

Pioneer Biography of Daniel Roloff, Kulm, North Dakota

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Daniel Roloff was born to Fredrich and Catherina (Klieble) Roloff in Taratina [Tarutino], South Russia on April 1st, 1862. His father was a laborer and worked out for people.

Daniel did not receive much education, especially in the English language. He had a chance to obtain some schooling in German schools in South Russia in the Taratina [Tarutino] vicinity, and learned the language and also how to write it.

Mr. Roloff had three sisters and one brother. The Roloff family did various odd jobs to help make a living. They were very poor, being in the peasant class.

When Daniel Roloff became about 18 or 19 years of age he went out and worked for himself. Receiving small wages he managed to save some Russian rubles each month.

At the age of 22, in 1884, Louisa Radke and he were united in marriage, Reverend Fischer officiating at the ceremony, which was held in Kulm, South Russia.

Daniel continued to work at odd jobs including farm work. A year after being married, a daughter named Melitha was born to this union. About this time Jacob Schlapps, who had gone to America alone to find land and a place to settle, returned to Russia to get his family. He met and told Mr. Roloff of the many chances of obtaining land here and that one could get three quarters of land at one time, namely: Preemption, Tree Claim, and Homestead. As Daniel did not have any land in South Russia and it was very hard to make a living there with his limited education, he and his family decided to come to America. Mr. Roloff states that this was the only reason, as stated, for his coming to the United States, the Czar not bothering him or forcing him to join the Russian Army.

In the fall of 1885, Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Roloff and one-year-old daughter, Melitha, boarded a train at Kulm, South Russia, went to Leipzig, South Russia, and traveled to Bremen, Germany. They had some clothing and bedding. In his pocket Mr. Roloff had 300 Russian rubles. The train journey took about three days. The family had to stay over one day in Bremen before they could board a ship. They were fortunate in obtaining good passage for their voyage, a modern ship, at that time, called "Missler,"¹ being the means of their transportation over the Atlantic Ocean. The voyage did not have a mishap or trouble of any kind. Some of the passengers became seasick, however. The trip took nine days, from Bremen, Germany to New York, New York. Mr. Roloff does not remember the cost of the trip. Landing in New York they had to stay over one day. While there Daniel changed the remainder of the Russian rubles he had left into American money. He received about 45 cents in American coin for every Russian ruble.

Taking a train to Parkston, Dakota, the Roloff family was met at the depot by Carl Radke, an uncle of Mrs. Daniel Roloff. Mr. Radke had a farm one mile east of Parkston and the Daniel Roloff family spent the winter of 1885-86 on his farm. Daniel helped Mr. Radke with the chores and farm work while Mrs. Roloff helped Mrs. Radke in taking care of her children. The Roloffs did not receive any wages but were given their room and board.

In the spring of 1886, Mr. Roloff purchased a wagon and immediately started to make it into a covered wagon. The framework was made of wood, and canvas, purchased in Parkston, Dakota, was stretched over this said framework. Mr. Roloff purchased two oxen for \$75, one cow for \$25, and one kerosene lamp for less than a dollar. Then he was in financial difficulty, not having any more funds.

Together with the Gottlieb Isaak, Gottlieb Mund, Gottlieb Schneider, and Carl Hillius families, Mr. and Mrs. Daniel Roloff and daughter started for what is now North Dakota. They traveled by train as far as Ellendale, Dakota. Unloading their cattle, oxen, wagons, and personal belongings here these pioneer families set out for Hoskins, Dakota, which is now extinct. However, at that time, it was located about three or four miles northwest of the present site of Ashley, North Dakota, where Lake Hoskins is located. The reason for this journey to Hoskins was to find out where they could locate for homesteads and preemptions. Mr. John Wishek was head of the land office there and helped settlers get located.

The Roloff family found a suitable place on section 26, township 132 and range 67 in Springfield Township, McIntosh County, Dakota Territory. As they had no means to build a home, Mr. Roloff dug a hole in the ground the width and breadth of their wagon box. He had dug deep enough so that they could stand up and walk under this wagon box. An entrance was also dug, so that they could crawl out. The Roloff family lived under here until May 1886.

