

The Zeisset Siblings – Keeping the Story Alive

Written by Loretta M. Hoerman, Summer 2026

Background

Narrator:

[Photo – Zeisset family at Sindolsheim]

Jakob Friedrich Zeisset lived with his parents, three brothers, and a sister at Sindolsheim, Germany. His father managed a large estate, until his death in 1861. Jakob Friedrich met Margaretha Mueller while he was living in Sindolsheim. She was from Semd, near Frankfurt, Germany. She had moved to Sindolsheim with her sister and her sister's husband, who was also farming at Sindolsheim.

Jakob Friedrich Zeisset and Margaretha Mueller, parents of our six immigrant ancestors, were married in Adelsheim, Germany in March 1864.

[Photo – Hofgut Kreuzfeld]

After their marriage, the newlyweds moved immediately to a farm at Kreuzfeld with Jakob's mother, his three brothers, and his sister. They would be managing a large farm belonging to a Prince of Hohenlohe. The brothers all worked together for a time at Hofgut Kreuzfeld, before they moved to manage other farms.

[Photo – JFZ and Margaretha with family AI version]

Jakob Friedrich and Margaretha had a baby every year for the first seven years of their marriage. Then, babies came about every other year. Six of their twelve children survived infancy and became our immigrant ancestors. Margaretha died in childbirth in February 1881. The premature baby also did not survive.

Three days before she died, Margaretha wrote a letter to their oldest daughter, 14-year-old Louise, who was living with one of her uncles and his family. After her mother died, we assume Louise had to come home to help with household duties.

By this time, Jakob Friedrich's mother was 64 years old and lived in nearby Schrozberg with her widowed daughter, Magdalena, and Magdalena's young daughter. They would not be able to help Jakob Friedrich care for his six children and manage the household.

So, there was Jakob Friedrich in 1881 with six young children and a farm to run.

Bertha was 12 and remained at Kreuzfeld. Lizzie, who was almost 11, and 7-year-old Jake, were sent to live with Uncle Isaak at Eichenau. Five-year-old Bettie and 3-year-old Henry were sent to live with Uncle Johannes at Niedersteinach.

ACT ONE

Arrival in a New Land

Cast:

Narrator –
Louise – 16 years old
Bertha – 16 years old
Bettie – 10 years old
Jake – 16 years old
Lizzie – 21 years old
Henry – 15 years old

Narrator:

Our story begins as each of the six Zeisset orphans arrive in New York. Louise arrives at Castle Garden in July 1883:

[Photo – Louise Zeisset young]

Louise:

I just arrived here in New York. I'll be 17 years old in a week. I talked it over with Papa and we decided I should come to America. Farming has not been going well for Papa – the weather is always ruining the crops. And he hasn't been the same since Mama died.

Papa and I heard it is easy for German girls to get work right off the ship – we German girls are known for being hard workers – not like the Irish girls. Papa was able to pay \$26 for my fare in steerage. We had parties for two weeks before I left so I could say goodbye to everyone. Then I took the train to Antwerp, my first time out of Germany! The ship left Antwerp on June 30th and got here to New York on July 12, 1883.

Peter Baer, who is married to Papa's cousin, went to Kansas three years ago. His wife and children are planning to join him in Kansas next year. My sisters and brother will eventually come to the United States too and we'll all end up in Kansas. That's the plan.

I came to America first since I'm the oldest and now, I'm going to Philadelphia with several other Germans. I must be very careful though, because I've been warned that Americans may try to take advantage of me since I only speak German.

Narrator:

Louise worked in Philadelphia for about three years.

[Photo – Schwäbisch Hall prison]

Things were not going well for Jakob Friedrich Zeisset in Germany. By the end of 1883 he was bankrupt. In August 1884 he was tried and convicted of fraud. We believe circumstances were such that he resorted to desperate measures not because he was a bad person, but because he had a family to provide for and no longer had the support of his

wife. He received a relatively light sentence of six weeks in prison at Schwäbisch Hall. Unfortunately, it cost him his life. He contracted typhus in prison and died October 6, 1884. The news must have reached Louise by mail later in the month.

We don't know, because it was never spoken of, but maybe the plan had been for the family to all be together in America. Jakob Friedrich had a cousin in Kansas, Peter Baer, and during these years, the call from America to start a new life was strong. Jakob Friedrich could have taken his family and had a fresh start in Kansas. But it was not to be.

Bertha and Bettie arrived at Castle Garden in New York on June 6, 1885, eight months after their father's death. They did not see the Statue of Liberty though – it arrived in New York from France 11 days later - assembly required! *Pause for laughter*
We hear from Bertha first:

[Photo – ship's quarters]

Bertha:

Here I am in New York with my little sister. We came on a ship from Bremerhaven, Germany. We were in the middle steerage compartment for families. If I had come alone, I would have been on the end with the single women. It wasn't so bad.

