

A profile of

Teresa Stangler Schuster

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written by **Burdette Blaska**
her maternal grand-daughter

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Mrs. S.

Mrs. S. was born in Austria in 1853. At three years of age, along with three sisters and one brother, she was the oldest child in the family, she came to the United States with her parents and settled in a farming community near Waterloo, Wisconsin.

The area in which this family settled was rather sparsely populated at this time, and one small community center served the settler's needs of a church, school, general store, flour mill, blacksmith, and repair and cobbler shop. About 20 miles distant was the city of Watertown, a large German settlement, which around 1860 was Wisconsin's second largest city that has grown little since due to the rural expansion of other areas in the state.

Due to the comparatively primitive methods of farming at this time, the girls as well as their brother shared in the family's effort to produce a living from the land, and possibly some surplus food or grain to be sold at market. Consequently, Mrs. S. often told of her experiences of making cradles from tallow, churning butter, roasting and grinding coffee, carding yarn and weaving materials for their clothing, cooking, making bread from flour that had been ground from wheat at the grist mill, preserving foodstuffs in earth cellars and by drying, making soap, and gardening. While Mrs. S. usually worked in the house and garden, it is known that her sisters often assisted with the work in the fields. These tasks in which Mrs. S. was engaged during her young years were all very time consuming; and, with present day conveniences and equipment, it is rather difficult to imagine that only three generations ago, long, tedious days were spent providing the required food and equipment for daily living needs and survival on the farm.

Of necessity, social life was limited. With considerable distance between farms and the only means of visiting being by walking, later by oxen and lumber wagon, then by horse and buggy, Sunday trips to church, an occasional Sunday afternoon visit with neighbors, and the Saturday afternoon visit to "town", on occasion,

to shop for supplies and market produce was the extent of social contact away from the home. Funerals and weddings of friends and relatives were often attended by walking. Helping to care for the sick in the community was a common practice, and calls for food and assistance by the Indians in the area have been related. Working "bees" for building purposes, doing farm work and household chores such as butchering, quilting and rug braiding were customary means of cooperative survival and visiting. Spelling "bees" in the school were attended by relatives and friends of the students. Popular, too, was the country dance, usually the square dance and quadrille danced to the music of a fiddler and directed by a "caller", but Mrs. S. didn't attend these functions as she apparently was taught to look upon dancing as something of an immoral pastime.

Mrs. S. attended school until she was about 12 years old and had completed the required reading, writing, arithmetic and United States history along with classes in a techism required of Roman Catholics. By her twelfth year she had learned much of the work of the household, and with help so scarce, she then assumed a greater share of responsibility in caring for the other children and with the housework. Her training was not extended beyond that of being a housekeeper, mother, and good neighbor.

At age 21, after adequate investigation by the parents, the proper introductions of that time and place, and a few calls at the home to become acquainted, she married Mr. S. who was known to be a respectable, responsible, young farmer. He was 26. His background was quite similar to hers as he was born near Prague, Czechoslovakia in 1852, came to the United States with his family at age six, and settled about 20 miles from the home of his future wife.

At the time of their marriage, it seems that funds and resources were still quite limited. The relatives tell of this couple walking eight miles to the church for their marriage ceremony and then walking to their new farm home for their wedding dinner and reception.

Mr. and Mrs. S. had eleven children, nine girls and two boys. While considerable progress was made in the standard of living in the home, most of both the farm and housework was accomplished by human power. Transportation was improved eventually by the addition of horses and buggy or wagon. Materials could now be purchased, and only the sewing needed to be done. Kerosene lamps eventually came into use. In spite of many improvements, life on the farm was still quite a difficult one, and Mrs. S. being well aware of the need for sensible use of all resources became the manager of this 13 member household. As only two of her children were boys, she delegated the duties of the field and those of the house to certain of her daughters according to her estimation of their physical endurance. Due to the need for their help in the home the older children received only elementary education, but three of the youngest daughters were allowed to continue and earned degrees in the education field.

Mrs. S. was a very religious woman whose behavior was guided by the teachings of the church and her strict interpretation of the Bible which she read extensively and explained to her children and husband. She was a meticulous housekeeper who felt a responsibility in having her children well trained and informed about managing a home and raising a family. She closely supervised the recreational activities of her children, always insisting on meeting and passing approval on their friends and expecting from her daughters an account of evenings spent away from the home in the company of male friends. She was authoritative as a mother, gave orders, and expected the confidence she usually had. With such a large family, however, it was unlikely that all members would be obedient to the same degree, and this was the case. She was considerably distressed when her husband would encourage certain of his daughters to attend the socials and dances with him even though Mrs. S. disapproved, and wouldn't go with them very frequently. Often, she was overruled by her husband that her standards were very rigid, and with the social pattern changing as it was, he urged her to allow the children more freedom in planning their activities and choice of friends. Though she never admitted defeat, his gentle persistence in supporting the views of the children tempered her strict rule considerably.

Mrs. S. was proud of her heritage, always making some distinction between "high" and "low" classes of German society. Her husband suffered a bit from this as she somehow never felt that his cultural background was quite as respectable as hers. This was apparent in her objection to his enjoyment of a little beer, dancing, playing cards, and his light-hearted, optimistic attitude toward life which she felt was characteristic of his Bohemian origin.

Although she was always direct in her approach to others and was quite opinionated, she looked upon gossiping and idle chatter as sinful. While she exercised considerable authority over her children during their childhood and early maturity, she never gave advice to them after they had either married or left her household. Through (or, in spite of) the autocratic leadership of Mrs. S. and the cooperative effort of the whole family, there was eventually acquired a substantial amount of land and financial security. When each of the children married or left home to pursue their interests, they were assisted with equipment or money with which to begin their independent life.

