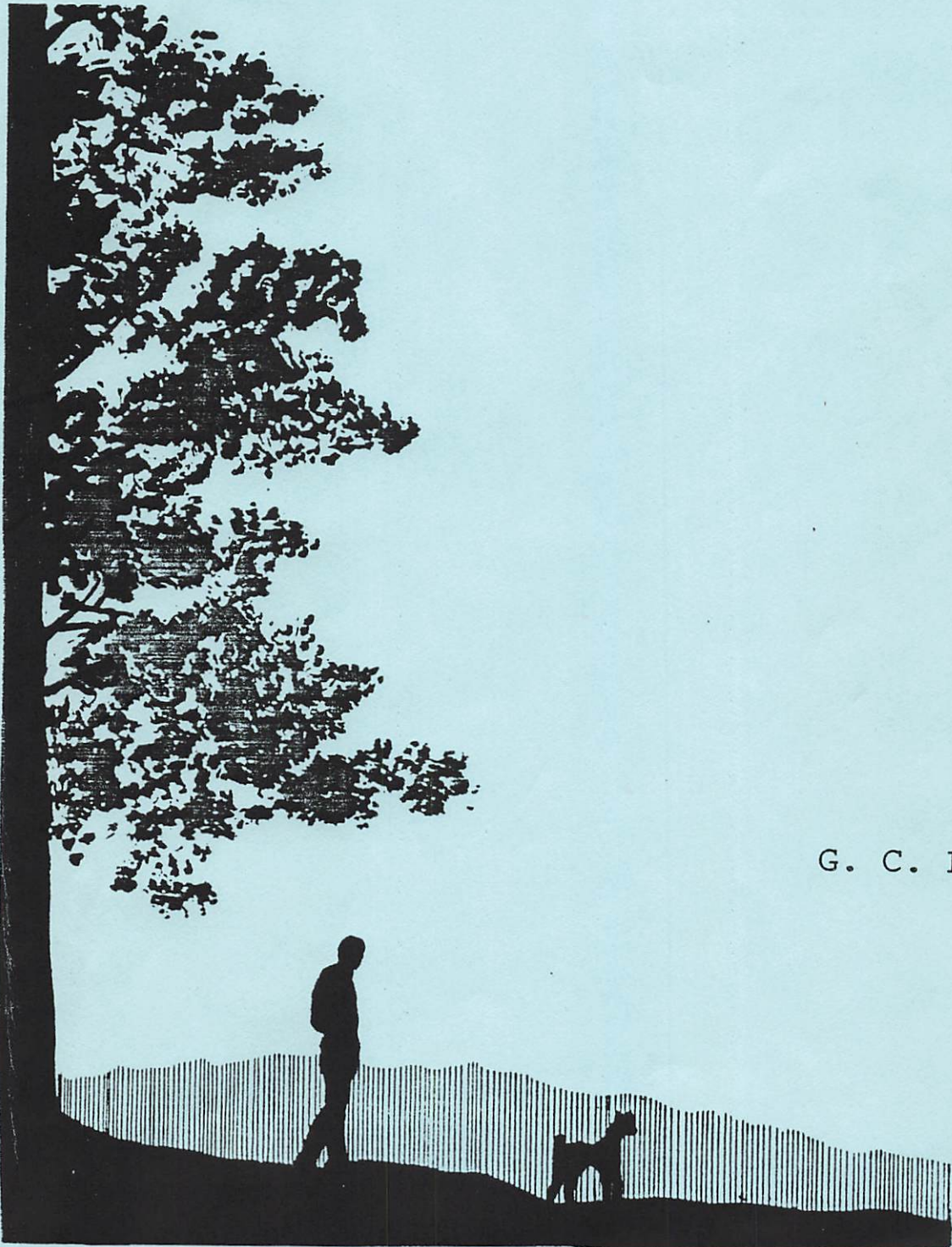


RANDOM MEMORIES

Part 2

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People As Characters

Every community has its characters. They can be best described as people, who because of their unconventional behavior, attract attention to themselves. To be a character, behavior characteristics have to be consistent. In addition to the unique qualities that surround them, characters generally are good conversationalists. In time, characters become legendary and stories about them are passed from one generation to another and, as would be expected, in a somewhat embellished form from the original. Interestingly, in spite of the embellishments, the stories as they are retold remain basically the same.