[Photo: AI image of Bertha and Bettie]

There was just nothing for us in Germany. First, Mama died in 1881. Louise and I had to help take care of everything. Two years later, I had to do everything after she went to America. Papa just wasn't the same after Mama died – he was so sad. He was having money troubles. And then two of our barns burned in January last year. Papa had a sale in February, but some men came and arrested him there. They didn't keep him long, but he lost his work at the estate farm and moved in with Uncle Johannes at Niedersteinach.

Uncle Isaak took in my sister Lizzie, and brother, Jake. Bettie and Henry stayed with Papa when he went to Niedersteinach. I started working out, wherever I could get work. Papa got very sick and died in October last year. We are all orphans now.

I'm going to be 17 years old in two weeks - old enough to be on my own. I don't know why I had to take Bettie with me.

Bettie:

I'm 10! My birthday was in April. I'm NOT a bother! *Direction: Bettie stomps her foot.*
I miss Papa.

Bertha:

I thought Bettie could have stayed where she was, with Uncle Johannes and Henry. She should have waited to come to America until she was old enough to work!

We've had some letters from Louise – she's in Pennsylvania and says it is so easy to get work. But Bettie and I are going to Kansas. I'm going to find work, and maybe I'll find a husband too!

Bettie:

I'm going to live with Aunt Lena and Uncle Peter Baer. They're not really our aunt and uncle – they're Papa's cousins. Aunt Lena's sister, Anna Bletscher, went to Kansas last year too, with her husband and their baby, Christian.

Bertha:

Peter Baer's family and the Bletschers came on the steamship Fulda in September last year. They gave us directions for how to travel. We even came to America on the same ship they had been on. It really helps to have family let us know what to do. They helped pay Bettie's fare, too. I had to pay my own way. Bettie will have to pay them back when she's old enough.

We've got to get on the train now. The Baers will meet us when we get to Kansas. Then we can rest easy.

[Photo – early Leonardville]

Narrator:

The year is now 1886, and we join Bertha, Bettie, and Louise in the new town of Leonardville, founded in 1882.

Bertha:

I went to work for Richard Burk in Leonardville. He is a well-to-do merchant. Bettie lives with Lena and Peter Baer who just moved to a farm north of Leonardville.

Juergen Nanninga and I were married March 26th this year, 1886. Louise came to Kansas too this year.

[Photo – young Louise]

Louise:

My wages in Philadelphia were \$1.50 - \$2.50 a week. The family I worked for provided my room and board. There were a lot of Germans in Philadelphia, but I still had to learn English. I heard of a German girl whose employer gave her a shopping list and money on her first day of work and told her not to come back until she had everything on the list. It was hard, but that's how she learned English.

I made enough money to pay for my train trip to Kansas. I have been working in Clay Center now.

Bettie:

I'm 11 now and live with Aunt Lena and Uncle Peter. They only had boys, so I help Aunt Lena with the housework and the cooking. I want to learn to sew. Mama taught Louise and Bertha to sew.

Narrator:

Louise worked for about a year in Clay Center, then married John Swart in 1887 and moved to his farm north of Leonardville, next to Peter and Lena Baer.

Back in Germany, Jake worked for Uncle Isaak for a few years. He lived with his uncle's family at Eichenau when he was confirmed at the Lutheran church in Lendsiedel. Isaak and his family moved to Darstadt in 1888, but Jake went to work for a farmer 22 miles east of Eichenau. Jake left for America in February 1890, and he has just arrived in New York City.

[Photo – Young Jake]

Jake:

The trip from Bremerhaven to New York City was very cold. The weather was awful the whole time until we got to port at Castle Garden on February 26th. Four days before we arrived, there was a hurricane with snow and hail near Newfoundland. We came across a ship that was missing its mast, so it was just drifting. Five of our crew volunteered to rescue the ship's six passengers, but one of our men drowned when the lifeboat capsized. Our captain decided it was too dangerous to try anymore. I heard that another ship rescued the crew of the boat two days ago. I'll be glad to get on the train to Kansas. No more ships for me! I just turned 16 and I'm ready to work.

Narrator:

Jake arrived in Leonardville on March 6th, 1890, and went to work for his brother-in-law, John Swart, Louise's husband.

Back in Germany, Lizzie lived with Uncle Isaak and his family, first at Eichenau, and then at Darstadt. Isaak farmed for the German princes, and it was a large operation. He had as many as 72 men working for him. Lizzie paid for her room and board by working for Uncle Isaak. Isaak and his wife, Bertha, had one daughter, Elise, and six sons, so the women could use her help.

Lizzie left for America at the end of April 1891. It had been six years since she had seen Bertha and Bettie, and eight years since she had seen Louise. Lizzie has just arrived at Castle Garden.

