

HILLMER, Ernest C. and Ida and a short history of Congress, Saskatchewan

Ernest C. Hillmer was born in Stillwater, Washington Co., Minnesota on Oct 5, 1872. He moved with his parents, who were both born in Germany, to Wanbury, South Dakota when he was a young lad.

He met and married Ida Backman, whose parents lived in the nearby village of Strandburg which had a population of Swedish immigrants. She was working in Milbank, Grant Co., South Dakota. Ernest started a tailor shop and, after they were married in October 22, 1894, they took over a small hotel which was managed by Ida.

Their first child, Chester, was born August 25, 1895. Five more children, Alphonzo (Fonse), Edith, Irving, Bernice, and Kenneth (Pete) were all born in Milbank.

In 1906, Ernest (Ernie) decided to file a homestead some 300 miles north of Milbank, near Lemmon, Perkins Co., South Dakota. He moved there with his wife and six children in the spring of 1907. They trekked across country from Dickinson, South Dakota in a covered wagon. A bachelor from an adjoining homestead came along with another team and wagon load of lumber. They lost their way and were about 5 days on the trail before reaching a homestead with a 10 x 12 foot shack. By this time the provisions were running low. They ran out of bread but managed to buy a loaf from a homesteader's wife. When they eventually reached their homestead, they were very thankful for a pot of bean soup that another bachelor, who was looking after things, had cooking on the stove and some cold pancakes left over from his breakfast.

Another son, George, was born on this homestead but otherwise the four years spent there were not very profitable. In 1909, they received a letter from Ida's brother-in-law, Gustave P. Mollberg, who had migrated from Marvin, South Dakota to a homestead about 65 miles southwest of Moose Jaw. He told them there was good land to be homesteaded so in the fall of 1910, Ernie went to Moose Jaw. He was met by his brother-in-law and managed to file a homestead in the same district on SE 22-9-2-3 and in April 1911, the rest of the Hillmer family moved to Saskatchewan.

Ernie loaded a freight car with horses, cattle and household furnishings in Haynes, North Dakota which was along the Milwaukee Road's transcontinental line known as the Pacific Extension. He took the three older boys, Chester, Fonse and Irving with him on the freight train. Ida took the passenger train with the four younger children, Edith, Bernice, Kenneth and George now nearly 2 years old and they arrived in Moose Jaw ahead of the freight train. Irving contracted the measles enroute which followed an epidemic of measles in the small community upon their arrival.

Uncle Gust met the family in Moose Jaw with a team and a democrat. He took them as far as McFadden's stopping place the first night, some 20 miles from Moose Jaw, and the balance of the way the following day. Mrs. Mollberg (Emma), Ida's older sister, took the family in and kept them until the first building could be erected. The lumber was hauled from Moose Jaw by team and wagon. The building was later used as a barn

once a proper house was built by George Berg, son of Mrs. Henry Berg, a widow. The Mollbergs' had persuaded her to come to Canada with eight of her children. The four older boys filed on homesteads. The current day Congress cemetery resides on part of Adolph Berg's original homestead. The Bergs also arrived from Marvin, South Dakota.

The Mollbergs' had two sons, George and Carl, who also homesteaded in the area and a younger adopted daughter, Isabel (Sabel).

Reverend Mollberg organized the Baptist Church and he held services in his own home until the Progress Hill School was built and opened in October, 1911. Mr. Mollberg was ordained to be a minister in the Baptist Convention of Saskatchewan on January 14th, 1914. This same year it was decided to have a mission in Assiniboia. Reverend Mollberg served from 1912 to 1920 in this area assisted by O.M. Morse and C.W. Clark.

The Hillmer family always attended church and Sunday school and in 1919 a Baptist Church was built. Ida Hillmer was one of the early members who taught Sunday school and she was a diligent worker in the Ladies' Aid as well and she remained a member until her death in 1936.

The Mollbergs had a large house and it was used for many social events such as the Ladies' Aid socials, Sunday school picnics and weddings. Ida Mollberg usually boarded the local school teacher and fed and befriended many of the local bachelors. Quite a number of them were newly arrived from Sweden and with her welcome, they found a home while getting started in a new country. Many of them attended the Progress Hill School for a few months to learn to read and write a little English.

The first breaking of the Hillmer homestead was done by George Halkestad and Simon Johnson. They broke about 28 acres with a steam engine and the first crop was flax which was the usual choice for newly broken land. It yielded about 29 bushels per acre and was hauled to Dunkirk which was the nearest rail connection in 1912. Once the railway came through to Congress in the end of December, Him Hennessy started a local grocery store and the Dewdrop post office was moved with the store.

There were a number of other families already settled in the Congress area; Gorius, Burgeson, Fordyce, Sumwalt and Nils Pederson to name a few. The hamlet of Congress came into being about 1917. Its' streets were named after USA presidents with the main street named Wilson Street.

The Hillmer family grew by four more children. Victor was born in August 1911, Leona (Pat) in March 1914, Pearl in October 1916 but she only lived a few hours. Her grave was one of the first in the Congress Cemetery. And lastly, Sidney (Dick), was born in April 1918.

Chester Hillmer married Letty Gorius and Bernice Hillmer married William (Bill) Gorius and all four moved to the Peace River country in Alberta during the dirty thirties. Bill and Chester initially filed on homesteads in the Chinook Valley District. They later sold their homesteads and moved to Grande Prairie, Alberta. The two men built houses side by side when they first moved to Grande Prairie and the four all died and were buried in the area.

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