Aunt Dena Saaijenga Revisited

Here is another piece written by Aunt Dena in 1994. The notebook was scanned by Cousin Cindy Jensen. Parts are missing but I will copy it "as is". The notes we have were her rough copy so punctuation and sentence structure were not "grade ready". Her existing notes begin with the story of her grandparents' decision to come to the United States and their early days in Illinois.

Interim - Little Did I Know By Dena Saaijenga

Grandma Luka Dina, as a young woman prepared herself for the new life to come. Not only that but also to satisfy her dreams as well: She worked herself up from the lowest form of domestic help in a rich, land owner's mansion, to the top, the chief maid over all help in the landowner's employment. She well would know how to manage her "Little House on the Prairie" in a practical way as well as in a grand manner. This meant the grounds, the garden, and the orchards. Also whatever was needed then when the occasion presented itself. Ah, but those two were prepared to live up to their dreams all right. Little did they know what reality and the facts of life might bring.

That couple Folkert Karsjens and Dina Luka according to plan arrived to take possession of their 80 acres of virgin prairie, land in Stephenson County, Illinois. I spare you the exact legal description in probably the late 40s. The State of Illinois was admitted into the union in 1918. It took several decades for all the territory to be taken up. I believe it filled up from the south to the north, generally speaking it seems.

One can only imagine what it was like to clear these lands. Consider just one natural red cedar full grown and without modern equipment what it would take to clear that, stumps, roots and all. That's just one. While Northern Illinois is not exactly forest land it by no means is treeless even now. And then the tall dense grasses what a problem they must have been without modern mowers. Just imagine the weeds with seeds that stuck to anything that brushed against them - that and the dust and the pollen. Do you suppose they had to use rain water to quench their thirst until they could get a cistern or a well dug? I know of only two springs with good water for man or beast: one close to Freeport - ten or so miles or so away from our farm, the other is around a stone quarry in a field to the northeast of us. A lone white pine tree pointed to the spot. I remember once after a lightning storm, how we looked through the glasses to see a herd of beautiful Holstein cattle lay dead under that tree. Lightning had struck that tree and they had gone under for shelter from the rain. Twas a frightening scene.

Of course Dena was not a novice at utilizing whatever items showed up, from rabbits, wild turkeys, quail, and such to wild berries and grapes and seeds from various other plants to use for

juice or even wine. My parents enjoyed the tell-tale antiques they (my dad's paw) had left behind: wood products from an oxen yoke to butter nappies. Just how they got their metal objects I do not know such as a one bottom walking plow, the hoes and spades, axes and saws. Of course, we as a family treasured in the daily use the set of fireplace andirons Grandfather had made as a final graduation showpiece to speak for his "finals" in the apprenticeship program he graduated from. Of course there were the "carried along" fine cut glass treasures: cruets, wine cruets, wine bottles juice as well as wine glasses, water goblets, butter dishes, and such scraps of beautiful china sets from Germany. I remember especially some hand painted cake plates. There were some pewter pieces - a little sterling silver -long since bitten out of shape. Ah, yes, and we treasured that chocolate pot and we were curious about the mustache cup. The chocolate pot was shaped like a larger vertical tea pot decorated with brown berries on green twigs. I believe it was made of white porcelain decorated with some shiny metal - probably pewter. I could go on. Suffice it to say family antiques get lost in the shuffles that go on in time. I have herewith presented a few I can contribute to posterity from my memory in these words.

How far Dina and Folkert got along in all that I don't know. First of all, there was a cabin that had to be built. Their first cabin I know burned down. I heard stories of how they lived in the granary before another shelter could be erected. I have a picture of the second cabin and I in another paper have explained how it was incorporated into the house with that, which I call the "great room", and several built-ons and porches. Whether the second cabin had been built before they had a barn, a place for a cow, I do not know.

I do know that early on my grandfather Folkert Karsjens on a steamy hot day went walking - I do not know whether there were roads for him to take or whether he had to make his way on foot through waist high tangles of prickly prairie grass, or had most of the land been cultivated by the. Anyway he got to Lightsville. I think that was the name of the settlement about 5 or so miles to the south, he bought his cow, but never got it home. He died on the way home with her of a heat stroke. I know nothing about the circumstances during and after that tragedy. I do know Grandpa's grave is one of the early ones in the Silver Creek Church Cemetery. Just who erected the tombstone, I expect it was my father much later. We can gather from that German Valley as a settlement had been established and that there was a formal church building. I have photos of what the first one too and I know the date of Grandpa's death is inscribed on the marble tombstone. I can recall visiting the graves of him and Grandma Dena Luka almost every time we got to church from my earliest youth. Eventually Mom and Dad were laid to rest in 2 of the remaining three lots. When George passed away the remaining lot was found to be too narrow, too close to the road that had been built around the cemetery by then so Hattie and I bought lots to start a new family section for those who needed them. We bought 10 lots I believe. Three are filled, George, Hilvin and Hattie.

My grandmother did not give up but cuddled her two young children a little closer and engaged a hired man until George, her son my dad got old enough to take over.

She must have been healthy, undauntable, and very capable. We later 2 generations later still benefited from her careful work in developing the place! There was adequate garden space and there were trees, shrubs and vines of about every fruit and herbs imaginable: a proof of the excellence of her overall experience in Germany. I expect she carefully recognized some native yield bearing trees and shrubs and fruit bearing or the useful for nurture - some other part of the plant -such as roots or foliage.

