

O.K. Luther Obituary and Life

by Kem Luther

O. K. Luther died at the Jennie M. Melham Memorial Hospital in Broken Bow, Custer County, Nebraska on April 18, 1989. He was 98 years old. Services were held at Govier Brothers Mortuary on April 22, and interment was in the Broken Bow Cemetery.

Omer Kem Luther was almost as much a part of the history and landscape of Custer County as its sod houses and prairies. The important places and moments in his life--the furrows he turned, the land he homesteaded, the businesses he managed, the friends he made--read as a chapter in the history of central Nebraska.

He was born in a sod house on his father's homestead near Mason City, in Algernon township. His father had come to Nebraska as a child with Omer's grandparents, Henry and Elizabeth Cline Luther, who were part of the great journey westward in the middle of the last century. Omer's father, Arthur, is pictured as a shy teenager in one of Solomon Butcher's photographs, surrounded by his large family of pioneering brothers and sisters.

Omer was born on November 12, 1890. Arthur had married Ella, one of two daughters which the Civil War Veteran John W. Ruckle had brought to Custer County in the 1880s. In the month that O.K. was born Nebraska was in political turmoil. The crops had failed, and farmers were blaming the railroads and Eastern money for robbing them of fair profit on their labor. The Populists, a new party representing farm interests, fielded a large slate of county and state candidates in the elections that fall. When word reached Custer County that Omer Madison Kem, running for Congress from the district including Custer County, had been elected as the first Populist state representative, the town square in Broken Bow was the scene of bonfires, parades and wild celebrations. A few days later Ella Ruckle Luther gave birth to her first son, and, caught up in the excitement of political change, Arthur and Ella named their first child Omer Kem after the new representative. O.K. Luther was not alone in this curious distinction, and throughout his life he continued to hear of other O.K.s born in Nebraska's decade of Populism.

The farmers' hopes for a Populist national government were soon turned to disappointment, however, and the fortunes of Omer Luther's family also took a turn for the worse. When Omer was only two his mother, his new brother, his mother's sister and his father-in-law--the whole Ruckle family--died in a tragic bout of dysentery. Omer and his father moved back with his grandfather's family. His father remarried in 1896 to Mary Jane Phelps, and Omer was joined before long by a large family of half-brothers and sisters, many widely known in this county: Ella Gardner, Leon (Babe), Violet, M.A. (Bus), Pat, and Cliff.

By the time O.K. was sixteen he was an experienced pioneer farmer, and had long traded the luxuries of formal schooling for a harder classroom, helping to support his father's new family. At seventeen he married Bertha Reynolds. Too young to take out a homestead in Custer County while good lands were

still able to be claimed, he filed under the Kincaid Act for lands on Goose Creek in the Sandhills in 1911. He returned to Mason City in 1916, the new family enlarged by two children, Don and Irene, and purchased lands near his father's family. After a few more years of work on the farm, he moved to Broken Bow in 1923.

In Broken Bow he started and operated a store where Ace Hardware now stands. The store traded in cream, eggs and hides. A second son, Gerald, was born in 1918. Each fall Omer shipped and sold seed potatoes by rail freight. As roads and automobiles began to replace horse and rail, the opportunity arose to deliver gasoline from pipeline heads to new gas stations in the growing cities. Omer was one of the first persons to truck gasoline into Lincoln, Nebraska. In the middle of the depression he formed crews to do grade and road work along Highway 2. When the economy began to improve he tried his hand at the new business of pumping gravel for the ever-widening system of roads. From 1937 to 1940 he supplied gravel for the Kingsley Dam at Ogallala.

In the depression he had been forced to sell all of the land he had acquired in Mason City. At the beginning of the 1940s, however, he purchased a new farm just west of Broken Bow. For many years he took an active role in the management of the farm along with his expanding business in gravel and contracting. It was on this ranch that the Broken Bow Rodeo was held just before it moved to the current fairgrounds.

After World War II Omer Luther married Billie Enid Rodabaugh of Thedford, Nebraska. Billie and Omer had one son, Omer Kem Luther. Long past the usual years of retirement O.K. continued to be active in business and family matters. Until he was past ninety it was not unusual to see O.K. driving around town on business and errands. Only in the last few years did medical problems confine his activities to a smaller sphere. Even then, he continued to read the newspaper each day and take an interest in national and local affairs.

O.K. is survived by his wife Billie, his children Irene Dixon (of Bella Vista, Arkansas), Gerald Luther, and Kem Luther (of Toronto, Ontario, Canada), and his brothers Pat and Cliff. He is preceded in death by his parents, his son Don, his sisters Ella Violet, and his brothers Leon and M.A.