

# Siebe and Bauwina Come Home - March, 1903

## *Hagemeyer Generations - Chapter Two*

By Stanley Hagemeyer © 2018

The day had finally come. Siebe had moved almost all their baggage and equipment out to the farm place. Now it was time for Bauwina and little Carl to go along and settle into their own “little house on the prairie.” Staying with her cousin, Fran Thedans, had been a life-saver for Bauwina and baby Carl. They were in a safe place while Siebe had taken care of getting their belongings out of Clara City to the farm. Siebe had appreciated, as well, having a place to lay his head and get a good rest during those two days and nights after arriving.

After a good breakfast, the three of them got up on the wagon. Siebe clucked the horses into motion and they headed out of town. This wagon was going to be their transportation for some time. The hard seat up front was mounted on leaf springs, nevertheless they felt every stone in the roadway transmitted upward through the rigid wheels. But they were on an adventure and their excitement softened the discomforts they currently endured. Siebe said, “We can take the Clara City-Montevideo road for two miles, and then turn south. It won’t take too long.” Little Carl, at 5 months, cradled in Bauwina’s arms, had the most comfortable ride of the three, cushioned by his momma’s lap.

When they got to the intersection about 40 minutes later, Siebe turned the team south on a dirt road that climbed a small slope in the otherwise mostly flat landscape. In the SW Minnesota prairie land, a big “hill” was usually no more than a rise of 10 feet on a gentle incline. The glaciers had sculpted the soil base into a uniform foundation with only modest slopes like the surface of a vast ocean. On this surface the succeeding centuries of grasses had deposited layers of soil, now black with nutrients exposed by the pioneers’ breaking plows. The view in every direction was the same. Only here and there a low spot displayed rushes and reeds with a little water that welcomed waterfowl and frogs. It all looked so peaceful in the early spring of March 1903.

But Bauwina had been thinking, and said, “I wonder about that man and his wife who lived here a few years. You said his name was L. M. Street. We took over their mortgage, is that right?”

“Ya, they bought it from the McLarty Thompson Land Company. We paid them \$5,000 when my Pa and I were here in November. So they are out of the business now.”

Bauwina continued her inquisitive line with, “So now we are the ones who own the land and we owe that company the rest of the money for the land? You said it was about \$8,400? Isn’t that an awful lot of money? How are we ever going to pay that?”

Siebe hesitated before he responded. Why ask this question now? They were on the edge of their big start as a farm family. He sighed, but hid his disappointment, “Oh, you have to know that every farmer gets started with debt unless he inherits a place.”

“Yes, but I heard that quite a few go broke in a few years, too. Isn’t that so?” she probed. “Isn’t that why that man and his wife, the Streets, sold it to us? They couldn’t make it?”

“My *liebchen*, we are the most blest because we don’t owe so much as some do” (using his favorite term for her, “my love” in the low-German they were inclined to speak when they were by themselves). “You know I saved my money ever since I was 16 and worked for the neighbors in Iowa. So our farm is nearly one-third paid for already. And the prices of oats and corn are really good. I think we’ll get it paid off in 10 years.”

“Ten years is a long time.”

“Most farmers are paying for 30 years.” He was only mildly surprised that she didn’t know this. Now he hoped that when she saw the place all her fears and worries would settle down inside buried by the excitement of seeing their very own place.

They proceeded south on the dirt path only slightly visible through the native grasses that had been trampled by the infrequent passage of wagon wheels. As they came to the last stretch of the “road” it passed through perhaps 50 yards of marshy lowland. Here the land company had built a road grade just above the cat tails that crowded the route on either side.

Bauwina remarked, “I wonder what this road will look like if we have a rainy spell,” as she looked with some alarm at the shallow water on either side.

“Ya, it’s not so good,” responded Siebe. “We’ll have to put a good layer of gravel on to build it up next year after we get our first crop.”

At the end of the half-mile the road came to a stop. The road went no further because to the south the low wetland continued and no road had been built. Further south a crowd of willows could be seen marking the edge of a large slough (the common term for the shallow water spots that dotted the otherwise open prairie of this part of Minnesota). They had come to the corner of their property which now opened to the west and south. A low fence line had been erected to mark the boundary, heading west along the northern edge of what was to be their land. Here to their right an even more faint path appeared along the fence, leading up an incline for about 200 yards and then leveled out. Siebe turned the horses and they followed the path up the hill.

When they reached the top, Siebe called “Whoa” to the horses and they quickly stopped, eager for a few moments’ respite. “Take a look to the south, my *liebchen*,” he said. Gazing to the south from the top of this knoll, he pointed out the 50 acres of slough, its blue water reflecting the clear sky.

“This slough is part ours and the other half to the east is on the Andresens’ farm. So we can use the low ground around on the west side of it for our pasture. It will be sometimes too wet to work for crops but the cows will always have grass there even in a dry season. And when you look way across to the far edge, you can see the Great Northern Railroad passes just south of our land. We can see the trains that go by every day!”

Bauwina enjoyed this bit of travel guide commentary. But her eyes also turned to the other field just to the west of the marshes that marked the edge of the slough. “That field over there is awfully low, too, isn’t it? Don’t you think it will be too wet for crops? It looks alright now, but ....”