During the period of my life when I was growing up, I was unknowingly impressed by the people whom I shall call characters because they fit the description I gave in the introductory paragraph. When it came to the time of selecting the characters I was going to write about, certain names and faces began to press forward in my memory, each claiming this recognition. My final selection includes only those who played a prominent role in my life and in the life of others and qualify to be characters.

The characterization is done for my own pleasure and that of the reader. There is no intention to offend or humiliate anyone. All of the people I have characterized have earned their reward and are resting peacefully. Without them, life would have been dull. It was the unconventional people that made it interesting.

Philip Preszler

Philip Preszler is my favorite character. He was likeable, funny, but not funny in the sense of wanting to be funny, just funny to hear and funny

to observe. He looked funny, talked funny, and even walked funny. He was a short, stout man with fairly large ears that were pushed outward by a hat that he wore well pulled down on his head. He was the shortest man in any assembly, but yet he was the most prominent. His verbal expressions when he told his stories were colorful, direct, and earthy. It was his way of captivating his audience which he could readily do. When he was in want of a word to describe an experience or object, he would make up his own vocabulary, a characteristic that also became his trademark.

For example, he told of an incident that took place when he was driving a car on a prairie road. These roads consisted of two trails, side by side, worn into the ground, first formed by wagons pulled by horses and later also utilized by motor vehicles. In places these trails were deep and difficult to negotiate by motor vehicle. According to Phil's story, his car jackknifed (swerved off to one side of the road) and by the time he got the vehicle stopped he had run over a rock pile. He described the damage to the underside of the car as "the entire grawaddle was removed." He said this in German but in the process of translation some of the humor is lost. There is no word like "grawaddle" in either the English, German, or Russian language. Another time when asked about the nature of his crop (Phil was a farmer), he replied in his own vernacular by giving the following response, "Lauter shet and Bullawaddle Schwens", a German-English jargon of sorts.

There was also the story that Phil liked Alpenkreuter. Alpenkreuter was an herbal product with a fair amount of alcohol. According to the label, it was a cure for a wide variety of illnesses including ailments of the bowel such as irregularity. Phil made the purchase in town and on the way

home could not resist a little nipping along the way. The story goes there were numerous roadside stops and agonizing moments.

Philip Binder

Philip Binder was a conversational spell-binder and never seemed to lack for an audience. He was a slender man of moderate height and wore a sort of perpetual grin on his face. In fact, whenever he smiled the numerous wrinkles on his face seemed to follow each other across his face like waves from a pebble tossed into a pond. He was quick to laugh and quick to greet his friends. He was a story teller of the old school, a time when telling stories was an art form. He told his stories in German and would punctuate the events periodically by saying, "Hun ich gsagt." (This I said) In time he was known as the "Hun ich Gsagt".

During periods of suspense in his stories he would pause to roll a cigarette which became a sort of ceremony by itself. He would carefully pull a bag of Bull Durham from his shirt pocket, remove a cigarette paper from the back of the sack, sprinkle a row of tobacco on it and artfully complete the cigarette. He placed it in his mouth, scratched a match, and lit it. He exhaled the first puff and continued with his story. His audience waited patiently throughout the ceremony for the story to continue.