[Photo – Lizzie Zeisset young – AI generated]

Lizzie:

Finally, I'm here in America! I can't wait to see my sisters and my brother! I'm 21 years old now – they may not recognize me! I may not recognize them! The trip from

Bremerhaven to New York only took 9 days, but I didn't feel so good for much of the trip, so I'm glad it's over. We got here at 3 o'clock in the morning! Now I'll find the train and go to Kansas. Maybe I can sleep on the train. I wish George was with me – he's my fiancé. He works for Uncle Isaak, and he helped pay my fare. He's going to join me as soon as he can. We're going to be married when he gets to Kansas.

Narrator:

Lizzie was not processed through Castle Garden (which closed in April 1890) or Ellis Island (which opened in 1892). She was processed through the Barge Office. When Lizzie arrived in Kansas, not only did she see her sisters, but she had six nieces and nephews to meet. Louise and Bertha each had a daughter and two sons. George Weller arrived in New York on July 10, 1891, less than three months after Lizzie. He left immediately for Kansas where he was reunited with his fiancé. Lizzie and George were married at the end of October 1891.

All the Zeisset orphans were in Kansas now, except for Henry. He was still living at Niedersteinach with Uncle Johannes. Henry applied to emigrate to America in 1892, after completing his confirmation and required education through 14 years of age. There was a significant cholera outbreak in 1892 which began in Hamburg, Germany. Henry's emigration was delayed until April 1893.

[Photo – Henry's confirmation class]

The Department of Inner Mission at Bremen was established in 1849 to help emigrants. They sent a letter dated March 10, 1893, to Uncle Johannes' wife, Elisabetha, with instructions to send Henry's luggage by train to arrive at Bremen eight days before Henry's departure, scheduled for March 25th on the steamer Braunschweig. Henry left Niedersteinach on March 22nd. He has just arrived at Ellis Island.

[Photo – Ellis Island]

Henry:

I am finally in America. All my sisters and my brother are here, and I'll be the last to join them. I was the 47th person to board the ship - I was in a cabin. My sisters and brother had to travel in steerage when they came to America. Sister Bertha and her husband paid my fare of \$88, which I will repay by working for them for a year. Most of the passengers on the ship were German, so not knowing English hasn't been a problem yet.

Our ship arrived at Ellis Island on April 8th, but there was a case of smallpox in the steerage compartment, so we were held in quarantine for disinfection. The little boy was from Warsaw, and he died yesterday. Cabin passengers like me were vaccinated while we were still at sea, but steerage passengers had to wait until we were in port. Now I need to find the train for Chicago where I will get on another train. I'm going to Reeleye, Kohnsass.

It will be good to be with my family. I hope I recognize them. I am 15 years old now. I was only 5 when Louise left Germany. My sisters sent letters to me in Germany and told me that Louise, Bertha, and Lizzie are all married and have children – now I'm an uncle!

Narrator:

For the first time since Louise left Germany in 1883, the six Zeisset orphans were all together, settling into a new life in Kansas, with a new language, and new opportunities.

ACT TWO

How Far We've Come!

Cast:

Louise Swart – 41 years old
Bertha Nanninga – 39 years old
Lizzie Weller – 37 years old
Jake Zeisset – 34 years old
Bettie Hoerman – 32 years old
Henry Zeisset – 29 years old

Narrator:

When we left our story before lunch, all the Zeisset orphans had successfully arrived in Kansas. We rejoin them now in January 1908 at Bertha and Juergen's home southeast of Leonardville. Bertha and Juergen are hosting a dinner for the whole family.

[Photo – Drawing of Nanninga farmhouse by Juergen]

Louise:

Thank you for hosting us, Bertha and Juergen! I can't believe it has been so long since we were all together in Germany. Twenty-five years? Is that right? I was the first to leave Germany – in 1883 – so, yes, it has been 25 years!

Bertha:

Well, Bettie and I were the first of our family to come to Kansas. We came two years after you left Germany, Louise, not quite a year after Papa died. So, we've been here 23 years.

[Photo – map]

Louise:

John and I were so poor when we married. We didn't even have wedding picture made. We moved to Nemaha County in 1896, ten years after I came to Kansas. We had eight children – six were born here at Leonardville. We lost our last baby, Rosa, a few days after she was born in 1901. But it was harder to lose our daughter, Emma, two months ago. She was only 13 years old.

We have almost 600 acres of our own and John rents land in Pottawatomie County, too. It's a good thing he has our sons, George and Henry, to help him. Elmer's 9 and will soon be able to help too.

Bettie:

Do you want to remind us why you moved to Nemaha County?

Louise:

You all know that! We're related to everyone around Leonardville – with John's sisters marrying Nanninga men. We didn't want our children to marry their cousins.

