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E R Hutchinson, **R M Probstfield**, and A. Stein – Clay County Pioneers

Randolph M. Probstfield came into the area in the spring of 1859. George Emmerling arrived with Probstfield but went on alone to St. Joseph's (now Walhalla) where he built the first flour mill in North Dakota. When Probstfield arrived in the area he found Adam Stein and E.R. Hutchinson who became permanent settlers at Georgetown. Probstfield settled in Oak Point, seven miles north of Moorhead.

There was also a man named James Anderson living one mile north of Fargo who was called "Robinson Crusoe." These men named above were practically the only settlers on the Red River south of Pembina in 1859.

In 1859, Georgetown was established about 16 miles north of present-day Moorhead by James McKay for the Hudson Bay Company. A warehouse, store building, shops, and similar buildings were erected. The company town was run by Robert McKenzie until he froze to death returning from Pembina with supplies. He was succeeded by James Pruden and Alexander Murray. R.M. Probstfield took charge in 1864. There were 30 men employed at Georgetown in 1862.

## German-American Settlers - The Tradition of Words

By **Carla Smith**  
Staff Writer

Along the banks of the Red River, a woman gives birth to her third child. As her husband helps to deliver the baby, her two older children huddle at the side of the tent, trying to stay warm. The muddy waters flow by, and just days later, the group heads out again. They battle the cold, the wind and the river, only stopping when they reach the plot of land that they can call their own.

"The crossing of the river that night is one that I shall never forget," said Randolph Probstfield, an early settler to the area. "The sufferings, the anxiety, the terrors and the disappointment to me were all events most deeply impressed upon my mind." As one of those first settlers of this area, Probstfield was a hardy soul who experienced many trials and setbacks in his journey from Prussia to his final destination in Clay County in 1852. He shared the river crossing story in a speech at the Red River Valley Old Settlers Association meeting in 1898. He told of the troubles in his journey, as well as chronicling his experiences in the Red River Valley. Probstfield also kept life-long journals throughout his life. They are kept in the Minnesota State University Moorhead's archives.

Crossing the river was the only way to make it to the Dakota land that held the hopes for which people searched. Whether it was freedom from persecution or simply a hunger to own piece of earth or the desire to till the soil, people from many backgrounds made a hard journey in search of what they saw as the promised land.

As an early settler and a German, Probstfield was in good company. According to Clay County historian Mark Piehl, "Germans were tied for second with the Swedish in the number of settlers in the Red River Valley." Many of the early settlers in the area were of German or German-Russian descent. They came to the area to settle the free land that was available to them. A homestead and the chance to make a living drew them to the fertile soil. Here they made lives for themselves, planting crops, building sod houses, and removing the stones that littered the prairies.

Even today, German traditions occur at major events, such as weddings and funerals. Clara Erlenbusch, a German settler in the area, shares this story in Shirley Fischer Arends book, "The Central Dakota Germans: Their History, Language and Culture." Erlenbusch recalls that: "They sold dances at weddings as long as I can remember...it's old. If they had the chance they also stole the bride. Then, they would collect money, and when they had as much money as the ones wanted that stole the bride, the bridegroom could buy her back."

If you've ever been invited into a German home, you can still see the traditions at work today. As Arends shares in her book, the Midwestern politeness that is so well-known today has always been custom of the German-Americans who settled this area. Fischer says: "The hospitality of the Dakota Germans is renowned. They feel that a stranger must be welcomed and food and water provided him." Tradition states that the visitor might be the son of God returning again to the earth. Perhaps, this is why, when you visit the home of a German grandmother, she offers you warm kuchen and encourages you to sit down at her kitchen table for some coffee and company. This long-held tradition of making a guest welcome is just one of the ways that the German heritage in the area has persisted.



Even Probstfield, as one of the early settlers, was known for providing for his neighbors and taking care of his own. Minnesota State University Moorhead archivist, Terry Shoptaugh, shares that “everyone who wanted to grow something was told to go talk to Probstfield.” As a man who worked the land and tried new crops, Probstfield’s pantry was always full. He tried his hand at

everything from watermelon to bananas to tobacco. Shoptaugh says that sometimes, “Probstfield was the only one with food.”

When many people struggled to feed their families, Probstfield provided food for his family and shared with others who were in need. One of the most interesting chronicles of Probstfield’s experience is the one that was written by his granddaughter, Edris Probstfield Hack, titled “Candles in the Wind,” a fictionalized account of her grandfather and his family, who settled in this area back in the 1850s.

Paging through “Candles in the Wind,” there are illustrations that show what the early settler may have seen. The scenes in the book show a life of hardship and struggle, but also a story of spirit and adventure. There are wide-open prairies, people traveling on horseback, and families working the soil of the land they cherished. The book, which opens with a foreword from the author, is full of the history of what a German settler would have faced. From battling prairie fires to learning to live and work beside Native Americans, the book recounts some of the adventures that Randolph Probstfield probably shared with this granddaughter as she sat on his lap in front of the fire on a cold Minnesota evening. Hack published a book of poetry in 1926 called “Between Sleep Poems,” almost 50 years before “Candles in the Wind” was released.