John Sherbensky, Senior

John Sherbensky was a big man, somewhat overweight, and had a jolly disposition. He was a hard working man, liked farming, especially operating large machinery. As a child of perhaps six years of age, I remember seeing him operate a steam engine with which he was pulling a threshing

machine to its next location. My younger brother and sister and I were an audience of three watching the hissing and clanging piece of machinery go by. When John Sherbensky saw us by the roadside he stopped the engine, picked up a long-nosed oil can and began to pursue us, squirting oil in our direction. We scattered like the wind in three different directions and could hear his laughter behind us. From this we realized that it was all in fun but did avoid being squirted with machine oil.

Another time, I recall being in the Kremenetsky grocery store with my mother. This same John Sherbensky came into the store, greeted everyone in sight and proceeded to help himself to a banana from the stalk suspended from the ceiling. I was somewhat mystified by this bold gesture, and perhaps envious, wondering when I might achieve the same status. I, too, would like to have had a banana, but did not feel that it would be appropriate for me to follow his example.

Emil Zerr

Emil Zerr was one of the smallest men I have ever known and one who had the gruffest and deepest voice for a man of his stature. The contrast of the voice to his physical appearance was startling. I remember Emil as a young man, who along with his wife came to our house for a visit.

I best remember the Model T Ford touring car in which the couple arrived. It had a classy appearance, the top was down, and the windshield tilted outward to give it a racy look. What struck me as being somewhat humorous was the position of the couple in relation to each other. Emil, the much smaller of the two, was sitting high in the driver's seat; the wife, much heavier, was sitting considerably lower. Not only was the seat

depressed on her side of the car, but the springs on the car as well. I can still picture the situation.

Grandma Landenberger

Grandma Landenberger was a respected member of our church and community. She was affectionately called "Grandma" by everyone because of the unselfish and generous service to the community. Grandma Landenberger was a "Kochensetzer" (bone setter). Anyone who knew of her and had some problem with either a dislocated or broken bone would come to her for help. Her skill and success became legendary.

I recall an incident that took place following a January blizzard when my father tried to start the 1928 Whippet. The starter would not turn the motor over so he attempted to turn it with a crank. The car back-fired, sending the crank against the backside of his hand. As soon as possible a trip was planned to seek the help of Grandma Landenberger. She diagnosed the injury to be a series of fractured bones on the back of the hand, reset those that needed adjustment, put the hand in traction, and asked my father to wear a mitten over it throughout the day to keep it warm. He followed her directions and the hand healed in time with little aftereffects.

At the annual church Christmas program she was always honored with a special bag of nuts and candy. After all the family names were read and everyone had received their bag, the last name to be called was "Grossmutter handenberger." It was done with special emphasis and collective pride. Everyone was pleased as she smilingly and gratefully accepted the gift as a token of appreciation from her many patients and friends. Grandma Landenberger had not gone unnoticed.

Pastor Baudler

Pastor Baudler was the pastor for our congregation over a number of years. He was educated in Germany, spoke German fluently and conducted all church services and related activities in the same language. My association with Pastor Baudler was in church, Sunday School and summer school activities. Because I saw him on a daily basis over a period of six weeks at a time, I best recall him in activities related to summer school. Summer school term lasted for six weeks and the purpose for the school was to supplement the Sunday school which was frequently interrupted because of bad weather in the wintertime to prepare young for confirmation. All of the instruction was in German and the curriculum included hymn singing, reading, writing, and memorizing lengthy Biblical verses. Class started at nine in the morning and ended at three o'clock in the afternoon. A break in the day included a recess in the morning and afternoon and a noon hour for lunch and recreation.

Pastor Baudler was an avid sportsman and in spite of his handicap, he participated in many sporting activities. Baseball and hunting were his two top favorites. His handicap was the loss of a leg sometime during his youth and in place wore a wooden leg. This did not keep him from playing baseball for he was able to bat, but had to delegate someone to run bases for him. Woe to the substitute runner if he was tagged; it sounded like the wrath of Satan would be his reward. The Pastor's passion for baseball sometimes overshadowed the needs of the young demons to return to the classroom, especially if the score was close or else it was his turn to bat. During the duck season he would be out hunting with his boys. I recall seeing him shoot at a flight of ducks that passed overhead and with

each discharge of the gun, his "game leg" would give way and he would gradually sink lower to the ground. I also recall several instances in school when the old injury would cause him considerable pain. His audible and intermittent groans could be heard throughout the classroom.