[Photo – Nanninga family, 1912]

Bertha:

We haven't lost any of our 12 children, thank goodness. And I'm not done having babies yet! Our oldest, Galena, is 20 - older than I was when she was born. It's good to have her help around the house. We only have 250 acres, but the cattle and hogs keep us busy.

[Photo: Weller Family 1904]

Lizzie:

I was 21, the oldest of all of us when we came to America. George had to finish up working for Uncle Isaak, but he came as soon as he could and we were married in October 1891.

We never cared to own our home. We've rented a place near Riley, a mile east and a mile north of town, since we were first married. Our seven babies were born here. We lost the second one, Lucy, when she was only two months old. George farms 160 acres.

[Photo – Jake and Christina wedding]

Jake:

You girls have had pretty ordinary lives – come to America, get a job, find a husband, have children, mostly stay in one place. I came to America in February of 1890 - not a good time to take a ship across the ocean! It was so cold and stormy!

I worked for my brother-in-law, John Swart, when I first came to Leonardville. Then I went to work for Mr. Russell and stayed there until I married Christina Bohnenblust in February 1896.

At first, we lived three miles west of Riley, close to her parents. That's where our first two children were born. We moved to the Arbor community west of Leonardville and George was born there in 1899.

Then, I saw what looked like a good opportunity. I decided to move the family to Oklahoma Territory and bought a place near Alva in December of 1900. We held an auction in January. I thought it would be easier to buy what I needed in Oklahoma than to move it. We moved to Alva in February 1901. It wasn't one of my best decisions. After a couple of months, I'd had enough of Oklahoma Territory, and we moved back to Kansas in July.

Louise:

Some of us just have wanderlust, I guess.

Jake:

We lived in a little house in Leonardville near the water tower and I worked for Mr. Uhlenhop. I found a place to rent up near Walsburg, northeast of Leonardville for the

summer of 1902 – so we didn't have to live in town. Then I rented Victor Hadin's place west of Leonardville in the Arbor district. Our next two children were born there. Then we moved to the Meyer place two miles west of Leonardville – not far.

Bertha:

You need to settle down, Jake! I've lived on the same farm since we were married, 22 years ago. I know my brother-in-law, Reinhard, was partly to blame for the Oklahoma fever, but at least he didn't take his family down there. And while you're at it, you need to finish up your citizenship.

Jake:

I am settling down. I'm farming 160 acres now. We're close to my sister, Bettie Hoerman's home. And Henry is renting a place south of us. I'm planning to stay put for a while – at least until I can buy my own farm. And, for your information, I filed my first papers for citizenship in October 1895. I just need to finish it up.

Henry:

George Weller and I both got our citizenship almost two years ago. And I came to Kansas after you, Jake.

[Photo – Bettie and Lou wedding]

Bettie:

I know how it is to move from place to place. Of course, I was only 10 when I came to Kansas in 1885, so I had to rely on family to take care of me. I lived with Aunt Lena and Uncle Peter Baer north of Leonardville and went to school at Crooked Creek – where everyone else was Swedish. I had to learn English fast.

The Baers bought a farm three miles west of Riley in 1892. I didn't want to go with them. Mrs. Stadel was teaching me dressmaking. Then I got a job with Banker Sparks in Leonardville – I helped his wife and helped take care of their son. That's when I started keeping company with Lou Hoerman – he was the most handsome man I had ever seen!

Lou and I were married in February 1899. Lou had rented a farm north of Green. I didn't like living up there – the creek was too close to our house, and I was always worried the ducks would drown. *Pause for laughter* The neighbor lady was not friendly, either!

A little over a year after we were married, I had our first baby – Lawrence. Then the farm next to Lou's father came up for sale a little over 3 miles west of Leonardville. Old Mr. Hoerman bought the place for us in 1901. Lou took over the mortgage the next year, and we moved there. He farms 240 acres. We had twin girls in 1904, but only one of them lived – we named her Louise, since Lou and I both had sisters named Louise. We gave her Mama's name – Margaret – for her middle name. Then Wilbert was born the next year.

Lizzie: We girls are all lucky to have Bertha with us when our babies were born. Louise won the award for having the first baby, Martha, born August 27, 1887. But Bertha was right behind her with Galena, born eight days later! Louise, you had four babies by the time I had our first baby, and Bertha, you had three.

George and I had six children – Carl was the last – he just had his first birthday last month.

[Photo: young Henry]

Henry:

I started out working for a year for my brother-in-law, Juergen, to pay off my ship passage from Germany. You might say they gave me room and board with that, but there surely wasn't much room. I had to sleep together with three or four of Juergen and Bertha's kids in a loft above the main room. It was so drafty we would wake up with snow on top of us after a cold and windy winter night. The food was good though!

