

Minnesota Ag Through the Years: Letters Tell a Story



The beginning...

April 10, 1828
Dear Sister Julia,
I arrived here at Fort Snelling last Tuesday. The fort is about four years old. I was sent to work in Fort Snelling's gardens. I like my job—except for all the mosquito bites I get! I've learned a lot about farming from my friend William, a trader. He travels out from the fort and comes back with good farming ideas. The expert farmers here are the Indian women. The Ojibwe live in the lake and forest areas north of here. They pick wild berries, catch fish and hunt wild game. They even harvest wild rice from the shallow lakeshores. In the spring, they tap maple trees to make maple syrup and maple sugar. Indian women plant corn, pumpkins and squash along the rivers south of the fort, too.

I miss you. I also miss your wonderful fresh peach pies. There are no fresh peaches here in the West!

Your loving brother,
Kurt

Five years later, Kurt is still at Fort Snelling.

September 25, 1833
Dear Sister Julia,
I am in charge of farming for my company now. It's hard work but I get a bit of a break in the winters. You should see the harvest from the fort gardens this fall! We have hundreds of bushels of potatoes and a great supply of wheat, oats, corn and garden vegetables. We trade some, too. The settlers living near the fort bring in eggs, wild game and berries to trade for the potatoes, squash and corn we grow here. Buffalo roasts and prairies chickens do taste good!

Your loving brother,
Kurt

Minnesota's first farmers lived here long before white settlers arrived and long before statehood. They were American Indians of two main tribes, the Dakota and Ojibwe (sometimes called Anishinabe). They hunted, gathered and grew their own food.

By the early 1820s, Fort Snelling was built where the Mississippi and Minnesota Rivers meet. The troops needed food, and Colonel Josiah Snelling ordered that 200 acres of nearby land be tilled for crops. Soldiers were the farmers. In this AgMag, you'll read some letters from a young soldier, Kurt Hoffman, to his sister back east. Kurt is fictional, but his letters are based on history.

Original drawing by Peter Findlsbacher
Courtesy Minnesota Historical Society

Kurt decides to leave the army after nine years of service.

February 22, 1837
Dear Sister Julia,
Winters are so cold here! I long for a warm spring day. I'm planning to leave the fort in July. I'm going to work at the **grist mill** at St. Anthony Falls. They grind wheat into flour there. I've learned so much about farming that I want to have my own farm. A job at the mill will help me earn money to buy it.

I met a young woman named Penelope Anderson. She's a hard worker and a caring person. I will ask her to marry me. We don't have many women here in the West. I hope Penelope will say yes!

Your loving brother,
Kurt

Penelope and Kurt married in 1838. They now have four children. They live in St. Anthony Falls where Kurt works at the grist mill. Milling is a growing industry, but Kurt is restless again.

April 18, 1852
Dear Sister Julia,
I really want a farm of my own. The job at the mill is good but it's not the same as owning your own land and being independent.

We hear the grass can be eight feet tall on the prairie! **Sodbusting** will be hard, but I plan to buy one of those new steel plows invented by the man in Illinois—John Deere. They say it makes easier work of plowing than iron plows. I'm glad I have four strong children to help with the work. Next week I will go to look at the land west of here. We plan to move early next spring.

Your loving brother,
Kurt

Think & Discuss

1. Why does Kurt call Minnesota "the West"?
2. What clues tell you about the roles of family members in Kurt's time?
3. Why was John Deere's new steel plow better than wood or iron plows?
4. What would you like to ask Kurt about his life and time?

For more about Fort Snelling, visit
<http://www.mnhs.org/places/sites/hfs/>

200 years ago!

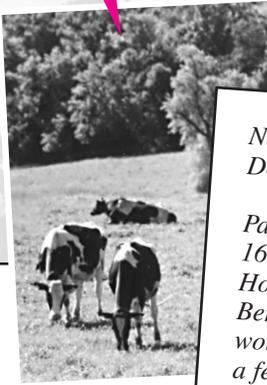
The Lewis and Clark Expedition of 1803-1806
Just over 200 years ago, President Thomas Jefferson sent an expedition westward to find and map a transcontinental water route to the Pacific Ocean. Captains Meriwether Lewis and William Clark left on their famous three-year journey to explore the uncharted West. By finding an overland journey between the Missouri and Columbia River systems, Lewis and Clark opened the unknown West for future development. But Indian tribes already knew the lands that Lewis and Clark discovered!