As a teacher, he reflected the old German concept of inflexible and autocratic rule in the classroom. His approach to learning was based on the Pavlovian theory that pain and humiliation associated with errors would discourage students from making the same mistake the second time. This may have been true but it also created a dislike for the instruction and instructor. A typical lesson was to dictate selections from the Bible which the students had to write in the German script. Following completion of this exercise the Pastor would collect the papers and make corrections. For each error he would swat the hand of the unfortunate student which he had asked to be extended, causing more embarrassment than pain. This episode might also include a ditty that he repeated, "hast Geschrieben, kanst nicht lessen. War ein Ochs in dem Kuhstahl gewesen". (You have written it but it can not be read, like an Ox in a cowbarn).

Pastor Baudler lived in a parsonage located in town which also included a barn large enough to hold a cow. Feed for the cow came from members of the congregation. I recall a fall day during threshing time when Pastor Baudler came to our farm in his Model T Ford and drove it next to the oat bin. He filled sack after sack with oats and placed them in the back of the car. With each additional bag, the rear end of the Model T settled lower and lower until it rested on its axle, giving it an appearance of a continuous uphill climb. Pastor Baudler cranked the Ford and merrily drove it home with enough feed for bossy for months to come.

"Colonel" or "EB"

Everyone seemed to know the "Colonel" or "EB" as everyone called him. He received the "Colonel" nickname from his auctioneering activities. "EB" was a shortening of Eberhardt which was his first name.

"EB" was a respected farmer, trader, and auctioneer in spite of a personal habit that was a part of his trademark. He had a reputation of consuming alcohol on a daily basis, a practice that did not seem to hinder his business ability. In fact, the common understanding was that the more he consumed the better he traded to his advantage. Despite these allegations, he was considered one of the shrewdest businessmen in town. Characteristically, he was never seen without his cigar, which was seldom lit. He apparently consumed it by chewing it instead. The "Colonel" was a character in the true sense of the word. He fashioned his own kind of world and apparently enjoyed it.

Roy Gorsline

Roy Gorsline was our rural mail carrier. During my younger years I did not know of anyone else who delivered mail. He was considered to be accommodating and his schedule predictable. The story about Roy's activities when he was not delivering mail would read like a scene from "Peyton Place". This reputation contrasted sharply with his pious public appearance and active interest in his church. Undoubtedly some of the gossip was exaggerated but evidence of his Don Juan activities were observable, since he consistently kept his car parked next to a house whose occupant was also well known to the community. I relate this story because it, too, was a part of the social fabric in which I grew up. To me, Roy was very much of a character.

John Krein

John Krein was born in Russia and migrated to the United States in the early 1900's. He came to North Dakota to stake out a homestead in the open prairies. This practice was consistent with what many other immigrants were doing. However, the circumstances surrounding John were somewhat different. He was not married.

It did not take John long to discover that he did not like to live alone. He had dreams of having his own wife to share his thoughts and to help pass the long and lonely winter evenings. However, eligible women were not readily available in the area, since most prairie occupants were young married couples with families. John persisted and finally was given a lead from where he might obtain a woman, a procedure somewhat similar to an order in the catalog. John was given the location and description of his future bride and all measurements and colors pleased him. John sent for his bride which also included the transportation costs by rail to Driscoll. Finally the great day arrived! John shaved, put on his best clothes, hitched a pair of spirited ponies to the buggy and drove to the depot at Driscoll to meet his future bride that he had never met before. John arrived early, because he did not want to keep her waiting. After what seemed to be an eternity, John finally saw the sign of smoke in the distance and the faint sound of the whistle of a train. John almost collapsed with excitement and near panic set in.