Bertha:

Our boys had to put up with the same thing! It wasn't like we left you up there all by yourself, Henry. It was so much better after we added on to our first little house.

[Photo – Young Henry]

Henry:

That first winter, I went to Fairview School for a few months, after chores, of course. It was only half a mile away. I was just trying to learn more English. I hated that the teacher treated me like a first grader. After all, I had graduated eighth grade back in Germany. I just didn't speak English that well yet.

I worked for other farmers for the next dozen years. The Russells fed me so little that I ate raw eggs I found in their barn. I left after a year. I worked a few years for Fred Otto, Fred Uhlenhop, and Dick Meyer. At least they fed me well. I liked their families and they liked me. I particularly liked working for Dick Meyer, and he gradually gave me more responsibility. He lived a mile south of Riley – he had a large farm. One winter, I fed and managed the herd of 100 cattle he owned 35 miles away, up in Washington County. Dick's niece's husband, Henry Meierkord had a farm there.

[Photo – Henry and Lou Hoerman]

Every Sunday I borrowed a horse and rode into Leonardville to go to the Evangelical Church. After church I would have dinner with Bertha's family, or Lizzie's, or Bettie's. I kept some of my stuff at their houses, because I usually didn't have much room where I was working.

Eventually I decided I could farm for myself, so I rented a place near Grandview, about 6 miles east of Leonardville. After the first year I figured I was \$900 ahead of where I

would have been if I had stayed working for Dick Meyer. So maybe now I can afford to get married.

I haven't told anybody yet, but just last night, I asked Miss Perseda Schreiber to become my wife, and she said yes. Perseda works at Sikes Store and is a great favorite of the German speaking customers, since Mr. Sikes doesn't speak German that well. Perseda is just petrified, though, at having to tell Mr. Sikes she is quitting to marry me.

So, in a few weeks, Perseda and I will start our new life together at my farm in Grandview. Maybe, someday, we will be able to rent Perseda's mother's farm right across the road from your home here, Bertha.

Lizzie:

It's hardly any surprise to us that you and Perseda are getting married. Why, sister Bettie wrote us last November that your chances for Perseda were quite favorable. I don't know why old Mrs. Schreiber was so opposed to you, Henry – you'd be a fine catch for any woman, if you weren't so shy!

Louise:

Just think. Six of us, and we're all settling into good lives in America. Better than what we would have had in Germany.

Bertha:

I'm so glad everyone could be here today. I'm used to cooking for my 12 kids, plus Juergen and me, but it's nice to share the food everyone brought.

Lizzie:

We need to remember this day.

Bertha:

Why don't we go into town and have our picture taken at Ostlund's studio! If just the six of us go, we can all fit in one buggy. I'll heat some bricks to put in the buggy around our feet.

Readers arrange themselves according to the sibling photograph:

Back row: Jake, Bettie, Henry

Front row: Lizzie, Bertha, Louise

[Photo: Six Zeisset siblings]

Narrator:

Our ancestors came to Kansas with essentially nothing, and we've just heard how things have gone over the past 20 years, with both challenges, failures, successes, and joy. They all have families of their own, and Henry is about to marry Perseda. When we return, we'll hear about the rest of their lives.

Act 3

Summing it up

Direction: Each reader is seated and stands to leave as they complete their reading. Bettie is sitting in the rocker she used to rock her babies.

Narrator:

We've come to the end of the lives of each of our six Zeissets. Their deaths occurred over a period of nearly 50 years, from 1924 to 1970. Each one will give a brief reflection of his or her life as we join them in their final days. In thinking about their lives, they were similar in some ways, but very different in others. I have questions for each of them, to help sum up their story. Let's begin!

Bertha, you had the most children, 15 of them. What were the challenges you faced?

Bertha:

I came to Kansas looking for work and a husband – I found both right away! That was the easy part. Raising fifteen children, and then suddenly losing two of them and Juergen - that was hard!

[Photo: Nanninga family]

Bertha:

You know we named one child after each of you five. We didn't have hired hands after the boys were old enough to help. In some ways, it was hard when the girls started getting married and moving away – to Cloud County.

[Photo of Galena and Louise's wedding]

Galena and Louise had a double wedding in 1911. That was something! And it was a church wedding too! We had 152 guests for supper that evening. Lena married Albert Berk and Louise married Ezra Trost. They had adjacent farms. Three years later Bettie married Luther Jansen and moved to Concordia too!

Lizzie:

As I recall, you had just had your last baby, Elizabeth, in December 1911, and then you had your first grandbaby in January.

Bertha:

Yes, but thank goodness I had my other girls to help with all the household and the cooking and the little ones. But you asked about challenges.

Louise:

You've had so much heartache, Bertha. It makes me think about Mama though, losing six of her twelve children.

