



Melaine Buzynski photos

Above left: The Backer family stands in front of the family farmhouse. The farm has been in their family since 1899. From left, Chris Backer (fifth generation), Larry and Juanita Backer (fourth generation), and current residents Jill and Will Backer (fifth generation). Above right: Larry and Juanita Backer stand before the United Church of Christ—Pleasant Valley, the rural church that has formed the hub of neighborhood life since the late 1800s.

ALL IN THE FAMILY

Fifth generation works farm by Clarksville

By Elizabeth Bingham

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In the late 1800s, waves of Germans immigrants settled in Iowa, a good share of them around Clarksville.

Northeast of town, those German farmers built a country church, First United Church of Christ—Pleasant Valley, where their families worshipped and socialized together.

Over the years, their various offspring courted and wed and strengthened already tight bonds between neighbors, forming a dense social and familial web that lasts to this day.

“The people that were in this area married people that were in this area,” noted Will Backer (pronounced “Baker”), who lives on the family farm southeast of the church that anchored their family’s social and religious life.

“Pleasant Valley Church is just over here, a couple miles,” noted Will’s brother, Chris, who also farms nearby. “The whole area, people are connected because a lot of them came from Germany and have lived here forever.”

“About everybody’s connected if you go back far enough,” he said, noting that he and his wife, Lori, discovered they are distant cousins, from at least four generations



Contributed photo

A 1916 photo shows the owners of the family farm at that time, with the farmhouse behind them. Larry Backer’s grandfather, Fred Benning, is driving. Larry’s uncle, Paul Benning, is standing. Larry’s grandmother Mary Benning holds his mother, Ella, on her lap.

back.

Their common relatives, the Nordmans, were actually the start of the Backer family farm.

“They came from Germany, the whole Nordman family,” said Larry Backer, father to Chris and Will. “They came as a family, probably about the late 1880s.”

He guessed there were five or six Nordman siblings who accompanied their parents from the Ostfriesland area in far northwest Germany.

“(Larry’s) mother told me once that her mother told her she could remember coming over on the boat,” said Larry’s wife, Juanita. “Her mom peeled potatoes and cooked

for the family” during the crossing.

The Nordman family originally lived about three miles northwest of the current family farm (also close to Pleasant Valley Church) until 1899, when they bought 80 acres from William Kellogg at \$43.75 an acre, the start of today’s Backer family farm.

That was Larry’s great-grandfather, A.H. Nordman. A.H.’s daughter, Mary, married Fred Benning in 1908. They then moved to the family farm after their wedding.

“When my grandmother got married to Fred Benning, who was my grandfather, they started farming here,



Contributed photo

Before the widespread use of tractors, a steam engine was transported from farm to farm to provide power for threshing oats. This photo from the late 1920s or early 1930s shows the steam engine of Juanita Backer’s grandfather, Bill Fenneman, and his brother. “I can remember them threshing back home with I was little,” she said.

and the Nordmans moved to town,” Larry explained.

In 1940, Mary and Fred’s daughter, Ella (Larry’s mother), married Harold Backer.

“Then my mother moved here in 1942,” Larry continued, “and my grandparents moved to Clarksville.”

Next it was Larry and Juanita’s turn to live on the farm, which they did starting in 1980.

“We lived here until 1997,” Juanita said. “Then Will and Jill moved on and we moved to town.”

“I’ve lived or worked here my whole life except one year,” Larry observed. When his parents first married, he said, they lived a half mile

north of the farm for a year, before they moved to the farm.

The Nordman/Benning/Backer farm achieved Century Farm status in 1999. Four generations—Ella Backer, her son Larry and his sons and grandkids—attended the recognition ceremony at the Iowa State Fair in 2000.

Farming had changed a lot over those 100 years.

“It was a typical farm way back,” Chris said. “It had a little of everything.”

The farm used to have chickens, pigs and cows as well as crops and a large garden for produce, particularly

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potatoes.

"Really, the only thing people bought was flour and sugar and coffee," Chris said. "You made your own bread and grew everything."

"You had your own milk," Juanita added.

Both Juanita and Larry remember farm work being done with horses, threshing and planting.

"We threshed on this place up until 1949," Larry said.

Before combines were available to separate the oats from the straw, the crop was bundled into sheaves, and the sheaves were gathered into shocks. After the oats dried in the shocks, they were run through threshing machines, which used to travel from farm to farm.

