

McCue-Trausch Farmhouse

by Catherine Trausch Renschler

Adams County, located in the region known in the nineteenth century as the Great American Desert, was established in 1867 when Nebraska became a state. The first permanent settlers arrived in 1869 and on December 12, 1871 the county was organized and Juniata chosen as county seat. By the end of 1872 when the Burlington Railroad finished construction across Adams County, settlers, attracted by free homestead land and railroad advertisements of cheap land available on credit, began to pour in.

William Beach purchased the northeast quarter of Section 12, Township 6, Range 11 from the United States on May 6, 1873. He paid cash, \$2.50 per acre, a total of \$400. It is unknown if the Beach family lived on the land or if it was held for speculation. William and Mary Beach of Van Buren County, Michigan sold the quarter section on February 14, 1877 for \$3,000. This sum indicates that improvements had been made.

On November 20, 1886 referees for the estate of Melissa L. Vansickle sold the quarter section at a public sale "in front of Farrells Stone Block in Hastings." Jacob J. Kindig, a prosperous farmer of Woodford County, Illinois, purchased the land for \$3,000. Jacob's cousin, Absalom P. Kindig had moved to Adams County in 1879 and perhaps advised him of the opportunities available. Jacob's only daughter, Mary Ann, was engaged to marry a promising young man named Basil M. McCue. Both the Kindig and McCue families were formerly from Virginia. Jacob and his wife Phebe both of Woodford County, Illinois deeded the quarter section of land to Mary Ann Kindig on December 18, 1886. "According to Mennonite custom the bride's parents provided a farm to the young couple, who had the choice of 80 acres in Illinois or a quarter section in the less expensive lands of Nebraska." They chose Nebraska and moved to the farm shortly after their marriage in 1887.

Basil M. McCue was born March 15, 1863 near Afton, Nelson County, Virginia. His formal schooling was limited to three five-month terms. He left home at 15, worked at a country store for three years then moved to Woodford County, Illinois where he married Mary Ann Kindig.

Adams County was enjoying one of the greatest boom times in its history in 1887. 'Land is King! Owners Are Princes!' the newspapers proclaimed. People believed them. Real estate activities became feverish. From January to March 1887, land transfers entered in the courthouse books ranged from \$50,000 to \$100,000 per day. Hastings was filled with speculators from the East." Later in 1887 the boom collapsed, land values plummeted and the crowds of speculators left the area. Farmers who had made long term investments in land were little affected, but 1888 was a poor crop year and in 1889 commodity prices were low. Even so by 1890 Basil M. McCue had prospered enough to built a large barn. The 100 by 50 foot barn, which stood on the highest hill around, was painted yellow, trimmed in green and immediately became a landmark.

By 1893 the McCue family had grown to include three children. The original frame house became too small for a growing family. Despite the fact that in 1893 Nebraska along with the rest of the nation was in the grip of a depression, Basil M. McCue began the construction of a large two-story frame house, reminiscent of a Virginia plantation manor. The Juniata Herald made this observation: "B. M. McCue, south of town, has his fine new farm mansion completed now and it is a home good enough for anybody. Mr. McCue has a large barn and other buildings, showing that there are at least some farmers who can make a living in this country. The present hard times will probably not reduce such hard working, thrifty, honest farmers as Mr. McCue to the starvation point." Basil's favorite color was yellow and the house was painted to

match the barn, bright yellow trimmed in bright green.

Jacob J. Kindig and his wife, Phebe came to live with the McCue family sometime after the large house was constructed in 1893. Jacob J. Kindig was born in Augusta County, Virginia and moved to Woodford County, Illinois as a young man. Jacob's father, Martin Kindig, was a Mennonite minister at the Springdale Church in Augusta County. Jacob followed in his father's footsteps and also became a minister, serving the Panther Creek Church of the Brethren in Woodford County. After his move to Adams County, Jacob served as a minister to the German Baptist Brethren (commonly called the "Dunkers") congregations near Roseland and at Juniata. The "Dunkers" did not have a formal clergy, but chose members of their congregations who showed true Christ-like living and had the ability to preach. The "Dunkers" were farmers, usually of German heritage, who lived a simple life as opposed to worldly. This meant jewelry and stylish clothing were not accepted. Gambling, taking of oaths, dancing and swearing were all forbidden. They were family and community oriented, the large families usually intermarrying. Unlike some other "plain" religious groups, the "Dunkers" were advanced in their farming methods and accepted useful household improvements. Jacob Kindig was involved in the establishment of the German Baptist Brethren congregation in Juniata and a church building was erected there in 1893. Jacob's grandson, Elbert McCue remembered hearing his grandfather preach in the little frame church in Juniata. The congregation disbanded in the 1930s and unfortunately its records and those of the Roseland congregation are lost.

