

## Paying overdue tribute to his grandmother, a Minnesota farmer recarves family history

Man honors hardworking women on family gravestone.

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Jim Vannurden

The Marklowitz family headstone, noting Caroline and her 18 children, Maine Prairie Cemetery, Kimball, Minn.



What began as a joyride photo op turned into a touching tribute to an overlooked grandmother. In the process, Jim Vannurden not only rewrote history, he re-carved it.

Two years ago, Vannurden and his wife, Barbara, drove their '58 silver Corvette convertible from their central Minnesota farm to Maine Prairie Cemetery near Kimball, where they parked beside a large granite headstone.

"We wanted to take some pictures of the car by our family monument," said Vannurden, 68, who raises draft horses south of Litchfield.

Jim's grandfather, German-born Fred Marklowitz, purchased the cemetery plot before his death at 85 in 1953. Marklowitz had gone from sawing wood to amassing more than 1,000 acres of farmland along with 60 cattle, 40 hogs, a dozen horses and three sets of modern farm buildings. "This is the reward of honest toil," he wrote in an autobiographical essay that ran in 1928 in a St. Cloud newspaper.

Nearly a century after his grandfather wrote up his life story, Vannurden sat at the cemetery and thought instead about his grandmother, Caroline.

Born in 1871, Caroline Skorupowsky had emigrated from East Prussia at 20, married Fred a year later and given birth to 18 children — eight of whom died before she did, six of them as young children.

Caroline and Fred Marklowitz, on their 50th anniversary in 1942.

In an email to me, Vannurden said he learned about his grandmother's grueling life from his mother, Olga, who was Caroline's 16th child.

"She told me that her mother would milk in the morning, then prepare breakfast for the family and up to five hired men," he said. Then Caroline would "go into her room and have a baby and be expected to be back in the barn for evening milking."

Sitting at the cemetery, Vannurden thought about "all the women that have not received their due respect." That's when he got the idea to carve Caroline's name on the large Marklowitz cemetery monument, along with the words "LOVING MOTHER" and the names and birth years of all 18 of the children she brought into the world.

"I thought, what could be a greater justice," said Vannurden.

His idea for the headstone began to germinate nearly 40 years ago, when Vannurden found a yellowed newspaper clipping in a box of his mother's photos. It was the autobiographical essay by grandfather Fred, from the March 20, 1928, edition of the St. Cloud Daily Journal Press, in which he described his rise from dirt-poor immigrant to well-to-do farmer with three barns in Maine Prairie Township.

"I have always kept between thirty and forty cows and lots of young stock," Fred boasted — leaving out any reference to the family members who did the bulk of the milking, namely his wife and daughters.

Vannurden showed the article to his uncle, Edgar Marklowitz, who was born a year after Olga in 1912.

"After reading it he began to cry and dropped it to the floor," Vannurden said. "When he recovered himself he said: 'That son of a bitch, he takes all the credit after treating his wife and kids as slave labor.'"

"Back then the women did all the milking," Vannurden said. "Can you imagine milking 40 head of cows twice a day by hand?"

Fred offered advice in his 1928 essay "to everyone who has an ambition to get to the top: 'Work hard, save hard and pray.' If you follow this advice you won't have to kick about hard times."

Having a hard-working wife and kids didn't hurt, either.

Vannurden sent along to me a photograph of Fred, Caroline and 10 of their children in front of their farm house, circa 1915. Fred stands cocksure with his hand on his hip wearing a white tie and dark suit, while Caroline sits with a daughter on her lap and two young girls on each side. I'm speculating a bit, but she looks exhausted — and likely appreciative of a rare chance to sit down.

The Marklowitz family, with Fred and Caroline surrounded by 10 of their children in front of their farm house, circa 1915.

When Caroline died at 85 in 1957, her obituary referred to her only as Mrs. Fred Marklowitz. Vannurden's mother, Olga, was 95 when she died in 2007; she buried four of her husbands and two boyfriends, whose deaths ranged from drowning to cancer and heart attack.

"There were two other men who wanted to marry her but she refused," Vannurden said. "So she put six men in their graves and I can only imagine she got that strength and resilience from her mother."

Now the family headstone mentions Caroline and the children, just under the engraved letters MARKLOWITZ. Vannurden left Fred off the monument, he said, because "I wanted this to be all about my grandmother. He got plenty of credit during his lifetime, while she never did."

"My point to all this is that women were treated as property and got little or no respect," Vannurden said, "and never given the credit when credit was due."

*Curt Brown's tales about Minnesota's history appear every other Sunday. Readers can send him ideas and suggestions at [mnhistory@startribune.com](mailto:mnhistory@startribune.com). His latest book looks at 1918 Minnesota, when flu, war and fires converged: [strib.mn/MN1918](http://strib.mn/MN1918).*