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—Williston Herald Photo

McKenzie County Pioneers, the Ekerts

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Old Settlers To Honor McKenzie County Pioneers

Mr. and Mrs. Fred Ekert are excited over the prospects for this coming Saturday. The two of them will be honored as the 'big names' in the 14th annual Old Settlers Day at Alexander.

This yearly event at the Community park is sponsored by the townspeople and draws several thousand people to the all-day celebration. A parade opens the event and, of course, the Ekerts will have top billing in the long parade.

A free barbecue at noon will be set for the visitors to the town of Alexander. A program appealing particularly to the old timers, with music and short talks is scheduled at the park.

Horse events and a baseball game also are on the ticket.

The guests of honor, the Ekerts, are pioneers of this area. He is 82 and she is 80, both of them coming to North Dakota in 1902. Ekert started in North Dakota as a farm hand. "I was making two dollars a day harvesting, the most money I had ever made in my life," he recalled.

The two homesteaded 12 miles north of Alexander and went into farming. Fred was in and out of the cattle business but now is strictly a grain farmer.

Ekert feels deeply about the area. He watched it grow from a territory to an organized county. He watched Alexander develop from a line camp where cowboys used to pasture their horses overnight and the cowboys bunked in a small cabin for an evenings rest.

"It was a nice little village," he said, "back then we called it Ragged Buttes."

The spry farmer said he built the first actual farmhouse in the county. "It was a tar paper shack 12 ft. by 16 ft. and we called it a claim shack," Ekert explained.

He worked for other farmers and sold hay to the ranchers during some of the early days in McKenzie County.

"We shipped a lot of beef out of this country at six cents a pound," he recalled.

Ekert's transportation, as all the other ranchers, was horseback. "My wife and I had a pair of blacks and we went everywhere on them." Mrs. Ekert interjected "We didn't have any roads and my nearest female neighbors were five miles away. If I wanted to visit I rode there."

"A big stumbling block in the development of this country was the poor transportation across the Missouri River," he said.

"We hauled building materials for our homesteads across the river in rowboats or on the ice and it was hard and expensive, it cost \$2 to \$2.50 to cross the river by ferry. All the neighbors got together and sent one for the mail and supplies."

Ekert praised the Williston merchants during the early years of development of the area. "Those stores carried many of us when the crops were bad. We could get credit anytime with those fine people."

He said the Bruegger Mercantile was exceptionally good, declaring "Bruegger was a mighty fine asset to Williston."

The pioneer had a chance to do something about the river crossing when he became a representative of the 41st district which included Williams and McKenzie Counties. He sponsored the bill in 1923 which called for the building of the Lewis and Clark bridge.

It was turned down by the governor once but through efforts of Ekert and other staunch supporters of the bridge, both in Williston and McKenzie County, the bill was past and the link between counties was completed. Ekert is proud of his part in securing the steel and concrete structure.

"I watched them build that

bridge, even went down in the river bed where the piers were being built and watched those men work. It was a fine sight," he said. "I came to this country as a farmhand and was able to serve my people in the state House, it was one of the high points in my life."

The two are anxiously awaited Saturday's events when they also will celebrate their 60th wedding anniversary.

Although they go south every winter, the Ekerts said, "We love North Dakota, the most wonderful place we have ever seen, and we're proud to have had a part in developing this fine country."