Basil M. McCue was a large-scale farmer for the latter 1800s when most farm labor was accomplished by the muscles of men and beasts. His large barn contained stalls for 16 head of horses. In addition to the quarter section where the farmstead is located, he purchased 80 acres adjoining to the south, and a quarter section a half-mile north. With this large amount of land Basil needed hired hands. He didn't have to look far to find them. The Adams County Poor Farm was located across the road to the north.

One of the earliest acts of the county commissioners had been the selection of a poor farm site on the south half of Section 1, Township 6, Range 11, five miles south of Juniata, in the 32-Mile Creek valley. The commissioners ordered a road built straight south out of Juniata, the county seat, to the poor farm. The road, now known as Juniata Avenue, remains today, dead-ending at the northwest corner of the McCue farm.

Because McCue hired poor farm inmates to work on his farm, the farmhouse was built in an unusual configuration. A wall running front to back through the center of the house separates the second floor. Two stairways lead to the second floor, one to each half. Basil's son, Elbert recalled the house had been constructed so the hired men who slept on the north side upstairs had no access to the family quarters on the south side upstairs. Only the family had access to the second story front porch, which is entered from the south side upstairs hall. Elbert remembered the inmates from the County Poor Farm who lived with the McCue family and received their room and board plus a small amount of money for their labor. One of these men, Philip Wagner, became a permanent member of the McCue family, moved to Finney County Kansas with them, and lived in their home until his death.

Basil McCue's farming operation was financially successful and in 1901 and 1902 he purchased 560 acres in Silver Lake Township, about 10 miles southwest of his home. He paid a total of \$5,800. His hard working and thrifty wife, Mary Ann contributed to this success. In addition to raising a growing family of children and performing the everyday drudgery of a housewife, she did all the interior varnishing and painting on the new house. She also raised geese, which she butchered and sold to the German families in the neighborhood. The McCue family planted a large orchard of apple and cherry trees on the three acres north of the house and preserving these would have been Mary Ann's job.

In 1902 Mr. McCue was forced to stay overnight in Garden City, Kansas because of a derailed train. While waiting he look at land and purchased 4,800 acres. The cost averaged \$3.73 an acre." Basil returned home and began the task of moving his family and farming operation to Kansas. The livestock, household goods and farm implements were shipped in nine rail carloads. The Adams County Democrat announced, "Basil McCue and family are packing up farm implements and household goods, preparing to move to Kansas. Basil has been a long time resident here, and we will miss him and his family very much but wish them all success in their new home." Prior to leaving Adams County Basil rented his home farm to George Dority.

Basil McCue became active in the land business and advertised Kansas land in the Hastings newspapers. He ran the following advertisement in December 1905:

"A FARMERS EXPERIENCE. In the spring of 1887 I moved from Woodford County, Illinois and located in Adams County, Nebraska. My friends and neighbors said I was foolish and a good many more things not so nice, for leaving a

sure-crop-state like Illinois and attempting to make a home and farm in a drouthy desert like Nebraska, but I made up my mind to try it and my good wife said she would stay with me and we came.

We bought land here in Adams County at that time for \$7.00 per acre, for real choice land we paid a little more. During the terrible years of drought and panic that followed we nearly lost heart but we never gave up. Every year we would seed our land and then turn our eyes toward Heaven and pray the good Lord to bless our efforts with timely rains. Some years our labors were richly rewarded and other years our efforts availed us naught....

