


Esther Thiese...From Postville, Iowa to Alexandria, South Dakota ..1971 Interview

By Kelly Diamond Wernette

February 13, 2012

In 1971, I thought it would be fun to interview my great aunt Esther. She was my grandmother's younger sister and she could remember the past very well. She loved to talk and tell tales of the farm life in the Dakota's and Iowa. The interview went well, but time passed. I had stuffed my notes in old notebook and had nearly forgotten it. In 2003 I stumbled on the old notebook in the closet. That would be approximately 13 years after Esther's death. From these handwritten notes I began to piece together her story. From those notes a story of hope and accomplishment came to life. I soon realized I was having fun paraphrasing and quoting her statements. A small biography emerged.

	Birth Information for <i>ESTHER ELIZABETH THIESE</i>
	(State File Number: 464928)
New Search	File Date: 12/10/1937
Order Certified Vital Records Online	Sex: Female
Vital Records Home	Birth Date: 06/04/1902
Health Home	City/County: HANSON
State Home	Mother's Name: DOROTHEA M RYBERG
	Father's Name: AUGUST W THIESE
	Back to List Back to Search Form

She was the fifth child of August William Thiese. She was born on June 4, 1902 in Alexandria, South Dakota. She was the first child born in South Dakota, the previous four children, including my grandmother, Stella Louise Thiese, had been born in Postville, Iowa. So the family just mysteriously packed up all their belongings and headed out to the Alexandria area, in Hansen County, South Dakota. August and Dora, Esther's parents, would have four more children in South Dakota. All together, the Thiese family produced eight children. Right to

Left Below: August Thiese, Dora Ryberg Thiese, Pete, Esther, Ruth, William (Bill), Eldo (the tall one) and Dorothy. Missing: Stella (at college) and Laura (died)



1901-Mary Irene Thiese, 12 year old daughter of Henry Thiese, is hit by a passing train and killed. August Thiese and family leave the Postville area and immigrate to Alexandria, South Dakota where they purchase a 360 acre farm.

1902-Esther Elizabeth Thiese born on June 4.

1903-Henry Thiese takes poison and dies on the anniversary of his daughter Irene's death on March 18, 1901. At the time of his death he owned the Eden restaurant in Manona, Iowa.

Esther was very good about remembering Stories. She had heard as a child that something went terribly wrong in Postville. A tragic train accident killed young Mary Irene Thiese, Henry Thiese's daughter. She was hit by a train near Postville on her way home from school and was mangled horribly. Her right leg was severed up to her hip and she lingered in pain for hours before she died. Henry was August older brother and he was like a rock of stability until this accident. After Mary's death he just fell apart. Henry died a year later. He died of an overdose of poison on the anniversary of his daughter death. Soon after much soul searching Dora and August Thiese decided it was time start fresh in the promising farm lands of the Dakota's. Young Esther was the first Thiese born in the new land. It was 1902 when her story begins.

Esther's maternal grandparents, William Ryberg and Mary Ryberg, also of Postville, decided to travel to Alexandria as well. So Esther would have her grandparents with her in South Dakota. It soon become a family movement to what was hoped to be greener pastures. William Thiese Jr., would also leave Iowa to join his brother August on the great plains of the Dakota's.

Esther had early childhood recollections of her Dad and Mom talking about the farm days in Iowa. They would get nostalgic and talk about William Thiese and his old farm in Guttenberg. William (August Thiese's dad) came to America in 1865 settling in Guttenberg, Iowa, Clayton County. William apparently had two wives. His first wife he married in Germany and she immigrated to the US with her husband and two sons Henry and William Jr. After settling in Iowa his first wife delivered a new baby boy, August Thiese. August was the first member of the William Thiese family born in America. Esther said August could not remember his birth mother. She died when he was still a baby. About 1867. William remarried very quickly after his first wife's death and August always thought of his step mom as his real mother. She raised him practically from birth. So they were very close. William and his second wife Magdalena went on to produce nine more children for an ever dozen. William and Henry were the oldest sons and they were the main farm hands in the early days. August came into his own after the older boys moved on to farms of their own, which is inevitable with large farm families. August soon was depended on to help William with the chores. Below the William Thiese family of Guttenberg, Iowa. All twelve plus parents.