Bertha:

We lost Juergen Jr. from diabetes in 1912, and Reinhard to cancer in 1914 and then Juergen died in the Great Flu Epidemic in 1918. I didn't know how I'd go on. After Henry married and moved to his own farm, Margaret was the next oldest – she was 23 when her father died. Elizabeth was only 6. Jacob was 19, and we were so worried he would get called up by the army. Thank goodness that war ended. I had 9 children still at home. But everything worked out. Jacob was even able to go to college. It was hard doing all that on my own without Juergen.

[Photo: Bertha Nanninga]

Narrator:

Bertha was the first of the Zeisset siblings to die in 1924. She died from stomach cancer six years after the death of her husband. She was 56 years old. Margaret, as the oldest, became head of the household then. Of the 13 remaining Nanninga children, only Margaret (who married George Trump), Bertha (who married Fred Heikes), and Emilie (who married Roy Lagerquist) remained in Leonardville. The rest married and lived mostly in north central Kansas. Bertha had 14 grandchildren at the time of her death.

Bertha leaves the stage.

Narrator:

Now, we'll hear from Lizzie. Lizzie, do you think your life was better here than it would have been in Germany?

[Photo: Weller children]

Lizzie:

Well, when I came to America, I was already engaged to George, so I knew I'd be a housewife and mother. I didn't have to find a husband.

Louise:

You were 21 years old when you came to America – almost an old maid!

Lizzie:

I'm sure our lives were better here than what we would have had in Germany. We began our family right away and George was farming. There was a lot of hard work in those first years. But we were working for ourselves – in Germany, we wouldn't have had the opportunity to do that, we would have always been working for someone else. I was surely glad to be around the rest of you, too!

Our oldest, Bertha, married Oliver Nelson in 1915 and they moved to Keats. I hate to say it, but I almost didn't miss her. She had been working out for four years, in different homes. Everyone wanted her – she was a good worker. She was at brother Henry's one time for 6 weeks.

Henry:

That's when our daughter, Carol, was born on Christmas day. We were so fortunate to have her help.

Lizzie:

One by one, the children married and left home, leaving only Carl at home with us. We celebrated our 46th wedding anniversary in 1937 with a big family gathering. It didn't make any difference that we were renting our home. It was being together that made us happy.

We would get those letters from our cousins in Germany after the World War telling us how terrible things were there. Bertha once wrote in a letter, "We can certainly thank God we came here." I think we all feel that way.

[Photo: elderly Lizzie and George Weller]

Narrator:

Lizzie died in November 1938, also from stomach cancer. She was 68 years old. Carl married Una Coutermarsh the next year, and George lived with them for a time, then moved in with his son George, Jr. at Stockdale. He moved to a Wamego nursing home in 1948, then to a Manhattan nursing home in 1957 and died there in April the same year at 92 years of age.

Lizzie leaves the stage.

[Photo: Louise and Lizzie]

Narrator:

Louise, you were the oldest and the first to come to America, even before your father's death. That took some courage. Looking back, what do you think kept the six of you so close?

Louise:

Little did I know I was saying my last goodbye to Papa when I left Germany. I was in Pennsylvania those first three years, so I wasn't any help to Bertha and Bettie when they arrived in Kansas. But then I lived at Leonardville for 10 years and we all helped each other. Each of us worked hard to make our lives here successful. I think we all felt a sense of responsibility to each other, particularly knowing our history in Germany.

[Photo: Louise and John Swart with citrus tree]

Jake:

Your husband was always interested in buying more land and trying new things. I'm glad you didn't settle down there in Texas when you bought that 40-acre citrus grove in 1928.

Bettie:

George and Zula almost tied with sister Bertha for number of children. They had 14 children.

Louise:

Yes. They moved to western Kansas in 1929, so we didn't see all those kids so often. Our youngest son, John Elmer, married Marjorie Chadwick in 1919 and they moved into our original farm in Adams Township, where we lived together for a time. Then he took over the farming on our home place.

Bettie:

Don't forget your oldest – Martha! When she married Max Krummel in 1914, several of us hopped on the train and went to Kelly for the wedding. We had such a fun time!

[Photo: group at Kelly train depot]

Louise:

She was 27 years old when she finally got married. We had to have a big party!

John and I started spending winters at our ranch near Donna, Texas – the climate was so much nicer. Our daughter, Lillie, of course, lived there year-round with her family.

I'll never forget the day our lives changed. August 8, 1931. John had a bad stroke that affected the left side of his body. Then about a month later he had another stroke that affected his right side and his speech. After a time, he was able to walk a little with crutches. He didn't leave the house for a whole year. He liked to sit by the window where he could see the feedlot. Little by little he started getting better.

