Then, [Iowa State Universi-

ty at] Ames heard about it and they came down and set up a field day the next year, which was '36 [when it] was dry, and we had a hard time making up... the ground was so loose, like sand, and you try to plow it and turn it over... in '37, the [Civilian Conservation Corps] camp moved there, and things really took off then. So I have a special love for the land and moving [to the Mayflower community] has been a very almost traumatic experience. I came here with my wife, she passed away, but I'd never lived any place except on that home place my whole life. I got hurt real bad off a horse, so I didn't pass my physical to go with the Army. I never got to go to college, so I've never been anyplace. And to adjust to city life and city noises... and when I married, I helped Dad pay off the debt on the farm, and then I accumulated enough money that I bought another 160 [acres] between our place and what used to be the old Lincoln Highway that crossed the United States. And it originally went by our place on the mud road back years ago, and so I met a lot of people with car troubles on that Lincoln Highway, a lot of what I call influential people.

BARBARA: You have some natural area, and some wooded area on your farm?

DICK: I kept thinking, let's try this project, or let's try that, so we've got a timber area and we have seven farm ponds of various sizes, one that we use

to water livestock out of, and it's a recreational area and it's only a mile from Belle Plaine and a lot of people come out... one of the gratifying things to me is that in 1965 our farm was named the state award-winner in conservation. And another thing that's real impressive [to] me is to see all the neighbors adapt these projects, where at first they were, “That boy's going to ruin a real good farm...”

BARBARA: So when [others] saw the benefits [of the projects]....

DICK: Yes, yes, slowly—the first few years there wasn't much progress, but later on, it became more.

ROOTSTALK: [*Looking at Dick's plaque:*] “The Des Moines Register and Tribune 1965 Soil Conservation Award.” That's very cool.

DICK: I always envisioned something like that when I was a little kid, and I was real proud when I ended up with that. Thought I'd bring it on in.



Photo courtesy of: Sandy Moffett

BARBARA: Do you have an area that's a habitat for wildlife?

DICK: Oh, yes. We have one little area that's still in the original prairie.

BARBARA: Is it your granddaughter that farms it now?

DICK: I ... put my granddaughter there now.

ROOTSTALK: Is she still perpetuating the conservation

techniques?

DICK: Oh yes. All my children are very involved in preserving the resources on the farm. I have no fear at all about our farm being kept up and [conservation] practices kept on up. It's a little hard with the modern machinery to implement some of the practices that should be taken... I made up my mind quite a few years ago that society could not afford what it would cost to put every acre under a terracing for protection and so forth. Contour farming does not lend itself to big machinery; that does not blend in to modern. We're changing our methods of farming, but we're not changing fast enough to keep up with the practices we need to do to keep soil erosion to a minimum. My father, back in '28, already when we would take corn off to fill a silo, would go ahead and put rye in for a cover crop, which they're just now in the last year or two getting involved in, we did that for years, back in the '20s.

BARBARA: So it's still in family.

DICK: Outside of forty acres, our land is all contiguous. There's forty acres between those two farms, someday I might buy that, but that's another story. I've gotten to the point where I think it's wrong for one man to own too much land, because as I saw it happening, getting consolidated more into larger farms, I could see Main Street suffering. Main Street suffers when you consolidate too much land under one ownership. What I first noticed was school enrollment, I was on the school board and our enrollment went down in school because they took these buildings down and nobody lived there. When you lose your school, your town suffers. And the next thing I noticed was enrollment in church went down.

VELNA: That's historically what's happened...

DICK: And then first thing I know, one of the grocery stores closed. It's just a domino effect. We had a man come in and buy four thousand acres, an advertising executive, and he got his own semi [which was unusual at the time], he was hiring his farmwork done by custom operators, and what machinery he did own, he bought direct from a machinery company; the seed corn he bought direct from the seed corn company, in bulk, which used to be bagged in small bags. [This] eliminated two seed corn salesmen in our area that supplemented their farm income by selling seed corn and without that extra income, they couldn't stay on their farms. So I think that farming too big makes a community or a town diminish... It isn't how big you farm, it's how smart you farm.

ROOTSTALK: What does that mean?

DICK: Methods of farming, to watch and hit the high markets....

BARBARA: I was going to say, marketing is a big part of that.

VELNA: The farmer now has to be up on all this, Internet....

DICK: A farmer has to be versed in economics, veterinary, husbandry for his cattle, take care of the land....

