

Appendix G. Nancy Hendrickson's Diary – SHSND Mss 10200

Nancy Hendrickson (1886 – 1978) was a child when her parents claimed a Heart River homestead in Morton County. She remained on that farm, increased in size by her homestead claim, throughout her life. She cared for her mother until that woman's death in 1926, when Nancy was 40. The next year, Nancy married Herman Apenes. They farmed and gardened together with her brothers Sander and Martin until Ap's death in 1934. In 1935, she married her childhood love, Carl Hendrickson who had also recently been widowed. They continued to live and work the same farm.

Hendrickson kept diaries periodically. She typically wrote in a five-year style diary (five entries per page). The entries were, of necessity, brief and focused on economic issues rather than personal thoughts.

I examined 10 years of diaries: 1933 – 1937 and 1952 – 1956. In 1937, she quit writing in the diary before the harvest for what would be a period of several years. The diaries from the 1950s are the most interesting in regard to her gardens. There is quite a bit more detail and consistency in these years. Diaries kept later in her life reveal that she continued to garden into her 90s, but there is little written about the details of gardening.

In this paper I have tried to organize the information in some way that will be useful to you. I have used several topics: gardens, vegetables, fruits, troubles.

The Gardens

There were several gardens on the Hendrickson farm. Most were located away from the house. She usually wrote "went to garden" or "brought home squash." One time she wrote, "Carl and I drove to garden" suggesting the gardens were at some distance from the house and if they were carrying vegetables back they would need some form of transportation. (15 September 1955) Potatoes usually, but not always, had their own space. She writes about "breaking gardens" which I assume were new pieces of garden ground. These are particularly visible in the 1930s. (9 June 1934; 29 April 1935; 17 June, 1935; 25 May 1956). The gardens were always disced or tilled by the farm equipment, but there was more work to be done to prepare the new garden ground. They had to be raked, especially if there was a dead furrow left in the space, and roots and other material had to be cleared from the soil. (12 May 1936; 17 April 1937)

Hendrickson had strawberry gardens in the 1930s which were separate from the rest of the garden. Strawberries were occasionally harrowed or disced and re-planted which was better done where digging would not disturb the other vegetables. (3 June 1933; 11 June 1934; 29 April 1935)

Planting of the gardens did not seem to take place on a specific date, but over a range of dates probably chosen by the weather and condition of the soil (though she rarely mentions these conditions.) The garden might have been disced in April, but usually planting did not take place until early May. Potatoes went in first, then the rest of the vegetables. The earliest Hendrickson planted "most of the garden" was 4 May 1937. The next day she wrote, "The garden is the largest, earliest and best." She had more to plant, however, that year, and continued planting until the end of May. (31 May 1937)

In 1934, the garden was late. Her husband, Herman Apenes, was ill with lung cancer and was soon hospitalized and died on 9 September 1934. She did not complete planting until 11 June 1934.

She used a homemade marker to plan her potato and corn patches. The marker allowed her to plant hills of corn and potatoes (in separate patches) at the proper intervals without crowding or wasting space. The marker was dragged through the patch in two directions leaving a track similar to a large, multi-lined, tic tac toe plan, or cross-hatch. She planted at the intersections of the marks. (11 May 1936; 22 May 1936;

She was usually anxious to get into the garden. Housework was set aside or she asked someone else to do it. She fretted if wind or cold slowed progress in planting. (11 May 1937; 31 May 1937; 17 May 1954; 18 May 1955; 25 May 1956)

The size of the garden was measured in different ways. In the 1950s she generally recorded the number of steps she made for the length and width of the garden. The garden in 1954 was 40 steps long and 9 rows wide. (12 May 1954) She recorded that her garden in 1955 was 5 rows wide and 55 steps long. She later reduced this vegetable garden by 8 steps and planted potatoes in the remaining area. The potato patch that year was 5 steps wide and 47 steps long (16 May 1955; 18 May 1955) The garden had similar dimension in 1956, but she planned the potato patch in advance rather than adding it as an afterthought. (24 May 1956) During the 1930s she was more likely to measure the potato patch by acres. At the time, she was gardening for herself and husband and at least two of her brothers as well as providing her married sisters with vegetables. In 1936, a very bad year in which her crops would fail, she planted 2 ½ bushels of potatoes in 1716 hills which covered about 1/3 of an acre. A few days later she continued planting potatoes over the remainder of the acre, adding 2940 hills. (12 May 1936; 23 May 1936)

