

North Dakota Rancher Swaps Land For Learners

By Jeff Almen

Harley (Bud) Kissner would like to be known for the prize-winning Herefords and horses he once raised, but he's not.

Kissner is better known as the Antler, North Dakota, bachelor farmer who gave away 42 acres — three 3-acre plots and three 5-acre plots — to six families who moved to Antler and enrolled their children in the town school.

Antler elementary was scheduled to close this school year but the 21 children the new families brought were enough for an eleventh-hour reprieve. It opened in late August with an enrollment total of 34 students.

Amid some criticism and national attention is 72-year-old Kissner, the real estate Santa Claus, who is both interested by and somewhat disin-



Kissner received more than 500 letters and an uncounted number of phone calls.

terested in the response his offer generated. "I never expected all of this," he said. "I just thought we'd get some North Dakota people to move here, but then a reporter from the Minot (N.D.) paper found out and it just grew.

Kissner's offer was simple enough. Working with his lawyer, who advised against the idea, Kissner devised a plan. Homesteaders are required to enroll their children in the Antler school, stay with the land five years, and improve the land with a shelter, before title is transferred.

"This land is high, doesn't flood, and has a good water table. I thought it was a good place and it doesn't disrupt the rest of the farm (about 600 acres)," he said.

Like many rural towns, Antler, N.D., located 50 miles north of Minot near the Canadian border, is dying. Farms grew bigger and displaced families left for larger towns. As that gradually happened so went town businesses and services. "Years ago there were 500 people in Antler," Kissner, a life long area resident, said. "When the town was really going, we had a bank, a doctor, a dentist, a photo shop, hardware stores, and a horse doctor."

Today, there is a gas station, GENEX and GTA branch facilities (Kissner is a member of both), a post office, a senior-citizens center and a few boarded-up buildings. The school was next.

Kissner was perhaps motivated first by a desire to help the small town. "I'm dedicated to Antler. People have treated me good here. Why shouldn't I support the community," he said. "If the good Lord has given me more than I need, why

shouldn't I give it back to the community?"

But that is not to say he didn't care about the school. "I'd like to see where my money is going while I'm still living," he said. "I wouldn't when I'm dead, and the school was in trouble."

Response to Kissner's offer was swift. After the original story was in the Minot News it was picked up by the wire services, and then by all three major networks, radio stations, and magazines.

With the media attention came calls and letters from people willing to take Kissner up on his offer. Shortly after the news went national, he had over 500 letters and was receiving telephone calls at all hours of the day.

Not everyone in Antler was in favor of keeping the school open, with some pointing to the high cost of keeping the school open. Kissner acknowledged high costs, but said, "It would cost more to give away your school district. There's a law that says if your district doesn't have a school, it is divided up. We'd never get it back," he said.

Kissner added that he felt those opposed to the school's continued existence want to tear the town down. "They make their money here, but they won't spend it here. It's hard to build a community. It takes money, brains and commitment," he said.

The six lucky families that were given the nod, a choice Kissner said was tough because there seemed to be so many needy, come from different parts of the country. Two families are from North Dakota, and one each from Utah, West Virginia, Colorado, and Michigan. Most are skilled laborers. But some local residents questioned whether there is enough work around Antler. "Anyone who wants to work and is ambitious can find work here, and then Minot isn't that far away," said Kissner.

Calls and letters came from all over the country, enough that the retired farmer says he got a picture of the United States. "It isn't a happy picture either," he said. "These people want to get out of the city and get their kids in smaller schools."

The respondents no doubt were interested in starting a new life or owning land, land that Kissner said is worth about \$500 an acre. "It isn't that big a deal, but I found-out that nobody is giving land away these days," he said.

To be sure, Kissner's donation holds risks for the people moving to Antler, for the town and for Kissner, but Kissner takes a realistic view of his new neighbors. "Back when they first homesteaded in this country, there were some good and some bad, and I expect the same here." But he is hoping that the chosen families have staying power.

Many people not interested in his land wrote or called, congratulating him on his effort to save a small town,



Harley Kissner poses outside the school he worked to save for the Antler, N. Dak., community.

others sent contributions for the school, and he heard from North Dakota Senator Mark Andrews. But perhaps the most interesting response came from California. "I had a call from a California woman who said 'I'm 50, I have a good figure, a daughter, I'm moving in with you,

and I'm taking a plane.' Nobody's moving in with me, I told her. It made me mad at the time, and the fellas in town couldn't get over it. They laughed and laughed." (Reprinted with permission from CO-OP Country News.)



Photos courtesy Dakota County Tribune, Farmington, Minn.

World's Tallest Christmas Tree

Necks craned and faces lit up at the sight of the 97-ft. Christmas tree with the unusually thick trunk located on the Richard Fox farm near Coates, Minn. during last year's Yuletide season. On closer inspection, passers-by discovered that the tree "trunk" was a 90-ft. silo that made the lighted 7-ft. tree visible for miles around.

Fox's son John and an employee, Gene Allen, were responsible for the world's tallest Christmas tree. They hoisted the tree atop the silo with a rope and lighted it with the help of a 150-ft. extension cord.



Richard Fox's 90 ft. silo served as the stand for his 7 ft. tree.