

## **Looking Up at Heaven from Underneath the Sod**

By Marleen Ehmann Bussma

There's a long time prairie pasture that holds a family grave.  
No church had been established when her soul went on its way.  
She was buried in the pasture of the homestead that they claimed.  
Simply laid into the ground; no headstone and no name.  
She lays there in the quiet, below where cattle trod,  
Looking up at heaven from underneath the sod.

The summers dried and winters froze the grass that covered her face.  
As the years and decades traveled on, there really is no trace  
Of this pioneering woman who settled on the land,  
Enduring many hardships as she worked beside her man.

You'd never know to look upon this stretch of prairie now,  
Which looks untouched and undisturbed, never yielding to a plow.  
It holds a link into my past and now I want to know  
Where my great-grandmother's buried – she's here – my mother told me so.

There is no history written down about just where she's laid.  
The story passed from kin to kin is all we have to say  
That she's buried in this pasture, up near a little hill,  
Under blue Dakota sky where wind is rarely still.

How did she come to be here, in this pasture all alone?  
It was while she worked to build their farm, to make a family home.  
The story says she was helping to dig a well by hand.  
This job required strength and brawn that placed too high a demand  
On this pioneering woman's body. It ruptured internally.  
She later died from her injuries; her eternal soul now free.

Barbara Zeller Elhard born in 1854,  
Once a wife and mother, didn't live there anymore.  
She lays there in the quiet, below where cattle trod.  
Looking up at heaven from underneath the sod.

I think of her life story and how it seems so sad;  
A woman of only forty-one and the life she never had.  
She didn't get to see the day when her children were all grown.  
She didn't get to spend much time in this new country she called home.

She emigrated to the states in May of 1894  
 As a German from Russia refugee hoping for a life of more  
 In economic opportunities and freedom from being oppressed.  
 Bringing their five children with them; they headed for the west.

With six other immigrant families, by train they did embark.  
 They settled in North Dakota, finding land for their new start.  
 With oxen for the field work and plans for a new sod home  
 Christian and Barbara Elhard began life on the prairie alone.

Fate did not allow her to live on more than a year.  
 It was in 1895 when the end of her life drew near.  
 Midday as she lay injured and resting on her bed  
 Her daughter Katherina was standing nearby and heard her as she said,  
 "Why is it getting dark in here, why is it so dark outside?"  
 My grandmother Katherina was only twelve the day her mother died.

It's been 111 years that her body has been resting in the ground.  
 I feel a strong and pulling need that her gravesite should be found.  
 She needs to be acknowledged, to have something to show that she lived.  
 A marked place where family can gather with thoughts and prayers to give.

A friend of mine has a talent that allows him to locate old graves.  
 He's interested and very willing to get her grave location saved.  
 We are armed with all of the details we could gather about where she'd be.  
 An unusual rock placement is noticed. Is she here? We will soon see.

Tom uses the rods that he's fashioned in helping to find gravesites lost.  
 He stands over the spot of interest while wind whips and the rods are tossed.  
 They swing back and forth in no pattern and then slowly the rods do start to move.  
 The left rod swings out pushing into the wind; not natural. Just what does this prove?

Tom moves up and down an area of where he thinks she might be.  
 He watches the rods, interprets their moves and declares that here lies a she.  
 The rods tell him that it is a female, buried below on this spot.  
 I am amazed and ever so grateful. We've found her, oh what a thought!

Her grave now has a marker, fashioned with stone and cement.  
 Her name was written while it was still wet with a stick, dried up and bent.  
 The place she has is peaceful, overlooking a green pasture and slough.  
 It's a spot that's in line with a home later built where her children lived in and grew.

My great grandmother never was missing. She's been with The Lord all this time.  
 I hope she's happy we've found her remains. For me, it's a load off my mind.  
 This link to my past is now mended, an historical issue preserved.  
 Her grave is marked for the family to see. It was no less than what she deserved.

**Note:**

In the summer of 2005, my cousin's cousin, Darcy Ehmann told me his great grandmother died from a rupture after digging a well on their homestead in 1895 southwest of Jud, North Dakota. There was no church or cemetery yet, so they buried her in the pasture. I told him we have to go find that grave. He didn't think we could find it after over 100 years of cows grazing. A few weeks later Darcy's sister, Marleen Ehmann Bussma from Utah, came to Jamestown and I asked her about it and told her we have to go find that grave. Three weeks ago after Marleen did some investigative work talking to her cousins, she found an older relative that was taken to the grave about 60 years ago. We went out there and found it, marked it with a big white limestone rock, and Marleen wrote a poem about this experience. - *Thomas Mueller*