Looking back, Juanita recalled her responsibilities as a young girl on a farm.

"When I grew up, at nine o'clock in the morning, us girls had to take Dad coffee and a cookie," she said. "At noon he'd come for dinner, and at three o'clock we had to take him a coffee and a cookie."

Larry recalled a boy's routine growing up on the family farm.

"You got up in the morning," he said. "You did your chores, went in and ate breakfast, then you went out and went back to work."

"Somebody always brought you lunch at nine



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Chris Backer sits in a tractor along with his daughter and grandchildren. Chris is the fifth generation of the family to work the land. From left, Chris Backer, grandson Harrison, daughter Amy, and granddaughter Madilyn.

o'clock or nine-thirty. At noon you went home and ate dinner. Then you went back to work and at three o'clock, someone always brought you lunch. Then at six o'clock, or in that area, you ate supper, then before you went to bed, you had lunch.

"You would have thought that people would be huge," he added, "but they weren't overweight."

Today's farm isn't as diverse or labor intensive as earlier versions. Now the family grows corn and soybeans along with a little hay for Will's beef cow herd, and the hardest work is done by tractors.

For some years they raised hogs, but a 1996 fire in a farrowing barn at a different location put an end to that.

While Chris and Will do most of the farm work, Larry

still helps out.

"Gotta have something to do!" he said.

Juanita no longer works on the farm, she said, "because they got a bigger tractor, and I didn't know how to drive it."

Now she concentrates on baking for the lunches and taking some hot meals out to the crews during field work.

"We get supper some nights," Will said.

After all these years, the farm work is still all in the family.

"Everyone that helps us is a relative," Chris noted. "Uncles and cousins."

As the fourth and fifth generations to farm the land, the Backers are looking to the future as well as the past.

"You want to keep the land in good shape for the next generation," Larry said. "You try to do the best job with it

From Germany to Iowa: Fred Benning's American experience

Larry Backer or Clarksville has a family document, an account of his grandfather Fred Benning's early experiences in Iowa, that he shared with Waverly Newspapers.

Fred wrote:

It's April 1904, and I finally made it to America after a long trip in the bottom of a ship, as we expected.

America looks great to me. I am 16 years old and have come to America to help my family earn money. In Belsehle, Germany, we are very, very poor. Hungry. You don't know how bad hunger hurts. I often went to bed hungry in Germany.

Back home, my mother tries her best by baking bread and baked goods

and selling her items in the street markets and to the wealthy people, but that is not enough to feed everyone.

I have four sisters back home, and I have one brother that was killed in the war. My father is also dead. My sister, Lousie, is already in America.

The Brases, some acquaintances of the family from Germany, paid for my trip to America. The Brases live in the Tripoli, Iowa, area. They sent money for me to come over so then I would go to work for them until I got my trip paid for.

After my trip was paid for, the Brases paid me 50 cents a day as a hired hand. I would send some of this money home to my mother and sisters in Germany. I also saved enough money to purchase my first farmland a few years after arriving in America.

that you can."

Not just their own land, they noted, but rented land, as well.

Chris observed that their field practices have evolved from plowing everything to no-till for the soybeans and very little till on the corn crop.

"You try not to work it any more than you have to," he said, to prevent soil erosion.

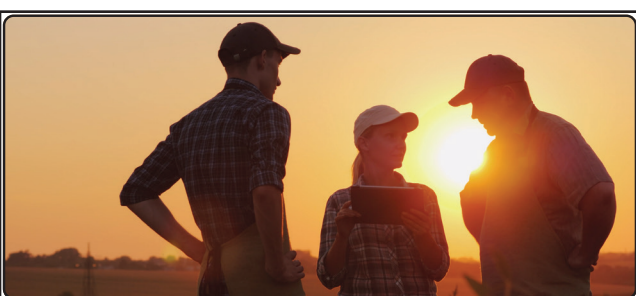
Thinking of the farm and the land is second nature to

the Backer family.

Farming "gets in your blood," Chris said.

Will said he knew his whole time growing up that he would be a farmer. As Juanita shared, he showed an interest in raising cattle at a young age, buying his first calf, Opie, in sixth grade.

"It's a way of life that you get used to," Larry noted. "I don't think there's any better place to raise a family than on a farm."



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