Find out more!
Lewis and Clark (PBS/ONLINE)
<http://www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/>

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In our last issue, we met Kurt Hoffman. Kurt had worked at Fort Snelling and at the St. Anthony Falls grist mill. He was hoping to move to his own farm in your last AgMag. He writes to his sister Julia.



The Hoffman family is settled on their own farm in southern Minnesota.

July 30, 1863

Dear Julia,
It is wonderful to finally feel we own every bit of our land. We've been on the farm for over ten years already.

Our oldest son John has gone to help fight the war. Of course Penelope was broken-hearted to see him go. So was I, but he needs to do what he thinks is right. We had to spend more of our precious dollars in machinery to help take John's place as a farm hand. It's hard to believe that machinery can make such a difference in the work, but it does. After the war, John hopes to come back and use the Homestead Act to get a farm of his own.

Our son Adam is thinking about joining a threshing crew. He'd be gone during August, September and part of October, following the wheat harvest to the northwest where the bigger wheat farms are. The money Adam makes will help us buy more machinery.

The girls help Penelope with the garden. They also help with the milking, pigs and chickens. They spend hours each summer day scaring away thousands of blackbirds that come to eat the corn crop. You can't imagine how many blackbirds there are. The girls sit in the corn field and bang old cooking pots together to scare the birds. Sometimes they sing or play their willow whistles and that frightens the birds away for a while.

We hear rumors about a railroad being built in our area. It would really help us farmers get our wheat to market. If there was a train, maybe you could come and see us. After 35 years, I long to see you again.

Your loving brother,
Kurt

November 27, 1881
Dear Aunt Julia,

Kurt's son John has taken over the farm and writes to his elderly Aunt Julia.

Pa has asked me to write to you as his health is not good. The 160 acres that I added years ago to our farm through the Homestead Act keeps us busy. My wife Rachel, sons Karl and Ben and daughter Kristine all help with the farm chores. We would have to hire help if we didn't have our children. We have a few cows to milk and some chickens that lay eggs and give us a chicken dinner now and then. This spring we had 21 little pigs. This fall we harvested corn, wheat and barley. One of our best old work horses died. We need to find another horse. Then we can start cleaning the barns and hauling manure to the fields before planting.

My brother Adam moved west in 1875. He worked on the big bonanza farms in northwestern Minnesota. Then he bought land in the Red River Valley but wheat farming has not been very profitable for him. The soil has been overused and doesn't produce the good crops it once did. A lot of wheat was going to market for a few years, so the price of wheat has been down. Adam is hoping flax will be a better crop for him.

Sister Laura went to Normal School in Mankato to learn to be a teacher. She taught for five years in the country school next to our farm. She had to stop teaching when she married Charles. Women can't teach if they are married. Laura helps Charles in his creamery now.

We hope you and your family are well. Pa and Ma send their love.

Love to all,
Nephew John



Photo Courtesy
Minnesota Wheat
Council

Think & Discuss

1. In what war did John fight? How did the war affect agriculture? Our country?
2. What is threshing?
3. How would railroads change the lives of prairie farmers? Of city folks?
4. The Homestead Act of 1862 helped many farmers get their start with 160 acres from the government. The land came from the Louisiana Purchase. The rules were simple: pay a small fee, stay on the land for five straight years and improve the land. Then it was yours. What are some ways farmers improved the land?

More About Lewis and Clark

President Thomas Jefferson more than doubled the size of the United States when he made the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 for \$15 million. Explorers Lewis and Clark set out to explore the uncharted West. In 2003 we mark the 200th anniversary of the Lewis and Clark expedition. Find a great timeline of the historic expedition here:

www.pbs.org/lewisandclark/archive/idx_time.html

Jefferson also sent a second expedition at this time to find out where the Mississippi River started. Zebulon Pike traced it to its source. The Mississippi went from being the western boundary of the U.S. to becoming the spine of the growing nation.

Where did Pike find the river's source? _____

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In our last issue, Kurt Hoffman's son John had taken over the family farm. Since then, John's parents (Penelope and Kurt) have died. Aunt Julia has died, too.

John writes to his Aunt Julia's daughter Rebecca, who lives in Philadelphia.

