

NOTE: The following is a biographical account by the grandson of Rosina (Prauner) Ketterman Lucht, written sometime before his passing in January of 1958. Rosina's first husband was Michael Ketterman, and their little girl was named Rosina also. The child is listed on the 1870 Madison Co., Census enumerated on July 9, 1870, as Rosina- age 2. The family is listed with surname "LUG", the spelling no doubt done "by ear". Rosina's obituary states the little girl died at the age of eight. Rosina married John Lucht on July 3, 1870 at the St. Paul Church in Norfolk Precinct in Madison Co.: per Madison Co. Marriage Records. All those mentioned by name herein have passed. This accounting closely relates the stories told by my grandmother Laura, sister of Ernest Reeker. Many thanks to Joyce Borgelt, Keeper of History, for sharing it with me, and the Battle Creek Enterprise for granting permission to submit it to the NEGenWeb project.

Researched by: Anita (Boyer) Thompson, 2003

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LOOKING BACK...

The Rosina Lucht Story

By Ernest Reeker

It was early spring in the year 1867. Nebraska had not yet been admitted to the Union as a State. The first great waves of homesteading immigrants were settling the most desirable lands in the eastern part of the territory, while more adventuresome souls ventured into the more remote parts far to the west.

A young couple trudged wearily westward from the railhead at West Point, Nebraska. They had journeyed from far off Germany to the United States. A few months had been spent in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, working and saving to accumulate sufficient funds to make the long trek to the prairie lands of Nebraska.

They did not mind the miles or the difficulties encountered in the slow march over the level Elkhorn river bottom. They felt their dreams of establishing a new home in this land of their adoption were soon to be realized. Such meager belongings as they had were packed in an immigrant wagon containing similar belongings of other hardy souls that comprised the caravan. Slowly, steadily, the column moved westward passing over tracts of land that were later to become the town sites of Wisner, Pilger, Stanton and Norfolk. Every few miles some group would shoulder the tools, clothing and supplies which were

theirs and with a cheerful farewell start off at a tangent toward the land that was to be their future home by virtue of homestead.

At Norfolk, or at the place which was later to be Norfolk, for in 1867 there was no human dwelling at the junction of the North Fork and Elkhorn rivers, the young couple shouldered their belongings and continued still farther westward, mile after mile, weary footstep after another, they moved toward journey's end.

Finally they reached their destination. It was a tract of land, beautiful, rolling virgin prairie land, eight miles south and one mile west of what is now Battle Creek. This was to be their home. Here they hoped to rear sons and daughters to become loyal American citizens. Here they hoped to find happiness, financial security and liberty.

One can easily reconstruct the picture as they stood upon a little knoll and looked proudly at the grassy acres, the wooded slopes and the green ribbons of shrubbery which marked the winding course of Battle Creek through their chosen land. It was a scene repeated thousands of times by each family of pioneers as they looked for the first time upon the land which they had chosen.

The sturdy German woman was born Rosina Prauner in Wurtenburg, Germany on December 17, 1829. Her husband was a childhood sweetheart and for years they had planned this journey to America and the founding of their new home in the new land of liberty. History records show that Rosina Prauner was the first white woman to settle in the Battle Creek territory of Madison County, Nebraska.

Though wearied from their long journey, Rosina and her husband had little time to rest. Now that they were in actual possession of their land, they were fired with fresh energy and ambition. They attacked their many tasks with a vigor which belied any physical fatigue. First they had to construct a home. Necessity forced them to build a sod dugout along the banks of the small stream which wound through their land. The industrious Rosina packed the earthen floor to oak-like hardness and smoothness. The sod walls bore small decorations which she fashioned. The tables, benches and other furniture were crudely fashioned, homemade and serviceable. A fireplace and a dutch oven completed the equipment. It was home for them, and a happy home.

Every moment of daylight and often far into the moonlit nights, the young couple worked side by side, clearing a piece of ground for a vegetable garden-and preparing the soil for planting of wheat. The first twelve months passed and a crop was harvested. They remarked upon the progress they had made. The fruits of their labors were plainly discernible. They had beat back still further the western frontiers of America. Their happiness seemed complete when a baby girl came to bless their dugout home.