The original Probstfield homestead is just 10 miles north of Moorhead. The family has left many artifacts to the Clay Country Museum, where visitors can view their old furnishings and see photos of the family. Almost 100 years after Randolph Probstfield’s death, his family and its heritage still mark this area as home. Within the city limits, you can find the Prairie Home Cemetery, where a large plot with neat, rectangular headstones holds the remains of members of the Probstfield family. Perhaps as they laid Randolph to rest in 1911, Hack read a piece of poetry at the graveside of her beloved grandfather. Her piece, “Retrospect,” which speaks of the dusty images of life and death, seems a fitting choice for a man who led his family the Red River Valley from the far-away land of Germany.

## Retrospect

A little molten piece of clay  
Dust images of long ago;  
The tears I've shed for you are gone  
As you have gone, and I must go.  
This pictures all I've left of you-  
It startles mem'ries long forgot.  
O, talisman from days of yore,  
I prithee join thy earthly friends  
Of visionary churchyard lore  
Last memory my grief unbends.  
No friendly sympathy give me-  
It is the lot God chose for me.



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Clay County Historical Society



Randolph and Catherine Probstfield posed with their 11 children in 1890. A granddaughter, June Dobervich, recently received an award from the Red River Valley Heritage Society for preserving a record of her family's contributions to the region's history.

## Pioneering family leaves rich legacy in Red River Valley

### Probstfield collections benefit numerous organizations

Randolph M. Probstfield was more than an agricultural pioneer. He saw himself as a steward of the history he was making in the business and politics of the Red River Valley, where he settled in 1859. Probstfield's penchant for keeping a record of his affairs was passed on to subsequent generations of his family. The result: A wealth of information on Clay County's early history has been painstakingly preserved.

Several Clay County organizations are beneficiaries of the family's

foresight and planning. Minnesota State University Moorhead acquired Probstfield's diaries. And the Clay County Historical Society recently added to its collections hundreds of artifacts and documents detailing the family's contributions to the region.

CCHS collections manager Pam Burkhardt first became involved with the family several years ago when she was approached by Probstfield granddaughter June Dobervich for advice on creating an inventory of

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## A curator's view: Looking for layers of meaning

*Larry Hutchings joined the Carver County Historical Society staff in June. He talked about his work as museum curator in the Summer 2001 Issue of Annals of the Carver County Historical Society. Adapted with permission.*

I entered the museum field almost by accident. Casting about for a career after deciding I didn't want to be a high school band director after all, I took a job as curator at the Stevens County Historical Society. Only later did I realize I had been preparing for that work nearly all my life.

As a child, I spent hours creating table-top museums, with the Science Museum of Minnesota as inspiration. My exhibits included rocks and minerals, toy dinosaurs, a miniature cast of the Kensington Runestone and the most prized piece in my collection – a mouse skeleton I had found in the barn, cleaned and mounted. Thus began my path to a curatorial career.

So far, none of the

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their vast collections. Dobervich and her sister had spent years researching Randolph's affairs, assembling materials from various state and federal archives, and gathering family belongings. They kept the materials in a room of their house that they dubbed "the museum." Dobervich had also helped establish the Probstfield Living History Farm Foundation, charged with rehabilitating the Probstfield homestead, Oakport Farm, as an interpretive center.

Burkhardt advised the foundation on its options for the care and

preservation of the family collections. Foundation board member

Dobervich, grateful for the guidance, decided to donate to the county historical society a selection of the materials. When the time came for Dobervich to downsize to an apartment, Burkhardt had to move fast. "I had one day to select items," she recalled, "and two days to pack and move them. But because I was already familiar with the family history, I was able to make decisions quickly."

She selected family photographs, the children's toys, Randolph's pipes and Catherine Probstfield's gardening tools; papers detailing the family's innovative farming methods, crop varieties and marketing ventures; and records of their involvement in county and state government, national agricultural organizations and the suffrage movement. The list goes on and on.

"We're very happy to be the recipient of such a rich collection of materials," said Burkhardt. "Some of



Probstfield Living History Farm

**With a grant from the Minnesota Historical Society for a historic structure report, the Probstfield Living History Farm Foundation will explore restoration of the farmhouse at Oakport Farm.**

them are on view now in 'open storage' at the Hjemkomst Center. We're almost finished cataloging everything. Then we'll begin doing research to uncover the stories behind the artifacts."

All the organizations involved – the county society, the state university, the foundation – plan to work in partnership, explained Burkhardt. "We've agreed to loan materials to one another for exhibits and other programs. And the Clay County Historical Society will carry on June's work of sharing our county's history with students from Probstfield Elementary School and other schools in the region."

For more information on the experiences of the CCHS in managing collections, building partnerships and cultivating donor relations, call Burkhardt at 218-299-5520 or e-mail [pam.burkhardt@ci.moorhead.mn.us](mailto:pam.burkhardt@ci.moorhead.mn.us).

Clay County Historical Society



**The Probstfield children and grandchildren carried on Randolph's dream of a self-sustaining, experimental farm, opening a local market in the 1930s to sell vegetables and flowers.**