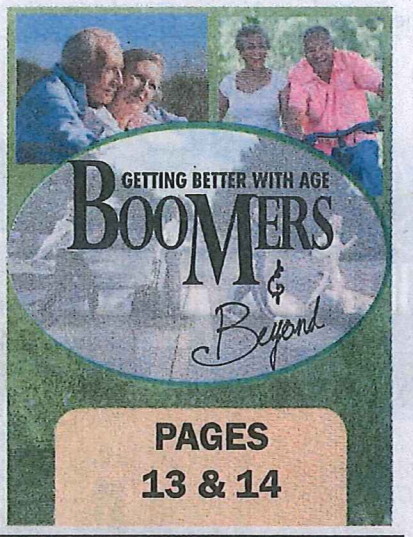


Watch for spring scammers

Police • Page 6

Irondale freshman sets track records

Sports • Page 7



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Viewpoints

Pioneers led rugged life in early Nebraska

Pamela O'Meara
Bulletin staff

As I arrived in Omaha, Nebraska, recently on my way to the Platte River to see the sandhill crane migration, I was reminded of my great-grandparents who emigrated there from Russia around 1880.

They came to America with thousands of others fleeing Russia and Eastern Europe to avoid persecution.

Henry Henkin and Zelda Brown met on a ship heading to the U.S. from Liverpool, England after they left Odessa, Ukraine to escape the pogroms—waves of attacks on Jews in Russia. Two million Jews fled the Russian Empire from 1880 to 1914, many going to the U.S.

My great-aunt Sue once told me how Henry hid in the attic from the marauding Cossacks.

Zelda was well educated and was accompanied on the ship by her parents. Henry, a few years older, was on his own, having accumulated a large sum of money as a merchant in Odessa. They fell in love and the ship's captain married them.

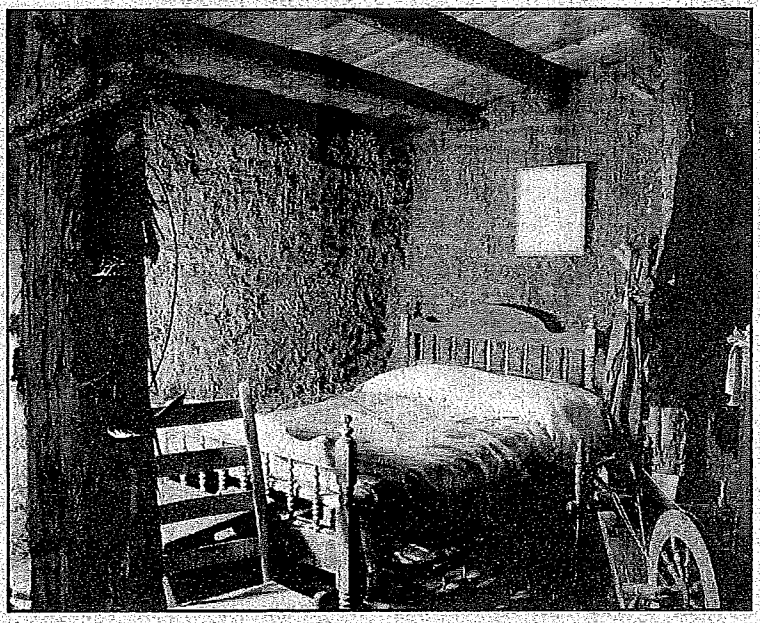
They reached New York and took the train to Omaha where they lived about a year, working and studying English. From then on, they considered themselves Americans and spoke only English at home. Zelda gave birth to my grandfather in Omaha.

Opportunity beckons

The Homestead Act of 1862 drew a steady stream of pioneers like Henry and Zelda. The prospect of owning 160 acres of land in the West—as long as they farmed it for five years, built a home and declared their intention to become U.S. citizens—was a great opportunity. With his newly learned English, Henry read a posting about an abandoned homestead with a sod house.

