

Griffiths, cont'd...

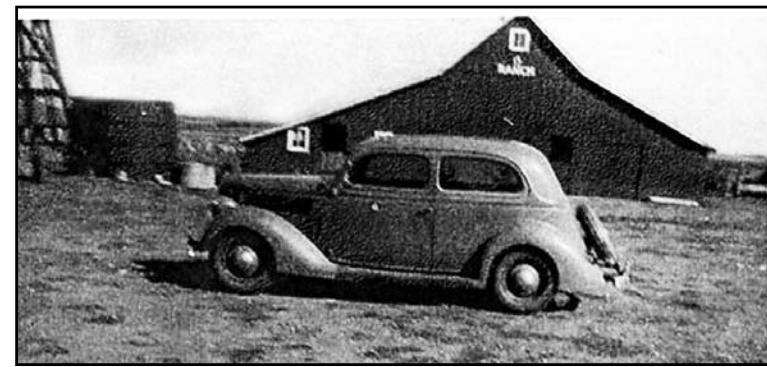
on April 10, 1991. Huge stands of cedar trees exploded into flame on the steep slopes of his bluff prairie. I still remember the deafening sound and dark black smoke. When it was over the pasture looked very different. From that point on Mert burned about every three years and stored our pumper, Old Nelly, in his quonset."

By 2001, Prairie Plains had made it a priority to secure a property with river frontage on the Platte, and to create an educational center there. The Institute had been awarded funding from the Nebraska Environmental Trust Fund (NETF) toward this goal. A meeting of members, including Mert, was held in May of that year to discuss the type of land and center we wanted. Soon after this meeting Mert and Gwen offered their river property to Prairie Plains. I believe Mert had to pick Bill up off the floor. This opportunity represented the culmination of a 20-year dream.

The Griffiths have been exemplary conservationists and stewards of their land, long time and loyal Prairie Plains members and friends. For his countless contributions, Mert was presented the 2005 Charles L. Whitney Award for Outstanding Service to PPRI.

Even before we had any idea the land would one day be a Prairie Plains preserve, we were allowed to bring SOAR to the prairie. All of Gwen and Mert's five grandchildren have SOARed on their grandparents' land; Travis, Bill and Jody Griffith's son, was also a Prairie Plains intern for a summer.

The Prairie Plains Griffith Prairie and Farm really belongs to all of us who have ever lived, worked, played, and SOARed there. We welcome others to share their stories about this amazing place with us.



Above, Christian (Chris) Gjerloff's 1936 Ford in the farmyard; the Gjerloff brand can be seen on the barn in the background. The brand has been transferred to the Griffiths, and can be seen today on the blue Morton building (below).



This summer, as I led the hike through the prairie to the river on our "SOAR into the Night" evening, I had the chance to chat with SOAR camper Daniel Treadway from Bennet, Nebraska. He asked, "Do you know my grandma?" And I said yes . . . and that we happened to be walking on land that once belonged to his great-great grandparents - and just ahead was Gjerloff Landing, where lots of people would come to picnic and swim . . . His reaction? "Cool!" I thought so, too.



Acknowledgments

For all the information, photos, time and patience, I thank Robert Gjerloff (son of Kay & Meta Gjerloff), Don & Gretchen Treadway (daughter of Ruth Gjerloff Lecron), Richard & Christy Chartier (daughter of Christian Gjerloff), Ted & Susan Kretzer (daughter of Hertha Gjerloff Olson), Mary Ellen Gerloff (wife of Jerry and daughter-in-law of Kay & Meta), Mert & Gwen Griffith, Nels Christiansen and Mildred Sands.



Celebrating the Land and its People: A Personal History of Griffith Prairie & Farm Supplement to *Prairie Plains Link*, June-July, 2008 by Jan Whitney

For many years – even prior to Prairie Plains's involvement, we have appreciated the ecological significance and scenic beauty of what we now call Griffith Prairie and Farm, so named to honor those from whom the land was acquired, as is our tradition. We have emphasized its value as an educational preserve with unlimited potential, especially with the Education Center. But there is more to this land. To really know a place we must know whose footsteps remain hidden beneath the surface, whose lives have depended on it for sustenance, whose minds and hearts still bear its memory.

We had been aware that the prairie riverfront was known for decades as Gjerloff Landing, and that the Gjerloffs had lived on the farm. Timely correspondence from Gjerloff family members Gretchen Treadway from Fullerton, Nebraska, and Robert Gjerloff in Hamilton, Montana prompted us to learn more about the people who were stewards of the land for over half of the last century.

