

Siebe and Bauwina Wait for Spring

Hagemeyer Generations - Chapter Three

By Stan Hagemeyer © 2019

Two and a half weeks had passed since Siebe and Bauwina moved into their farm home. Siebe was sitting by the window on the south side of the cooking room sharpening his pocket knife with a stone. His parents had given him the knife and sharpening stone when he turned twelve years old. The pocket knife went with him everywhere. And the stone had come to Minnesota, too. The early spring sun was shining through the window and he felt its warmth on his back.

Siebe felt happy and he was eager for the day. The chickens were already fed and he had taken care of the morning chores for the other animals. He looked up and watched Bauwina for a moment as she mixed a lump of dough in a large bowl on the table by the cookstove. The weather was slightly balmy, the way an early spring announces itself in the southwestern Minnesota prairie country. It was March 21, 1903.

They were both eager for spring. The day before Siebe had walked the full length of their farm, all the way to the south fence line where the higher ground overlooked the slough. He had watched a train puffing black smoke go by as it headed southwest on the track passing only 200 yards from where he stood at the fence line. It felt so good to feel the ground under his feet drying out from the winter snows. Pretty soon he could start field work.

Bauwina interrupted his dreaming. "Siebe, I need you to bring in another pail of coal from the shed. I need to keep the fire just right for baking bread this morning, and I don't want to run out of coal at the wrong time. The bin is about empty."

Siebe replied, "Ya, sure. I'll get it in right away."

"Did you see any eggs in the barn this morning? Those four hens are a little slow getting started. I could use a couple more eggs. We only have two left right now." Siebe was about to reply when they heard a cry from the bedroom where the door was open. Little Carl had awakened again. Bauwina said, "It's hard to get things done when he sleeps so little. And he's hungry all the time. I'm afraid I might not have enough for him. Maybe we'll have to start giving him some cows milk pretty soon."

The chickens were one part of their farm that was already in production. But the eggs were few at this point. The chickens could run free and they came back into the barn at night of their own accord

because they knew that was where Siebe would feed them. The one cow that was producing milk for them was also adding to their diet. The other cow was still nursing its four-month old calf.

Siebe was starting to disengage again. As he rubbed the last finishing strokes with his knife against the stone, he envisioned spreading oats with the end-gate seeder fitted onto the rear of the wagon box. He imagined planting corn with the one-row planter he had bought from the Streets family for \$12 when they moved out. Siebe and Bauwina had taken over their mortgage. Buying the farm was one thing, but getting started farming involved a lot of other expenses and he had to calculate his finances carefully.

After purchasing a wagon load of oats in Clara City when he arrived he made sure that it was to be delivered the same day the animals were brought out. The oats would feed the horses, cows, pigs, and chickens until threshing time in late July if he was lucky, but they needed some for seeding his first oats field, too. He was beginning to realize it wouldn't be enough and he would have to buy some more. Next time he would get it from one of the neighbors and haul it in his own wagon. The oats had cost him way too much money getting it from the feed store in town, and then paying a delivery charge besides.

Bauwina came back into the cooking room holding Carl on her hip. "Siebe, you've got to hold him a little while so I can finish getting the bread dough into the pans. You can get the coal after I get this started."

She continued to talk as she handed the little boy to him. "Do you think the oats will last long enough? You said there was some leaking out of a hole in the wall where the oats is stored. How did a hole get there?"

"I don't know, but it looks to me like it was made by a rat or some critter that wanted to get in last fall so it could stay in the granary for the winter. I put a patch over the outside to plug it up but it still leaks a little. It needs to be fixed from the inside when the oats bin is empty. I can't get at it right now to do it right."

Bauwina continued, "That's our expensive oats leaking out. Didn't you see that hole when you were here in November to buy the farm?"

Now Siebe was defensive, "Oh, you know we looked the place over the best we could. I knew the buildings were built a little on the cheap side. But you can't see everything all at once. I don't

remember seeing that hole. Maybe there were weeds growing next to the hole and I didn't notice. It's really only a small leak now."

She was a little worried. It was hard to get a grip on all the expenses. Anxiety made her voice a little sharper than usual. "Is our money going to run out before we get a harvest, Siebe?"

"No, *Liebchen*, our money won't run out. We will still have money next Christmas. By then we will have had a harvest. I'm going to be selling wheat in August, you wait and see."

During the year before they moved they had talked day after day about how to manage the expenses of getting started. Siebe had been working and saving money for years. Of course, he had worked with his father ever since he was five years old, as was expected. But after he finished school, when he was twelve, he had extra time and energy. His Pa let him go to work elsewhere whenever he didn't need him at home. By the time he was 16, he had become known as a reliable young man, and he was often helping neighboring farmers with haying or fixing fences. At harvest time they always needed extra workers. He learned about handling different kinds of horses, too, because some people had different breeds than his father had.

Siebe was the oldest boy in the family. When he was seventeen his younger brother, Henry, left school at age twelve and took over most of the work Siebe had been doing at home. From then on Siebe worked steadily for neighbors, sometimes living in as a "hired man."

By the time he met Bauwina, he was twenty-three. At that time he was renting eighty acres near the family home and had acquired a few pieces of machinery of his own. With hopes for a future with Bauwina, his motivation increased. He aimed to accumulate enough to get started farming, maybe in Minnesota where the land prices were lower than in Iowa. Although he was frugal, he did take a big trip to Omaha in 1898 to see the Trans-Mississippi Exposition and World Fair. It was his last big adventure as a single man.