BARBARA: Farmers that are successful are highly educated. A lot of it's on their own, they dig in and they learn.

DICK: You can self-educate. Read, read, read, read, and then read meaning into what you read.

BETTY: My story is much shorter and much less interesting. [Sandy and I] came [to Grinnell] because of the College, then we fell in love with the land,

and then we fell in love with the people. We never have regretted coming here.

ROOTSTALK: How do you find the people here different than elsewhere?

BETTY: Well, we grew up in North Carolina, where people are maybe more effusive, and someone warned me that if I moved to the Midwest, that I would give up that southern warmth. That's not so. There's a warmth here. It's a little more cautious, but still....

SANDY: We came in 1971, and I had always lived in a small town in North Carolina, two small towns actually. And Betty and I, when we first got married, had lived on an acreage in an old farm house, so when we first came here, we decided we would like to live in the country here as well. We moved into a rental house in town and we had three dogs and we fixed up a place in the garage, because they weren't house dogs, and we had a wonderful neighbor that we used to talk over the fence with and he never mentioned the dogs, even though two of them were beagles and they would make some noise. He never mentioned the barking dogs. But one day I said to him, you know, what I'm really looking for is a house in the country. And he said, "I'll find you one." And he did, we moved into one of those houses that people had abandoned. There were people who rented the bottom, they moved out and we found that it was for sale. The man who owned it was going to use it to store equipment and hay in, but we bought it and lived there for forty-two years. When we first moved there we had four acres. Then we managed to add another four acres. And we kinda continued piece by piece until we had, between the two of us, about 175 acres of land, which is now virtually all in restored prairie. All from a conservation easement. We've used ... the conservation reserve program, to the maximum. We never could've done this without that program. But we've managed to restore—in fact, this morning I

was out burning prairie. And we moved [to the Mayflower] almost two years ago, because we felt like it was a good idea, and we've never looked back. But I go out to the farm every day. It took a while for me to really get into the Iowa land. The first piece of property I bought was south of town, about twelve miles, and I decided I was going to make it into North Carolina, so I started planting pine trees all over the place. Well, I won't go through the whole story, but every year something disastrous happened. So finally I just said, I'm just gonna relax for a while. And on that piece of land, there was about a half an acre of native prairie. And that was my favorite piece of that land, it was just gorgeous.

DICK: Beautiful in the spring, isn't it?

SANDY: Beautiful.

BETTY: And the fall.

SANDY: And so I decided that I would plant the land that wasn't tillable, there was about twelve acres, and planted that native prairie. That was about twenty years ago, and the rest of it's timber. So and planted that native prairie. That was about twenty years ago, and the rest of it's timber. So little by little we managed to do that. So one other quick story: there is a group of ten couples, ten families, that twelve years ago discovered that there was 640 acres of land in Mahaska county that was for sale. And we didn't have any idea that we could do this, but a couple of us got together and said let's just see if we can get some people who are interested in buying this and turning it into a conservation property. And we did, we managed to get ten families together, put a down payment on the land, it's going to be paid for in two years now, and it also is all in restored prairie, with the exception of a little bit of it that's in row crop... Both of these are in conservation easements, so they're the way they are and they can't ever be changed.

DICK: So you signed a conservation easement deal then, so it never can be changed?

SANDY: Yeah. Our farm can be bought and sold but can never be divided, only a very small portion of it can be farmed, houses can't be built on it...

ROOTSTALK: And how much land is that?

ROOTSTALK: What motivated you to focus on conservation?

SANDY: Well, we own about 170-odd acres between the two of us. In Mahaska County, there's 640 acres

ROOTSTALK: What motivated you to focus on conservation?

BETTY: For a while we saw—and I'm sure it still goes on, and I don't blame people for this—people farmed as they say “fence row to fence row” so everything, trees and everything, got cut down. And natural places seemed more and more threatened. And the little patches of natural places that we had out there on the farm and south of town became more precious. And I think we wanted to conserve them in any way that we could. And I would like to say one more time that I have done very little work in this process, but I am a big appreciator of what Sandy and other people have done in this direction. And it's beautiful, the prairies are beautiful, they're beautiful all year round, in separate ways each season. So it's pleasure.

