

# Generations of Life on the Missouri River

Herb Grenz has a vivid memory of the Missouri River flood of 1944. The Emmons County rancher was eight years old at the time of the flood. The family ranch in western Emmons County along the Missouri River had seen floods nearly every year and 1944 was no different.

Grenz, now in his 80s, can't say why that flood was so memorable as it certainly was not the largest flood Emmons County would experience. That distinction was given the 1952 flood, which ironically occurred as the Garrison Dam, built for the purpose of reducing catastrophic flooding, neared completion. The 1944 flood was not even a particularly damaging event. That year, like most other years, fences were damaged and repaired, paths and dirt roadways had to be refilled in spots and minor lowland cleanup had to be done.

Now, looking back, Herb suspects he remembers that particular year because, unknown to him at the time, and similarly unknown to his long-time river neighbors – the McCrorys to the south and the Schiermeisters to the north, and most likely unknown to most of the rest of Emmons County – the federal government was finalizing the Flood Control Act of 1944.

An Act that would forever change how the Grenz family, the McCrory family, the Schiermeister family, and many more just like them, would thereafter have use, access and benefit from that river. The Grenz family and their neighbors up and down the river expected, even in some ways relied on, annual floods. They were a dependable and expected annual spring event, as sure as the snow would come in late fall and melt in early spring. Farmers and ranchers welcomed the inflow of floodwaters to replenish their dry and thirsty low-lying hay fields. Once the mountain snow in Montana started melting, however, there were no barriers to those large flows inundating Emmons County, taking fences and roadways with them.

What eight-year-old Grenz did not know at the time was that the 1944 flood occurred as the federal government was finalizing the Flood Control Act of 1944, which would forever change how his family and many others just like it, would use, access and benefit from Missouri River water.

Grenz's grandparents settled the family ranch in the early 1900s. They had come from Ukraine, joining many thousands of other such immigrants looking for

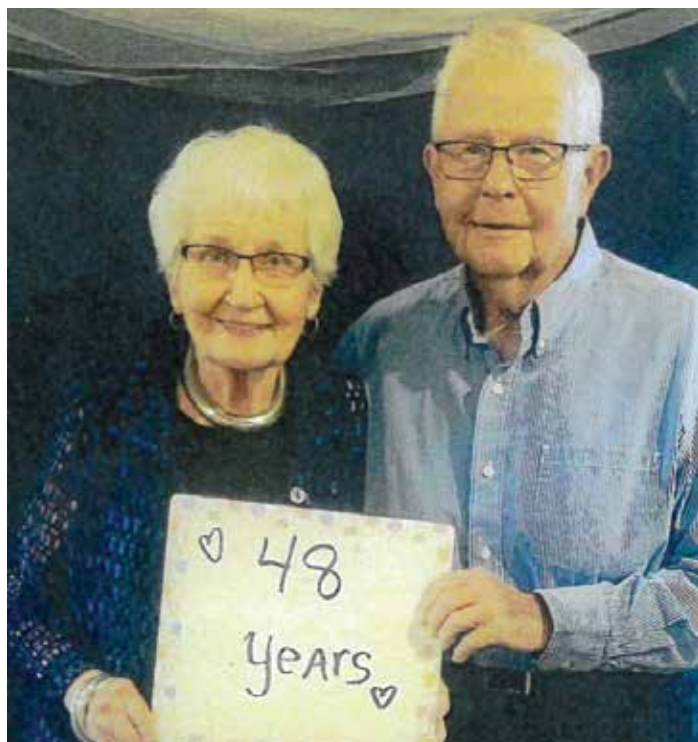
opportunities offered to them in the United States. Grenz's father, Godfrey, was 12 when they arrived in western Emmons County. At the time, Emmons County was an unsettled area in a mostly unsettled state.

Godfrey's family eventually included 10 children, of which Herb was the youngest. Large families were not uncommon at the time. Herb's wife of 48 years, Arlene, was herself from a farm family of eight children.