As I began to visit with some of the Gjerloff descendants, I recalled the feeling I had when interviewing my father about the Deweese Mill on the Little Blue River where he grew up ("Once Upon a River," *Prairie Plains Journal* no. 14, 1999). It is a bittersweet passion for place that I can appreciate when I recall the farm and river where I grew up. When you spend so many years so intimately connected with a place, it remains yours forever, regardless of names on titles.

There is another similarity in the stories of the Deweese Mill on the Little Blue and Gjerloff Landing on the Platte. Both were gathering places where people would come to picnic, socialize, fish and swim . . . even be baptized. Among those who can remember those times is Mildred Sands, donor of the Sands barn that is becoming the Charles L. Whitney Education Center on Griffith Prairie. The Sands and Gjerloff families were close neighbors and friends. What Mildred recalls most is "the wonderful Sunday chicken dinners down at the river." In fact, those Sunday picnics were legendary. Others echo the memory of a most hospitable and generous family and wonderful food. Carl and Jennie "always kept picnic tables and barbecue pits there for people to be able to enjoy a fun day at the river," recalls Susan Olson Kretzer, speaking of her grandparents.

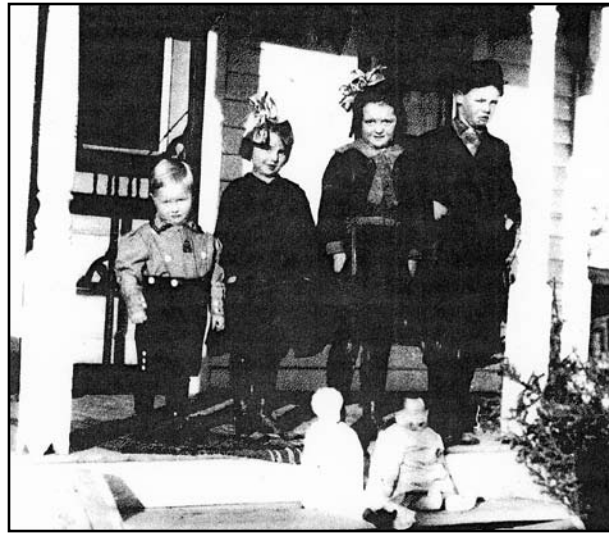


Platte River at Gjerloff Landing, late 1920s. The identity of the four waders in front is thought to be Gjerloffs (left-right) Hertha and Ruth and their cousins, Robert and Jerry, who lived on a farm four miles southeast of Marquette.



Gjerloff Landing today, looking toward the river. The tall trees on the left are the cottonwoods that still mark the entrance.

Carl and Jennie were Carl Hoffmann Gjerloff (son of C. C. H. and Vilhelmine Gjerloff); and Jennie Feddersen Gjerloff (daughter of Christian and Anna Feddersen), who acquired the farm from Jennie's father in 1913. The Feddersens and Gjerloffs were among the Danish immigrant farmers that began settling the area around Marquette in the late 1870s. The Danes created the



The Gjerloff children on the farm, circa 1918: Christian, Hertha, Ruth and Victor.

settlement of Kronborg, 3 1/2 miles east of Marquette - then as now centered around St. John's Lutheran Church. No doubt the Gjerloff family made the 14-mile round trip to church every Sunday morning prior to hosting those wonderful picnics . . . and for a number of years, by horse & buggy!

The Gjerloffs had four children: Victor (1907-1971), Ruth (1909-1992), Hertha (1911-2005) and Christian (1913-2004). Their experiences growing up on the farm west of Marquette near the river were undoubtedly typical of rural Nebraska life at the time. Hertha (also known as HESSIE) wrote a most descriptive and personal piece she titled "A Time Gone By," about the rituals of getting ready for Christmas in this Danish Lutheran farm family home. Beyond that, she wrote about her parents, Carl and Jennie, in a way that confirms others' recollections about them. I felt that her memoir called for a broader audience as a unique representation of the time and place - so have included a majority of the piece as an insert to this *Link* supplement. Her writing was not dated, but her reference to a

postage stamp being 20 cents places the time in the early 1980s.

