

Lena celebrates 100th with Rio Vista memories

By Kristin Delaplane

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This summer Lena Christian Nielsen Emigh, born June 17, 1899, on the family's Rio Vista wheat farm, was feted at the Congregational Church on her 100th birthday. Lena traces her heritage back to Denmark. Her parents migrated to San Francisco in the 1890s.

Lena's father, Loren Nielsen, worked in a livery stable where they rented out horses and buggies for people who wanted to ride through the park. Her mother, Dorothea, worked for a family as a maid.

They were from different villages in Denmark, but knew of each other. They met in San Francisco and were married in 1895. Lena's father spent one season working on a farm near Rio Vista, had liked it and decided that would be their future. In 1897, the couple purchased a 380-acre ranch in the rolling hills five miles from the small township of Rio Vista. They moved in when Lena's older sister was just six months old. The family would eventually include four girls.

When the couple first moved to Rio Vista, there were few structures. According to Lena, "There was a house and barn and another for storing sacks for grain. They had no electricity or indoor pumping. We used coal oil lamps and candles for light," she said. "I can remember going to bed carrying a candle. We had the wooden coal stove that they cooked on and that was all the heating we had for all the rooms. The only transportation was horse and buggy. That's how we went to school. The school was a 1 1/2 miles away."

Lena's parents went to town using a horse and buggy.

"The folks had to into town to get the mail and the few groceries they needed," she said. "We didn't need many groceries because of all the staples they had on the ranch. They had eggs from the chickens and they milked the cows. The cream from that milk was churned into butter. And Mother baked all the bread, rye and pumpernickel bread."

The girls helped out on the farm. One job was to get rid of the mullin weed.

"It's a little bushy weed that grows profusely in the spring," remembered Lena. "My father would give each a hoe and we would whack every one of those weeds and get

them out of the ground.”

Another job was to help plant the grain seed in the winter when the days were foggy.

“My father had a two-wheel cart with a bin contraption on the one side for the seed, which he could open and shut. The cart was hitched up to the horses and as he would go around the field, he would open the bin to throw the seed out. If it was a real foggy day, he couldn’t see where the last track was when he came around again, so one of us girls would have to get on the horse to help guide him.”

Because there were no boys in the family, a chore man was hired full-time. His room-and-board was provided and he ate with the family. During the harvest season about five more men were hired. They stayed in a bunkhouse on the farm. Lena’s mother also cooked their meals, but they ate apart from the family.

When it was time to harvest the grain, Lena’s father brought out his team of 28 horses and mules and hitched them to his threshing machine.

Lena explained the operation:

“They had two men in this compartment where the grain would come into the harvester. One would have this sack in front of him. There was a spout and the seed would come into the harvester through that and the man would hold up the sack to fill it.

“When the 100-pound sack was full, he would hand it over to the other fellow, the sack sewer. He would sew the top of that sack, making an ear with the material on each end. The ears were handles. When they got three or four sacks, they would trip this board and the sacks would slide down onto the field. A man with a big wagon would come along and pick up the sacks and back to the ranch.”

At noontime the workers took a break. This also unhitching the 28-mule-and-horse team and taking them back to the barn. The crew of at least five men was then fed their noon meal.

The 100-pound sacks of grain were stored on the ranch and sometimes taken to town where they were stored in a warehouse along the dock of the Sacramento River.

“There were always grain buyers from out of town,” explained Lena. “They usually came from Stockton. After you sold your grain, it was up to them to haul it away.”

The grain was loaded on barges at the dock and taken to Stockton.

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