The Grenz family grew and flourished along the river. The spring floods, occurring almost every year, provided a good spring start for hay, and in the dry summer months, they had a simple and efficient irrigation system for their fields. A propane-powered pump easily lifted water 20 feet from the river to the fields and the excess water drained back to the river. Water access was plentiful and there was



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*Herb and Arlene Grenz*

no federal permitting required; no environmental hoops to jump through; and no one to pass judgment on their farming operations. There was also easy and unobstructed access to the river for their cattle.

The Flood Control Act of 1944 changed all of that, some for the better, and some for the worse.

Grenz remembers the building of the dams. The Oahe Dam in South Dakota, completed in 1958, was particularly on their radar. As he recalls, “No one in Emmons County knew much about that dam. We knew it was way down by Pierre, South Dakota, and so we never thought it would impact North Dakota, much less our ranch,” Grenz recalls.

Grenz doesn't recall any public meetings on the dam taking place, only a few vague and incomplete newspaper articles. No one seemed to know that Emmons County, and all the counties along the river, would soon be forever impacted.

The first indication of coming changes from the Oahe Dam was when an Army Corps of Engineers land appraiser came to the ranch. He showed the Grenz family the 2,000 soon-to-be-flooded acres of the ranch. It was good land, easy to irrigate and needed to water their cattle. The Grenz family was shocked.

Grenz asked the Corps agent “How does this affect our access for irrigation ... for cattle ... and in using the hay crop from those lands?” Grenz recalls the agent saying that he did not know. He had no answers. Those issues and others would be decided only after the government took ownership of the land.

The Grenz family was compensated approximately \$40 per acre, from which it had to pay back to the government a 45% capital gains tax, unless it could quickly find other land to buy. Additionally, the ranch lost all direct access to the river though it could “bid” to have access. Gone were the days of dropping a pump in the river during the dry summer months to irrigate their land; now federal permitting and payment of access fees would apply. The Corps later modified the policy and the Grenz family was required to pay (without any opportunity to bid) an annual fee of \$3,000 to have access to the river. Failure to pay meant loss of access, and the Corps would then require the family to fence the entire boundary between the ranch and the river. The Grenz family also had to agree to keep the area mowed and keep noxious weeds and thistles off the land.

Those were the conditions imposed on the Grenz family to use Missouri River water, water which they had for 50 years prior freely, easily and responsibly used. Land that had been the best part of their ranch was now owned by the federal government. Water that had been easy to access and easy to use was no longer available. The ranch, once made



*Flood Control Act of 1944*

up of contiguous acres efficiently managed and farmed, was now fragmented, harder to manage and less efficient.

The loss of use and access experienced by the Grenz family, the McCrory family, and the Schiermeister family was also experienced by many other families, farms and ranches along the river.

Herb and Arlene like to tell a story of a day in the late 1960s or early 1970s when a young family from a nearby town stopped at the Grenz ranch. They asked if they and their two young daughters could walk across the Grenz pastures down to the river shoreline to see it up close and enjoy the river bank. Of course, Herb and Arlene said. But as the family walked along the shoreline, they were being watched from afar by a Corps employee. They did not know that picking up a few stones and tossing them into the river violated government land management policy. They did not know that picking up and taking a small piece of flint from thousands of such scattered pieces would result in a \$500 fine. A \$500 fine, in 1970-era dollars, for picking up a piece of flint.

That story, and many more, represents to Herb and Arlene an example of some of the challenges in working with the Corps.

Herb and Arlene Grenz have persevered through these challenges. They have raised four children, all of whom have pursued and achieved their own successes in life. As is common in farm families across our country, the Grenz children had no interest in staying on the ranch, perhaps in part due to seeing what their parents have gone through to access Missouri River water in the 70 years since Oahe Dam was completed.

To Herb, Arlene and all the other families up and down the river, this article salutes you and thanks you for what you have given up so that the rest of us, all of North Dakota, can receive benefits and opportunities from the Missouri River.