But every spring would occur that feeling away down, just a little spark of fear that would magnify as the spring passed and the hot dry months came on, that we might not get rain and then all our efforts would be in vain. Somewhere there must be a land with a reserve of water sufficient to mature our crops and we would find that place. We stopped at Garden City, Finney County, Kansas and here found just what we had been looking for 20 years. When the rain does not come millions and millions of gallons of water were running to waste that could be turned over this land. We bought 4200 acres of this paradise immediately and moved our family to this wonderful land. We thought of our neighbors and friends up in Nebraska so secured about 200 quarters of this land for them. They can have for \$7.00 to \$15.00 per acre." In the same newspaper was a news item "B. M. McCue and a party of seven left last night for Garden City, Kansas. The men who accompanied Mr. McCue were selected by the Russians of Lincoln and Hastings to investigate conditions at Garden City and nearby."

In 1907 Basil McCue established the Garden City, Gulf & Northern Railroad, one of the few private railroads in Kansas. The town of McCue, on that line, was named for Basil McCue. He later sold the railroad to the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe for \$500,000. In June 1907 Basil M. and Mary A. McCue sold their old home in Nebraska to William M. Dutton for an undisclosed amount.

William M. Dutton was born in Oskaloosa, Iowa in 1859, son of Basil T. and Mary A. Dutton. He moved to Hastings, Nebraska in 1886 to start a harness manufacturing business with two boyhood friends, William McKey and J. H. Haney. The new business, called the J. H. Haney Company, began as a manufacturer of horse equipment. It prospered and grew into the respected Dutton-Lainson Company of today. Although W. M. Dutton never lived on the farm he owned from 1907 to 1917, he was closely involved in the farming operation. During the years 1905 to 1919 agriculture in Adams County prospered and Mr. Dutton made many improvements to the farmstead. In 1911 the Adams County Democrat announced: "Mr. Dutton of Hastings who owns the former Basil McCue farm is having the place fixed up so the former owner would not know it any more. The barn has new doors and otherwise repaired, also painted the regulation red. The house is snowy white with a light gray trimming and if you drive by these premises on the east road you will agree with the writer that everything looks different and for the better." And in 1913: "A fine hog house is going up on the Dutton farm occupied by Rudolph Huckfeldt." During the Dutton years the entire farm was planted to rye. The rye was cut with a binder, shocked, then topped to remove the seed. The straw bundles were hauled to the J. H. Haney Company factory in Hastings and used to stuff horse collars. Other improvements included two cement pit silos 25 feet deep, cement walks and large cement horse tank, new well with steel towered Aermotor windmill and water piped from the well to the house, barn and hog house, and a new creamery built next to the windmill. All these improvements remain except the hog house, which blew down in a tornado in the early 1950s and the two pit silos, which were filled when the center pivot irrigation system was installed in 1976.

The farmhouse, like all buildings that have been inhabited over long periods of time, has witnessed the full spectrum of human emotion: quiet family life, the joy of weddings and childbirth, and also great tragedy. Basil McCue, like his father-in-law, J. J. Kindig, was a minister of the Roseland Dunkard Church and performed several marriages during his years in Adams County. Two of those weddings took place in the McCue home. Harry S. Hoffman and Laura Snively were married in July 1901, and Frederick S. Hoffman and Clara Davis were married in May, 1903.

The James Peterson family lived in the house during 1909-1910. The November 17, 1909 Hastings Republican told this tragic story. "The home of Mr. And Mrs. James Peterson who live about 11 miles southwest of Hastings near the county poor farm, was the scene of a most horrible accident yesterday. A shot gun in the hands of a farm hand was accidentally discharged, the entire charge literally blowing the head off the 3-year-old son, Lloyd, who was standing near, scattering the brains and portions of flesh all about on the walls, ceiling and floor. The facts are as follows: Mr. Peterson had been hunting the day before and had set the gun down in a corner of the kitchen. The hired man picked the gun up to examine it and in raising the hammer his fingers slipped off and when the hammer dropped the gun was discharged. All members of the family-father, mother and two other children-were witness of the dreadful tragedy. The grandfather, J. S. Peterson, who makes his home with his son, had gone upstairs to get ready to go to town. The father and mother are almost crazed with grief. Undertaker Livingston called in the case says he never looked upon a more sickening and heart-rending scene. He says the walls and ceiling in the room were all spattered with brains and blood." Elizabeth Kleier, the

closest neighbor, living one-fourth mile east, often told of hearing the shot and the anguished mother's screams.