She hoed periodically throughout the summer. In the '30s, she hoped that a good weeding would help the vegetables grow in spite of heat and drought. (3 June 1933; 26 June 1933; 17 July 1933; 2 July 1934; 14 June 1935; 31 July 1935; 9 July 1937; 5 August 1955; 23 July 1956) In 1954, the weeds got away and slowed the harvesting of the potatoes. She also mentioned that the potato vines only produced 2 to 4 potatoes each. Whether the weeds were a result of weather conditions or inadequate weeding is not clear; nor is it clear whether the poor potato crop was due to weeds or to poor climate. (1 October 1954; 6 October 1954)

Harvest generally meant using pails to gather the produce. Then a plank was placed on the back of the pick-up and the pails were placed on the plank. (19 September 1956) Sometimes the bed of the pick-up was filled with large vegetables such as corn or squash. The vegetable harvest usually began in early August. On August 3, 1935, they had corn for supper; August 2, 1956, Hendrickson picked 10 quarts of beans and cucumber and onions. They sometimes picked new potatoes in August (12 August 1954; 5 August 1955). From early August on, harvest of all vegetables continued steadily. In mid-September until mid-October, the harvest became oppressively difficult as they tried to stretch the garden past the first frost. (18 September 1952; 17 September 1956) Hendrickson kept careful records of how many bushels of potatoes she dug and of the numbers of canned fruits and vegetables.

Hendrickson did her canning in the summer kitchen. In the fall, she would carry the canned goods into her root cellar (9 October 1933; 25 September 1936; 15 September

1955; 16 September 1953) By 1956, the root cellar was caving in, so Nancy and Carl built bins for potatoes in their basement.

Hendrickson never mentions putting her gardens to bed in the fall. They were simply emptied of vegetables and then attention turned to other matters. (2 October 1952) Throughout the gardening season, her work and that of her husband and brothers was divided with the farm crops, visits from friends and neighbors. She sometimes had household help, but only one or two people cared for the gardens.

Vegetables

Hendrickson grew the usual vegetables including potatoes, tomatoes, carrots, onions, rutabagas, peas, corn, green beans, shell beans, watermelon, muskmelon, squash (probably winter squash, but not specified). She almost never mentioned varieties, except for Vasquez potatoes and N.P. potatoes. (26 September 1933; 17 September 1934; 18 May 1955) She picked wild asparagus occasionally. (16 May 1955)

Potatoes were her most important crop. She sold seed potatoes in the 1930s (28 April 1933) and new potatoes (3 September 1935). She worried over inadequate potato harvests in the '30s and in the '50s. In 1934, the potatoes were no "larger than chicken eggs, mostly the size of pigeon eggs and smaller. I planted 6 bushels. It was a full acre." (18 September 1934) In 1936, which would prove to be her worst gardening year, she wrote of her potato patch: ". . . it makes an acre in all. If they grow we get plenty, if they don't it is work enough." Apparently, the potatoes did not grow because she had to buy seed potatoes in 1937 at \$2 a bushel. (4 May 1937)

Potato crops also failed in the 1950s. In 1954, the weedy potato patch yielded only 2 to 4 potatoes per vine. In 1953, there were only about 3 to a vine, yet she called the harvest fair – 13 bushels of usable potatoes and 1 bushel of small potatoes. (6, 7 October 1953; 1 October 1954)

However, Hendrickson also harvested good potato crops in the 1950s. In 1952, she was pleased with her potatoes, some of which weighed over one pound. (30 September 1952) In 1956, the potatoes were large, "no small potatoes." (18 September 1956)

Other than potatoes and squash, Hendrickson's crops did not merit measurement either by quantity or size. She did comment on how many jars of vegetables she had canned. She gardened to have enough for a few years. In 1933, she opened and ate a jar of peas that were canned in 1925. (9 May 1933)

Hendrickson left potatoes and other root crops in the ground as long as possible. The Hendricksons picked potatoes and left them in the field in pails covered with tarps for a while. Tomatoes and melons were also covered and left in the field until a hard freeze brought an end to the garden. If the vegetables were ruined by frost she gave them to the pigs. (18 September 1952; 16 October 1954; 10 September 1955)

Fruits

Hendrickson raised strawberries and melons in her garden. She occasionally mentions crabapples or apples, but since this is so inconsistent, I suspect she got them somewhere else. The rest of her fruits were picked from the native shrubs on her farm.