The same month in which Mr. Roloff located on his land, March 1886, three men, Daniel Grosz, Simon Keeson, and he, walked to Hoskins to file their claims. On the way, the distance being about 30 miles cross-country, Mr. Grosz suddenly became sick. The weather was very disagreeable and unsettled. Mr. Keeson and Mr. Roloff had to spend some time with Mr. Grosz in order to revive him so that they would be able to go on, stopping in a convenient place. The men had started out on foot in the early morning and reached Hoskins, Dakota, late in the evening. John Wishek, the government man in charge of the land office there was very kind to them and did everything he could in the way of hospitality. He fed them, found a suitable place for them to take a bath and gave them beds in which to sleep. The next morning these three men started for home, returning the same way as they had come to Hoskins, via foot. The purpose of their visit to Hoskins, Dakota Territory, was twofold – one to file their claims and the other to see just how thickly the settlement was populated. They found shacks not so plentiful in that area.

While living under this wagon box a queer incident occurred. Mr. Roloff had made a baking oven out of lime. Home-made bricks were fashioned from this lime and a crude, but substantial, oven was built outside. It was from three to four feet high, about three feet wide and about four feet wide [sic]. An opening, about one foot high, was left to do the baking. One day, the latter part of March, a cyclone came along, said cyclone not being very big, and did some damage to this effect: Mrs. Roloff had some coffee cakes in this oven in order for them to bake. The oven, being too hot when the opening was closed with a piece of tin, was left open so that the cakes could bake more slowly. This small cyclone came along and whisked out the coffee cakes from the oven and spread them all over the prairie.

Mr. and Mrs. Roloff picked buffalo bones in their territory and often walked from 20 to 25 miles away from their wagon box home in doing this kind of work. Their two oxen pulled a double box wagon, which was borrowed from a neighbor, Mr. John Miller, and taking their small daughter, Melitha, along with them, they traveled around the vicinity and worked until they had this wagon full of bones. The price at that time, April 1886, was \$10 per ton. They picked \$200 worth of buffalo bones from the latter part of March until the middle part of May. Their main purpose in working so hard to obtain all the bones they could was to get enough money to help build their first home, even though it could not be made entirely of lumber. Mr. Roloff relates that he hauled these bones to Ellendale, Dakota, where he sold them. He also states that he saw piles of clean, white bones, in Ellendale, Dakota, that were all of a half a block in circumference.

A small, one-room shack, 8' X 12' in size, was built in May 1886. It was built of lumber and sod, the roof and top side walls down to the window frame were made

of lumber, the rest of the shack being made of sod. It had one door and one window and the date the Roloff family moved into this home was June 1886. It was lighted with the kerosene lamp purchased in Parkston, Dakota. This first shack contained all home-made furnishings, namely: a bed, swing for the baby, one table, two benches, and a stove. The stove was made of lime bricks, home-made, and has been described above. Twisted hay, obtained from nearby sloughs, was burned in this stove. Food was secured from Ellendale, Dakota. A large straw sack, brought from Russia, was filled with hay and served as their mattress. The bed was made of rough boards and nailed together in crude fashion just so they had something to sleep on.

The first well of the Roloff family was approximately 100 yards from their home. It was very shallow and near a slough. Mr. Roloff relates that often, while getting water here, which he had only to dip out, he found small snakes, lizards, and frogs in the water. He dipped them out and threw them as far as he could. Then he dipped a clear pail of water and took it home. This was their drinking water at that time.

In March 1887, Mr. Roloff built a larger shack on his homestead. By this time he had proven up his homestead, preemption, and tree claims, three quarters in Roloff Township, McIntosh County. This second home was built "half and half." Lumber and sod were used and the house was built on the same order as the first home, only it was larger and had more windows. Prior to building this second home, the Roloff family had a hard time with their one-window shack.

Mr. Roloff says, "In the winter of 1886-87 we only had one gallon of kerosene for the whole winter. When this one gallon was gone we had to find something else for lighting the home. We had brought some home-made flax sacks along from Russia and cut narrow strips from these. Then we broke a small clay pot in such a way that we could place this strip of flax sack (one strip at a time), in this pot and have it sticking up and over the top of this pot. We had fat and grease in the house and put a large quantity of this at the bottom of this pot. The strip soaked these up and served like a wick. This was our light for several months. Many mornings we would wake up and find our one window blown shut with snow. We did not know whether it was morning or still night. Our one door on our little hut opened inward so I shoveled myself out and around to the window and got it cleared of snow. I had to shovel myself out many times like a wolf out of a hole. However, we were never frightened. Our house was warm.