Suddenly, and without warning, tragedy stalked into the dugout home. The young husband became seriously ill and competent medical aid was miles away. Rosina, like other pioneer women, had a thorough knowledge of first aid treatment, but this was serious. A doctor was summoned and finally reached the little home, but during his

examination of the sick man he shook his head negatively. The young immigrant husband had the dread fever of the plains, typhoid, and there was no hope. In a few short days Rosina was a widow.

No one would have censured the young widow had she deserted her homestead and returned to some town or village to rear her daughter. But Rosina was made of sterner stuff. She faced a task seemingly too great for any woman. She had one-hundred sixty acres of land to cultivate – a dugout home in the side of a creek bank – and a babe to care for. There were no white neighbors to whom to turn to for aid. But she did not hesitate. Her decision had been made years before in Germany that she would settle in America and that she would find a home, happiness and the security and liberty she craved.

Tirelessly she went to work. With such help as she could employ from time to time to do the more arduous tasks, she planted another crop. It was harvested and a dishonest laborer sold it and decamped with the money. She faced the winter with no money, no supplies, lacking even the bare necessities of life. Then came the most crucial period of her pioneer days. Rosina and her little daughter became seriously ill. Had it not been for the chance visit of a distant neighbor, this story could not have been written.

As was the fashion in pioneer days, neighbors cared for the sick woman and her child. Rosina recovered but the little girl could not withstand the ravages of the disease and passed away. It would seem that fate might have dealt more kindly with a courageous soul as Rosina, but fate seems to delight in trying the courage of the most intrepid. Even this great loss could not deter her. Doggedly she went to work again, trying to ease the sorrow that was hers.

During the two years since she and her husband had first looked upon the land which was to be their home, and which they had hoped would bring them happiness, Rosina had suffered only sorrow and disappointment.

She had kept in touch with her family in Germany and in her letters had urged her two brothers, John Prauner Sr. and Charles Prauner Sr., to come to America, to Nebraska, and become free men, owners of fertile prairie land. Her vivid description of the opportunities that awaited them finally resulted in their decision to join her.

She gave them detailed instructions how to make the trip. The Union Pacific railroad had been built and the center of immigrant activities was Columbus. Rosina told her brothers to start overland from Columbus and travel in northeasterly direction. She described the land marks about her dugout home, and gave them the approximate distance they were to travel. Finally she instructed them to watch for a woman and black dog standing on the highest hill.

Day after day, as the twilight shadows were blanketing the land, Rosina and her big black dog climbed to the top of the highest hill. There she waited, typifying patient pioneer womanhood, scanning the level land for some signs of her brothers.

She often told how they made the journey and had been discouraged by the vast distance in this new land. They had traveled as far as she had told them. The landmarks had been identified, but they could not see the woman and black dog. They were almost ready to return but another high hill in the distance seemed to beckon them on, and there they found Rosina, just as she had promised, waiting for them.

With the coming of her brothers, life took on a more rosy hue. Here was the physical strength to cope with the many tasks she had of necessity been forced to leave undone. They were able to clear their own homesteads and help her in the cultivation of her land. Though they urged her to leave her dugout home, she steadily refused. Its memories of husband and daughter were too poignant for her to lightly leave. She was forced to repair or rebuild it on several occasions.

During these venturesome years other immigrants had come into the Battle Creek neighborhood. Among them was a German farmer who was fired with a love of his new land and the opportunities it offered to an almost fanatical degree. It was not unusual that the comely Rosina with similar ideas would be attracted to him, and he in turn, found himself admiring the young widow who would not be discouraged. A swift courtship culminated in the marriage, and thus was founded the family of John and Rosina Lucht.

John Lucht owned a homestead just a mile and a half south of the present site of Battle Creek. A substantial sod house and other out buildings were a great improvement upon the crude dugout in the creek bank. Rosina moved to her husband's farm while her brothers took over the cultivation of her own homestead. Once again Rosina felt that her dreams were to be realized.