With their responsibilities to their family over, Mr. and Mrs. S. retired from the farm and moved to a town of about 2000 residents. Mrs. S. was 63 at this time. She chose the site for their home in town which was directly across the street from the Catholic church, and just a short walk of four or five blocks from the shopping center. Here she continued her interest in her home, husband, garden, church, and the social activities of the women's group of the church. She maintained a beautiful garden and supplied the church and friends with flowers for a number of years. She visited her children when invited, and enjoyed having them along with her grandchildren visit her. Her reading interests centered primarily around religious publications and current affairs. She listened to the radio for news and a few selected programs. Both she and her husband continued to enjoy good health until about ten years later when her husband's health began to fail. Although he was never bedridden, probably because she felt it was healthier for him to remain up and around a good deal, his failing strength demanded her continuous attention for

several months before his death. Feeling that he would neither be comfortable nor happy in a hospital, she attended him and gave him all needed care even though it required considerable physical exertion on her part, at times. When he could no longer walk across the street to attend church services, she prayed with him at home and helped him in spiritual preparation for his death. In 1938, he died at the age of 84.

After her husband's death, Mrs. S. continued her daily activities much as before. She spent more time at church activities, often attending two or three masses daily as she had more time and less work with only herself to care for. One of her daughters felt Mrs. S. should now either make her home with her or have someone live with her and talked to her about this from time to time. This suggestion she dismissed with finality each time it was made. She continued to make her trips to the stores, post-office, and to the bank as was necessary. Even at this time (age 80) Mrs. S. maintained noticeable pride and dignity. She was a tall, thin woman who walked with an erect carriage at a brisk pace, always looked neatly groomed and clean, never used cosmetics, and never deviated in her manner of dress. She persisted in wearing the style of dress to which she had become accustomed in her mature years, and was completely unaffected by fads in a changing society. Always she wore a high-necked, loose blouse with a little lace at the throat, a tucked skirt tight at the waist worn almost ankle length with oxfords and tailored black hats and coat. She continued to manage her finances as well as any other matters needing her attention without the help of a relative or guardian. Her biggest annoyance during her 80's and until her death was undoubtedly the reference made from time to time by her meddling daughter that she was getting old and that she should have help with her work, or that someone should live with her.

With perhaps a few minor exceptions she remained in good health during these years, in fact, until her death. At some time in her 80's she decided that a little tonic would probably be good for her which, she thought, could best be provided in the form of a good brandy as she didn't believe in consulting a doctor for a matter

such as this, and probably had more faith in the home remedies to which she was accustomed rather than in physicians whose services she had utilized but rarely in her lifetime. Although she continued to do her own shopping until just a few weeks before her death, the exception was made for purchasing the brandy. This was always done by a daughter whose judgment she respected, as she would not want it to be known locally that she was using brandy even though the use never exceeded an ounce or two a day.

At age 89, it was learned by a daughter that she had a breast tumor. After considerable persuasion, she consented to have it removed. She was taken to the hospital and a breast amputation was performed. Quite naturally for an 89 year old woman, side rails were put on her bed by the hospital attendants. Two days following surgery after retaining her full presence of mind, she called a nurse and asked for help to the bathroom. The nurse told her she must stay in bed and left saying she would bring the necessary equipment. Impatient with that treatment, she climbed over the end of the bed, found her way to the bathroom, returned to the room and sat in the chair. When the nurse returned, she asked her to call her daughter to come for her as she was ready to go home. Orders for her discharge had to be obtained from her physician which he gave on the condition that she be brought home in an ambulance. When the ambulance arrived and the attendants brought the stretcher, she refused to use it, walked to the ambulance, and took her seat next to the driver leaving no choice for the second attendant but to sit in the rear customarily occupied by the patient. On reaching her home, she invited the ambulance attendants to sit a few minutes and have tea with her.

Another anecdote tells about her and indicative of her strong will and complete independence is an episode when the weather became severe and icy. A neighbor cautioned her not to try to go out to church that day. A few minutes later, Mrs. S. was seen with a bucket of sawdust spreading it before her making a safe path for her to take to church.

Mrs. S. continued to handle all of her own affairs, to her own shopping and errands, attend church services, and care for her home until just a few weeks before her death. Her mind remained alert and her attitude of determination, complete independence and resourcefulness likewise persisted. One of her daughters who was with her on the day she died was quite distressed because she insisted on getting out of bed, sitting in a chair, and walking around her house a little. This undoubtedly appeared to her to be inappropriate behavior for a person thought to be near death, although to the daughters there who understood her will for activity and independence, it seemed natural and they supported her in her last wishes. She died at age 94, the only known cause of death being old age.

To summarize, Mrs. S., in contrast to Mr. F., who will be described next, learned self-reliance and resourcefulness at a very early age. The courage and endurance necessary for her and like early settlers, who had little financial resource, to survive and provide for a large family were undoubtedly acquired through early environmental experiences of mutual assistance and sharing in the products of their labor. Marriage, raising a family, and participation in the affairs of the community were looked upon as a right and responsibility in the home of Mrs. S. Too, her highly moral and religious principles confirmed this obligation to society, and gave her a certain firmness of purpose. In further contrast to Mr. F., whose early life was spent in the same locality, Mrs. S. had a trust and respect for mankind rather than money which grew out of need and helpfulness mutually shared by family and friends through the exchange of work, their surplus products, and sharing the reverses and pleasures of pioneer farm life. She, it is thought, adjusted herself and contributed to the social structure in which she lived, shared in its benefits; and through a long and active life, while not altering her habits or routines much in her years of retirement, she was respected and admired as a remarkable lady by her family and those members of the community who knew her.