

## Written Profile



**Farm:** Matzner Farm, Originally Matzner Homestead Farm  
**Location:** Aurora County, South Dakota  
**Date of Origination:** April, 1883  
**Industry Sector(s):** Corn and Soybeans

"The US Government bet you couldn't live on this land for five years, and my grandfather took them up on their offer," shares Norval Matzner, grandson of original landowner Alois Matzner. The Matzner Farm was established in 1883 as a product of the Homestead Act. Originally signed by President Abraham Lincoln, the Act offered "free" land to interested owners west of the Mississippi who had to agree to show improvements on the land within five years. The Matzners surpassed the five-year mark and are celebrated today as a century farm. Their story embodies the fundamental values of **Agriculture's Lasting Heritage**.



Norval Matzner and son Alan

An immigrant from Germany, Alois Matzner was living in Iowa when he heard about free land in the Dakota Territory, prior to statehood. He filed on the 160-acre plot sight unseen. In 1883 he built a house and barn with the help of his children, and his wife moved to the new property soon after. Alois took up the government on a second offer and planted a "tree claim" (10 acres of planted trees) to receive an additional 160-acre plot.

Son Herbert Matzner continued the family farming tradition for his entire life, with the exception of two years spent serving in the first World War. Herbert passed when his son Norval was only 20 years old, leaving Norval a family farming tradition to uphold. Norval farmed for three years before being drafted into the army. He hired someone to farm while he was serving our nation for three years and then returned. He and his wife LaVonne continue to farm the land today, which now encompasses some 800 acres.

The Matzner Farm endured significant challenges over the years. "My dad farmed during the Great Depression," explains Norval. "Nobody had anything, really. In our township there were at least forty families, and my dad was one of only four who could pay their taxes." The family raised beef cattle at the time, and the cattle survived off of Russian Thistle. This iconic tumbleweed is considered an invasive weed today, but ironically saved the Midwest cattle industry during the Dust Bowl of the 1930s.

When asked about the sustainability of his farm, Norval expresses the importance of knowing the land. In order to conserve the land and the environment, you must first know what you are working with. "We've left land that isn't suited for intensive cultivation in prairie land, or we have sewed it back in with grass. We rotate crops and try to have a good amount of alfalfa (to build soil and prevent erosion)."



Norval and LaVonne Matzner

A manager of a successful family farm today, Norval credits his family's success to the perseverance of the original pioneers. "People now don't realize what pioneers went through to come out here. When my grandfather came out here, there wasn't a tree within twenty-five miles – just trails, rocks and grass." These pioneers put up sod houses with makeshift roofs. Without electricity or running water, they broke ground for the agriculture industry that provides our most basic necessities today.

Above all else, Norval reflects, "A farm is the best place in the world to raise a family. Our children learned to work and pick rocks." While we all may not be faced with the challenge of annual rock-picking, we can appreciate the value of hard work and the investment the Matzner family has made in the future of agriculture. We congratulate the Matzner Farm on their contribution to **Agriculture's Lasting Heritage**.