

Viola Ackerman made a home on the family farm for 50 years.



Viola Ackerman stands with her husband and four of their children in the early 1950s on their farm. (Family photo)

Oct. 7, North Dakota

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Growing up as a pastor's daughter came with perks for Viola Ackerman.

In rural North Dakota in the 1930s, the family had running water and indoor plumbing. Between the children at church and her 13 siblings, Ackerman always had a friend. Her father ordained her wedding in 1944.

Ackerman, who had eight children, 15 grandchildren, 24 great-grandchildren and seven great-great-grandchildren, died Oct. 7. She was 94 and had been living at St. Gabriel's Community nursing home in Bismarck, N.D.

Ackerman was born in 1925 in Hull, Iowa. Her family moved to Linton, in south-central North Dakota, where she dropped out of high school and met her future husband, Theophile Ackerman, at 17.

It wasn't exactly love at first sight.

"He just pursued her," said Shirleen Piela, the couple's daughter. "He kept asking, and so she finally gave in. The first time he came to the house to pick her up, he was very nervous, because it was the minister's daughter."

They married in 1944, and Ackerman moved to her husband's family farm northeast of Linton. For the first time in her life, she gave up running water and indoor plumbing.

"She maybe expected a little bit more, but I think she soon realized this is what it is," said the couple's son LaVern Ackerman. "You make the best of it."

Ackerman tended the garden and the chickens. Until the family got indoor plumbing in 1958, she carried buckets of water to a tub to bathe her children every Saturday night. She helped her daughters put curlers in their hair for church the next day. After church, she fed chicken noodle soup and pie to her family.

Ackerman lived on the farm for 50 years. Her grandchildren often visited, helping to gather eggs, bake cakes and pull the wagon out to the clothing line to hang up wet clothes.

"It felt like home there," said her oldest granddaughter, LaRae Doll. "I felt like I belonged. She was so patient and so sweet. She was a very peaceful person."

In 2015, Ackerman suffered a stroke and moved into the nursing home. When the home closed to visitors because of coronavirus regulations, Ackerman struggled.

"Her family meant the world to her. That was her life," Doll said. "She had to die alone without her family. A woman who would have wanted everybody around her and would have wanted that comfort really wasn't allowed that comfort at the end."

— *Eleanna Eimer*