



# Buffalo Tales



Volume 23, No. 5 Buffalo County Historical Society September-October, 2000  
e-mail: bchs@kearney.net website: bchs.kearney.net

## HISTORIC HOMES OF RAVENNA—THE POLENZ HOUSE

### Part II

by Valerie Vierk

In February 1915, when nationality parties were sweeping the town, Mrs. Bertha Polenz, of German/Dutch ancestry, hosted a "Pardy" down. The invitations were inscribed on miniature wooden shoes! The guests came garbed in old-country costumes, some of which were family heirlooms dating back two or three generations. Many people wore wooden shoes. German songs, games and music were played. Of course, the menu consisted of weinerwursts, sauerkraut, kartoffels, schmierkase pretzels, rye bread and other delicacies from the Old Country.

In April 1917, the youngest daughter, Esther, wed Paul Niemack and her wedding dinner, too, was at the big house. Several tables were set up end to end, about 30 feet in length to accommodate the guests. Harold Polenz, six-year-old nephew of the bride, remembers that he and several young children were being supervised upstairs. They tiptoed part way down the stairs though, sat there and thus could watch the activity at the eastern end of the tables where the bride and groom were seated.

On April 6, 1917, Good Friday, America officially entered WWI, the horrible conflict that had been raging since 1914 in Europe. In a July 1917 edition of the *Ravenna News*, Bertha's second son, Albert, appeared on a list for possible induction into military service but he was not called, probably because of the death of his wife which left him the main caregiver to his young daughter. Eventually about 350 men from the Ravenna area served in the war. In 1919 Albert remarried. The young woman was Olive Mae Bacus, called Mae. They later had a son, Jerald.



In July 1918, the North Pole Ladies (women who lived north of town), gathered at the Polenz house to plan for making a quilt whose proceeds would be donated to the Red Cross. A very imaginative menu had been concocted in which the guest could make their selection. This caused much merriment. Some of the entrees were: Choice Boston Chopped, Son of Noah, Seaside Enchantress, Turkish Delight, Kitten is Napping, Fruit of the Vine, Skipper's Harbor, Unruly Member, Boston Over-Throw and Let Us Be Friends.

Then suddenly the gala affairs at the big house ended. Mrs. Bertha Polenz, unbeknownst to her friends, was to be married! She had been courted by a wealthy farmer who lived in a distant town where she went to visit her daughter. In April, 1919, Mrs. Polenz became Mrs. Theodore Vasholz of Stanton, NE. Although Mrs. Polenz left her beautiful big home in Ravenna, she moved into another beautiful home in Stanton

## WITH THE SOCIETY

### A Note from the President:

We are now enjoying the Fall weather and hope it is a while before we enter into the Winter months.

The Historical Society wants to thank Wendell Wessels, Director of Finance, and the City Council for approving Keno funds in the amount of \$6,650 to be used to shingle the Depot at the Trails and Rails Museum. Many artifacts and displays are housed in the Depot and it is very important to keep the building in good repair.

At the present time we have a search committee reviewing applications, and interviewing the applicants, for a new Director for the Trails and Rails Museum and the Farm Site. We anticipate having someone hired by the first of the year.

—Larry Nansel, President

that set on a hill. (Although Mrs. Vasholz didn't live in Ravenna, she had another smaller house built right north of the big house in Ravenna in 1925.)

She and Mr. Vasholz had twenty years together and then he died in April 1939. His widow continued to live in Stanton until approximately 1950 when she moved back to Ravenna and took up residence in the house that she had built in 1925. In the early 1960's she became a resident of the Good Samaritan Home in Gibbon. She died on August 22, 1968 at the age of 99.

In the fall, of 1919, Herman and Clara (Kluge), and their children Harold, Mildred, twins Albert and Bertha and Herman moved into the big house. (Harold's youngest brother, Herman, had been born here two years before.) The family lived here until the spring of 1920 when they moved to Lexington.

In 1920, Mrs. Polenz sold the house to her son, Albert, for \$6,500. Albert, Mae and the two children moved. Albert and Mae lived here for the next forty-two years. The house continued as a boarding house, with school teachers being the main boarders, although a few high school girls would sometimes stay here during the harsh winter months. One Ravenna resident remembers hearing about a wrestler also boarding here for a time.