In 1916 W. M. Dutton advertised the farm for sale. The ad (which covered a half page in the Adams County Democrat) contained the following description: "The Huckfeldt farm (known as the old McCue farm.) Without any doubt this is the very best stock and grain farm in Adams County, one of the most productive counties in the state. It is gently rolling and the drainage is perfect, good water in abundance, the soil is dark loam rich in crop producing qualities, every acre is in intense cultivation and the crops now on it demonstrate its great productiveness. The 6 hog-tight pastures are so arranged that hogs can be turned into any of the pastures directly from the hog house by an ideal arrangement of lanes leading from the hog house to the pastures. The house and barns are built upon a very beautiful site-one of the highest points in the county from which at night can be seen the lights of the city of Hastings, 9 miles away, the county seat with a population of 11,000, and also those of Roseland and Juniata five miles away.

Large 10-room house in excellent condition inside and out. Cement walks in front yard and from kitchen to creamery, fruit and shade trees, cistern in house, wire fence all around house, large stock and grain barn with numerous cribs and granaries and extensive hay lofts, large calf barn, large hog house, cistern in hog house, windmill, 2 cement pit silos 25 feet deep, substantial well-built creamery, sheds and other out buildings. Possession March 1, 1917" Matt Heuertz purchased the farm in July 1917. The Adams County Democrat announced the sale. "Matt Heuertz has disposed of the fine Hastings property he recently acquired on Eleventh and Kansas, the Babcock house, to William M. Dutton and takes on the deal the old McCue farm of 240 acres in Roseland township at a consideration of about \$125 per acre. This is a fine improved farm and will give Matt and his boys plenty of land to look after." Matt Heuertz owned the farm from 1917 until 1921.

The beginning of World War I increased demand for food products and resulted in higher prices for grain, horses and mules. With the entry of the United States into the war in April 1917, however, the drafting of young men reduced farm labor and resulted in farmers looking for mechanization. Among the developments of these years were corn harvesters, binders, threshers, improved steam engines, and the growing use of tractors. Wheat was in such short supply that flour was rationed and marginal land was plowed, the repercussions of which would be felt during the Dust Bowl era.

With higher commodity prices came an increase in land values. The Federal Land Bank, Production Credit Association and other lending agencies were formed. Farmers forgot the lean years of the 1890s and assumed debts in excess of the earning capacity of the land. When the war ended grain prices fell dramatically. In the fall of 1919 wheat dropped from \$2.15 to 33 cents a bushel in less than 90 days, corn from \$1.50 to 25 cents a bushel. A recession had begun on the farm that would culminate in the Great Depression of the 1930s. The stock market crash of 1929 was barely noticed by farmers, but it presaged what was to come. During the early 1930s there was a deficiency of rainfall in Adams County and commodity prices remained low.

During the 1920s and early 1930s the Bill Utecht family rented the farm and four Utecht children were born in the house. LaMoine Utecht recalled how cold the big old house was in winter. His folks couldn't afford coal and burned wood for heat.

Ownership of the farm changed hands five times during the 1920s; each time the land was heavily mortgaged. Finally in March 1930 the mortgage was foreclosed and the Sheriff auctioned the land. First National Bank of Hastings became the owner, purchasing an unpaid mortgage of \$10,500 on a farm that had sold for \$35,000 in 1921. On March 6, 1933 President Roosevelt called the National Bank moratorium, and the First National Bank went into receivership, its debts were greater than its assets. The receivers advertised farms for sale, the terms-cash. June 26, 1933 Matt Trausch purchased the old McCue farm from the receiver. His son Bert recalled "Roosevelt closed the banks and a lot of farms around went into receivership. We went to the bank in Hastings and made the deal. We gave them cold cash, no check. We got the deed and the abstract."