Siebe responded, “Ya, it’s not so good. What we have to do is get a crew to come in here next year and put a line of tile down in the ground to drain those two low spots into the slough. Otherwise the crop will be drowned out whenever we get a rainy spell.” She looked at him quizzically.

“You see,” he continued, “that is what is going on in all the farms around here. Tile is being installed in every farm where the land has a low spot. It works good to get rid of the extra water. You’ll see. We’ll have to wait until we get our first crop before we can pay for

that, but I think we can get it done next fall.” His enthusiasm was only slightly dampened by her probing questions.

Now he directed her attention to the set of buildings coming into view to the southwest about an 1/8 of a mile away. But she had already been looking at them in silence. What was going through her mind? She could not help but think of her parents’ six-room house back in Iowa that she had left when she married Siebe. They had moved in with his family for the next few months, and their home was modestly gracious, as well, although well populated with Siebe’s younger siblings. Then after a few months they had moved to a small apartment of their own. It was really just the upper story of the Swenson’s home in the town of Spencer. Siebe had continued to work with his father on the farm but also picked up short-term jobs with other farmers as he had been doing ever since he was a teenager. The house Bauwina was staring at now looked awfully little on the big open prairie.

Siebe was trying to come up with words to break the silence. He had guessed her thoughts when he looked at her face. He blustered out with some enthusiasm, “Here’s our place! It’s got two good-sized rooms with a lean-to on the back where I’ve got the cookstove set up.” He pointed to the other two buildings. One was a two-story barn of sorts, big enough for a few animals to winter in and the other a smaller 20x20 shed that could be used for animals or crop storage. “That one doesn’t have any grain bins built into it yet, but I think I can build them myself and finish up by the time we need them next fall.”

These were the minimal buildings the land company had their crews construct on dozens of quarter-section farms all around the county so they could advertise the land for sale “with buildings.” Evidently the Street family had lived in the house and had constructed a small fenced-in area on one side of the barn.

Bauwina was also struggling for the right words. She loved Siebe and she was excited about having their own farm. She knew they were pioneers and they were among the first generation to live and farm here. But she somehow had thought the house would be a little bit bigger. “Let’s go right over to the house. I want to see where you’ve put the furniture so far. Oh Siebe, I’m proud of you for working so hard to get it ready!” She was happy. And she was

uneasy. And she was proud, all at the same time. Here they were, she only 24 and he only 27 years old and they had their own farm place! Well, she thought, we're going to have to make this place into our own.

The wagon stopped near the door on the east side of the house. He helped her step off with Carl still in her arms. Carl was stirring now that the regular jostling of the ride had stopped. Siebe opened the door and they stepped into first room. There were no curtains, and the bare floor held only the table and two chairs they had brought from Iowa. The second room revealed the bare bed set up awaiting the linens, blanket and comforter she knew were somewhere in the trunks sitting on the floor. Somehow it all looked a bit dingy. Clearly, it was put together with the minimum of workmanship and materials. Here and there the bare plastered walls showed gouge marks where the workmen failed to smooth out the plaster hastily slapped on to the slender lath boards.

She was trying to take it all in, and it was a struggle. She could see it would look completely different with curtains on the windows, maybe a rug on the floor in the living area, and bed clothes in place. But the actual work it required was dawning on her like an unwelcome cloud on the horizon. But she summoned up her better thoughts and said, "Oh Siebe, I'm so glad we're here. And this is our very own place. But I am just kind of stopped, thinking of what to do first. And I did think it would be a little bigger, maybe finished better."

"Ya, it's not so good. But we can make it good. You'll see. We can do it, I know we can." He, too, was caught between the exhilaration of celebrating their home-coming and the now all-too-clear vision of the work that needed to be done just to survive the first year. All those mixed-up feelings didn't come out in words easily. "Here, you sit down with Carlie and take it easy for a few minutes while I bring in the crate with the pots and pans and the rest of our kitchen stuff."

They had arrived. She sat and looked around. In a couple moments Siebe struggled through the door with the first crate of kitchen utensils. "I'll bring in the dishes next and then..." he stopped as he looked around, and realized he didn't know where to put the pots and pans. There was only the 6 foot long shelf on the south wall

and two shorter ones on the west wall near the door to the lean-to cooking room. But where would the groceries, the canisters for flour and sugar, coffee and tea go? Where would they put the bag of potatoes? It was puzzling.

He had thought through the challenges of setting up the barn and the space for the animals' feed and water. He had figured out where to keep his few pieces of machinery, the plow, the disc harrow and the hand-cranked grain seeder that he had brought from Iowa. But the house now puzzled him. And he could see that Bauwina was sitting there puzzled, too. They knew they could do this. The truth was there in their bones. But for the moment, they were overwhelmed.

Suddenly Bauwina said, "I think we should get out the bread and butter. And find that summer sausage we brought from home. We need a good lunch before we get too far into the work!" She gave baby Carl her breast while Siebe found the crate that had most of the food supplies they intended for their first couple weeks' use.

Then they sat by the table. Siebe said a few stumbling words of prayer. There were not words sufficient to give thanks and there were not words enough to express their need. But they sliced the bread and the sausage. And they ate. They drank water and enjoyed the familiar smokey sausage sandwiches. And they smiled at each other. They celebrated their first meal and they dreamed of the future.

## END of CHAPTER TWO