

## **Ottillie Bailer**

Submitted by: Lillian Bennett & Marjorie Sawyer (grand daughters)

Standing barely five feet tall and weighing less than one hundred pounds, Ottillie Bailer, in the later stages of her life, was a gentle, unassuming, devout lady. Wearing white gloves and a hat on her head, the highlight of her week was heading off to the Sunday church services.

Ottillie was born in Germany before the turn of the century. While she was still very young, her father who was both a teacher and a preacher, moved the family to Russia. With the Russian Revolution eminent they were forced to flee Russia. A move to Canada was a better alternative than returning to Germany. After a rigorous journey across Europe, the family boarded a ship in England to start a new life. A long train trek led them to Saskatchewan. The family settled on land near Lemburg and took up an unfamiliar farming lifestyle

Life on the prairies proved to be a challenge. Being the oldest daughter, Ottillie was kept busy from sun up to sun down, taking care of her asthmatic mother and doing many household and farm chores. The wind and dry conditions proved to be fatal for Ottillie's mother who died soon after their arrival in Saskatchewan. Ottillie was then placed in charge of her younger siblings and also had to oversee all the household duties. This proved to be an invaluable education, for what the future would hold in store for this young girl.

After a few years passed, Edward Bailer, arrived from England to work on the farm. Even with the language barrier, Ottillie and Edward were attracted to each other. However, wages as a farm labourer were not much more than room and board so he decided to return to England to try to earn enough money to settle permanently in Canada. His heart remained in Lemburg and after several letters back and forth, in which they both tried to communicate in each other's language, he decided it was time to return to Canada. Soon the two were married and having assembled the very few belongings that would fit in a horse drawn wagon, they headed off to Readlyn to begin their life together on their own homestead.

With a great deal of faith, hope and determination, they worked side by side to prepare the land for seeding a crop. With few tools and one horse, progress was slow and very physically demanding. While they wished to build a home as soon as possible, living in a tent was the temporary solution. Food and supplies had to be hauled from Moose Jaw, at least a two day adventure. It was during one such trek to Moose Jaw to get the winter necessities that Ottillie found herself alone in the tent giving birth to their first child. Getting back as quickly as he could in spite of the wind and snow that was falling, Edward could hear the loud cries of their baby daughter, as he neared the homestead.

In the course of the next few years, Ottillie and Edward were to be blessed with six more children. Thankfully five of these were boys, but even the girls were expected to do their share of the many tasks that needed to be done to keep the farm productive.

Unfortunately, all of those efforts resulted in only a very meager existence. It was a tough life, which worsened when the flu epidemic of 1919 hit. The children got sick first and then Edward caught it just before Christmas. The children all recovered but Edward died on New Years Day, three months before his youngest son was born.

Forced to become the head of the household, Otilie struggled valiantly to keep her children fed and clothed. Seven times the children were forced to run and hide in the fields when well meaning social workers attempted to remove the children from the family home, feeling that they were not being cared for properly.

Faced with the many hardships that farm life created, it was difficult to keep one step ahead of the bill collectors. The children helped as best they could, but eventually jobs away from the farm had to be found. It became clear that trying to remain on the farm was futile. The family abandoned the farm and moved to Grenfell, where a few of the older children had found more lucrative work.

Life continued to be difficult, especially during the war years. Otilie had to watch four of her sons march off to war, with only three returning home at the end of the war.

However the adversities the family dealt with had only served to make them all stronger in large part due to Otilie's unfaltering faith in God. The family bonds created through those early years battling the prairie sustained the family, who remained very close throughout their lifetimes. Despite some health difficulties, Otilie managed to maintain her own home well into old age, enjoying many opportunities to share good times with her children and their families. Otilie's courageous spirit, lives on through all of her descendants, who were fortunate enough to have shared in some of her ninety plus years on this earth.