A Kindness That Saved the Farm

When white settlers moved into northwest Iowa in the late 19th century, they squared the landscape with mud roads that make the flat land a grid. Of 23 townships of Sioux County, 19 are cut out into perfect squares.

But the Big Sioux River doesn’t give a hoot about straight lines, so the townships at the county’s western border are jagged as sin, the worst of the sinners being Settlers Township, a chunk of land that looks as mauled as something the dog dragged in: a jagged, upside-down, barnacled fish hook, whose heart was carved out long ago when the rampaging Big Sioux determined it would take a sharp left and leave behind a series of towering bluffs.

Take a hike up to one of those beautiful bluffs, pick up an old milkweed pod, and let the seeds fly hither and yon, a hundred feet above the river bottom. Even if those seeds catch an updraft, most of them will come to earth on Van De Stroet land.

Once upon a time, an immigrant farmer named John Van De Stroet worked the land beneath that bluff. Wasn’t good land either, at least not by his neighbor’s reckoning, the soil light and thin amid all those bluffs shouldering a river that all too often flooded.

Van De Stroet rented his place from a gruff, bearded guy named Keen, who determined that most of what he’d made during his life out here on the cusp of the Great Plains would be given, upon his death, to a Methodist hospital just up the road.

Along came the Depression, and Keen mortgaged his land to the hilt to keep from losing it; when he died, that Methodist hospital became the Van De Stroet's landlord.

To say times back then were tough is a silly understatement. In Van De Stroet’s obscure corner of the world, it was smarter to shoot cattle than feed them, if you had cattle at all. When things grew desperate, the Van De Stroets went to the hospital
board and pleaded for grace—1,000 dollars' worth of rent simply couldn't be had and consequently couldn't be paid.

Graciously, the hospital nodded their consent.

Those river hills nobody else wanted? They ended up at the heart of the Van De Stroet family's survival. When no feed could be grown or bought, John let his sheep graze the bluffs, where they ate back the buck brush. When things got even bleaker, he shooed his hogs up there too, to munch acorns from the burr oak that run like an unruly moustache over those hills. While other farmers were dumping livestock, those bluffs saved the Van De Stroet operation, and by the time the Second World War came around, the family farm got on its feet.

Somewhere I've got an old newspaper clipping from 1976, 44 years after the hard-pressed Methodist Hospital Board shook their collective heads and let that thousand-dollar land payment ride.

In the picture with the newspaper story stands an old farmer, his shirt buttoned up tight beneath his chin. To his left is his wife, in a hair net and a print jacket, what's likely her finest mother-of-pearl brooch perfectly centered on her chest.

The old guy—you might have guessed—is Mr. Van De Stroet. Get this—he's handing a slip of paper to a guy with an open collar—a check for a thousand dollars, forty-four years later. All three are smiling.

I'd like to believe that those beautiful Big Sioux hills are full of stories, more than you can get from flat Iowa land. I suppose some of those stories would make you wince, but there are others, like this one, really bound to make you smile.