Standing (L-R): George, Henry, Ferdinand, William J., Caroline, Fredrich, Herman and Otto
 Sitting (L-R): Ludwig 'Lewis', Magdalena (mother), August, Louise, William Thiese (father), and Kate. The Iowa family

August Thiese (dad)...front row...3rd from left
 William Thiese. Grandfather...5th from left/chair

Esther was quoted as saying that “For a long time William and August did most of the work on the farm. August used to tell stories about swimming with cows in the river. He said he used to hang on to their tails. “August would stay and help his dad as long as possible but he soon married Dorothea Ryberg and set off to find land of his own. After a number of years in Postville Iowa August moved his family to Alexandria, South Dakota. Esther said “a large number of Iowa family followed dad to South Dakota. William Thiese Jr., and William and Mary Ryberg

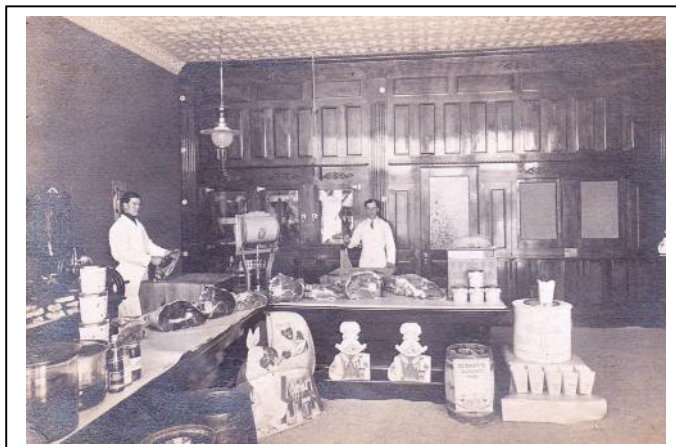
arrived in the Alexandria area all about the same time. So the August Thiese kids had plenty of relatives to hang out with. “My dad and mom missed the old farm in Iowa and all there brothers and sisters. But they adjusted and formed a little colony of their own” Esther said with a smile. Local records state that the August Thiese family “lived on the P.F. Wickham farm, just east of the C. Heinemann place.”



This is a picture of a Thiese farming the land. This old photo shows life in Alexandria about 1904.

Esther could recall that most of the farm work was done with teams of horses. Starting in 1902, or about that time, a severe drought gripped the Dakota’s bringing hard times to farm families. “Nothing but Russian thistle would grow,” she said. “You could see cattle leaning up against the barn with their ribs showing through their skin, you could count every rib. August was forced to sell 45 little pigs called Poland/China hogs to the government. The government used them as fertilizer. He was sick about it. Yet we had no feed.”

In good times the farm produced oats, corn, barely, and wheat. “You had to put a large crop to make any money at it,” she said. “My dad was forced to work another job. He worked for P. F. Wickham’s of Alexandria, South Dakota. They shipped grain and other farm products on the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul railroad,” stated Esther. The most important store in town for the farmers was the R.O. Waksman Store, that’s where the supplies were bought and sold.



Picture of the R.O. Wakeman store in Alessandria, South Dakota about 1908. The postcard says “R. O. Wakeman and his Flunkie Henry.” I think that was supposed to be funny...but not sure. KDW

Bill Thiese, or William Thiese Junior, moved to Montevideo, South Dakota, to become a wealthy harness maker. “August and William worked together farming the land. It just didn’t work out. That land could not support two families. So William starts making harnesses and the next thing you know he was one of the wealthier people around. He loaned dad \$1000 dollars. That was big money back then. I don’t think August ever paid him back. At one point he said not to worry about it,” exclaimed Esther.”

