

SHOW-ME LIFESTYLE

99-year-old man shares moments of Century Farm

By **BRENDA BLACK**

THROUGH eyes dimmed by blinding disease, Earl Erickson watches the world change. Still, much remains the same, such as his farm "containing 80 acres, more or less," according to a deed dated Jan. 20, 1906.

While the farm celebrates 100 years, Earl turned 99 on Feb. 1. Al Decker of the Bates County Extension Office presented the Missouri Century Farms Recognition sign to Earl on his birthday. Rarely is an owner of a 100-year-old farm nearly the same age as the property.

About 4,000 farms were in Bates County 100 years ago; now just 1,200 remain, according to Missouri Department of Agriculture statistics. Only 63 have been recognized as Century Farms. The odds for Earl reaching 99 would have been about 1 in 400, but

Key Points

- Earl Erickson, 99, is proud of his Missouri Century Farm.
- Erickson farm was started in 1886 by Swedish immigrants.
- Next generation of Ericksons continue farming tradition.

since he is involved in agriculture, the likelihood was 1 in 200,000.

The farm began in 1886 when Earl's Swedish father, Erick, arrived in America at age 15. In pursuit of the American dream, Erick passed through Ellis Island and onto the Midwest. He farmed in Weston, Neb., married Elizabeth Frostrom and started a family.

A new start

By January 1906, Erick moved south to Missouri and bought 80 acres near Amsterdam. He traveled by boxcar with their possessions, including household goods, implements and



AL DECKER, Bates County Extension specialist, (left) presents a Century Farm sign to Earl Erickson on his 99th birthday. Earl's son Gary Erickson, Platte City, and daughter Lucille Lindsay, Amoret, planned the surprise presentation.

three mules. His family arrived the next month. A year later, Earl and his twin brother, Ernest, were born. By 1910, a daughter completed the family of eight children: Ray, Evelyn, Lydia, Clarence, Lillie, Ernest, Earl and Thelma.

Miami Creek, which cuts through the property, was a selling point for the Swedish fisherman's family. "We went seining in the creek," Earl re-

members. "There were carp that weighed up to 15 pounds that we cooked."

The Erickson land was more than a fishing hole. It provided a home. By the 1970s, after numerous renovations, the original four-room house had two porches, a parlor, an extra bedroom, kitchen, utility room and indoor bathrooms.

Though building a farm was hard work, the Ericksons managed to have some fun. Besides ice skating on Miami Creek, Earl learned to roller skate. The Breezy Hill Tent Show brought entertainment to town, playing Gene Autry movies on makeshift canvas walls that could be viewed for 10 cents.

If a movie had been made about the Erickson twins, it would have featured cars. In 1929, Earl and Ernest bought a Model A Ford Roadster for \$500. The boys tinkered with engines and always had a hot rod. Town folks could hear their souped-up wheels before they saw them.

Their fascination with cars didn't change the fact that most of the farm work was done with horses or mules. Likewise, cars did not stop Earl from pursuing other interests, such as Ruby Coffel. On May 3, 1942, Ruby and Earl were wed, and by October of that same year, Earl was drafted into the Army. From 1942-45, Ruby followed Earl in the service from state to state.

Earl's daughter, Lucille, recalls her mom saying, "When your dad unpacked his foot locker back in Amsterdam he said, 'I'm never leaving again.'"

Milk check secures future

The couple bought the homestead from Earl's folks on Feb. 20, 1950, for \$70 an acre and built a Guernsey dairy business. "We went from cans to bulk-tank processing," Earl says, "but we always had a

Grade A herd.

"I don't know how many pounds we produced," he comments, "but I do know the milk sent my kids to school and paid off the farm."

After 26 years in the dairy business, Earl converted to beef cattle. When he finally retired in 1991, he stayed on the farm, but the cattle pastures were left to the care of Lucille and her husband, Clay Lindsay, who still graze Angus on that acreage.

"Dad had always said, 'I was born in this house and I plan on dying here,'" Lucille says. Then lightning struck the house on Aug. 8, 2000, and rendered it uninhabitable. Earl moved in with Clay and Lucille after his bride of 58 years passed away and fire from the lightning subsequently destroyed his lifelong home all in the same year.

"I was thankful I had a daughter I could come live with," Earl says tenderly.

Legacy will continue

He greets each day with thanksgiving, especially since one cardiologist's prognosis six years ago told him he only had six months to live.

"I could kill you trying to fix you," the doctor told Earl.

"Well, I can't live like this, so try and fix me," Earl instructed. "I have my house in order."

Ready to go whenever God calls him, Earl says it gives him peace knowing the farm will stay in the family. A son and daughter, five grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren protect a hundred years of Earl's American dream. The real value of the land, Earl believes, is a family that continues to love and respect and use the property as intended. It holds fond memories that no war, drought, grief or fire will ever destroy. The man and his land are each living history.

Black writes from Butler.



THE search is on again for Missouri farms that have been in the same family for 100 years or more.

These farms will be recognized in the Missouri Century Farm program, which was launched in the bicentennial year of 1976 as the Missouri Centennial Farm program at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

To date, a total of 6,910 farms have been recognized.

To qualify as a Missouri Century Farm, farms must meet the following guidelines:

- The same family must have owned the farm for 100

consecutive years or more as of Dec. 31, 2006.

- The family shall consist of direct descendants only.

- The farm must be at least 40 acres of the original land acquisition and make a financial contribution to the overall farm income.

Applicants certified as owners of a 2006 Missouri Century Farm will be recognized by their local MU Extension office in the county where the farm is located.

Application forms and information are available through Extension Publications, 2800 Maguire Blvd., Columbia,

MO 65211, or at your local Extension office. The deadline is June 1. Apply by May 15, and you pay only a \$25 fee to cover the cost of certificates, farm signs and booklets for approved applicants; after May 15, it will cost \$35.

The Missouri Century Farm program is jointly administered by the MU College of Agriculture, Food and Natural Resources and MU Extension.

■ **For more information, call the MU Century Farms office at (800) 292-0969 or visit the Web site: extension.missouri.edu/centuryfarm.**