SANDY: Yeah, I would like to say that it was altruistic, but it wasn't. It's what [Betty] said—it's beautiful, we were able to do it, we weren't in a situation where we were living off the land exclusively and had to get every grain of corn that we could possibly get out of it. So that was one thing, and we were lucky in that way. There're really three different pieces of land that I've been involved

with. One is the little piece of woodland that's south of town. It probably could never have been farmed. There's a little bit of farmable land there, about twelve acres. But otherwise, the rest of it is woods and it just wouldn't be economical. And the second grows timber, and timber's not valuable at this point. So we just wanted that little piece of wild land. And not changing it, leaving it that way, didn't amount to anything—we didn't have to really protect it. In fact, it's still not protected as such, with an easement like the other two pieces are. Then the second piece, which is our own farm, is surrounded by crop field, and it really is a sanctuary for birds and animals and all kinds of things.... Quite a bit of wildlife. And then the crop fields around there, in the summertime, pheasants make their nests out there. And in the fall, it all gets turned into you know, essentially, a desert. A soybean field in the winter, there's nothing there—bare ground. You know, that's land that could be put in to crops but we wanted it to stay that way and again we're lucky in being able to do that. We have the luxury of not having to get an income off of that land. And then the motivation for the third piece, which is the piece that we've done with other people, is pretty much the same. I mean, the people who originally went out there and looked on it as an extremely diverse piece of Iowa land. It's got flatland that can be farmed, it's got land with deep gullies and runoffs and things like that that can only be used for running cattle in it or something like that, and it shouldn't be used for that because it degrades the land. So the motivation for that, and putting that in a conservation easement, was to conserve that really kind of unique piece of Iowa land.

SANDY: It takes as much work as I can put into it. I do everything I can. If there were two people, I could do more, if there were ten people, I could do more. The prairie, I burn it, part of it every year. I try to manage invasive plants and keep

them from—although the prairie itself manages the invasive plants pretty well once it gets going. There are always new areas to seed to prairie. It’s a wonderful thing; it’s what I do.

DICK: One point I want to make—I’m not just a farmer, I’m a proud farmer. I’m proud to be a farmer. I take pride in what we’ve accomplished. I didn’t do it all alone, of course, with the help of a lot of people, the conservation work, but I think you folks have availed yourselves of these services, that should be stressed more.... I think Mrs. Franklin Roosevelt put it in words very well: “We’re all involved in conservation because everything comes from the land. Urban and rural, we’re both tied to that because our very survival depends on preserving our natural resources.” She was a great conservationist. She was one who helped motivate me to get involved.

VELNA: Is that difficult to do? Can ordinary people do it?

DICK: Well, you can’t generate enough money from the farm to a point, especially farmers that accumulated a debt buying the land and the banks closing and the mortgages and then the drought of ‘35 and ‘36, that was terrible, fact is after I came [to the Mayflower], nights I lay here and do a lot of thinking and I don’t know how my father accomplished what he did. I paid off the last \$20,000 while he was still alive, he’d had a heart attack, but when the drought came in 1936, we put [the grain we grew on] 110 acres into one silo, and didn’t even get it full. That’s the kind of hardship [we suffered]. And I would go to Chicago with livestock, when I was eight years old, I would go alone. I brought home a check for cattle for \$600-some and that’s the first time I ever saw tears in my dad’s eyes and he said, “Son, that check will not pay for half the taxes on one year on the land, for the whole carload of cattle.”

VELNA: How do you convince people that this is a good use of their land? Some of these families that have these hundred-year-old farms and so forth, you have to make it possible for them to exist and it sounds like it’s very tricky.

BARBARA: Well, you have to have a real interest, and be dedicated. In my case, even my children who are interested in maintaining their heritage in that farm—even [though] they don’t live on it or farm it, they really claim it.

DICK: I put part of it right away in my boy’s and girl’s names, and they took much more of an interest in it right away when it was in their name. They weren’t going to let anything happen to their land. And now, I made a remark back when we were offered up in the millions, and I told them one day, you know, maybe we should sell. And you know what Don told me? “Dad, you do that, I’ll disinherit you....” I’ve started passing some of the land over to them.... I got a granddaughter that’s farming the land now. Till she got old enough, my sister’s boy came back from the service and he was there for twenty-some years and I took a couple of neighbor kids that didn’t have enough land in their family, to help them get started too. We need to help the younger generation get started in agriculture. I believe in helping the younger generation to get started.