Finally the train arrived, stopped, and the conductor stepped out on the platform to place a stool below the car steps. Several male passengers emerged, but no women. John began to have misgivings! Did his bride miss the train? Did she decide not to come? Did she forget the destination?

John's mind was in a turmoil not knowing what he should do. Finally, after what seemed to be an eternity, a lady dressed in white stepped out from behind the conductor who carefully helped her down the steps. John had no sure way of recognizing her other than from the blurred black and white photo he had in his pocket. He hoped fervently that this was his future wife. John was not to be disappointed. He had her name and called it out. She responded with a wave and a smile and John quickly went to greet her. He escorted her to his buggy with a large triumphant smile on his face, and a feeling of satisfaction and great anticipation. He felt like a conquering hero who had just won his prize. Out of the corner of his eye he observed that the merchandise that he had ordered turned out to be better than the description. She appeared to be a good bargain and he had made a wise investment. Life on the prairie would now be exciting!

Jacob Vollmer

Jacob Vollmer was best known in the German as "der Vollmer Jacob". The German-Russians had a way of reversing reference to someone by using the last name first. Der Vollmer Jacob was a cobbler, cream buyer, and story teller. He was also a strong believer in ghosts or "Geister" as he called them. He loved to tell stories about Geisters and was never in want of an audience. Jacob liked to do this while he was repairing shoes.

Repairing shoes in his day required the use of very little mechanical equipment. Most of the work was done in a sitting position with a shoe placed between knees. This placed the cobbler at the same level with his audience and made talking and working more comfortable. It was in this arrangement that Jacob told his stories about ghosts. There were no

interruptions except for a momentary pause to take a swig from a bottle that someone was thoughtful enough to provide. It was known that Jacob's stories became better with each of passage of the bottle.

Jacob's favorite story was the ghostly behavior of a lighted object that he simply called Das Lichtel (the light).

As the story goes, Jacob was born on a farm and was about fourteen years old when the appearance of the ghostly light took place. It was while he and his older brother were standing outside the kitchen door entrance one evening when they noticed a bright light bobbing across the open prairie just south of the farm. They both remarked about the strange location of the light because it did not appear to follow a road. Finally the light disappeared and nothing more was said about it until a few nights later when the same event took place. Jacob and his brother were mystified. Never in their experience had they seen anything like this and could not provide any explanation for it. Jacob's brother laughingly said maybe it was a rabbit with a tail light! Jacob was more serious about what he saw and began to recall some of the ghost stories he had heard as a boy when he still lived in Russia. The stories he heard were very much like the wandering light that he had observed. To strengthen his belief the light made frequent but inconsistent appearances around dusk, emerging from the church graveyard about a mile west and south from the farm where Jacob lived. It would continue in an easterly direction across the open fields and prairie and disappear in an abandoned farmstead about two miles from where it first emerged.

Jacob was perplexed and wondered what the light was and where it came from. Finally in his own mind he began to unravel the mystery of the ghost-

ly light and its unique behavior. Several years prior to the appearance of the ghost or light a man had hanged himself in the barn where the ghostly light disappeared. Because he had committed suicide, the man was buried outside the church graveyard and separated from it by a fence. The ghost felt rejected and lonely and therefore emerged periodically to haunt his previous home which was the abandoned farm where it always disappeared. During the early morning hours the ghost would make its way back to its resting place outside the graveyard at a time when no one was around to observe it.

Jacob had some first-hand experience with the ghost which led him to believe that it had a sense of humor. He told of one night when he was riding home on horseback when he saw the ghost appear next to his horse. The horse jumped to one side and Jacob had all he could do to remain on the horse. By the time he had the horse settled down the ghost was gone except for a chilling echo of a ghostly laugh that came from the direction where he last saw the ghost. Jacob remembered the incident well because it was the time that he lost a good half bottle of homebrew, something that he missed sorely following the incident!