Henry was friendly with the Native Americans living nearby and traded his dressed turkeys for their cornmeal goods. They taught him how to send smoke signals to call for an Indian midwife when Zelda, then pregnant, went into labor. But alas, a blizzard interfered. The baby, my second cousin, was delivered on the dirt floor of the sod house.

I got a peek at what their lives might have been like at the Plainsman Museum in Aurora, Nebraska, which housed an authentic sod home.



Pamela O'Meara/Review staff

The walls of this authentic one-room sod house, reconstructed and preserved inside the Plainsman Museum in Aurora, Nebraska, show clearly how they were made–there's still grass sticking out. Pioneers brightened the space as best they could, with colorful quilts and fabric tacked to the boards that held up the ceiling. The fabric also had a very practical benefit.

Sod was the only building material out on the treeless prairie at that time, but it provided a cool haven in summer and lifesaving shelter in winter. The walls of the museum's house were thick, with blades of grass sticking out, and it was a bit dark inside the one-room house. A piece of fabric covered the ceiling to keep critters from falling on the heads of homesteaders. The bed had a colorful quilt and was in arm's reach of a spinning wheel, piano and table that crowded the room.

Henry and Zelda lived in their sod house for about two years until a combination of typical settler hardships hit them: Henry's ox stepped on his foot and broke it, and the market for turkeys collapsed.

Henry could no longer make a living farming, so he responded to an ad from someone looking for a partner in a general store in Elk Point, South Dakota, just across the Nebraska border. He bought in, and made enough of a success of the venture to later buy out his partner.

Many routes west

The Plainsman Museum also has exhibits of 19th-century shop interiors, perhaps something like Henry's, where visitors can walk in and look at various goods from that era.

Henry kept his general store for many years, bringing my grandfather into the business. They eventually ordered goods from Marshall Fields in Chicago and made quite a go of it until a fire shut them down.

Along with the Plainsman, several other area museums offer glimpses of pioneer life.

The Mennonite Heritage Park in Henderson conveys the experience of 135 Mennonite families who fled the Ukraine area in the 1870s, along with about 20,000 others, when their lifestyle and religious freedom were threatened.

So, about six years ahead of Henry and Zelda, these 135 families took the railroad to Lincoln, a little southwest of Omaha to stock up on supplies and then settle in Henderson. Volunteers showed us the pioneer Mennonite church and the community house that served as temporary shelter until families could build their own houses.

The Wessels Living History Museum in York depicts the dramatic changes in family farming life from Native Americans to European immigrants, such as the shifts from wells to irrigation and horse-drawn plows to motorized tractors. The Wessels home itself was part of that change. The structure was a kit home, ordered from the Sears Roebuck catalog in 1917 and shipped in numbered pieces by train. Such "houses by mail" offered pioneers sturdy, modern homes they could put up as fast as they could nail Plank A into Joint B.

The Stuhr Museum of the Prairie Pioneer, a living history museum in Grand Island, Nebraska, offers an even more expansive view of pioneer life. The museum has over 100 structures, including Railroad Town, which features life in the 1890s, with a mercantile shop perhaps similar to my great-grandfather's.

It was tough traveling

The most unique pioneer museum I visited was the Great Platte River Road Archway over Interstate 80 at Grand Island, a stopping point for pioneers heading to Oregon and California in the 1840s and '50s.

Visitors take an escalator up, cross over the Interstate and immerse themselves in simulated rugged areas in the mountains. There, they can consider the experiences of the pre-railroad pioneers, most of whom walked the prairies and mountains alongside their covered wagons. It's not hard to picture them discarding once-prized belongings along the way to lighten their loads. The Mormons' travels were especially difficult, as they used two-wheeled carts pulled not by animals but by the immigrants themselves.

So in these Nebraska museums, I found out more about the great-grandparents I've never met—how they weren't the only ones fleeing persecution and how hard they must have worked to establish themselves. I have new respect for their resilience and optimism. They persevered and succeeded.

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