These included Juneberries, plums, chokecherries, bullberries, and grapes. She also canned purchased peaches, prunes, and apricots. In the 1950s she froze corn and peaches and made quantities of peach pies which I assume were frozen, so she must have had a freezer by 1953, though she complains about the irregularity of REA power. (2 Septmeber 1953; 23 August 1955; 28 July 1956)

Hendrickson started picking fruit in July. Juneberries were first, and her first mention of them is 15 July 1935. These were usually canned (not made into jelly or jam or processed as were chokecherries). In 1935, a good year for Juneberries, she picked twice and canned 155 quarts of Juneberries (15 July 1935; 20 July 1935; 24 July 1935; 30 July 1935) Next were chokecherries. On July 31, 1935, she mentions chokecherries for the first time. These she sometimes boiled for the juice (3 August 1934) or “rubbed and baked” for pies (10 August 1933; 24 August 1935) After she started the chokecherries, she began to pick plums. These she picked for a long season extending from August into October in some years. (2 September 1953; 24 September 1953; 22 September 1954; 10 September 1956; 1 October 1954) She even processed green plums for jelly (4 August 1936; 13 August 1936) In 1936, she and Carl drove to the plum thickets on Section 19. She wrote:

Oh boy! I never saw so many plums in all my life. We picked a couple of bushels in just a little while and bullberries enough for my pies and pudding. Plums are so big and nice. Must be 20 bushels in the patch.”
(11 August 1936)

Though plums generally were available into September, on August 28, 1936, she wrote: “Canned last plums. Now come bullberries.” There is a sense of hurry as she tries to keep up with the ripening of the wild fruits.

Bullberries also had a long season. In 1936, she canned 80 quarts of bullberries, and 10 quarts of bullberry jelly. (17 September 1936) These may have substituted for garden produce which was very slim that year. (She does not mention canning any vegetables or harvesting root crops in 1936.)

Grapes ripened along with plums and bullberries. These she canned for sauce. (15 September 1954; 22 September 1954)

People also stop by the Hendrickson farm to pick Juneberries, chokecherries or plums. (26 June 1936) Most are friends, others are just driving by. She mentioned a family stopping by one day, then complained that “so many Russians come and bother us for berries.” (8 August 1936) What brought on that fit of pique is hard to say; she never seems to be bothered by other visitors. A few days later she wrote that she “cooked jelly out of the green plums the Russians picked for me.” (13 August 1936) Hendrickson routinely shared and exchanged garden produce and native fruit with friends and family. It is unusual to see her in an un-generous mood.

Troubles in the Gardens

Hendrickson’s diary is emotionally level. When her first husband died, she allowed herself one sentence of despair and worry, then she continued with her life. He died on 9 September 1934; by September 17, she was digging potatoes. She wasn’t uncaring, but she would not let good vegetables spoil, either. The potatoes would get her through the winter.

The drought of the 1930s brought out a little tension; 1936 was the worst of these years. On 28 June 1936, she wrote: "Nothing growing here makes people disgusted. No rain." There had been rain only once in six weeks. On 5 July 1936, she wrote: "Hot 106°. Hot wind. All vegetation drying fast." The crop did fail in 1936 and that fall she purchased tomatoes and melons, and seed potatoes the following spring.

The loss of the crop in 1936 gave her more worries in 1937. It appeared to be another bad year, but her diary ends before harvest so it is not clear what the outcome was.

In the garden, potato beetles were sometimes a problem. In the 1930s they sprayed an unspecified substance to kill them. Bugs killed most of the cucumbers in 1953. She harvested only 14 cucumbers that year. (20 August 1953)

Hail ruined the rhubarb (27 July 1954) and an untimely frost damaged the tomatoes 19 August 1952.

Her worst enemy was pheasants. Pheasants were introduced in ND around 1910. The first introductions tended to be in the southeastern and northern border areas of the state, but by the late 1920s the population was successfully established and reproducing well and the first pheasant hunting season opened in 1930. The birds were devastating to Nancy Hendrickson's garden. They ate her corn to the point of having none to harvest in some years. Her first reference is 17 June 1935: "Planted in corn that pheasants took." In 1952, she apparently harvested no sweet corn, and in 1956, the Hendricksons had only one meal of sweet corn, "pheasant has taken the rest." (5 September 1952; 24 August 1956)

A new enemy appeared in 1954. She wrote: "Hunters drove right through the potatoe field on Mon. Who?" (6 October 1954) This was during harvest, a bad time to have someone driving in her fields. But that was the year the patch was weedy and probably ideal for pheasant cover. Ironically, the solution to the pheasant problem was another problem of impertinent hunters.

Only rarely did Nancy Hendrickson complain of illness, fatigue, or pain. (29 September 1952) The amount of work she was able to do in one day is amazing. Though she enjoyed picnics and visits with neighbors at her place or at theirs, her days were usually filled with work. The garden was an integral part of that work and like other farm work was carried out on a seasonal basis. She was always glad to finish planting and harvesting. On 2 September 1935, she wrote: "We have spent many days this year picking wild fruit, now we quit." But when one task ended, another began. More work filled in the spaces left by the completed harvest. Her days would tire a modern woman just in the reading.

25 September 1954. I canned 10 quarts tomatoes, washed windows in and out, mirrors, cupboards, changed dresser scarf, put things away – clothes, etc. swept, mopped, did not get any baking done.