In the spring of 1887 Mr. Roloff put in ten acres of flax with his team of oxen, a hand plow, and a drag. He seeded by hand. He did not realize a bushel of grain due to drought. Having nothing to do for the present time, five men and neighbors—namely Carl Hillius, Daniel Netz, Simon Keeson, Daniel Roloff, and John Schneider—decided to dig a well and call it a "A Cooperative Well." This was in the latter part of May 1887. It was dug about six feet deep and located about one-half mile northwest of the Roloff homestead. The men curbed it with stones and fixed a roller on top, adjusted a rope to this, and tied a pail to the end of the rope. Though the well was only six feet deep they thought it necessary to have a roller because when children would have to get water it would be easier for them to haul the water up in this manner.

After his crop failure in the summer of 1887, Mr. Roloff decided to join three of his neighbors, Simon Keeson, Fredrick Flegel, and Christian Kroll, and go with them to Parkston, Dakota, to look for employment, as the crops there were good. A son of Mr. Mund took these four men to Ellendale with a team of oxen and wagon. Here they boarded a train and journeyed to Aberdeen, Dakota. The latter town, at that time, had a population of about 500. Mr. Roloff relates a story pertaining to this trip.

When these four men reached Aberdeen they found out that they had to stay overnight in that city. As they were very low on money they went to look for a place to sleep in some livery barn. They would have stayed in a hotel but they could not afford to. Finally they found a livery barn which contained one horse. They gathered sufficient hay to make two beds on the floor and went into a corner and made themselves comfortable. About this time the owner of the horse came to feed the animal and was going to give it hay. He saw these four men in the corner and became frightened, thinking they were wanderers or bad men. He notified the sheriff and these four were taken into custody. They were badly frightened and what made the situation more complicated was that neither one could speak English to explain their business. They were taken to the court house, searched, and questioned. When they couldn't speak English or understand what was being asked of them, their belongings, which were very little, were taken away from them and they were put in jail for that night. They were very much alarmed and nearly cried. Neither one of the four slept as much as a half an hour that night. The next morning an interpreter was brought before them and they all tried to speak at once. Everything was finally straightened out; their belongings given back to them, the officers patted them on their backs, called them "good boys" and gave them a good send-off.

Arriving in Parkston, Dakota, in the middle of June 1887, Daniel Roloff found employment with Carl Stelzer for one month, working in the harvest fields. He was paid \$20 for one month. He then found employment with John Henke for another month, with the same wages and same kind of work. The rest of the men found similar employment and earned as much, too.

With the \$40 Mr. Roloff earned, he purchased a cow. He also obtained two ponies, buying these on credit. They cost \$60. Mr. Roloff relates that with their new acquisitions they felt rich, especially having three quarters of land, too. They were very happy.

Mr. Roloff farmed for about 40 years on his original homestead. Five children were born here, making six children in all. The names of the children born on this farm are Nathaniel, Gotthilf, Reinhold, Leah, and Tevalt.

In the year of 1926, Mr. and Mrs. Roloff retired from active farming, moving to Kulm. While spending a few weeks on their farm visiting, Mrs. Roloff suddenly became ill and passed away on the farm, nine miles southwest of Kulm, North Dakota. Mr. Roloff remained a widower for one year. He then married Catherina Hieb, Kulm, and lived with her in the present house in which he is residing. They were united for two years and she passed away, Kulm being her place of death. Mr. Roloff was a widower for another year and married Carolina Sockman. They were united for about three years and his third wife passed away in the city of Kulm. Mr. Roloff remained a widower for about one and one-half years and again married, his fourth wife being Sophia Zahn. They are living in the city of Kulm and are devoted church members, belonging to the Congregational Church of Kulm.

Mr. Roloff is 76 years of age and is still very active for his age. His present wife is in ill health at this writing, June 1938. Through two bank failures Mr. Roloff has lost nearly all of his money and is making application for old age pension.

Editor's note: Some of the dates in this account given to the WPA field worker differ from the Roloff family history published in the 1992 Kulm, ND Centennial book.

¹ Editor's note: "Missler" is not the name of a ship, but was actually the German travel company that arranged for many German-Russian immigrants' travel to America. This agent worked primarily for the North German Steamship Line.