In the 20's and 30's, Mae had a beauty parlor in one of the small upstairs bedrooms. Harold remembers the weird looking contraptions used to give women marcel. Albert's sister, Minnie Hathaway, also lived here during some of this time. Harold remembers going across the street to have lunch with her when he was attending high school.

On June 10, 1943, Albert's daughter, LaVerne, married James Wiley with Rev. G.O. Keschull officiating. The bride's parents served as attendants. The local paper stated, "The home was especially decorated" and a wedding dinner was served there. LaVerne had been teaching school at Seneca, Nebraska where she met the groom, who owned a ranch there, but was originally from Urbana, Illinois. Grandma Bertha attended the wedding.

Albert was employed on the Chicago, Burlington and Quincy Railroad from October 15, 1917 until his retirement circa 1957. Since railroad work frequently took him out of town, Mae primarily ran the boarding house as far as the cooking and cleaning was concerned. One of Albert's railroad co-workers remembers Albert's huge "dive in" deep freeze that was located in the big house. Albert kept it well stocked with various meats that he would select for Mae to prepare.

Harold believes that the two large stone birdbaths that sat on the south lawn were commissioned by Albert. They contain stones



of about 3"x2" that are secured in the mortar.

Albert also replaced the curved south porch, partially because the wood was rotting, but also because enclosed porches became the rage in the 1940's.

The west porch was taken off during this time and a double car garage added. Albert kept two large cars, a Buick, a Cadillac and a Harley Davidson motorcycle in there. He also bought an airplane when "barnstorming" became the rage in the 20's and 30's. Although he wasn't a pilot, he liked to go out to the airfield east of town and taxi around on the runway. One day he got to going so fast he became airborne! Luckily though, he crash landed into a haystack and this was the end of his flying career. Following this event some of his railroad co-workers jokingly called him "Lindberg."

In the late 1940's or early 1950's, Albert set about having the house insulated for the first time. This came to be known around town as "The insulation story." The contractors examined the house and gave their estimate, which was agreed upon by Albert. But when the actual work began, that of drilling holes in the siding and blowing in the insulation, strange things began to happen. The walls kept taking more and more insulation and not filling up! Finally, a more detailed inspection was done and the contractors realized the board studding was 2"x6" (or 2"x8's), not the customary smaller widths. Thus, the walls were farther apart and would require more insulation to fill. The contractors protested that their estimate would have to be increased, but Albert stated that they'd had plenty of time to inspect the walls and that their original estimate should stand. It did.

Albert died November 15, 1962 in Grand Island and is buried in Ravenna's Highland cemetery. Mae moved away and did not keep in touch with Albert's family. They learned that she died circa 1985 and is buried in Oregon. Albert's first wife, Nellie, is buried in her family plot on the other side of the cemetery.

The house was put up for sale in June 1965 and sold shortly after. Three or four different families lived in the house either as renters or owners until 1992 when long-time Ravenna residents, Harvey and Betty Shrader, bought it and set about converting it to a bed and breakfast. The restoration took ten months. (The following descriptions are in no way complete. Space does not allow mention of all the unique items in this house.)

On the main floor one of the small bedrooms was converted to a laundry room. Another small bedroom was converted to a full bath. There is still one bedroom downstairs that is occupied by the Shraders, who not only live in the house but do all the cooking, almost all the cleaning and maintenance to the house. Dixie Bonczynski comes in bi-weekly to do accessory cleaning.

The kitchen had been remodeled in the 1970's. Author remembers being in the house circa 1968 and seeing the old, long, undivided sink. Now on the south by the windows an antique round wooden table and china hutch sits. Also, a wooden child's table and chairs sits against the northeast wall. A long lace curtain hangs in the doorway leading into the dining room.

In the dining room the original built-in, China cabinet with glass doors still stands. Two other free standing China cabinets also set in this room. A turn-of-the-century wooden phone hangs on the east wall in the same place the original hung. Although it isn't the original phone, Harold advises that it is a close replica. He remembers the



number: 181. A long table with seating capacity of about twelve is the focal point. There is also a small antique desk on the west. Large bowed windows on the south provide much light for potted plants.

In the living room in a large gold decorative frame hangs a picture of Bertha Polenz and her granddaughter, Faith LaVerne, at about age four. They are holding a book. On an adjacent wall in a large oval frame hangs a picture of two little boys, Betty's dad and his brother. In this corner, on a small table sits a large white clock with a carving of a peasant girl holding wheat. Two doves sit upon a smaller table. It is somewhat humorous that the girl is actually too large for the size of the table. Perhaps this is some artistic scale technique unknown to Americans. The engraving at the bottom Retoural suggests a French origin, possibly 1940's vintage. A small New Haven brand clock is imbedded in the statue. A chimney lamp with a pretty pink base also sits on this table. It was given to Betty by her mother, Clara Sanders.