It was fascinating, during the course of this inquiry, to discover that the Sands barn was not the first building to have been moved onto the farm to serve another purpose. The Blue School - a country school so named as it was located on the north fork of the Blue River, just a mile down the road - was moved in the mid-50s to become part of a new house. Victor lived there, as did Hertha's family for a short time. Susan Kretzer (Hertha's daughter) recalls playing in "the pasture behind the house" and riding her horse there.

The farm was home to Carl, Jennie and Victor the remainder of their lives. Carl died in November, 1952, followed by Jennie in July, 1955. Nels Christiansen, who is now our neighbor in Aurora, worked for Carl and Victor and recalled the day - August 11, 1971 - when he reported for work but could not find Victor in the farm yard where they usually met. Nels discovered Victor's body in the cornfield, pad and pencil still in hand from checking irrigation rows. That marked the end of the 58-year period of Gjerloffs living on the land.



**Victor Gjerloff
(1907-1971)**



The beautiful historic St. John's Lutheran Church and cemetery in Kronborg, where many Danish settlers and their descendents have been laid to rest - including Feddersens and Gjerloffs.



Another Gjerloff Connection

Our association with the Gjerloff Family began long before we acquired the land on the Platte. Carl Gjerloff had a brother, Kay (pronounced *Kigh*), and a sister, Julie. Kay and his wife, Meta Nielsen Gjerloff, had two sons, Gerald (Jerry) and Robert. They lived on a farm four miles southeast of Marquette, and spent a good deal of time with their relatives on the farm along the Platte. Some members may recall our tribute to Jerry in *Prairie Plains Journal* no. 16, 2001-2002.

We were introduced to Robert and Jerry in 1981, while they were in Aurora taking care of their farm business. The introduction was made by Bill's father, Charles, who happened to be their attorney. Charles recognized our common interest in biology and education; Robert worked in research at the Rocky Mountain Laboratory (part of the National Institute of Health) in Hamilton, Montana; Jerry was a professor of botany at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. They wanted to meet with us regarding management and program development for a natural area in Bader Park, which had been set aside with funding from the Albert and Julie Eriksen Fund of the Hamilton Community Foundation. Robert and Jerry were directors of that fund; Julie Eriksen was their aunt, Julie Gjerloff.

It was through this association that we were able to develop our management and interpretive program at Bader Park, and publish *Microcosm of the Platte: a Guide to Bader Memorial Park Natural Area* (1987) - all with support from the Albert and Julie Eriksen Fund.

We visited Jerry and Mary Ellen in Madison, Wisconsin in 1982, where they guided us through the University of Wisconsin Arboretum. The Arboretum was a pioneer in the field of prairie restoration, and was an inspiration for the Prairie Plains restoration program.

Little did we know at that time that in about 20 years there would be yet another historic Gjerloff - Prairie Plains connection!



Albert and Julie Eriksen with Vilhelmine Gjerloff, mother of Julie, Carl and Kay.



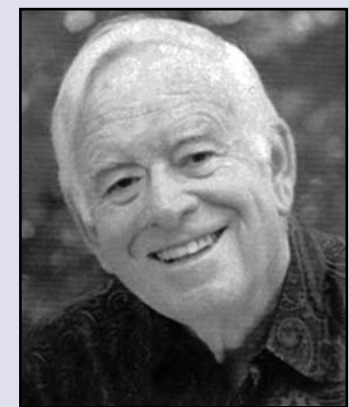
Mert & Gwen Griffith at home on the farm.

The Griffiths

Eugene (Mert) and Gwen Griffith purchased the farm from the Gjerloffs after Victor's death in 1971, and moved there with their two young sons, Kevin and Bill, in 1972. The house that was originally built around the Blue School is still Mert and Gwen's home - although it's had a few additions and updates through the years!

Our history with Mert began when he and Bill and Orvin Bontrager (then on our board) met at a Soil Conservation Service prescribed burning workshop in Hampton in 1990. Mert wanted to burn his pasture and Bill and Orvin wanted to help. Bill recalled the burn in *Prairie Plains Quarterly*, January-March, 2005: "The next year John Sampson, a Soil Conservation Service employee, and Mert planned his fire, and it was a great one,

continued on back . . .



Gerald (Jerry) Gerloff*, Aurora High School Class of 1937, was posthumously inducted into the Aurora Alumni Hall of Fame in June, 2008. Honored to receive the award on his behalf was Bill Whitney, class of 1970. It was a wonderful opportunity to speak of what a positive impact the Gjerloff Family has had on Hamilton County.

*Jerry chose this spelling.