Farmer keeps tradition alive in Burlingame

By CHRIS COBLER
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July 9, 1982 Topeka Capital-Journal profile of Ivan DeWitt

The first DeWitt came to America from Holland around 1700, according to family records.

The seventh generation DeWitt, Jazereel, came to Kansas from Ohio in 1869. His grandson, Ivan, still lives within three miles of where his grandfather settled west of Burlingame. And in some ways the life of the younger DeWitt, 83, resembles the lives of those who preceded him on the land.

DeWitt still lives in the small house he had built in 1923 across from the old one-room schoolhouse he attended with his seven brothers and sisters.

DeWitt's grandfather took a train to Topeka and then started walking southwest to find a place to settle. He stopped near Burlingame and built a two-story brick house.

"I can't really see how they did it," said DeWitt. "They didn't, of course, have any machinery. I don't see how they could get those big bricks that high."

DeWitt prefers to live in much the same style. He has no air conditioner, and he heats his home in the winter with a wood-burning stove.

"I cut most of my own wood," he said, gesturing toward a pile of dead wood in back of his house. "The house never freezes. I almost broke down and got gas, but I changed my mind. I figured as long as I could cut wood, I would."

DeWitt has lived on a farm most of his life, although in particularly difficult times he would move to the city to look for work. He retired from the Topeka Air Force Depot in 1964 and returned to his home to raise hogs and sheep.

He quit raising sheep two years ago because dogs and coyotes were killing them, but he still raises as many hogs as he can.

"I haven't got any better sense," he said. "I've got to have something to do.

“My wife’s scared to death I’m going to drop over and have the hogs eat me. She hollers if I get out of her sight.”

But one look at DeWitt dismisses such worries. His large hands and rugged face appear ageless. His health, he reports, is perfect.

He’s only been in the hospital once in his life. His wife, Faye, whom he married in 1960 after his first wife died, also is in good health.

“I don’t know why,” he said. “I guess we’re just tough. We never get the cold or the flu when it’s going around.

“I like to tell people that it’s just meanness that’s made me so tough. I don’t drink any more, and I’ve hardly ever smoked. I don’t know, though. My two brothers both drank, and they’re older than me.”

Whatever the reason, DeWitt has found old age beneficial. With the money from his hogs and from several other sources, he lives more comfortably than almost any other time in his life.

“As poor as I was at one time,” he said, “it sounds awfully good to me.

“I raised 10 kids on 40 acres of land. That wasn’t too easy. I’ve been pretty poor all my life. You might say I’ve been bloomin’ hard up.

“We’d get up to where I thought I’d make it, and then a drought would come along.”

The years of hard work to make ends meet keep him going when many people tend to take it easy.

He mows the yard around his house himself with a push mower. He hoes a small garden, even though he owns a garden tiller.

He describes it as “doing anything that comes up.”

But he adds that raising hogs is not something he has to do any longer. He does it because he’s always done it.

Every day he walks out to his pig pens to feed his 17 sows and one boar. This week he is surrounded by a litter of pigs. Cajoling the sow with high-pitched clucking noises and a kick in the rear, he gets the sow to stand and display its 690-pound frame.

“I get along with pigs,” he said. “I can drive a pig about any place.”

As soon as the pigs are big enough, he drives them up the homemade wooden chute into his pickup truck and takes them to market in Wakarusa.

The work can be dangerous. One of his sons came out to help load the pigs and was pinned behind the gate of the chute when the sow decided to turn around.

“He was stuck until one of the pigs managed to squeeze out,” DeWitt said. “Luckily, all he lost was some skin off his leg. My old brittle bones would have broken.”

Whenever he does need help with his pigs or other chores, his family is quick to lend a hand. The DeWitt family is large — he has 36 grandchildren and 38 great-grandchildren — and most of them still live in the Burlingame area.

“I wouldn’t want to be anyplace else,” DeWitt said. “I have good neighbors. I know about everybody, and I guess everybody ought to know me. I’ve been here long enough.”

Most of the DeWitts assemble for a family reunion at Christmas. DeWitt plays Santa Claus — he already has the whiskers for the part.

“I cut the Christmas tree, and set it up at the hall we rent. We give everyone a present.”

Winter has always been one of DeWitt’s favorite times. He remembers spending many of his younger days ice skating on the Dragoon Creek which ran through his father’s land. He still has a faded picture from about 1919 of himself and his first wife skating on the creek.

He also has an old attendance card from the one-room schoolhouse in District 49 where he made it through the eighth grade.

The schoolhouse, surrounded by miles of farmland and few families, is long since closed. The wood is faded and falling from years of neglect. Its lone remaining use seems to be as a reminder of a time almost forgotten.

DeWitt makes it a point to remember.

He has a record of all the shoes he’s ever worn and how much they cost. His oldest brother, Clifford, began the record in an 1899 datebook published by Dr. C. Wakefield and Co. His first baby shoes cost 50 cents. DeWitt continued to keep track through the years.

“I don’t know anybody who’s ever done that,” he said. “Do you suppose anybody has?”

Next, he pulled out the head to an Indian tomahawk which he dug up in the Dragoon Creek on one of his many visits there as a boy.

“This is worth money,” he said. “I don’t know where they got it or how old it is. There’s not any stone like it around here.”

DeWitt well knows the land and the type of stone that lies in it. Most of his 83 years have been spent studying the land. Now he will rarely leave it.

His children who live in Topeka have to coax him to visit.

“It’s too wild for me,” he said. “I won’t drive there. I’ve told my family that they have to come get me if they want me. There’s too many changes.”

Photo caption: *Ivan DeWitt, 83, a ninth generation American, continues to work on his farm near Burlingame.*

Photo: Staff/Thad Allton