In the foyer just inside the east door, a picture hangs that was given to the Shraders by some German friends. It is an actual picture of an old German inn circa 1900 vintage. The friends thought it was appropriate to give the Shraders this picture as they too were operating an "inn".

The wood of the staircase and banisters leading to the second floor is now a beautiful honey color. The woodwork was stripped and refinished by another Ravenna couple, Melvin and Renate Lade. Carved in the wood is a wreath that is believed to be the symbolic laurel wreath. This same design was on the outside of the house before the original siding was replaced. This decorative wood was called filigree or gingerbread and could be bought precut in most hardware stores of the times. Maple leaves are also carved in the poles of the banister. In the space where the stairs join second floor, several antique pictures hang, many of a religious nature.

The upstairs hallway hosts a lamp table with long swirl design legs, about three feet high. On the small round table sits a unique lamp whose base is a bronze-looking figurine of two Greek maidens. There are two glass tulip shades. This lamp appears to be an antique, but is actually a reproduction, the only one in the house. A large clock hangs in this area and a mantle clock sits on a nearby shelf.

On second floor, the small bedroom on the east has been converted to a sitting room with a microwave and a sink. Double windows overlook main street. A plush turquoise couch circa 1930 vintage also sits in the room. Although the couch isn't horse hair, it resembles it in texture but is actually a type of nylon. A large wardrobe sits on the south and a standing lamp circa 1940's vintage lights this room.

The original 4-legged round backed bathtub and sink is still in use in the original bathroom. Another small bedroom next to this has been converted to a bathroom. In this bathroom sits a vanity/dressing table and chair of 1940's vintage. A little green antique scale sits on the floor and an antique picture of a Native American maiden hangs on the wall.

The four bedrooms now have brass name plates, and are named for the Shraders' daughters, Angela, Jennifer and Suzanne, and their niece's daughter, Jessica.

The *Angela* room on the southwest has an angel theme with tranquil pictures of angels on the walls. One of the pictures is the scene of the angel watching over the two small children as they cross a rickety bridge. The twin beds of approximately 1920 vintage have mahogany rainbow shaped headboards and smaller footboards. A small marble topped desk from England and a dresser also sits in this room. A quilt with an angel upon it hangs on a chair.

The *Jessica* room on the northwest has a violet theme. This room is sometimes called the Denver room as many of the pieces came from there. This is a charming room as almost everything is violet: wallpaper, lamp shades, bedspread, curtains and

several pieces of glassware on the white chest. One of these is a demitasse cup and a saucer and a small necklace box. The bed frame is decorative white iron and was found in a corral by the Shraders. They sandblasted it, painted it and used it when their children were growing up. The decorative white chandelier was found in Denver on Colfax Avenue.

Across the hall south lies the *Suzanne* room with a children's theme. This is the largest bedroom, and also has the curved bay window area. The main colors are burgundy and blue. The room is spacious enough for a queen and a double bed that are covered with decorative quilts. A picture, approximately 1920's vintage, of a beautiful young mother and child hangs on one wall next to a christening dress and white shoes. On the south wall hangs another pose of the same mother and child. Tiny blue leather shoes and two more pictures of children, little boys, also hang on this wall. On the trunk at the foot end of one of the beds sits cream colored high topped shoes circa 1930's that were in the inventory of Fred Cottrell's "Blackbird Store" in Ravenna when it went out of business in 1980. (This store had the look and smell of an old time general store that somehow survived sixty years past it's time! Fred's inventory was so extensive that stock sometimes became antiques before it sold.) A small child's quilt sits by the shoes. On the north wall hangs a collection of other children's pictures, although not actual photos. The spacious closet in this room will soon be converted to a bathroom. Now it holds a crib of 1940-50's vintage that can be assembled for very young guests.

The *Jennifer* room on the southeast is part of the turret and thus curves outward also. These large windows look southeast onto main street. The room is decorated in colors of hunter green and paisley and contains a double bed and a couch that makes into a bed. The regular bed head and foot is of Tiger oak, named for its striped veneer, as is the chest of drawers. Strangely enough, these pieces weren't purchased at the same time. A small writing desk sits by the door. This room contains a large closet that will also be converted to a bathroom in the future.