One other time, according to another of his many stories, he and several of his friends were on their way back home from an evening celebrating New Year (Neujahr Anschiesen) when the Lichtel suddenly appeared near the sled in which they were riding. They were stunned for a moment but quickly assembled their collective courage and decided to give chase. They went cross country and were gaining on the Lichtel (ghost) when all of a sudden it disappeared in front of the horses. The mystery of the ghost still remained unanswered except for the faint laughter of the ghost, unlike

anything Jacob had heard before except following the earlier incident on horseback.

Jacob claimed to his dying day that the man who hanged himself was the ghost who traveled between the graveyard where he was buried and the barn in which he set his demise.

Jacob's stories were so convincing that some of his audience showed a reluctance to travel at night in the vicinity where the ghost was said to be. The Lichtel existed as long as Jacob did. However, to this day it continues to live on in the memories of his audience. This was the legacy that Jacob Volmer left to the world.

Peddlers

We called them peddlers. They were men who drove from one farmhouse to another to either buy or sell. The products that they sold were generally household items used for cooking or baking such as vanilla extract, cinnamon, cocoa, soft drink mixes, and various ingredients for preparing desserts. They also sold medications for external or internal use including red and white linament, mint flavored "greendrops", Alpenkreuter, salves and a variety of other patent medicines. The buyer "peddler" as he was also called was interested in discarded metal items made from brass or copper. Occassionally he would also barter chickens for a magazine or newspaper.

I recall two such prairie travelers who made regular visits to our farm. They were Hochhalter who was the Watkins dealer and Levi that bought brass and copper junk. I only recall them by their last name since that is the way everyone referred to them, "Der Hochhalter kommt, oder der Levi is hier".

Hochhalter, the "Watkins peddler" drove a Model T Ford which he kept clean and shiny. He was neatly dressed and his tall and slender figure made him look impressive. He maintained a dignified and polite relationship with his customers who generally were the women of the household. He carried samples of his products into the house in two large black suitcase-like containers. We were always excited waiting for him to open them and smell the fragrance coming from the soaps and spices in their attractive containers. We would stand by in mute expectation and excitement watching our mother make a selection of the items that she was in need. At any one time they may include linament, Carbo-salve, vanilla, cocoa, pepper, and a few other items. Never enough in our wishfull thinking! Hochhalter usually arranged his itinerary so that he could spend the night at our house. To this day, I wonder where he slept other than perhaps in the porch. Before he left in the morning he would present mother with a gift of sorts. I also recall that because of his diabetic condition he brought some food of his own. He had a special bread that looked appetizing.

In time, grocery stores and other outlets began to stock many of the items that the peddler sold and his kind gradually disappeared. So ended another era.

Levi, the junk "peddler"

It was not uncommon on a farm to discard copper or brass items in the form of worn out brass bearings, bushings and gears, and copper tubs and teakettles, especially if the farmer was a handyman and repaired his own equipment. I remember as a child claiming ownership of a brass gear that had been removed from a milk separator. It was with a longing expectation

of untold wealth that I waited for Levi to appear. I recall the day that he drove into the farm yard with his Model T Ford. I was fascinated by the pile of copper utensils in the back seat, some of the pieces were identifiable, others were so badly battered that they were beyond recognition. The larger pieces rested on the running board tied to the door handle. It had the look of a portable junk yard. Levi stopped his car in the yard, and I bravely approached him with my brass gear in hand.

I was never more excited to finally have my long awaited dream come true. Money of my very own, and from my own business venture. I handed him the gear and he carefully weighed it. Slowly, one by one, he handed me three shiny nickels. I immediately forgot about Levi and clutching the money in my hand I ran with my riches and showed them to my mother. Her remark, "that is good" was all the approval that I needed. Subsequently I also became the envy of my younger brother and sister. The three nickels were the start of a saving for a jack-knife that I purchased later. Life was never the same.