

Emigh recalls simple, fun times in Rio Vista

By Kristin Delaplane

Sunday, August 08, 1999

When Soren and Dorthea Nielsen first moved to their farm near Rio Vista in 1897, there was a one-story house with a kitchen, dining room, living room and one bedroom. As the family grew to four girls, Soren added two more bedrooms. Furnishings were simple; in the living room, a chair, a couch, some throw rugs on the wood floors.

Water was obtained from a well. There was running water, but never any indoor toilets. In the bedrooms was a pitcher and washbowl for simple washing. "I don't think we got a bath every day," said Lena. When they did, "My mother would heat the water and we would take a bath in a round tub in the middle of the kitchen floor." While the girls were still young, Soren fixed a special room for a tub.

The girls' clothes were generally ordered through the Spiegel catalogue. In those days, girls wore dresses, never pants. Washing the clothes was done on the back porch.

Lena described the operation. "The wooden wash machine had a handle that, when turned, would agitate the clothes. Then they went through a hand wringer, which was on the machine. Then we'd put the clothes in a tub of cold water. There was another wringer on that tub. Then we put the clothes out on the line."

Once the clothes were dry, there was the ironing and, as Lena remarked, most of the dresses had to be starched. "With four girls there was lots of ironing. On a hot day my mother would be in the dining room with the door closed to the kitchen, where she had a roaring fire going in the wood stove to heat the flatirons. When one iron got a too cold, she'd have to run back to the kitchen and get a new iron."

Soren and Dorthea Nielsen (they became known as Sam and Mary) were religious people and Lena can remember when the girls started going to Sunday school. "We bought our Model T in 1914. That's when we started going to church." There was no Lutheran Church, so the family attended the Congregational Church, one of only two churches in town.

When Lena graduated from grade school, she moved onto high school in Rio Vista. Lena described the stage-like bus she took to town. "They had added enough seats to carry maybe six kids. At the time I started high school, they were having classes in a big lodge hall. That was the year they were building the high school."

When Lena's mother emigrated from Denmark, she came with a girlfriend who also married a farmer in Rio Vista. Her daughter was Lena's best friend. When they were teens, a big treat was going to San Francisco. "Mabel and I would get on a steamers at five or six o'clock in the evening. We'd eat our dinner and sleep on the boat. When we'd wake up, we'd be in San Francisco. We'd spend the day shopping and get back on the boat in the evening. We'd be here the next morning and the folks would meet us."

Following her high school graduation, Lena went to work as a bookkeeper at a bank in town. It was during this time that she attended a dance at Bird's Landing and met Arthur Emigh. "That was quite a popular place for dances and parties. They had one party that was famous called the Strawberry Festival. All the young people, they went to that."

Arthur and Lena were married on the ranch in 1922. Lena recalled the day. "I was married in the dress that I made in sewing class. It was the one I wore when I graduated."

Lena made her home on the 1,000-acre Emigh farm, a wheat and sheep farm located three miles from town. Lena explained how her husband took over the farm. "His father had farmed the ranch and then my husband and his brother took over. When the war came along (World War I), they had to leave one on the ranch. They flipped a coin and his brother went to the service." When he returned, he wasn't interested in farming.

Lena lived much as her mother had. "They didn't have any electricity either," she said. "We had a wood and coal stove and I went through the same thing with the washing. I would do the cooking for the harvest and sheep shearing crews just like my mother. It was a lot of hard work. After the children came along, it was harder yet."

Lena and Arthur had two boys and a girl. In 1949, Lena's life became easier when she and Arthur bought a house in town. Arthur retired and his sons took over the family operation, one in raising sheep, the other grain.

Arthur died in 1961. Lena is active with the Congregational Church and enjoys her eight grandchildren, 18 great-grandchildren and one great-great-grandson.

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