The Shraders own 70 to 80 clocks, and approximately 25-30 are displayed in the house. Many of them are running, and most need to be wound—no small job. One that sits in the living room is a mantle clock made of peach onyx. Another unique clock was given to Betty by a friend, Cee Cee. It is a replica of Shrader's business card, pink with a drawing of the house upon it. It hangs in the enclosed porch on the south. Space does not allow for an adequate discussion of the many unusual clocks. Author was recently in the house at 4:00 p.m. when several of them started chiming. It was a delightful experience and gave the effect of being back in another time.

The loft has a charm all its own and is very popular with visitors. The strong wood studding is still visible as the attic is "unfinished." There are five beds, two couches, an antique rocking chair, and a table and chairs up there. It is dormitory style and is used for large family groups, "slumber parties" and hunters. A few months ago a group of sixteen women rented it for a "slumber party." A few weeks ago a family originally from India stayed up there and were captivated with it, especially in the early evening when the birds started singing. They sounded extremely close because they were—in the tree right next to the house. A group of senior girls from Ravenna High have reserved the loft for a place to sleep after the 2000 post prom party. A beautiful, large 1930's vintage tapestry of a family of elk hangs up there. The colors are a rich gold and brown. A 1950's vintage gas heating stove has been installed up there and heats the entire large area. Two window air conditioners cool in the summer. There are decorative windows on the east and south. By the east window a large geranium grows. In the winter, often a lamp is burning in this window that gives a cozy effect to passers on main street. The second couch that was recently added had to be brought up through the east windows as the steps were too narrow. This was a nerve-racking task!

This article will conclude in the next edition of *Buffalo Tales*.

**BUFFALO TALES** is the official publication of the Buffalo County Historical Society, a non-profit organization, whose address is P. O. Box 523, Kearney, NE 68848-0523.

Dr. Roger P. Davis, Editor

2000 Annual dues, payable January 1, are:

- Basic Membership .....\$15.00
- Institutional Membership .....\$20.00
- Supporting Membership .....\$30.00 +

Life memberships are \$150.00 for individual, \$200.00 for husband and wife.

**Directors**

Term expiring June 1, 2001: Edward Anderson, Wilma Larson, Janeen Vokoun and Jack Homer.

Term expiring June 1, 2002: James R. Ganz, Sr., Larry Nansel, Dan Spiers and Robert W. Goldenstein.

Term expiring June 1, 2003: Dora Day, Jan Fern, Joyce Sullwold and Wayne Humphrey.

**Officers (1 year term)**

- President ..... Larry Nansel
- Vice-President ..... Robert Goldenstein
- Secretary ..... Janeen Vokoun
- Treasurer ..... Mardi Anderson

**TRAILS & RAILS MUSEUM**

We have had a good summer with a record number of guests at the museum. It is good to know that our attendance has increased each year for the last 10 years. Many of the guests have been to the Archway and that is good but we also are becoming better known across the state. Although we are now closed for the season we have opened for several large groups who called for an appointment. This will also add to our overall attendance record.

Our next project is **THE CHRISTMAS TREE WALK**, which will be held December 2nd through December 10th. We are planning on a record number of trees and from early reports, it sounds like some very unique trees will be displayed. We do possibly have room for two or three more if you know of anyone who would like to take part. Our theme this year is **"CHRISTMAS CAROLS AT TRAILS AND RAILS."**

When you are called to help, please help Wilma by saying "Yes" or call her and volunteer.

Remember that we also have a Bake Sale and food is needed. You may bring it any day of the week we are open as this runs continuously with new food each day.

This project is a fun time and also a fund raiser, so we need your support. We are planning expanded hours plus many extras. Watch for more information, or call 234-0321, or 237-7327 for more information.

--Margaret Hohnholt, Volunteer Director

Trails & Rails Museum 706 West 11th Street (308) 234-3041

**Buffalo County Historical Society**  
**Box 523**  
**Kearney, NE 68848-0523**

Address Correction Requested

L  
 FLOYD RANDALL  
 11025 RAVENNA RD  
 GIBBON NE 68840

Non-Profit Organization  
 Bulk Rate  
 U.S. Postage  
 PAID  
 Postal Permit No. 7  
 Kearney, Nebraska