Christmas, 1901
Dear Cousin Rebecca, Rachel and I are still here at the homestead farmhouse. Our oldest son Karl has a house across the road from us. We still raise hogs along with corn, wheat, barley, chickens and cows. We sell the pigs, the cream and some of the wheat and barley. The rest is food for the animals or us.

Last year many of the neighbors put money together and bought a **threshing** machine. It uses steam power and separates crop seeds from stems. It sure is faster than harvesting with horsepower. We go from farm to farm, helping each other thresh in the late summer. You should see the feasts the women bring out on threshing days!

Please come for a visit soon. You can take the train all the way!

Fondly,
Cousin John

[Karl, son of John and grandson of Kurt, sends this letter to his cousin Paul. Paul is Aunt Julia's grandson and lives in Philadelphia.]

Christmas 1936
Dear Paul,
We hope things are well with you. At least we've had food to eat, even with the drought and the depression. Grandpa Kurt would be happy to know we still raise pigs. But we are losing our **topsoil**. If we keep losing our rich topsoil, we will have problems growing good crops for many years to come. Next spring we plan to plant evergreens on the north and west sides of the farm buildings to help keep out the wind during the winter.

Our daughter Amanda and her family live on the old home place across the road from us. They put electricity in their home. They even have running water and an indoor bathroom! They have a refrigerator and lights, too. Next thing you know, they will have one of those fancy electric milking machines we saw at the County Fair!

Happy New Year!
Cousin Karl

[Amanda, daughter of Karl, granddaughter of John and great granddaughter of Kurt, continues letters to the Hoffmans in Philadelphia. She and her husband Kermit Keiffer help manage the Hoffman farm.]

November 10, 1950
Dear Laurence,
I am still thinking about the wonderful visit we had while you were here last spring. After you left, our 400 White Rock chicks arrived. Some days I get 38 cents for a dozen eggs and other days I get 55 cents.

Son Ted and his family now live in the house across the road from us. Ted is a veterinarian. It's handy having him to vaccinate our 110 pigs.

We bought a four-row corn planter this year. A bad storm flattened some of the corn this fall so we couldn't use the corn picker. It took many days to hand pick, even with our grandchildren and their friends to help.

Everyone will come here for Thanksgiving dinner. Have a happy holiday!

Lovingly, Amanda

November 12, 1976
Dear Laurence,
Thanks for sending the picture of an old-fashioned farm. It reminds me of how things have changed. Now we have chemicals to **fertilize** our crops and help control weeds, insects and disease. We are careful to use them safely. Huge tractors, combines, corn pickers, electric pumps and elevators now make the work easier. Some folks are thinking about using computers to keep farm records. Our animals are changed, too—larger and leaner and healthier, thanks to technology. Most farms seem to be specializing again. They either grow field crops or livestock, or have dairy farms.

We hope to visit you in Philadelphia soon. It takes only three hours to fly there from the Minneapolis-St. Paul airport!

Love,
Amanda

January, 2003
Dear Family,
We are planning a Hoffman family reunion for the 4th of July. We'll show pictures and tell stories of our great-grandparents and their 160-acre homestead here in southern Minnesota. We'll have rides on ponies and in our air-conditioned combine. We'll show how our tractor's computer, linked to a **GPS**, makes maps that show us exactly where to spray for weeds, and the right amount of spray to use. There'll be 1500 pigs to see. We'll have a huge picnic with fireworks in the south forty. Bring your old photos and your new video camera.

Hope to see you then!
Lauren Keiffer Smith
(My mom is Amanda!)



- Think about the causes of the **Dust Bowl**. How had people used and changed the land in plains of the Midwest?
- Look at all three issues of the Hoffmans' story in this year's AgMag. How many changes to the farm and farming can you list? What were some major current events when each letter was written? How did these affect the families in the letters? What are YOUR family's stories?

More About Lewis and Clark

This is the Bicentennial year for the Lewis and Clark Expedition. During their exploration, Lewis and Clark were busy! They collected plant and animal specimens. They studied Indian cultures and conducted diplomatic councils. They set up trading relationships with tribes and recorded weather data. Sacajawea, a Shoshone Indian woman, was their guide and helped them achieve their goals. Celebrate the accomplishments of Lewis and Clark and their contributions to our history. See:

<http://www.lewisandclark200.org/>

Try This! While you're there, look for a map of their journey. Then draw alternate routes through the **least** number of states.