He was no spendthrift. That was something Bauwina noticed and liked about him. They were married in 1900. She knew he handled money well, but now with all the spending at their new venture, she was concerned that their money might run out sooner than they had planned.

“I’m going to take the horses out tomorrow,” Siebe continued. “I want to see if the ground is dry enough for the disc to break up the corn stalks and clods in that field over in the northwest corner.” He had told her about walking over the fields yesterday. “It looks like we may get an early spring and I could seed oats in that field in just a couple weeks.”

Siebe’s talk about planting turned her mind toward her own hopes for spring, and her concerns about the money faded away for the time being. Bauwina was thinking about planting the garden. She had all those precious seeds from her mother and they represented a large part of the coming year’s food supply. There would be tomatoes and green beans she would preserve in jars, and beets, squash, and cucumbers, too. “Siebe, I am thinking you need to dig up that plot we picked out for a garden. The frost is out of the ground. I don’t want to miss out on some early planting.”

“Sure, that won’t take long,” he responded eagerly. The garden plot sits with just a little southward slope, so it should be warming up just fine.”

“Good,” Bauwina said. “As soon as you get it plowed up, I can start raking and getting it ready for planting some potatoes and green beans. It would be so nice if we had fresh beans by early June. Wouldn’t you like that?”

“Oh, ya, that would be nice. It would be so much better than the sauerkraut we’ve been eating every other day. Don’t we have any of the jars of green beans left we brought from Iowa?”

Bauwina didn’t have to think long. “There’s two of them. I thought we would have some for dinner Sunday.” She was uncertain whether he was complaining about her cooking or just the frequent sauerkraut she put on the table. Her voice rose in pitch just a little as she continued, “You know, we should be thankful that cousin Fran gave us twelve quarts of sauerkraut. Otherwise, we’d be eating potatoes and rutabagas every other day.”

Siebe didn’t say anything for a little while. Like many young husbands, he never knew exactly what to do when his bride seemed to be a little prickly. “Oh, no, I like the sauerkraut with potatoes. And the mettwurst we brought from Iowa is holding up real good. Hasn’t got any spoiled taste to it. I think it will last through May.” They had brought a 15-gallon wooden barrel of mettwurst and salt pork with them. The meats were packed in oats in the barrel to keep them dry and cool. It was plenty cold on the train ride and they had put it in the small root cellar under the house as soon as they moved in.

Bauwina was more relaxed now. “Siebe, you know what else I’m going to plant as soon as it’s safe from frost?”

“What is it? Kale?”

“Well, yes, kale can stand cool weather, so that is on my mind. But I’m going to start a few ground cherries in pots by this south window soon. Then I’ll have some to put out in the garden in the middle of April. I’ll save most of them to start later and maybe plant them around May 1st to be careful about frost.”

“Oh, ya, I remember now you said you got a little bag of dried up ground cherries from your Ma.”

This was his favorite fruit. The tiny yellow fruits were crammed with a hundred or more seeds in every cherry. They belonged to the tomato family but tasted sweet like a tropical fruit. The plants grew clearly like a tomato but the fruit, each a little 3/4 inch sphere enclosed in a paper-like shell hung on the branches looking like Japanese lanterns. When ripe, they fell on the ground, thus they were called “ground cherries” or “husk tomatoes.”

Bauwina smiled, “You know these ground cherries are from the same seed my Ma brought over from the old country. She thought maybe nobody here would have any seed and Pa loves them just like you do. Of course, she found out that your family grew them, too, so there’s plenty of seed around to be gotten. But she’s been saving her own every year since. So we’re going to have good German ground cherries this summer!” That made her think back to the trip over from Germany.

Siebe, noticing that she had paused with a look that seemed to be seeing far away, said, “Don’t you wonder how she fitted so much into your luggage? Even seeds for the garden!”

“I was too little to worry about things like that. I think we had just two suitcases with us, and then the trunks that were put away somewhere in the ship ‘till we got to Baltimore.”

They had not talked much about their prehistory. When they were courting, they seemed to talk a lot more about the future than the past. Finally Siebe asked, “Weren’t you scared when you got on that big ship at Bremen?”

“I was just six years old. And I thought that wherever Ma and Pa went, it would be all right. Of course, I didn’t know how funny it would feel to have the floor moving under our feet from the rocking waves. Ma got pretty sick the first couple days.”

“How come you didn’t get sick?”

“Well, I guess Ma got scared of the waves. But Pa held onto me whenever the boat moved a lot and he didn’t get scared. He would laugh and joke with me, so it made me feel it was all right, I guess.”

Crossing the Atlantic on a steam ship was not a pleasant part of the journey. The accommodations were minimal, although her father had arranged for a small state room. She had slept on the floor, but they got by. Bauwina had gained an increased sense of adventure from that trip and it nourished her confidence that she and Siebe could make this work.

Now she was older, and the adventure was one of surviving their first year of farming. The horses were eating their way through quite a bit of their precious oats, but they would soon be paying their way as Siebe put them into harness. Their precious dollars would also be going into the ground with the seed corn they had to buy. Some of the oats would go into the ground, too, the oats they had paid too much money for in the first place.

They had so much to do to get their life in Minnesota started. Work would come before play. Planting before harvest. They both knew that cycle. Their parents had prepared them for this day. But now their parents were 140 miles away, and it was all up to them.

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