MARY VANSCOYOC ODGERS

by

James Odgers

This picture of Mary Van Scoyoc, in front, and her sister, Elizabeth, looking over Mary's shoulder, was taken at their home farm five miles southeast of Oakhill, Kansas in 1937.

On the back of the original photograph is written "Mary and Beth in tall cane on the Van Scoyoc farm."

As is obvious by the height of the "cane", the drought years of the earlier thirties had began to subside by this time. The cane in the picture was most likely *Sorghum vulgare caffrorum*, also known as "kaffir corn."

This tall forage was cut and chopped and fermented in a silo as ensilage to be fed to cattle and horses in the winter. The crop is just being harvested at the time this picture was taken, as is evident by the stubble in the foreground.

The cylindrical tile silo where the cane was stored is the only thing left standing today, other than the foundations of a few buildings that made up the dynamic farm that seven people once called home.

Elizabeth "Beth" VanScoyoc Dieffenbaugh died in June 1978.

James Odgers has spent almost five decades living in north central Kansas. His early childhood recollections of harness hanging in the barn recalls for him the draft animal years of agriculture in Kansas. He notes that his mother lived within that era, while he only got to glimpse the shadow of its passing.

World War I began almost a year to-the-day before Mary VanScoyoc was born. The sinking of the *Lusitania* occurred exactly two months before her birth. Twelve years previous, Orville and Wilbur Wright had launched their little wood and canvas flying machine at an airfield in northeast North Carolina. When she was three, Henry Ford began mass-producing his Model T. These world events set the tone for the times she born into, but do not tell us much about day-to-day life on the 160 acre farm two miles south and two miles east of Oakhill, Kansas. There, Mary said, her father "had two Belgian work horses and two mules—Kate and Maude—we farmed only with horses (and mules) and a two-bottom 'sulky plow'." [1] The years on the family farm were sometimes tough; however, as Mary puts it, even during the dry years of the late 1920s and 1930s "we never thought about leaving."

The lure of the 160 acres of land provided under The Homestead Act of 1862 is probably what brought Peter VanScoyoc to Kansas and explains why the VanScoyoc farm consisted of 160 acres, the amount of acreage the law provided. Peter VanScoyoc was born in 1841 and became a "half-orphan" when his father died at a young age. As often happened when a man died, the teen-aged Peter and his family were left without support. Unfortunately for Peter, he was taken in by an abusive uncle. Peter ran away at the age of seventeen to join the military in Ohio three years before the Civil War broke out. After serving in the Union Army, Peter moved to Kansas to make a fresh start in the West.

Little is known about the woman Peter VanScoyoc married, other than that she came from Germany and her maiden name was pronounced "cruise," though it might have been spelled Cruze, Cruz, Croos, Crowes, or some other variation. One of their children was Marvin VanScoyoc.

Mary VanScoyoc Odgers' other grandparents were James Baker and Martha Josephine Pinkerton. Not much is known about James

---

[1] What a "sulky plow" probably looked like can be related to the sulky horse racers who ride the cart in "harness racing." A sulky plow was similar, but with two plow shares beneath.

Baker other than that he was a foreman on the Santa Fe railroad and was from Georgia. We know more about Martha because of her eventful migration from Mississippi to Kansas, which provides an interesting story, if not too many specific dates and places. Martha Pinkerton was a Civil War widow with two teenaged sons. She left Mississippi in two wagons pulled by oxen. As Mary tells the story: when the group got to the Red River crossing at the Texas-Oklahoma border the river was high and the ferryboat man was afraid the boat was going to capsize in midstream, so he drove one of their wagons—with the team hitched to it—overboard. The last they saw it was floating down the river. They wouldn't have done it if she wasn't a widow lady.

Martha settled near present day Idana and built a dugout near the 97th meridian. Her dugout was washed away in a flash flood the very night she moved into a cabin she and her sons had just completed. Later, Martha married James Baker. One of their children was Hattie Baker, who married Marvin VanScoyoc. Mary VanScoyoc was born to Hattie and Marvin on the farm outside Oakhill, Kansas. The three-room farmhouse was added onto after the third child arrived. All of the children in the family eventually went to high school in Longford. Since Longford was seven miles away many of the children boarded in people's homes for $2.50 a month during the school year.

The farm had eight horses, seven milk cows, and a few stock cows, and they grew wheat, corn, and kaffir corn. The field corn was all shucked and picked by hand, and Mary said her father had cracks in his hands clear to the bone.

