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NOSTALGIA

THE COWBOY AND THE DUTCHMEN

by Margaret Friedrich

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It was wheat-sowing time on the Oklahoma prairie in October of 1895. Two early settlers were giving their newly turned fields of virgin soil the final preparation before broadcasting the precious Turkey Red seed wheat. Philipp Frick and George Koch were close friends and neighbors whose farms lay across the section line from each other. Although the section line was reserved for a road, no roads were built at that time. There was no real barrier between their two farms.

Frick and Koch were part of the small group of twelve families who had left the Volga region in Russia in 1892 to travel together to The United States of America. Responding to advertising in their local German-language newspaper, the group had come to the country where religion was free and land was plentiful. In February of 1893 each head of family had filed on a quarter section of land — 160 acres — in the Cheyenne-Arapaho Opening in Western Oklahoma Territory. These farms were a part of the 300,000 acres which were unclaimed during the third "Run" for Oklahoma lands on April 16, 1892; they were located in northern Washita County near the present town of Bessie.

The first crop of winter wheat, sown in the fall of 1893 to be harvested in the summer of 1894, had been a failure due to a severe drouth. The settlers had almost lost the valuable Turkey Red seed brought so painstakingly from Kansas in their covered wagons. They had harvested only

enough grain to provide seed for another crop and to furnish bread to sustain themselves through the winter. The summer of 1895 was different. Each farmer had had a few surplus bushels to sell. They knew the land was productive.

Since their farms lay side by side, Koch and Frick had formed the habit of working together, first on one side of the section line and then on the other. That October day both young farmers were in excellent spirits. The soil was rich and deep, and they had prepared it well. With the farmers' perpetual optimism they looked forward to an abundant crop in 1896. The morning was cool and sunshiny with a pleasant light breeze, no strong wind. The sky was superbly blue with high cumulus clouds floating overhead — one of those exhilarating days seen on the western Oklahoma prairies.

Because the weather was no longer hot, both men and horses could work more efficiently. George and Philipp joked with each other when they came within shouting distance as they harrowed the field in an ever-decreasing square pattern. All their friends were also working in the fields that day.

Sharing the optimism and enthusiasm of his parishioners, their pastor came riding by on his roan saddle horse and stopped for a brief chat. He was the Reverend John Bunge who had been in the community only since July 5, 1895. He was the first resident pastor of Peace Lutheran Church.

The church had been the earliest project of the twelve families, once shelter had been provided for their families in their half-dugout homes. Since only one church per village was permitted in the German settlements in Russia, these settlers from Neu Straub near Sarotov were all Lutherans. Pastor Bunge shared his delight in their good prospects and was about to ride on when George asked, "Did you bring lumber when you came back from El Reno?" The conversation was carried on in the German language because the new citizens were not quite at ease with the language of their already well-loved country.

"Yes, I got enough for a good-sized table and some bookshelves. In fact, I'm going home now to draw the plans," and his roan cantered away to the sod parsonage a mile east.

Later that afternoon the skies grew darker. The pioneer farmers looked toward the Northwest where they saw a huge dust storm moving in. It approached slowly but steadily. When the storm was nearer, they saw that it was not a prairie wind which propelled the clouds of dust but a large herd of cattle driven by cowboys.

Koch and Frick were well aware of the animosity of the cowmen for the farmers. This attitude was particularly venomous toward the so-called German settlers. More than once they had heard themselves referred to as "them damned Dutchmen," and so had their neighbors.

When the herd had finally passed, and the dust had cleared somewhat, the neighbors noticed that Koch's and Frick's horses had bolted and were standing in the opposite corner of the farm, not in the cultivated field but on the prairie. They could not see the men. Were they trampled by the cattle? Had they been hurt by

the runaway horses dragging the harrows behind them? Could they be hiding among the trees along the small creek on the Koch land? They went to investigate.

When the neighbors arrived, they found Philipp Frick and George Koch lying near each other in the middle of the field. They had been shot dead on that eighteenth day of October, 1895.

Pastor Bunge was summoned to break the news to the families. The men picked up the bodies and put them on two plow horses and took them home. While some of the friends washed and prepared the bodies for burial, others built two coffins with the pastor's new lumber. Still others dug two graves in the newly-dedicated church cemetery. The next day after a Christian funeral they buried side by side the two young victims of the first tragedy in the lonely pioneer community. The graves were marked with crude hand-made markers. There was no money for tombstones.

Years later when there was a little money to spend, the Frick and Koch families erected a single tombstone with twin arches at the head of their graves. It stands today in Peace Lutheran Cemetery across the road from the large brick church and a half mile east of the small town of Bessie in Washita County, Oklahoma.

On the left arch is engraved:

George Wilhelm

KOCH

Born 22 July, 1868

Died 18 Oct., 1895

On the right arch is the inscription:

Johann Philipp

FRICK

Born 8 Oct., (year blank)

Died 18 Oct., 1895

The murderer was never brought to trial. ■