Alexandria, Hanson, Co., SD -- 1909 Business Directory...Thiese, W. J.....livery

Esther recalled enormous dust storms that rolled across the Plains as a child. “It was awful; dust would get on everything, even our food. We used to take wet towels and fill every crack in the windows. We even put the towels around the door in our futile attempts at blocking out the dust demon. During a peak storm we always failed to get the job done,” she explained with a pained expression on her face.

Times were hard but education still seems to have always played a role in the Thiese family history. Esther and older Sister Stella Thiese went through grade school and high school in Alexandria. Stella would play sports, particularly girl’s basketball, and would go on to finish college at the Grand Island Business College in Grand Island, Nebraska. She played on her college girl’s basketball team of 1910-11. Unfortunately, when Leonard (Pete) Thiese was born on April 13, 1910, “Stella was forced to come home and help mother take care of little Pete. She was so angry about it.” Both Stella and Esther would teach school for a while in the Alexandria and White Lake school districts. Esther said “the money was needed to help the family”.

Esther could remember rambling about the farm as a kid in search of eggs and corncobs. Searching for eggs was a good job for the little ones and it supplemented the family diet. Corncobs were used as fuel. Wood was a luxury item and burning it was almost “unheard of”. She also got to feed the horses hay.

She recalled that they used to melt snow for drinking water because the water was so hard.

Esther once said that “we lived like the Amish back then”. If we could transport ourselves back to this time and era of the early 20th century we might be shocked to see how similar the Thiese lifestyle was to the present day Amish. Let’s look at the similarities between Thiese and Amish of today. The Thiese’s spoke both German and English but usually German at home. They traveled by horse and buggy. August owned a rather “smart looking surrey” (buggy) which he used to go to town and church. They attended the German Lutheran church of Alexandria; preside over by a Rev. L.L. Layne. They also attended St. Mathews Lutheran church of Spencer, with Rev. Bessler. All Thiese’s were baptized and confirmed in the German Lutheran Church. The family would get up every Sunday, put on the Sunday best, and drive 12 miles in the family buggy to church. “They loved to preach in German”, said Esther with a grin. My grandmother’s confirmation certificate from this era is entirely in German. (Copy provided) Fortunately, we still have that document. Now most of the things mentioned above could be said of the modern Amish. Obviously, a few differences exist. For example, the Amish are “plain people” and generally dress simply. They also have their own unique religious beliefs.



This is the horse and buggy transportation of the Thiese farm in SD. Using the buggy to take the family to town and church was very important. Not to mention school and local activities. Family post card.

However, almost everything else is perfectly in line with the Amish lifestyle....using horses to plow, driving the buggy’s to town and church, simple

farm lifestyles, speaking German, and having an intense close knit community that reached out to help the greater community.

“Being German became a little difficult when World War I broke out” said Esther. “Around 1918 and earlier there was a general fear of German riots similar to the Irish riots during the Civil War. People wondered where our sympathies lied: with Germany or the United States? Our brother Eldo Thiese (Slim) volunteered to serve his country along with dozens of other German boys in Hansen County. The German boys wanted to make it very clear that they supported the USA. Eldo was shipped off to Camp Lewis in Washington State, where he trained with the 77th Infantry division, first army, under the command of General “Black Jack” Pershing. Everyday stories were written in the local press about our local German boys and their contribution to the war effort. Eldo could write a good story and he sent letters back home to the local paper in Alexandria where he would detail his experiences during the war. People loved reading his little stories. His column kept us informed,” she said.