BARBARA: Well, it’s so interesting for me because I grew up with a father that lost everything in the Depression, and we moved farm to farm, and he was a farm hand from then on, and we kinda lived [through] some tough times, and I went to lots and lots of schools. And I said: “There’s one thing I’ll never do and that’s marry a farmer. You’re not going to catch me getting caught in that kind of thing.” Well, of course, then what happened—I met the guy I really loved, and he was a farmer. And he was a born and bred farmer. But it gets in you then.

DICK: Back when we were kids, to be a farmer was kind of low class. But I never considered that we were poor because I'd go to town and I was well fed, on the farm, while the kids in town didn't have that. That was one advantage that we had. One girl would sit across from me in fourth grade, and she made the remark, she says, "I'm real worried"—she wasn't acting right, and I asked if she was sick, and she said "I'm worried, I heard Mom say I don't know how I'm going to buy any coal." So I came home and told my Dad. You know what happened on Saturday? We loaded a load of wood up and took it to town to give it to 'em.

BARBARA: Yeah, there was a lot of that. Helped each other.

DICK: And you don't forget those kinds of experiences.... There's a lot of community pride in being a good neighbor.

ROOTSTALK: What would you say to the younger generation of farmers, based on your experiences and your perspective now?

BARBARA: Oh boy. Farming is a great career... There's all these things connected with your farm that you can associate with—like in the early spring, that first smell of the earth that inspires the farming aspect in people. When the farmer first goes out in the spring and works up the soil, and there's this smell, and the birds come, there's a whole atmosphere. And it's just inspiring. What's going to happen for the year? And you know, they can just really get excited when that's their career. And what you have to be prepared for in this day and age of farming, is that it also is big business. And you have to be prepared to be a marketer and to do extensive studying in how the crops are raised and what you do with them. You really have to have a high education. It isn't just like you go out in

your overalls and put the corn in the ground... Years ago, people could take a little plot of land and farm it and raise a family. And that's not the way it is anymore, you can't do that. Most people on the farm have off-farm jobs to supplement their income. Farming is probably one of the highest-risk things that you can do, because you have good years, bad years; you are entirely dependent upon the weather. You have to gamble that the weather's going to behave and give you the rain at the right time and the sun—you really are kind of a gambler. But if you love it, you love it; it's really worth it. And you're your own boss. It's a business you own, so you can look at it in that way, too.

DICK: Practice soil erosion control. Going back to the capabilities of the land, we still need to plant trees and that, too. We don't need to farm every acre. I still believe in rotating crops to a point; it breaks up the disease cycle, we won't need as much spray. And if you have livestock, you naturally have to have hay, and hay is a very good conservation measure to prevent erosion. So I would say to a younger generation that we still need some diversification in agriculture: "Don't put all your eggs, so to speak, in one basket." Usually it's been my experience [that] when one commodity is down in price, why, usually one of the other commodities or ventures that you can put on the farm is probably...the price is good, so that your income averages out for the year. Agriculture is a business and it has to be treated as a business. In other words, you can't go ahead as some of the big corporations do, and put in a crop in the spring, and go to Miami for the winter months. It's a 365-day-a-year enterprise. I used to have a neighbor that was gone a lot and he would say I'm on the "BCM program." And I'd say "what's that?" and he'd say "beans, corn, Miami."

ROOTSTALK: So how do you feel about big corpora-

tions in farming?

DICK: Well, corporations are good if they’re used right. Although a corporation to a point means big-ness. And that isn’t the answer. The answer is to farm smart. In other words, it isn’t how many acres you farm, it’s how you farm it. So in the long run, by farming what I call smart or using proper measures, you’re going to leave something for the next generation too. Don’t just undermine it for yourself. I try to leave... what I did leave in better position than when I acquired it.

ROOTSTALK: And a big part of that is conservation?

DICK: Yes. I figure I’m leaving them a better legacy that way than just a number of acres undermined.

ROOTSTALK: Now, you said that a part of your land

is in the original prairie, and that you practice conservation techniques, but you don’t have it in a conservation easement, correct?

DICK: I don’t know what [my children’s] long-range [plans] are, but my feelings would be that I would like to someday see the farm used as a demonstration for the schools to come out and to have tours. If we can get conservation into the minds of the younger people, when they become adults, they’ll be stewards of the land automatically. So my idea is that with the type of the land that we have there, we can show a lot of different methods of preserving resources not only by water impoundment but contour farming—and then with tree planting, they can have all kinds of tours there on that place. It’d be a good demonstration area because it could all be incorporated in one trip. 🌿



Photo courtesy of: Sandy Moffett