We decided to go down to Donna in the summer of 1937. We thought it would be easier to find a nurse to care for John there, than out on our farm. My arthritis was so bad that I couldn't always help him.

When we came back home, John got worse in the summer of 1939 and was bedfast from then on. He died in December 1940 at our home. He was 80. Lillie was so good to come up from Texas to help us.

[Photo: Louise and John family photo]

Narrator:

Louise died on Memorial Day in 1946 in Texas. She would have been 80 years old in less than two months. She spent the winter in Texas and was on her way back to Kansas with her son, George, his wife, Zula, and Lillie Johnstone. A truck skidded out of control in

mud at an intersection on a road detour near Dallas and collided with the Swart car. Louise died the next day at Baylor Hospital of injuries from the accident. The others had minor injuries. Louise had 25 grandchildren and 13 great-grandchildren when she died.

Louise leaves the stage.

Narrator:

Jake, Jake. Did you ever find the place you were looking for?

[Photo: Jake's alien registration 1918]

Jake:

When I came to America I wanted to own my own farm – something Papa never had, and his father never had – I would be the first Zeisset in my family to own a farm. It just took a little longer than I had hoped. To clear up an earlier concern, I got my official citizenship papers in 1921. So yes, by then I felt like I had succeeded.

Bettie:

I know how lucky Lou and I were when we bought our farm, but Jake, you certainly tried enough different ones! Even the one in Oklahoma.

Jake:

Don't remind me. I'd like to forget about that!

We were happy when we finally had our own place. No more renting. I bought the place from Christina's brother in 1912, but it didn't have a house. We moved the Goodin house in Leonardville out to the farm, so we didn't even have to wait to have the house built.

Our last child, Jakie, was born in 1915, and then our two oldest girls, Emma and Bettie, were both married the next year. The boys were good to stay around and help me on the farm, but it would be a long time before Jakie could help. Sometimes we hired Lou Hoerman's boys to help us.

[Photo: J. Zeisset family]

Bettie:

Yes, until Christina took a disliking to Lawrence! We sent Wilbert over and he got along fine with her. He and Roman were always going fishing or swimming. Lou bought that farm right across the road when you bought your place, so that was handy.

Jake:

The Depression hit and that was hard on us. Christina had a lot of sickness too. The farm ground had poor yields – kind of like Papa's farm, I guess. We finally had to give up the farm in January 1935. What a way to start the new year. I wasn't ready to quit farming though – so I found a place for rent over on Mill Creek. Our son Earl rented a farm just east of us. And George was farming at Grandview then.

Henry:

You were only about 2 miles southeast of our place then.

[Photo: Jake and Christina old]

Jake:

Jakie lived with us until 1940 when he married Fern Davidson and moved to Manhattan. Wife and I decided then to quit farming and move into town in 1942. We rented a little house at the east end of Riley.

We always had a lot of company when we lived there. I always like to give the grandkids a sack of candy. I used to do that with my kids too, when I'd come home from town. But I'd take a piece of cheese over candy!

Christina had so much lung trouble – she kept that incense burning and claimed it helped her lungs none of us could understand that. We lost her just before Thanksgiving in 1950. I was in and out of the hospital after that. I finally moved in with Nellie and her family up there at Waterville.

Narrator:

Jake died at Nellie and Ernest Lindquist's home in July 1952. He was 78 years old.

Jake leaves the stage.

[Photo: Henry 1938]

Narrator:

Henry, in modern times, we think of the youngest child as being outgoing, rebellious, spoiled, carefree – those stereotypes certainly do not describe you. Do you feel like your hard work paid off?

Henry:

I was a nomad for my first 13 years in America. I lived with whatever farmer I was working for and sometimes stayed with my sisters for a month at a time. I saved a lot of money that way – no mortgage and no rent for me! So, maybe I seemed carefree, but I had a plan. I just kept saving until I finally rented over in the Grandview neighborhood. Next, I needed to find a wife, and I found the perfect one.

[Photo: Henry and Perseda wedding]

Bettie:

You were 30 years old when you finally married Perseda. I think you were too focused on working.

Henry:

I wanted to be sure I could provide for a family. Do you ever think back to Germany, Bettie? We were too young to understand what was going on, but Uncle Johannes told me Papa had money troubles. And then Mama died. I wanted to live the American dream – but you must have money, and you get money by hard work.

Bettie:

And in farming you must have luck too!

Henry:

We were lucky when Perseda's family farm was open for us to rent in 1909, in time for our babies to be born there. Merton was born in early November 1909, less than two months before Bertha's Milton. And Carol was our Christmas Day present in 1911, born two weeks after Bertha's last one, Elizabeth. They were almost like twins! We lived only half a mile apart.

Perseda, being a preacher's daughter, was always active in the German church – the EUB church now - in Leonardville and the WCTU. She was even the WCTU county president for a time. She was the church organist and always taught Sunday School. And she had her chickens – Single Comb Rhode Island Reds.

