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Blooming Grove Meeting House. Dunkard meeting house in Blooming Grove, PA. From the collection of the Blooming Grove Historical Society.

Sophia Charlotte Ulmer Bidelspacher: A Rose Valley Story

Williamsport Women

by MARY SIEMINSKI

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When Sophia Charlotte (Ulmer) Bidelspacher was interviewed by a Grit reporter on January 17, 1936, the 88-year-old recounted detailed memories not only of her own childhood, but also of what she had been told about the lives of her parents and of her grandparents, who had come to the Blooming Grove area from Wurttemberg, Germany in the early nineteenth century.

The first settlers in Blooming Grove were of the Dunkard faith and were pacifists. John and Gottlieb Heim, two bachelor weavers, had been imprisoned in Germany in 1803 for refusing to bear arms for Napoleon. According to "A Brief Historical Sketch of the Blooming Grove Colony and Meeting House" by David C. Ulmer (1928), after a year in prison they were released on the condition that they immediately emigrate to America.

The Heim brothers, along with a large number of other Dunkards, left Germany the next year for Philadelphia. They purchased land in Lycoming County and made their way to their new home, which they called Blooming Grove, in the spring. Walking together, the group of families reached the summit of Quaker Hill in Eldred Township on May 20, 1805.

SOPHIA'S GRANDPARENTS

In 1817, Sophia's grandparents Jacob Heim (1773-1849) and Christina (Gohl) Heim (1774-1817), along with their four boys and two girls, set out to join the community.

It was not an easy journey from the start. According to the Grit reporter, "These oppressed immigrants suffered a double bereavement in the journey to America, for when they had undertaken but the first lap of the journey in a small boat down the Rhine to reach the ocean, a child, a boy, was taken ill and died. So deeply did this grieve the mother

that the sorrow and her ill health were fatal after the trip had begun across the water to this country." She was buried at sea.

"However the day came when the weary travelers landed in Philadelphia. From Philadelphia to Blooming Grove, the journey's end stretched many miles and these had to be covered on foot."

Because she was not able at the time to walk such a distance, the younger daughter, 7-year-old Anna Maria, was left in Philadelphia, to be reunited with her family later. Much of the responsibility for caring for the remaining children fell to 16-year-old Margaret Heim (1801-1889), Sophia's mother.

SOPHIA'S PARENTS

In 1830, Margaret married Jacob Ulmer (1801-1892), and they bought land in nearby Rose Valley. According to Sophia, Jacob cleared the 127 acres with an axe. Neighbors helped Jacob and Margaret build a log home and log barn. On February 13, 1847, Sophia Charlotte Ulmer was born in Rose Valley.

According to the Grit article, "Land for a school was given by Mr. Ulmer so that the Ulmer children, of whom there were seven, had but a quarter of a mile to go to school. Terms were only three months long." The Ulmers also gave land for the Rose Valley Church, which still stands, and for the Cemetery.

Sophia related stories of her life on the farm: "Spinning was done by means of two sharpened polished sticks, ringed with polished bone rings, the sticks being twirled about in skilled fingers in the process." At the time she was interviewed, Sophia still had those sticks and a basket woven in Germany and the copper kettle used by the family for cooking while on shipboard and after settling here.

LIFE ON THE FARM

In 1868, when she was 21, Sophia Ulmer married Jacob Bidelspacher, whose ancestors had also come from Germany. They farmed a plot of



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Sophia Bidelspacher at her spinning wheel. Photograph from the Lycoming County Historical Society. Most likely taken between 1910 and 1920.

land close to that of her parents. The Grit reporter relates, "Mrs. Bidelspacher tells of her life while she lived in Rose Valley. Although she did not do much work in the fields, she was not a total stranger to such toil as she aided in hoeing corn and potatoes, in making hay and similar other tasks. She also milked, churned, and cared for her children." Sophia and Jacob Bidelspacher had four children: Clara, Martha, Charles, and Christine.

Sophia was an active needle worker and made many quilts. She recalled making clothes for herself and her family. In her younger years, she played the dulcimer and the accordion and sang hymns to their accompaniment. The family was musical; another member of the Heim family had made a piano using materials at hand—the keys were beef ribs.

Sophia and Jacob eventually left Rose Valley and went to live in Warrensville. When Jacob died in 1904, Sophia moved to

Williamsport to live with her children.

At the time of the interview, she was still active. She read the daily newspaper, "Down to the minutest detail so she is able to discuss, with a perception undulled by the passing years, the happenings of the day."

Sophia Charlotte Ulmer Bidelspacher died on June 4, 1938. She was the last surviving member of the Dunkard Church. She was buried, like her husband, in the Blooming Grove Cemetery, behind the church in which she had been baptized 91 years before.

10/14/18

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