

# Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

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## THE LONE SOWER: MY LIFE STORY Part I

by Adolph Voss

In the little village of Prohn near the large city of Stralsund, Germany, along the south shore of the Baltic Sea just east of Denmark, begotten by a wonderful mother and fine father, there came into existence at twenty minutes after one o'clock in the morning of the eighteenth day of January, 1876, a boy who, a little later was christened Ewald (Adolph) Wilhelm Max. This boy was I. Our home, a large house built by my father, faced the sea about a mile away. Here I spent almost six years and did what all typical German children did in those days of long ago. Among the things I remember are: picking fruit in season from fruit trees in our back yard, going to school in an old wooden building near a three cornered yard where there was a large wooden water pump with a monstrous handle. Frequently I watched my father pull good sized fish out of a little stream near our house with a copper wire snare tied to the end of a long pole. Our father frequently took us children to the sea shore for a swim. Many times the children of the villagers visited with the children of the Landed Lord, Herr Shirman. We tried to please them by acting as servants, hoping to wangle favors from them.

Our father, Wilhelm Carl Joachim Voss, was of medium stature, five feet seven inches tall, dark complexioned and always wore a full beard. He was the village postmaster and was very much interested in politics. He spoke well at public meetings



Wm. C. J. Voss home in Prohn, Germany 1882.  
It also housed a bakery, post office and mill.

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Editor..... Gene E. Hamaker

Membership in the Buffalo County Historical Society is open to anyone who has an interest in Buffalo County and its people, or in the history of the area.

Annual dues, payable January 1:

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Trails & Rails Museum

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*WITH THE SOCIETY*

**Note Change of October Meeting Date:** The October meeting of the Buffalo County Historical Society will be held on Thursday evening, October 22, 7:30 p.m., at the Youth Center in Kearney. This will be a joint meeting with the Fort Kearny Genealogical Society.

Maynard Envick, one of our Board members, will give the program. Maynard and his wife, Wilma, spent several weeks in Europe this past summer where they visited with Maynard's relatives in Norway, tracing family history and genealogy.

Members will note the change from the regular Sunday afternoon meeting date.

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A house on the South Loup River in Sartoria Township has been offered to the Buffalo County Historical Society by John and Eva Eckhout, to be moved to the Trails and Rails Museum grounds. The Victorian home was originally built for a resort hotel by Jerome W. Lalone in 1883, the venture failed and Lalone lost the land and its buildings. It was purchased by W. Martin Jones in 1893, and sold by Jones to Felix Eckhout in 1898 and has been in the Eckhout family since. Although not a success as a resort hotel, it was an overnight stopping place for freighters and stagecoaches on the trail between Kearney and Broken Bow, hence, its proper place as a trails hotel on the Trails and Rails Museum grounds.

We would appreciate any additional information from anyone having knowledge about this historic home or any of the early families living there.

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**Special Christmas Displays** will be shown at the Trails and Rails Museum on Saturday and Sunday, November 28 and 29, and again on December 5 and 6. Further details will be announced later.

and was very much against enforced military service and in favor of the American method of the secret ballot in elections. I always regarded him above the average in ingenuity or talent. He was quick in creative thinking as shown by his many contrivances on the farm when in America. He built a very odd looking windmill which pumped all our water for many years. Before father built his own idea into a windmill, we had to get or raise water from the new one-hundred foot "bored" well by using a bucket, rope, and windlass. Not being able to buy an organ, he built one, rather crude of course. He built a machine with a large revolving drum which was coated with tin which had been roughened by being punctured with a pointed tool. This contrivance ripped the husks off the barley kernels and thus produced "barley grits". There was much demand for rag carpets so he built a loom which proved quite a source of income. He had perfected himself in early life in various trades—as a weaver, carpenter, mason and baker. I believe I owe most of my mental attributes to him.