Side by side, she and John Lucht strove to wrest wealth and security from the land. They battled grasshopper plagues, drought, blizzard, financial panic and flood. Sometimes they emerged victorious. Often they were beaten but never disheartened. They had to sit impotently by and watch as hordes of grasshoppers destroyed a splendid wheat and corn crop. On another occasion they had to race to higher ground as a sudden flood tore down Battle Creek, destroying everything in its path. They lived through the great blizzard of 1888, the drought of 1894, and kept doggedly at their task. They had had the taste of victory and so they kept forging ahead.

PART II

It is regrettable that the life story of Rosina Lucht could not have been obtained from her first hand. Her adventures put to shame many of the deeds of imaginary heroes conceived by fictitious writers.

It is a notable fact that the first frame dwelling in Madison County was located on the Lucht homestead and was used as a combination church and school. Rosina's children attended school here and before the founding of the Lutheran Church in Madison County, she and her family worshipped there.

It is characteristic of our forbearers that they should turn to religion during those perilous times. It is well known that they were a deeply reverent people. They realized that only with the aid of a Supreme Being could they hold to their courses in carving a civilization from the wilderness of Nebraska's frontiers. Here in their land of adoption they were permitted to worship as they chose and it was a privilege which they guarded with jealous zeal.

Rosina Lucht often held small gatherings breathless as she calmly related some of the many adventures which befell her. Her remembrance of the Indian tribes which inhabited northeast Nebraska belie the gory tales so many delight in telling. For many years she was in daily contact with the red men.

When she and her first husband lived in the creek bank dugout, Indian warriors often visited them. Never did they offer her violence. Quietly, stolidly, they squat on their heels and watch as she prepared a meal or baked some bread. Silently they would extend their hands for a sample when the finished product was ready for the table. Then, with a grunt of appreciation, they would rise and stalk away. She said that many times, in spite of their silence and their insatiable appetites, she appreciated their company. She never refused to share her food with them.

The trading post for the Battle Creek settlers was in Columbus. After her first husband's death, Rosina had to depend upon neighbors to bring her supplies from the trading post. She would prepare a long list and as the wagon of some neighbor came into sight, headed for Columbus, she would race across the fields to intercept it, give the driver the list and ask him to buy for her. The return of the wagon was a signal for her Indian friends to pay her a visit. After one or two such experiences, Rosina made certain that the shopping list contained a few cents worth of candy, some gaudy cloth, and a few trinkets.

"These Indians, so often called fierce and cruel, were just like little children", Rosina related. "They would bicker and quarrel among themselves over some trinket I had given to one. They would complain to me. I knew they were just like children and I treated them that way. They never bothered me, and goodness knows, if they had been as bad as others said they were, I would have been scalped a dozen times."

This constant begging and expectation of gifts by the Indians who had visited her regularly and accepted her gifts of food and trinkets ceased suddenly, but the visits continued. However, they would no longer ask for nor accept anything from her. One day she asked one of the Indian visitors why. With pantomime and stumbling words he explained that she was alone now, her husband had gone to the Happy Hunting Grounds and they knew she would have difficulty in caring for herself and her daughter without giving gifts to them.

Many times a choice bit of venison, some wild ducks or prairie chickens which the Indians had killed in their hunts were brought to the dugout home to help restock the larder of the lone widow.

Once when asked about the abundance of game in the Elkhorn Valley, Rosina Lucht explained that were she to tell what she actually saw, her audience would think she was guilty of exaggeration.

“Oh yes,” she often said, “I’ve seen the sky darkened with great flocks of wild geese and ducks. Millions of them and so unafraid, man was a strange creature to them and because of this, the slaughter by the white man was terrible. The civilized white man has only himself to blame for the dearth of wild life. The Indian killed, but just enough for their needs – never more.

Great herds of buffalo ranged this territory. Not a few hundred, but literally thousands of them. Sometimes the level land in the bottom of some valley seemed to change color from the bright green of the grass to a dark brown as the grazing buffalo moved slowly along. Many of these herds were regular in their migration to the northeastern part of the State until the land was well settled and many landmarks have their names based upon the herds that passed this way.

