

FOURTH GENERATION STILL WORKING STEVENS CENTENNIAL FARM

by
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If George L. Stevens, great grandfather of Ervin "Skip" Stevens Jr. can look down from his spot in the hereafter he's bound to be smiling. The farm he bought in 1879 is still owned and operated by his descendents. The Stevens property became a centennial farm in 1979 when Ervin Stevens Sr. sold to his son Ervin Jr., better known as "Skip".

Great grandpa must also be amazed and shaking his head in disbelief as he views new buildings on his original holdings, modern farm equipment, and most of all, the value of farmland as prices continue to rise.

Ervin Stevens Sr. remembers his grandfather and he told how the centennial farm originally came into the family.

"Grandpa came from New Hampshire and settled on a farm in southern Minnesota. A severe drought in 1878 combined with a grasshopper plague forced him to give up his stake", Stevens said. "Discouraged but not defeated, grandpa struck out for the tall pine lumbering country in northern Minnesota in June."

George L. Stevens only had 10 cents in his pocket when he landed in Rock Creek. Fortunately he found a job immediately working in a sawmill and by Christmas he was able to send for his wife and six month old infant son. "The baby was my dad", Ervin Sr. said. "Grandma cooked for the loggers when she arrived!"

The sawmill was located on the Harold Baum property and in the spring, George Stevens bought 80 acres in the same area. Eventually he bought another 100 acres to join his original 80 and later 200 acres on another farm. Today, one hundred years later "Skip" Stevens farms 246 acres of the original farm that was recorded in the county courthouse on June 28, 1879.

Skip's job is simple compared to that of his great grandfather. The land was heavily wooded one hundred years ago and before they could plow a single furrow the pioneer family had to put in long, hard labor hours cutting trees, grubbing out stumps and picking rock.

Ervin Stevens Sr. said, "People often wondered why the pioneers cut all the trees around the building site. The woods were so heavy they had to make a large clearing around the buildings so some air would circulate".

Oxen were used for all the heavy chores around the farm. "Grandpa raised his own oxen and trained them to work in teams when they were calves", Stevens Sr. said. "Many stumps were pulled out by a good team. Today a big "cat" can clear 10 acres of land in no time at all", he added.

Potatoes and hay were the primary crops in the newly grubbed out soil. The wood was piled for fuel, the potatoes and hay served as winter foods for family and livestock. The first water supply on the Stevens farm was an open well with a bucket. An indentation in the ground where the well was located is still visible.

The closest neighbor in 1879 was over two miles away. Winters were long.

George L. Stevens was attached to his land and as he acquired more he envisioned his sons as his neighbors. When they grew to manhood and married, George split the acreage between them. Two sons received 90 acres each and one received 160 because it was not considered the quality of land on the other two farms. Forty acres were retained for pasture. Each son built a set of buildings on his property.

Ervin Sr. said, "Some of the land was swampy and hard to get into but during the depression that lowland saved our farm. We went in with a sythe, cut the hay and hauled it out by hand". He recalled another time when the farm was in danger. "In 1912 times were so tough the trees were cut so cattle could eat the leaves".

The original farm was not surveyed when George Stevens bought it 100 years ago. People just stepped things off and divided it up. The house was built on what appeared to be the most desirable spot. Years later when the land was finally surveyed it was discovered that part of the house was on the neighbors property. "Grandpa had to buy that 30 to save his house", Ervin Sr. laughed.

The neighbor was equally unsure of the property line for he piled all of his rocks on the Stevens land. "I was still moving rock from that pile as late as 1946", Ervin Sr. said.

"Grandpa helped start the first creamery in Rock Creek and was treasurer on the Board", he said. "It really bothered me to have to vote to close that creamery".

Ervin Stevens Sr. felt it was important that nobody ever urged him to stay on the farm and yet four generations of Stevens have decided they prefer farming although they were trained for other occupations.

Ervin Stevens Sr. is a member of the bricklayers and carpenters unions and worked at those trades before and while farming. "Skip" followed the advice of his father and did work off the farm for awhile. When he graduated from high school he enrolled in a vocational school and became a diesel mechanic. Later he worked as service manager for John Deere Industrial Dealership and lived in Minneapolis and St. Cloud.

Ervin Sr. and his wife Barbara raised three sons, a daughter and a niece. While some of their children wanted to live on the property and built homes there they chose to make a living in other occupations. It was Ervin Jr., and his wife Nancy who decided they would like to carry on the family tradition and farm the land.

"At first it was fun to leave home but I always enjoyed farming", Skip said. When the first of their three sons arrived Skip and Nancy seriously considered moving back to the farm. It was a hard decision for them to make but one they don't regret. They are hoping at least one of their sons will want to carry on and will some day take over "Maple Grove Farm". "We have to admit we'll be a little disappointed if they don't", they said.

Ervin Stevens Sr. looked out over the spread of land that had been in his family for 100 years. Memories of good times and bad filled his mind.

He pointed to a clump of trees that marks the graves of an aunt and uncle who dies of diptheria. "Everyone who has ever lived on that place has just plowed around those trees", he said. "I guess we never give the pioneers credit for their hard work. No doubt they often were disgusted and discouraged but they were really contented people who preferred working for themselves. They were independent".