Matt Trausch, son of Thomas and Anna Schifferns Trausch, was born in a dugout on the prairies of Adams County, on September 29, 1877. His father had immigrated from Stolzenbourg, Luxembourg to Kane County, Illinois in 1870. Attracted by the advertisements of cheap land, Thomas arrived in Adams County in March 1876. He purchased a quarter section of land from the Burlington Railroad for \$5 per acre on a ten-year contract. On October 20, 1876 Thomas Trausch married Anna Marie Schifferns, daughter of Peter and Susan Schifferns. The Schifferns family was among the first settlers in what would become Roseland township, arriving in March 1873. The Trausch and Schifferns families were of the Roman Catholic faith, but there was no Catholic Church in Adams County at that time so Thomas and Anna were married in the Busch schoolhouse just west of the later location of Assumption. They endured all the hardships of the pioneers: blizzards, grasshopper plagues, prairie fires, droughts, isolation and poverty. Settlers who were less

determined relinquished their claims and returned to the east, but the Trausch and Schifferns families persevered. Soon a small colony of Luxembourgers had settled in Roseland and Juniata townships. In April 1883 a five-acre tract of land was purchased in Section 4, Roseland township and a small frame church, named the Church of the Assumption was erected. The area surrounding this rural church is known as the Assumption community.

Matt Trausch grew to manhood in the Assumption community and in 1902 purchased a 160-acre farm in Section 10, Roseland Township, two miles east of Assumption. In 1903 he married Catherine Kaiser, daughter of Nicholas and Susan Theisen Kaiser, and they raised a family of eleven children. Matt was well known in the community. He served on various Assumption church committees, he was an officer of the Roseland Farmers Union store, and served as road overseer in his township. Matt worked as a carpenter in the winter months, constructing several buildings in the neighborhood, some of which still stand. About 1905 Matt purchased a Joliet corn sheller and shelled corn throughout the community. In 1924 he purchased a steam engine that he used to power a threshing machine. For the next decade he and his son Bert did commercial threshing throughout the area. The threshing ended with the drought of the 1930s when few crops were raised.

Bert Trausch was born March 22, 1906 on his parents' farm two miles east of Assumption. He received his education in the Assumption parochial school and at an early age began helping his father with the farming and the commercial grain shelling and threshing business. On March 1, 1934 Bert moved into the old McCue farmhouse along with his brother Charles and sister Martha. He would live there for 36 years, the longest of any of the farm's owners. The house, which was white trimmed in dark gray, needed painting and repairs. At that time paint pigment cost extra so the house was painted all white. It would remain white for over 60 years.

1934 was a devastating year for farmers in Adams County. 1933 had been the driest year in 57 years resulting in depleted subsoil moisture. January through May 1934 saw almost no moisture and in May unusually high temperatures began. Nebraska's highest May temperature, 102 degrees, was recorded on May 29. In early June rain fell, but it was followed by high temperatures. From June 19 until the end of the month the region sweltered. July opened with a 103-degree day that was to be followed by the hottest month in Nebraska history. For 18 consecutive days from July 8 through July 25, temperatures over 100 degrees were recorded. On July 15, the mercury soared to 112 degrees, establishing a new record that didn't last long, for on July 19 the official high was 113 degrees. Adams County was declared an emergency drought area. August brought ten consecutive days over 100 degrees with August 5 reaching 110 degrees.

For the Trausch family the unrelenting heat was almost unbearable. Hopes of raising a corn crop were gone by mid June. After that it became a matter of survival of both livestock and humans. Bert recalled the conditions: "Martha raised chickens, the young ones survived but the hens died from the heat. They just set on the nest panting from the heat and then keeled over." Rural Adams County was without electricity to power fans, refrigerators or water systems. "The heat continued day and night. The humidity got so low, furniture and wood in the house cracked. We couldn't stand it in the house at night. We went out by the windmill where we had run water on the ground, sat on the ground, and drank cool water. We wet cloth and put it over our heads to let the wind blow through." He also reminisced about small animals-skunks, raccoons, rabbits, even rats, drowning in the horse tank. Desperate for water, they jumped in during the night and couldn't get out.

As bad as it was, the effects of the heat were surpassed by the miserable dust, which gave the "Dirty Thirties" their name. There had been small dust storms in 1932 and 1933, but in 1934 huge swirling blizzards of dust blew across the country. Bert recalled the April 1934 dust storm that "came up from the northwest about 5 o'clock in the evening. My brother Charles and I were in the barn when the dust hit, we couldn't see the house from the barn. We had a radio aerial on the house and the friction of the dust blowing past it made so much static electricity, the static shot off the aerial and lead in wire all the way along the roof, down the side of the house and inside by the radio."