That is not to say she neglected the ornamental: flowers, blooming shrubs and trees. As far as I can remember when I last set foot on the place Grandma's flowering almond bush was still there, there were at least 3 lilac bushes, purple and white, to mention a few. I remember elderberries, blackberries and strawberries and on. Yes, and spring flowers like the beautiful star of Bethlehem and so on.

Grandma Dena lived until she was 82 when she died of pneumonia. My mother Hilka had been with her about 10 years at the most. Father kept the memory of his parents alive by teaching us to visit his parents' graves and a picture - a large one on an easel, standing in the northwest corner of our parlor. I can tell by how my mother handled that and kept it on display as long as she lived that she truly admired and loved both her mother-in-law and husband.

The last entry of that notebook bears the following piece by Aunt Dena:

An Unusual Day in October

There come certain melancholy days in October, with its generally bright blue skies, when fickle winds softly streaming, in a hollow sort of way, interrupted by fitful lulls, yet prevailing to steer ominous clouds pumped from some critical power below the horizon to southwest ahead of them so that the sun can record the movement of those threats in fleeting patches of light and shade on the ground below, for you cloud by cloud.

Lin's notes: Now for some history that might help you understand Aunt Dena's comments.

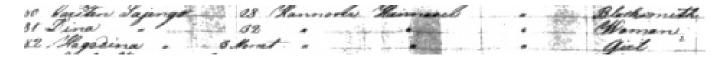
Great Grandpa Folkert K. Saaijenga was born February 28, 1822 in Larrelt, Germany and died September 26, 1855 near German Valley, Illinois. Before his emigration to the United States he was a blacksmith apprentice, studying under German masters for a number of years. He had to carry - and have endorsed - a Wanderbuch (the equivalent of a modern-day passport).



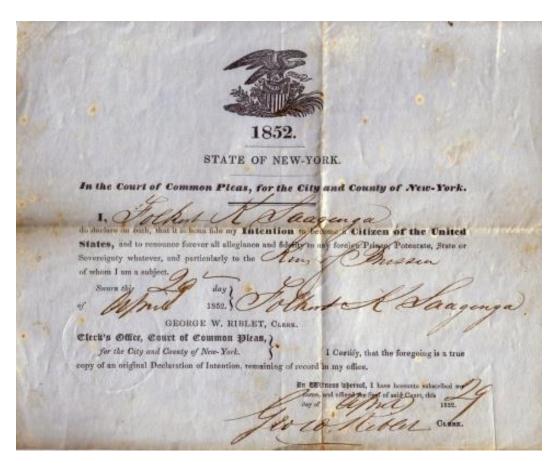
Apparently his "final project" for this program was the fireplace andirons that Aunt Dena mentions.

He met and married (in February 1849) Luka Dina Broesder who was born January 18, 1813 in Germany and died April 8, 1899 near German Valley, IL. May 1, 1850 they had a daughter, Haukedina.

In 1850 the three of them set sail from Bremen, Germany on the ship "Orion".

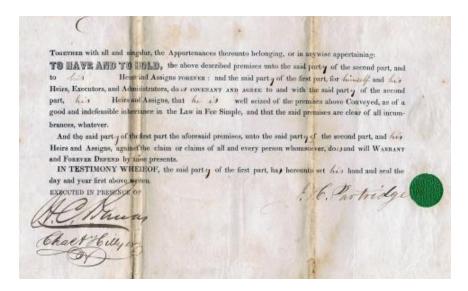


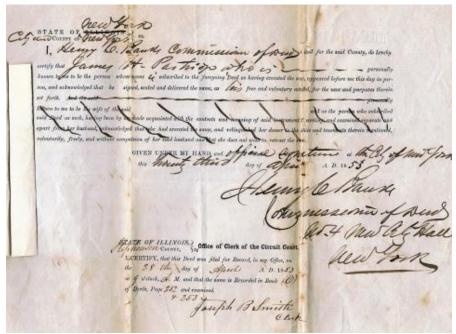
They arrived in New York City Aug. 16, 1850 where they stayed several years and Folkert was able to use his blacksmith trade skills. Folkert became a US citizen April 29, 1852.



On May 19, 1853 they had a son, George Folkert. The couple purchased, sight unseen, 80 acres of farmland near German Valley, IL April 23, 1853 for \$250.00.

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(I often wondered why two people from Germany would choose to purchase land in a totally unknown area. Why not move to Iowa or Indiana? When Silver Creek Church published their history book "A Spiritual Saga150 Years", I discovered that Luka Dina's sister and brother-in-law Jacobina and Jelle Ruetter were among the charter members of that church August 10, 1851. Ah, now I had an answer to that question.)

They moved to German Valley and began farming and building up the property as Aunt Dena wrote in her story. Times must have been hard because they apparently lost the farm due to nonpayment of taxes but were able to redeem it for \$5.75.

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Then disaster struck! As Aunt Dena wrote, Folkert died at the age of 33 in Sept. 1855. By that time Luka Dina's sister and her family were moving to Iowa. Here she was a widow, two small children, and a farm to keep up. In a booklet of notes kept by Folkert, he listed paying Henry Sjoberg for helping put up straw. This was the man Luka Dina married August 21, 1856 at the Silver Creek Church in German Valley, IL.



This marriage was not a success and legal proceedings were put in

place.

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Then came even more legal problems:

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Neighbor Bode was appointed guardian over Luka Dina's children December 21, 1867!

Luka Dina took back her Saaijenga name and lived another 32 years on the family farm.



She passed away April 8, 1899.



In 1901 her son George and Hilka Popkes were married. Nine children were born to this union and Aunt Dena was one of these. That's Aunt Dena (tallest gal in the plaid dress) below:



Such a rich history this family has!