

My Father and My Recollections of Him

In order to understand my father, it is important to go back and give a brief history. It begins with Catherine the Great, Czarina of Russia. When she became the ruling sovereign of Russia, she wanted Russia to be more like Europe. That made some sense, because she was raised as a princess of one of the German Republics before she was sent to Russia to marry the tsar-apparent. She issued an edict to encourage German citizens to relocate to Russia.

The edict made a great number of promises to German immigrants, among them:

- 1) Each adult male would have so much land.
- 2) Expenses would be paid to move German families to Russia.
- 3) They would be able to retain their German language, culture, and religion.
- 4) They would not have to serve in the Russian army.

Under that edict, my mother's family went in 1766 to the Volga River region, still today in Russia. Then the program was discontinued until Catherine's grandson restarted a similar program and my father's family went to Russia in 1805. The lands opened during that phase were in what is now Ukraine, near the Black Sea port of Odessa. My father's single ancestor had a wife and eight children when they left for Russia but his wife died during the trip or shortly after arrival. That ancestor, Jacob Karl Zimbelmann, remarried in Russia and had nine children with his second wife.

In the 1880s, Russia began to break some of the promises made to those German immigrants – especially requiring that children learn Russian in schools and that men be conscripted into the Russian army. My grandfather, John Zimbelman Sr. was taken into the Russian army. Once in the army, they were obliged to a 25 year-term, made up of six months on active duty and six months of leave. He was taken into the army for the Russo-Japanese war during the early 1900s. On one of his leaves, a relative suggested he desert the army and go to America and gave him some money that the relative had saved up to help John do so.

My father's family came to the US through the port of Galveston, TX. John, my grandfather, had a sponsor in Fort Collins, CO, so that was where they headed. My father and his next sibling, a sister, were born in Loveland, CO, a city near Fort Collins. An older sibling, my uncle,

was born on the Atlantic Ocean during the trip across. After a couple of years, probably working as farm laborers, the family moved to Keota, CO where homestead lands were available. They homesteaded the land in Keota long enough to qualify for ownership and my father went to school there. Typically they were expected to graduate from eighth grade and then stay home to help with the farming. My father graduated in seven years since they promoted him two grades in one. I now appreciate better his intelligence.

During a severe drought in the late 1920s in the Keota area, Grandpa started a grocery store and creamery. That was not enough for a living, however, so they moved to Prospect Valley – postal address of Keenesburg, CO – where they believed they could sink wells for water. My grandfather drilled the first irrigation well in that area. Eventually he borrowed enough money to buy land that he could share with his sons. Over time, they each ended up with about one-quarter section of land with its own well that they were able to irrigate for raising sugar beets, pinto beans, alfalfa and corn as the primary crops.

In 1929 my parents married and I was born in 1930 – in the throes of the nationwide recession. To start farming, a family, and all of the attendant challenges was quite a feat during that time. My grandfather felt some ownership of the farms that he set his sons up with, and frequently stopped by to tell my father how to farm better. They spoke to each other in German, so my siblings and I could not understand them, but we usually could get the gist of the conversation. They were often heated conversations, understandably since my grandfather had probably gone out on a limb financially for his sons. But at the same time, it added to the stress of the times. I remember my parents stressing the value of education and the hope that I would be the first grandchild to go to college.

My father eventually succumbed to all of the stress and became an alcoholic. I remember yelling at him and being quite upset at his turning to the bottle. My mother would have to take him to some center in Denver to be “dried out;” eventually he gave up alcohol and we never had it around any longer. I feel bad now, as I only saw it as a moral shortcoming at the time. I was probably about 40 before I took my first taste of a beer because I was worried that I might also be vulnerable. I would be more tolerant today and try to help him rather than being so critical. After his death, I learned of another burden that he carried. While on the farm in Keota, my father was driving a farm truck with some of his siblings hanging on to various parts. One

younger sister fell off and was killed when she was run over. We never talked about that while he was alive, but I can imagine that was another burden he had to bear.

Then along came WWII and I worried about my father being drafted. He was beyond the usual age and I was too young, but I worried about that all the time. My grandfather and two brothers came to the US in early 1900s. Seven siblings stayed behind in the villages where they grew up. Stalin was very paranoid about the Germans on his flank as Hitler attacked Russia. So his authorities went to the German-Russian villages and took their farms and belongings and sent them to Siberia and Kazakhstan, even though there was no evidence they would be disloyal to Russia. Grandpa felt this was unfair, so he was sympathetic to those Japanese-Americans whom our authorities indicated should move from California. He leaned on my father and uncles to lease their farms out to Japanese who could avoid internment camps if they had viable alternatives for employment and housing. The Japanese farmers raised row crops and sold them to the produce markets in Denver. They were very good and my grandfather said that the income from those leases allowed him to be debt-free for the first time since coming to the US. Overall it was a positive experience except for the occasional taunt: “Hey Zimbelman! When are your eyes going to slant?”

After WWI ended, the Japanese who farmed our places went on to set up their own farms nearer the produce market or moved on in some other way. In 1947, my father bought four dairy cattle of the Ayrshire breed. I think this may have been partially a way to show some independence from his father. Ayrshires originated in county Ayr, Scotland; they are marked like Holstein or Guernseys except with red and white patterns. They were known as hearty livestock and good dairy cattle. At the time, we sold milk based on its fat content, so although Ayrshires gave fewer pounds of milk, their increased fat content made them very competitive. I loved the cattle as did my father; he spent many hours recording the production and other characteristics of our herd. I went to college at Colorado State University to learn how to use genetics and other scientific concepts to breed better cattle. My father looked forward to my returning to the dairy farm and taking over since my siblings were not interested in doing so. When the low-fat era began, the Holstein breed, which produced more pounds of milk with lower fat content, became more favored and other breeds tended to diminish in numbers.

I took Advanced ROTC (Reserve Officers Training Corps) at college and had to report to duty during the Korean War. Upon my return from Korea, I went back to the farm as expected. My wife was not amenable, as a city girl, to the hours of a dairyman. So I considered the School of Veterinary Medicine at CSU, but eventually went to Graduate School at the University of Wisconsin. Knowing now that no offspring were going to continue the dairy herd, my father had a sale of the farm and cattle in 1957. He scheduled the sale so I could come home between semesters and help with the sale. At the time of the dispersal sale he had almost 300 head, about 130 of which were milking. That was a large herd in those days, while today dairy herds of 1000 head or more are more typical and manageable with much more automation.

After selling the farm, my father went into real estate, focusing on farm lands and oil/mineral rights. He eventually found what he considered a good deal for a gas station property which he and my brother, Jim, could run jointly. He died at the gas station when he was just short of the age of 60. He was a great father, but I didn't appreciate him at that time. He was not very communicative, especially about his feelings. He could never say things like "I'm proud of you" or "I love you," but he always clipped articles about me and would hand them to me with a "here" whenever I visited. It was his way of saying those things.

Robert G. Zimbelman, January 2014