

WALTER W. “SPRIG” GRABER: A MAN FOR ALL SEASONS

Editor’s Note: Walter W. Graber was a leading personality in the Pretty Prairie, Kansas community for many years. He died on July 3, 2003 at the age of 96. The following article appeared in the July 11, 2003 edition of The Ninnescah Valley News and is reprinted here through the courtesy of Tim and Nancy Stucky, publishers and editors of that newspaper.

No one left more fingerprints on Pretty Prairie than Sprig Graber. The schools, the rodeo, the Sunset Home, the senior center, the township, even the countryside were influenced by Graber. He helped bring lights to the football field, a state championship trophy to the high school’s trophy case, professional stock to local rodeo chutes, Vietnamese families to local homes and golf to a milo field. And after he made his hometown better, he went off and had a positive impact on the State of Kansas, the United States and the world.

With the passing of Walter W. “Sprig” Graber at age 96 last week, Pretty Prairie lost its favorite son.

Born in rural Pretty Prairie in 1907, Graber’s distinctive nickname was an abbreviation of his country grade school—Springvale. After graduating from Bethel College and teaching in the Pawnee Rock and Macksville schools, he returned to his hometown, married a Nickerson girl, Jean Arbuckle, and began teaching, coaching and farming. In 1936 his Bulldog basketball team compiled a 30-3 record and won the school’s first state championship.

“Some ‘jinxes’ were discovered during the different tournaments our Bulldogs were engaged in, and during the state meet all of them were completely eliminated,” reported the Pretty Prairie Times in March of that year. “At the district tournament at Turon, Coach Graber donned a new set of clothes; he had shaved and put on a clean shirt. (Because his team finished second) this ‘duding’ was denied him at the state meet, much to the disgust of his new wife. And at these games another ‘jinx’ was removed by demanding that this new wife of the coach sit alongside Vernon Krehbiel during each contest—and that was also recognized as an asset in the wins the team turned in. At any rate, the combination of an old suit of clothes, no shave and a soiled shirt, and the loaning of his wife was instrumental in breaking the ‘jinx’. The boys came through handsomely. Now reposing among their souvenirs is a beautiful plaque, given by the State of Kansas, to the team that showed their prowess over all contenders.”

Graber attended a football game at Pratt’s newly-lighted field and decided Pretty Prairie needed a similar improvement. Using high school players to help dig holes and haul poles, Graber supervised the installation of lights around the local gridiron. In September of 1936, Sprig Graber, Harry Graber, Merle Graber and Harry Kautzer turned those lights on at the first Pretty Prairie Night Rodeo. Folks came by the truckload to sit beneath the stars and watch cowboys compete against rough stock from local pastures. But those were difficult days and in 1939 the quartet decided they couldn’t afford to lose more money on the rodeo.

“The rodeo skipped a year in 1939 and then when it started again the Booster Club was actively involved,” Graber recalled. “I managed it for the next three or four years and we contracted with Beutler Brothers to provide the stock. Before that, anybody who had a Brahma bull or a bucking horse would bring it in. It was tough going in those years, but I thought the rodeo had potential,

especially when the Kingman Cattlemen's Picnic went broke. There was a void there I thought we could fill. There were little rodeos all over the country, but I thought there was place here for a real slam bang rodeo."

(Pretty Prairie's "slam bang" rodeo—consistently billed as "Kansas' Largest Night Rodeo"-- held its 66th edition in mid-July 2003.)

In 1949 Graber gathered with a small group of wheat farmers in Byrd Hardy's Greensburg barn to form the Kansas Wheat Growers' Association. He later helped organize the Kansas Wheat Commission and served as that organization's first president. The following year his innovative farming practices were featured in the Kansas Farmer magazine.

"Something new under the sun combines an electric blower and a silo-shaped metal haymaker to put up chopped alfalfa the same day it is cut," the magazine reported. "W.W. Graber insists his limited experience with the new method bears all the marks of success. "It beats sun curing all to pieces," is his comment, "because there is no risk involving the weather. The silo that stands above the trees and buildings at the west end of Pretty Prairie's Main Street is one of two in the state that makes it possible to cut and store hay in one day's operation. Cattle are conveniently fed."

From the end of Main Street, Graber was soon flying east, to Africa, under the auspices of the Garvey Corporation. Kansas historian Jim Hoy would write of Graber, "Over several months in the mid-1960s he flew at tree-top level over thousands and thousands of square miles of Africa, searching for a suitable location for wheat production, part of an ambitious project sponsored by the Garvey Corporation of Wichita. He selected Morocco, set up headquarters in Casablanca, flew equipment in, hired and trained local help and within three years had 15,000 acres planted to dry land wheat that produced 40 bushels an acre.

Graber's political career began with his election to the Roscoe Township Board in 1939. He was then elected to the Pretty Prairie School Board and the Kansas State Board of Education. His community spirit led to two terms as District Representative in the Kansas House. During those eight years he sponsored revisions to the probate court system which continue in place today. He encouraged enrolment of rural students in the state's medical schools and fought for changes in state funding for the benefit of small school districts.

When he left the House in 1976 he was proud to have been part of dramatic alterations in the state's political landscape. "When I went up there," he said, "things were controlled by a few in each house. Some chairmen were in their dotage, but they had seniority. That's changed. More minority groups have made their way to the House and Senate. Last year there were eight women and six blacks, where there were neither before. The first year I was in Topeka two-thirds of the Senate and 42 representatives were lawyers. Now there are more field of representation."

After leaving the State House, he worked with the United States Food for Peace program, assisting Catholic relief workers in the Andes Mountains of Peru. He developed a food program for Union Carbide plant workers in Colombia, supplementing their diet with bulgur wheat while serving as Executive Secretary of American Bulgur Processors.

He was named “Man of the Year” by the Kansas Wheat Growers in 1978.

In 1979, Graber was invited by Governor John Carlin to join a trade mission to China. He found the Chinese people “resourceful and disciplined” and left the world’s most populous nation optimistic that Kansas grain would find its way to Chinese ports. Although impressed with the people, he was uneasy about the Chinese diet, noting it was the only place he had seen dog meat listed on hotel menus. “Any you are apt to find anything in your soup,” he said, “from webbed duck feet to the rear end of a chicken. It’s a great place to lose weight.”

The return trip included a stop in Hong Kong where Graber visited a camp of Vietnamese refugees. “It was the most pitiful thing I’ve ever seen.” he said. “I couldn’t sleep the night after we left them.” Convinced American churches should extend a helping hand to the “boat people”, he organized a local effort to adopt Vietnamese families.

Although at age 85, golf was not on his personal agenda, he firmly backed development of The Links on the west edge of Pretty Prairie. In a letter to the editor in April of 1992 he noted the town’s successes, including installation of floodlights which “...was the beginning of Kansas’ Largest Night Rodeo,” of volunteer efforts to construct the doctor’s clinic and the skating rink, of initial construction of Prairie Sunset Home, then additions of cottages.”

“Now in the year 1992, with many success stories to call upon, the community is pushing for a golf course.” Graber wrote. “The survival of any community depends in large measure on how its people approach the future. We have two choices: we can either grow, or we can fade away. Many small communities have failed to survive because their people did nothing.”

Graber could never be accused of doing nothing. Fond of referring to Pretty Prairie as “the center of the universe,” he spent a lifetime making his universe better. From one end of Main Street to the other, Sprig Graber’s fingerprints will forever be apparent.