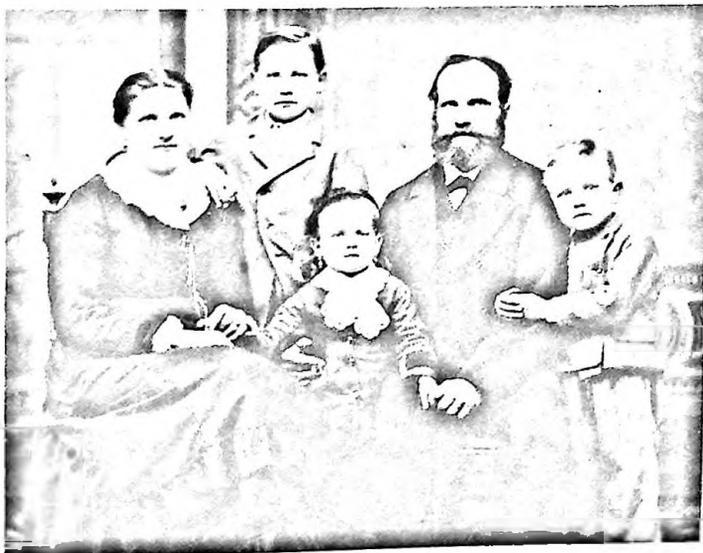
Our house in Prohn was large enough for living quarters, for the post office, and for a good sized bakery. The bakery business was such as to demand a one-horse rig to peddle bread even to Stralsund. We boys, Herman and I, sometimes rode with him to guard against thieves while father went into stores to sell and deliver. He did well in business and was above average in education. His love and zeal for political freedom and the democratic form of government incurred the ill will of the local officials which finally cost him his Postmastership. A post office inspector was sent to inspect with orders (as he afterwards learned) to get him out. A stamp rate book on a shelf had slipped off a stack of books and was leaning against the stack. The inspector promptly reported that the "office was in a disorderly condition...". This our father considered tyranny. Father said: "Where I cannot get justice I will not have my sons waste three years in the army, nor will pay taxes anymore." America was in our father's mind. His brother, Karl, had previously urged him to make the big watery jump across the Atlantic Ocean. His four sisters and his brother, Karl, were already in America.

Father had married Johanna Carolina Dorothea Virginia Rehl, who was born at Curtshagen, Germany, on December 7, 1853. Our mother, to whom I believe I owe most of my physical attributes, told us that she descended from noble stock, giving the name of Herr Von Strelitz. She was of the typical north Germanic husky type. She had a sister, Minnie Witt, whose son, Wilhelm, owned the big flour mill in Prohn. Mother taught us to say prayers and urged us to attend Sunday school and made us help with the gardening on a rather large piece of ground. She herself did much of the hard work outdoors. Mother did not want to go to America. She feared the ocean trip and did not want to forsake her sleeping in feather beds. So father, to persuade her, agreed to bring feather beds to America and also to give her a gold watch. She finally promised to go, but said (jokingly), "If the ship goes down, I'll pull out all your hair." During a heavy storm on the ocean, some water splashed through an open porthole and mother thought the ship was sinking, but father closed the porthole and all was well. The ocean trip on the passenger liner "Wieland" too almost two weeks and mother suffered severely from sea sickness. Brother Herman and I spent much of the daylight time parading on deck in the breezy sea air eating rye bread and butter which we had brought with us and thus escaped sea sickness. We landed at Ellis Island, New York and first touched American soil on about August 26.

We came directly to Kearney, Buffalo County, Nebraska by rail, arriving September 2, 1882. Uncle Fisher picked us up in an old lumber wagon drawn by two

slow work horses. Herman, Emma, and I rode in the rear of the wagon which was filled with hay. Uncle Fisher had thoughtfully put in a large, ripe watermelon which we "kids" finished before we arrived at Uncle's home off the bank of the Wood River. There was no real road, just a trail through the tall waving native grass called blue stem. The Post Office was at a farmer's home called Greendale. We soon bought a 160 acre farm home from James Mollard (Louise Hopp's husband) for \$1,000. just about all we had. On this place there was a sod house, a sod stable, two old horses—Tom and Doll—two cows, and an old lumber wagon, a cultivator, a harrow, a walking plow, and a fifty acre field of unhusked corn. There was plenty of wild hay to cut in the draws. Mr. Mollard went out a little farther into the "wilds" and got another 160 acres for almost nothing. We were afraid, especially our mother, of the Indians and wanted to be near all our relatives, four aunts and one uncle. They all had come to America several years before, first to Wisconsin, and later to Nebraska: Aunt Minnie Voss Fisher, Aunt Hannah Voss Hatter, Aunt Friederika Voss Hopp, Aunt Straudt, and Uncle Karl (Carl).