Eldo “Slim” Thiese before the war with his new car. Eldo was critical of the fact that much of the training was done without real guns or bullets. Here he laughs at how the enemy might feel about an army with pick axes instead of guns. Slim was by all accounts a very popular young man who was a leader and a big brother for Esther Thiese. Eldo Thiese was born August 13, 1893. He will sustain injuries in the Argonne

“According to Eldo the training was a bit of a joke,” she said. “No bullets, few guns, and general chaos reigned. Things eventually got better. The troops became more disciplined and eventually the boys were actually anxious to see some action. So they hopped on the troop train to New York City from Washington State. That is one long train ride across the United States. It turned into a national event. People lined the train tracks and cheered as the troop train

roared by. People lined most of the 3000 mile of track to see our boys pass by. Every town, where they stopped to refuel and take on coal, would bring out people who treated them like heroes. These good folk would bring pies, cakes, bread, and cookies to the train station. Total strangers took the “Doughboys” (nickname for WWI soldiers) into their homes. Friendships were formed that lasted a lifetime,” said Esther. “Nobody had any idea of the pain and suffering these young men were in for. They were about to enter hell itself.”

When Eldo, Esther older brother, finally reached France he continued to send stories to the Alexandria newspaper. “He wrote stories about the farmers in France and compared there farming techniques with what was going on in South Dakota. He said that the farmers over there seem to suffer from the same problems that dirt farmers everywhere experienced. He said the people here are just like us. Working hard to make a living,” she recalled.



“No one had any idea of the type of hell these boys were in for. They were about to enter Hell itself,” said Esther Thiese in an interview in 1971. She recalled the events leading up to the death of Eldo Thiese on August 20, 1920. Eldo was wounded and gassed in World War I. Although he survived his initial injuries he returned home with severe lung damage. His unit was in the thick of the final battles of the war. He received a hero’s funeral that was attended by a huge crowd of public mourners in Alexandria, South Dakota. “You never get over a loss like Eldo,” Esther stated. “Not a single person ever dislike him”. Eldo picture here with gun.

“Eldo was not lucky in the war. He was thrown right in the middle of all the nasty stuff. His unit, the 77th infantry, would be highly decorated for their bravery. But they suffered severe injuries in the Argonne. On September 18, 1918 he was hit with a deadly poison gas attack. Eldo was temporarily blinded and wounded very badly. He recovered from his wounds and his blindness while recuperating at a field hospital in France. He was an invalid for 3 months but he did recover enough to return home. However, he never fully recovered from the gas. It had injured his lungs. He would return to South Dakota but died shortly after returning,” she expressed sadly.

Eldo eulogy stated: “He was courageous in the war, and his death may be laid indirectly to his service in France, as he has never been strong since his return more than a year ago, and his health has failed rapidly although he has never complained, and never admitted that he was not perfectly well,” stated a story in the Alexandria Herald. He had a huge military funeral, with full color guard, and a 21 gun salute. It was the first time any of us had ever seen such a thing. The boys from his unit carried the casket,” she recalled. The local newspapers wrote a long and beautiful story about his funeral and life.

“I taught school in Alexandria and White Cloud for years after the war. I never failed to point out the sacrifice and bravery of the German American soldier. The fear and distrust of us disappeared,” she said.

“Around 1936 I began to look outside South Dakota for possible employment. I decided to follow my family to Michigan. My older sister Stella Thiese Kelly had married Frank Kelly and lived in Flint Michigan. My younger brother Leonard “Pete” Thiese and William “wild Bill” Thiese had already joined sister Stella in Michigan. I arrived in 1936 and took up residence with Bill and Manona in Waterford, Michigan,” she said. Her days on the farm were over and a new life in Michigan was just beginning.