By 1934 there were no living trees on the farmstead, so that fall Bert and Charles obtained elm seedlings through the Clarke-McNary program and set out rows of elm trees to the north of the house. They carried buckets of water to the trees during the drought and some of those trees remain alive today. The drought continued throughout the decade. Bert did not raise a corn crop until 1940. When asked if he had considered leaving Nebraska during the 1930s Bert replied: "Where to? We owned our farm. If you could hang onto the land you stayed. We always had hopes better times would come."

October 28, 1937 Bert Trausch married Edna Kline, daughter of Dan and Leona Bassett Kline who farmed in southwest Hamilton County. Bert's sister Martha, who had been cooking and keeping house for her brothers, moved to Hastings.

When Edna moved into the house there was no electricity, no running water, few window screens, and the kitchen plaster was crumbling. One week after the wedding Matt, Bert and Charles removed the woodwork from the kitchen and knocked the old plaster down. New plaster was put up and the woodwork reinstalled.

Charles Trausch continued to live on the farm with Bert and Edna until October 1942 when he sold his farm equipment and horses and enlisted in the Army Air Corps. He was discharged in November 1945 and moved to California in May 1947.

During World War II all building materials were difficult to obtain. When the Naval Ammunition Depot near Hastings announced the availability of free surplus lumber for farmers, Bert obtained the lumber to build a large chicken house and a small brooder house across the driveway south of the house. The chicken house is still standing.

In 1935 the Rural Electric Administration (REA) was created to bring electricity to rural areas. In May 1938 the REA wired the first farmhouse in Adams County. But it wasn't until late 1949 that REA lines reached the Trausch farmhouse and in early 1950 it was wired by Matt and Bert. At that time a pressure tank, attached to the cistern, which was filled by the windmill, was installed in the basement. A white metal sink was installed in the southwest corner of the kitchen. That sink is the only "modern" item in the kitchen, which still contains the old Hoosier style cabinet with metal flour bin. About 1940 a large cast iron bathtub had been placed in the pantry. The tub was filled with buckets of water heated on the cook stove and it drained through the wall onto the ground outside. The conversion of pantry into bathroom was completed in 1950 with the addition of a stool, sink and water lines.

Bert and Edna Trausch raised two daughters, Catherine and Agnes, and continued to live on the farm until 1970 when they moved to Assumption. From 1970 until 1998 the farmhouse stood unoccupied. In 1976 a center pivot irrigation system was installed on the farm. At that time the huge McCue barn, built in 1890, was torn down by Bert Trausch. Only the limestone foundation remains. The house and other outbuildings escaped a similar fate because they are located in the pivot corner. The exterior weathered; windows were shot out and boarded up; thieves broke in and stole most items of value left by the Trauschs. It appeared the story of the old house had reached its final chapter.

In 1997 Catherine, dismayed by the deterioration of the house, convinced her husband Pat Renschler to make weather-proofing repairs to the exterior. During the repair process, the Renschlers were captivated by the charm and serenity of the old house and by the magnificent prairie view from its windows. Repairs became restoration of both the house and the outbuildings.

The McCue-Trausch farmhouse is historically significant because of its association with early rural and agricultural development in Adams County and because it is an example of vernacular architecture influenced by the southern origins of Basil McCue. The side gallerie type porch, transoms over all exterior doors, and room arrangement that gives every room two or three outside walls reflect his Virginia origins. This design, appropriate for warm southern climes allowed cooling breezes to flow through the house. However it does not adapt itself well to the harsh windy winters of the Nebraska plains. All exterior ornamentation remains intact, including cut shingles and sunrise detailing on the gable ends, ornamental window caps, and detailed turnings on the original screen doors and balcony balustrade. The house still stands on its original limestone foundation and retains its four brick chimneys. It was named to the National Register of Historic Places in 2000.

The old McCue house still stands, a testament to the endurance of Nebraska farm families. It is one of the few 1890s farmhouses remaining in Adams County, and the only one in nearly original condition.

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