The sod house was warm but the roof was made of heavy cedar rafters and covered with straw, and the straw was covered with dirt which leaked badly after heavy rains. There was just a dirt floor. There was so much snow and wind in 1888 that all draws and low places were filled so that the whole area appeared leveled. It took almost a day to go to our sod stable to feed the stock. We children missed almost a week of school. In due time father built a frame granary and a corn crib. Thus, in true pioneer fashion we lived rather happily in "Grand Old Nebraska" with the coyotes, jack rabbits, skunks, badgers, wild ducks, geese, muskrats, beaver, and thousands of wild prairie chickens. Wild geese used to come every morning and evening from the Platte River just twelve miles south to feed in our fields which, I believe, started a zeal to hunt in me which has lasted throughout my whole life. We seemed to enjoy the boundless freedom in the great open spaces of Nebraska's semi-wilderness and the



Voss family portrait taken in Germany 1882. Left to right: Carolina (mother), Herman, Emma, Wm. C. J. (father), Adolf Max.

vast and fertile prairies with their occasional frightening and leaping fires.

Father fashioned a pin into a fishhook, and with a cotton string as a line we fished in the clear and gurgling spring water of Wood River for bullheads and other fish. We boys, roaming the prairies, found buffalo horns, skulls, chips, and some well preserved skeletons as the Indians and buffalo hunters had left them. Mother now began urging the building of a new home and that on a hill about the center of our land. Still being very short of money, father contrived in his usual ingenious way to build a house on a slight slope roughly one third dugout, one third sod, and one third frame. After we had lived in the old soddy about eight years, we lived here for many years before we built an all frame house which still remains in good condition.

We children had a little youth paper in the German language called "yugand post" which we looked forward to with great eagerness. Our mother read it to us until we learned to read ourselves. Our parents had a weekly German newspaper published in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Our father also kept science magazines. He taught Herman to play the violin which had been brought from Germany. Our mother made her own yeast with hops which grew wild along the Wood River; she canned wild fruit, such as plums, choke cherries, grapes, and gooseberries. We raised sheep for wool which mother spun on a wheel father made from a spindle he brought from Germany. Mother knit socks using the home spun yarn and also colored them with native sumac. Eggs from our chickens keep groceries on our shelves. We borrowed \$500 at ten percent interest to buy two more horses, two more cows, and extra needed machinery. We had to drive twelve miles to Elm Creek to have wheat ground for flour. Corn brought twenty-five cents a bushel, wheat, thirty cents, sometimes forty cents, and eggs as little as eight cents a dozen. A horse was worth about \$80 and a cow \$20 and lumber was high. There was good hunting, fishing, and trapping.

The Union Pacific Railroad, called the "Kearney and Black Hill's Railroad", came up the Wood River valley from Kearney in 1891 and Amherst was located about two and a half miles east of our farm and the Post Office located there. At about that time we bought 160 acres more of Union Pacific land at about \$350. At this time we began



Left to right: Adolph Max, Mattie, Emma, Herman E. Voss. 1898.

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to attend Sunday School in our new frame school house. People began to move in from everywhere. Many covered wagons moved up the river valley to the far northwest in search of free land. The new settlers fought prairie fires and "worked out" their poll tax. Threshing outfits travelled from farm to farm, charging so much per bushel for threshing.

Hunting, fishing, trapping, gardening, football, and baseball always had a great part of my physical activities, with hunting and baseball predominating. I credit my attaining above average age largely to these activities. My father and mother permitted me to use the old double-barrell shotgun brought from Germany at an early age. Many a wild duck and prairie chicken I bagged, together with a few wild geese. I trapped along Wood River for six or seven years. I soon managed to get steel traps and trapping guides to explain the intricacy of the science of trapping. It brought me an income which my parents, for the first time, permitted me to keep **all my own**. I caught many muskrats, which brought from nine to twelve cents apiece. Mink brought three or four dollars apiece. Caught one extra large racoon brought three dollars. Also caught many large skunks—eighteen out of one den or hole. I dug out a den of real small skunks and kept one for a pet for several months. One year I sent furs to Chicago and received the "fabulous" sum of \$18. My first purchase was a pair of knee-high rubber boots which I needed very much.

At twelve to fifteen I felt small and weak, but ambitious. I carried on with a vague feeling of assurance of my future. I felt a kinship with all my surroundings—nature. Dewdrops on the green grass in the early mornings shimmered in the rising sun. The singing of birds and the softness and harshness of the winds kindled in me an ecstatic sense of belonging to a great and wonderful world of activity and well being. I had simple yet deep thoughts of a useful life before me. The earth and the stars were the two entities between which I enjoyed my mysterious being trying to become a worthwhile individual in this wonderful and free country my father had brought us to with great sacrifice. Father did a great thing to bring us all to the greatest freedom on earth.

(Editor's Note: These are excerpts from Voss' manuscript.)

All photos courtesy of Ramona Nutter, niece of Adolph Max Voss.