I’ve seen many herds of deer and antelope but these more timid animals went westward as the settlers came. I had one strange experience with deer. One morning I went into the clearing near the dugout and found a deer lying down with its shoulder badly torn and bleeding. Apparently it had been wounded by some hunter. It struggled to rise as I drew near but was too weak. I did what I could for it, bathed the terrible wound, brought water for it to drink and carried some grass for it to nibble on. Gradually it became accustomed to me. I fed it tiny bits of bread and a little sugar. A few days and it was strong enough to move around but it would not leave the neighborhood. Daily it would come to the clearing to make its presence known. I’d leave the dugout and it would come up to me, nuzzle my hand and follow me around like a dog. I’d always give it some little tidbit. I grew to expect the visits. They stopped suddenly and I wondered why. The answer was not long in coming. A neighbor brought me a shoulder of venison and from his description of the ease with which he had killed the deer, I knew my pet would not return.”

Rosina watched the development of Madison County and her own community of Battle Creek with jealous eyes. Intently loyal, had she lived in the present, it is safe to say she would have been a dominant leader in the social, political and religious life of the county. She supported every movement which had for its purpose the improvement of living conditions and the security of the people in her adopted community, state and nation. She opposed just as vigorously anything which threatened the freedom which she felt was the right of every human being. Liberally of her time, her money and her endless energy, she gave to the development of Madison County.

Few realized that much of her activity was carried on in spite of almost unendurable physical pain. During the perilous years following the death of her first husband she was

forced to work in all kinds of weather. Often drenched to the skin by cold winds and snow, she had to return to the damp dugout and steam dry before a roasting blaze. She became afflicted with rheumatism and suffered untold agonies. Had she been permitted to rest, obtain proper medication and treatment, she might have suffered no lasting effects. Denied this, she had to let the affliction wear away. It left her slightly stooped, but with the coming of years her aging body became more and more stooped, until those who did not know her might have thought her deformed. Yet this physical suffering was never permitted to detract from her kindly interest and understanding of those with lesser troubles to bear.

The original home of John and Rosina Lucht is the site of the present Battle Creek Lutheran Cemetery. Here was history made in the fledgling days of Madison County, and here lies one of its most notable pioneer builders, her work done, and posterity a witness to her greatness.

Four daughters came to the Lucht home to replace the babe who perished in the dugout home. Rosina Lucht made certain that her daughters were never to undergo the hardships she had suffered. Today these four daughters are well known residents of Madison County. Mary Lucht still occupies the home of the original homestead. Lena Hohenstein, Anna Schrotder and Rosa Reeker have and are carrying on the tradition of their pioneer mother.

The son completed the family circle. John Lucht, who too learned loyalty and industry at his mother's knee, is a rancher in Western Nebraska. There are 29 surviving grandchildren, most of them living in Madison County.

Were one to attempt to recount the many unusual adventures which befell Rosina Lucht in her half century and more of life in Madison County it would require great volume. She lived a long useful life. It came to a peaceful end on January 20, 1920, and she was laid to rest in ground which she had helped to reclaim from the wilderness. Here she rests, while her spirit hovers over her descendants, smiling approvingly as they profit by the lessons which she taught them and which she had learned so painfully and at such sacrifice.

POST SCRIPT

The committee has been proud to present this story written by Mr. Ernest Reeker and dedicated to his grandmother, Mrs. Lucht. Mr. Reeker died a number of years ago, and since he wrote the article, Lena Hohenstein and Anna Schroeder have died. However, Mary Lucht, the oldest of the children, was 93 February 15, and makes her home at the Lutheran Hospital at Norfolk. Mrs. Rosa Reeker is 86 and lives with her son Harry Reeker. John Lucht, the youngest of the family is 84 and lives at Wood River. Incidentally, Mrs. Lucht's five children were born within a span of nine years which fact, considering there were no conveniences as we know them today, must have made much work and worry for the young mother.