The five children and their parents all lived at home on the farm through the drought years of the 1930s. Mary described those hard years:

> The windmill ran dry and we had to wait for it to fill in again. If the wind didn't blow, we would unhook the windmill and pump it by hand. The animals suffered terribly. Normally we had a big garden—we planted sweet corn in a bend in the creek with the team. Clouds would come over and fade away. Dad would sing 'it ain't gonna

> rain no more no more.' Inez [Mary's sister] made eighty dollars a month teaching school and that paid for rice and beans—the essentials.

Usually, the Dust Bowl Days are related to the 1930s, but Mary remembers the very worst dust storm as actually happening earlier:

> In the late twenties—twenty-nine I think—a dust storm came up at eleven o'clock in the morning and it got as dark as night. My father came to get us from school. The chickens went to roost because they thought it was night. In western Kansas the cattle got loose because the fences were drifted over with dust and they walked over the fences. There was a lot of dust pneumonia in Western Kansas.

Things improved after the drought years. Mary's father was wrong, it finally did rain again. Times were better; as she said, "in 1941 we had electricity, in 1942 we got a cream separator and a refrigerator." But they still milked seven head of cattle twice a day by hand.

Every farm in the area had milk cows. Selling cream (butter fat) was how families earned their spending money. Eggs were traded at the store straight across for groceries. At one time, there were seven creameries in Oakhill (a town never over 200 in population), and butter fat sold for 14 cents a pound.

In the evenings, Mary said, "we listened to the radio. It used a car battery, we had to take it into town to be charged. The antenna was a wire strung from the house to an out building." For daytime fun "we played at the neighbor's some, and in Skunk's Glory Creek when it had water in it." Chapman Creek was a larger, permanent stream near Oakhill. "Chapman Creek by Oakhill had bison skulls in the creek bed. Mother said when she was a child they would go down there and see them."

On the Fourth of July: "In a grove by Chapman Creek the whole community would come. We had a big dinner and people did fireworks during the daytime. There were no night fireworks because

we all had to get home to do chores." Chores such as milking those seven cows, for instance.

When she was thirty-five, Mary Josephine VanScoyoc, my mother, married my father, Elmer Odgers. The family moved from rented farm to rented farm. We lived in Clay Center, Oakhill, Longford, north of Clay Center and, finally, we moved to a place within two miles of Nebraska at Hollenberg, Kansas. During the children's teenage years, we lived in a little stone house built in 1872. The house only had three rooms, but Elmer was able to buy the place from his brother's widow for one thousand dollars. Mother lived there for twenty-seven years, until moving fifteen miles back south to Washington. She sold the house for fifteen hundred dollars.

Even though he had four sisters, Mary's brother Wendall inherited sole title to the home farm when Hattie VanScoyoc died because of a provision in the will that if Wendall would pay for his mother's funeral, he would get the 160-acre farm. Wendall went into the military to serve during World War Two. He contracted kidney cancer while he was in basic training. He survived his affliction and had a $700 army pension for the rest of his life because of it. He had the $650 needed for his mother's funeral, and he inherited the farm just like the will stated.

Looking back on all these events, why does it all seem so melancholy and sad? It wasn't *all* like that, it couldn't have been. But to write about Mother is to tell the story of father as well. He was a fiercely honest and independent man, but was literally broken by the misfortunes of life. He was in an accident while he worked for the city of Clay Center and could no longer work. When I asked about any type of accident compensation, Mary said: "he tried to get it, but they wouldn't do anything."

Henry David Thoreau could have been referring to Elmer Odgers when he said that "the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation." Mary said "During hard times when you kids were little, Elmer sold his Mother's wedding presents of Carnival Glass tumblers and a pitcher and the rounded-glass front cabinet they were in, sold five Indian head pennies for five cents each. The dealer didn't give near enough for any of it."

And so, Mary Josephine VanScoyoc Odgers's life has been influenced and molded by the events and people that have passed through it, and the times, good and bad, that have occurred. Through it all, she has never complained, and doesn't to this very day, even as age takes an increasing toll. She quotes the Bible verse: "the meek shall inherit the Earth." If being meek means being uncomplaining and always cheerful in the face of adversity, if it means putting family before anything else, then that inheritance is waiting for her. At the old family farm near Oakhill, Kansas, only a tile silo stands watch.