The Flint Michigan Thiese family. From left to right: William (Bill) Thiese, August Thiese (father), Ruth Thiese (of Alabama), Leonard (Pete) Thiese, Stella Louise (Thiese) Kelly, and Esther Elizabeth Thiese. August moved to Flint to live with Stella Kelly and stayed there until his death. William lived in Flushing Michigan and Leonard lived in Waterford Michigan. Ruth Thiese Plymal lived in Alabama and was visiting her family for this picture. August was born in Iowa, farmed in the Dakota's, and died in Flint, Michigan on February 14, 1950. Esther, on the far right, shared her memories for this short biography. Missing from the photo is Dorothy Thiese Frasier of California.KDW

Esther Thiese in Flint, Michigan—1936-1990

Esther Thiese arrived in Flint Michigan in 1936 and took up residence with “Bill and Manona”. William (Bill) Thiese was Esther little brother and she immediately went to work doing light housework for 6 dollars a week. She soon moved on to become an aupair for several prominent people in the Flint area. She worked for Attorney Hugh Hoffman in 1938. She traveled to Fort Lauderdale Florida with the family and sent postcards regularly to Stella Kelly and family in Flint. “I really enjoyed the time I spent in Florida and we all hated it when we had to travel back to the cold northern climate of Michigan” she said with a smile. In 1940 she landed a new job working for Walter Earl the Buick motorcar inventor. She would be his governess for about one year before landing a new job for AC spark plug in Flint. “When the war broke out in 1941 they needed plant security people really bad. Walter gave me an excellent recommendation. I had heard the work was very easy and the pay was good. So I called and got the interview for the job at AC. But when I went down to the main office it was a total mob scene. The place was packed with people applying for jobs. But, when I walked in I was taken right through the crowd and walked into the main office for an interview. I was interviewing for the job of “matron” as they called it back then and I knew it was a good job and I wanted it very badly. I was really thankful for that recommendation by Walter Earl. It really paid off that day. The boss at that time was a man named Al Langers, and he must have asked me a thousand questions. That very night I got the phone call. Congratulations, your hired, come to work tomorrow. Your working 3rd shift he said. I felt so lucky,” she said.



Esther Thiese seated on left in While Lake South Dakota. Ruth Thiese a 1922 grad of White Lake High is standing. Esther on right is seen as an adult in the Flint Police era. She loved to play cards and almost always attended all family weddings and get togethers.



“I made allot of money during the war years. It did sometimes feel like stealing. I had to learn to deal with that feeling of guilt because plant security people did not do too much back then. Yet, we were paid very well. Eventually, I got over it and used to it. We used to walk around and check restrooms, escort visitors, and report anyone loafing on the job. We used to joke that our most important duty was keeping the Kotex machine filled. The plant was of course filled with women in those days. The “Rosie the Riveter” thing was happening everywhere. So I did get in and I walked my way into very good physical condition. We walked allot and I loved that. I was just one of 34 female security people they hired during the war years. I stayed on the job as security officer until 1948. In 1948 I became a Flint police officer,” she said with a hint of pride in her voice.

“Well Al Langer gave me an excellent recommendation and I also had an excellent score on the civil service examination. So I now found myself working as cop for the city of Flint for a salary of around \$2000.00 per year. All in all I put 17 Years of service into the Flint Police department,” she said

This is the 1959 picture of Esther’s family. From left to right: Bill Thiese, Esther Thiese, Dorothy Thiese Frasier, Ruth Thiese Plymal, and Pete Thiese (Leonard). Stella Thiese died in 1958. Pete was the youngest (1910)



Pete Dorothy 1941...Pete and Dorothy +Linda and Judv 1949

“At first I was a booking officer on the third shift. On my first duty day, I had to book six prostitutes and I almost went home and quit right on the spot. I did hang in there and I toughened up. I had to toughen up to survive dealing with the criminal element of Flint. It was a tough town with very shady characters. Yet, the important thing was I survived my rookie year and was able to transfer to a police job that I enjoyed allot more than booking. I transferred to the Juvenile Crime Prevention wing and stayed there until I retired,” she said.