[Photo: Henry Zeisset Family]

Bettie:

You were lucky again when the Schreiber heirs sold the farm to Perseda in 1917.

Henry:

Yes, we were happy to get the farm, but we also got a \$15,000 mortgage. That was a lot of money back then. But with our own house, we started making much needed improvements. We added on to the house in 1922.

Bettie:

I remember we had you folks over for Christmas – and Carol's birthday – in 1920. It helped me to have company – it was a year after we lost our little Johnny. A mother always remembers.

Henry:

Merton farmed with me for three years and then left for college in 1930, so he could go into the ministry. Just as I cared for and tended the land, Merton would care for and tend to his human flock. Carol married Raymond Benninga in 1938 and then I had a farming partner once again. We paid the mortgage off in 1943.

[Photo: Henry and Perseda 1955]

Bettie:

You had a big celebration for your 50th anniversary in 1958. I remember you said there were 167 guests! But you and I were the only ones left from our sisters and brothers.

Henry:

Yes, Perseda and I renewed our vows. I bought her a new wedding ring – she lost the first one. The grandkids provided the music, except Ray – he was away at college. We sold the farm that summer – 1958 – to Donald Lund and bought a little house in Leonardville. We became city folks in January 1959. I couldn't ever adapt to that – I wanted to go back to the farm.

Narrator:

Henry became very ill with a high fever during the year before they sold the farm. After he recovered physically, he began to have cognitive issues, and soon the family decided for his safety to have him go to a nursing home in Manhattan. He kept wandering away, so he was moved to a home in Junction City with better supervision. He died there in January 1961 from a hemorrhage. He was 82 years old. His funeral was the first one held in the new Leonardville EUB church after the old one was destroyed by fire in 1958.

Perseda lived with Merton and his family in the winters, and Benninga family in the summers, until she entered the new Leonardville Nursing Home as its first resident in 1967. She died there in January 1969, at 90 years of age.

Henry leaves the stage.

Narrator:

Bettie, your vision and mind both failed you in your later years, but today I'm going to give you your wedding ring that Lou gave you in 1899 and it will restore your memory.

Direction: Narrator walks over to Bettie and puts the ring on her finger.

Bettie, what do you want your family to remember?

Bettie:

They're all gone now – all my brothers and sisters. We six orphans did well in our new country. We came with nothing, but it was the land of opportunity.

I lost Lou in 1936 – appendicitis. He died just the year after we lost our son, Lawrence. We were married for 37 years, and now I've lived 33 years without him.

[Photo: Bettie with her children 1943]

Wilbert, Gladys and I lived together until Gladys married John Llewelyn in 1945. Then it was just Wilbert and me. We built a new house – it was so wonderful! Then, at 49 years of age, Wilbert married Mae Hoerman and they got the new house! I went to live with Gladys, just a mile north. Then Wilbert and Mae had two children – at their age! Well, I should talk – I was 43 when little Johnny was born.

[Photo: Bettie, Mae & Wilbert]

What would Mama and Papa think of their children! And grandchildren! I counted one time and if Mama and Papa were alive today, they would have 42 grandchildren, not counting the ones who died in infancy. I barely remember Mama. Papa was never happy after she died. And then he died and we were left orphans.

My daughter, Gertrude, told me they held a Zeisset reunion in October this year - 1969 - at Leonardville. I couldn't go – I live in a nursing home in Hutchinson now, but I'm so glad the family got together. It was held at the EUB church. They said there were 100 people at the reunion – imagine that! I hope they keep having reunions. We Zeissets have a remarkable story that needs to be remembered.

[Photo: Bettie with Lawrence and Loretta]

Narrator:

Bettie died January 2nd, 1970, in Hutchinson. At 94, she had lived to be the oldest of the orphaned Zeisset immigrants.

[Photo – Zeisset reunion in Germany]

Zeisset reunions were held almost every other year since 1969. The COVID pandemic interrupted the reunions after we celebrated the 50th year anniversary of the reunions in 2019. This year's reunion is the first one we've held since the pandemic. We have had various programs for reunions over the last 30 years, but one of the most memorable was when 33 descendants of the six immigrant Zeissets traveled to Germany for a family heritage trip to see where the immigrants were born and where they lived.

[Photo – Zeisset reunion with German Zeissets at Weisweil]

We also had a gathering with our German Zeisset cousins, including some descendants of Jakob Friedrich's brothers, Johannes and Isaak, and descendants of his first cousin Matthaeus, who hosted us at Weisweil.

[Photo: Six immigrants]

Our ancestors came to Kansas from Germany as orphans because of circumstances far beyond their control. We honor them by keeping their stories of survival and triumph alive.