“I worked in a squad car with a detective who was male. This was a common practice in those days. Men tended to advance and woman rarely did. Whenever we got a missing person investigation or juvenile complaint, he and I went to investigate. This went on for about two years. Finally, they trusted me enough to let me work on my own without a male counterpart. One of my first solo adventures involved driving to Saginaw to arrest a juvenile girl named Charm, and never has a child been more misnamed. The problem was I didn’t know how to drive. I sure didn’t want to have to admit that so I jumped in the car and thought: I can do this. I have watched people drive. It can’t be that complicated. So I slowly drove to Saginaw and back and that was my first driving experience. When I got back my boss said: Where to hell you been all day. What took you so long? I didn’t dare tell him I had to learn to drive on my way to Saginaw,” she said with her wry Esther smile.

She described her job as being both tough and rewarding. The tough part was dealing with the constant presence of abuse, which was rampant in Flint. “I sometimes had to remove a child from a home; this is never an easy thing to do. We would put them in probate, and I would drive them out to the home. It would always be very quiet and very sad. However, the rewarding side was working the big football games and sports events and the occasional and rewarding moment when you actually turn some child’s life around. Once in awhile we did make a difference”, she said.

She was injured once on the job, but it was not to serious. She broke her ankle during a football game at Atwood stadium. She was quick to point out that retirement was not easy for anyone. The income for female police officers was

dismal, she explained. So after retirement, she worked for a group called URGE. This was United Retired Government Employee's. They worked hard to increase and raise retirement income and cost of living raises for retired government workers. She said that "the pension paid to retired police officers was criminal. It is hard to understand the small benefits paid to workers who risk their lives daily for this community."

On April 19, 1975 Esther Thiese got her picture in the Flint Journal. Her retirement home, a house trailer, was flooded when the river went over its banks leaving her temporarily without a home. For awhile Esther was required to sleep in a high school gym until the "Civil Defense" people told her she could go back home. She weathered the storm with good grace and a touch of humor. "When can I play pinochle again?" she asked with a twinkle in her eye.

Esther Thiese's life was an interesting life during interesting times. She experienced the quiet farm life of South Dakota and the inner urban crime patterns of Flint Michigan. During her life that ran from 1902-1990 she said there was one important lesson that helped her cope with everything from two world wars to the great depression. She said: "don't ever lose your sense of humor."

End note: I sat down with my great Aunt Esther Thiese on a nice day in 1971 and began to record her comments about questions I had typed out before our interview. It didn't take me very long to realize she had experienced a great deal in her life. It was all very fascinating for me and I am so glad I recorded it and typed it up while it was still fresh in my memory. It wasn't long before I attempted a small biography about the events in her life. I would like to thank her for making all of us more aware of the life and times of this very fascinating woman.



Esther about 1989. Esther and Kathy Wernette 1985.

Erinnerung an den Tag der Konfirmation.



RÖM. 3. 26.
SO HÜTEN WIR ES AN, DASS
DER MENSCH GERECHT WERDE
OHNE DES GEBIETES WERKE,
DASS ER DURCH DEN Glauben.

HEBR. 10.
ICH WILL ABER GEDENKEN
AN MEINEN BUND, DEN ICH
MIT DIR GEMACHT HABE
ZUR ZEIT DEINER JUGEND.

Das ist
Pein Leid.

Das ist
Pein Blut.

Stella Louise Thiesse,
geboren den 22^{ten} August 1891,
confirmirt den 19^{ten} März 1905
in der ev. luth. Martins-Kirche
in Hanson Co., South Dakota.

Denkspruch.



Er mich bekennet vor den Menschen, den will ich
bekennen vor meinem himmlischen Vater. Wer
mich aber verleugnet vor den Menschen, den
will ich auch verleugnen vor meinem himmlischen
Vater.

Matth. 10, 32. 33.

O Heiliger Geist, mein Tröster, mein Licht und theures Pfand,
Laß mich Christ, mein'n Erlöser, den ich im Glaub'n erkannt,
Bis an mein End bekennen.

W. H. Rorvig
ev. luth. Pastor.

Ich will Dir danken
in Ewigkeit.

Siehe, das ist
Gottes Lamm.



