

Steinauer, NE

Willard John Sommerhalder was born February 11, 1922 on the Sommerhalder homestead. He was the youngest of 6 children born to John and Anna (Gerriets) Sommerhalder. He was proud to have lived his entire life on the land homesteaded by his great-grandfather Jacob. Willard was a lifelong member of Salem United Church of Christ. He was baptized there March 26, 1922 by Rev. Herman Krueger and confirmed August 1, 1937 by Rev. Ernest Tischauser. His confirmation verse was I John 4:9 God's love was revealed among us in this way: God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.

Willard knew all his life he wanted to be a farmer and proved it from an early age. When he was just 3 years old, he could milk a cow and would shell corn to feed his chickens. He loved horses and would do anything to get to spend time in the barn with his dad. One of his most memorable experiences during the dry 1930's was helping to ship cattle by train.

Willard attended rural school, district #41 for grades 1-8 and graduated from Steinauer High School in 1940. After graduation, he became a fourth-generation farmer, continuing to raise grain, hay, Hereford cattle, and hogs with his father and brother.

On September 24, 1955 he was united in marriage to Mary J. Svanda at Salem United Church of Christ. Their union was blessed with one daughter, Marlene (Sommerhalder) Kruse.

He served his church and community in many ways, holding numerous offices throughout the years. He was involved with Lewiston Grange, Farmer's Union Oil Board, Pawnee County Promotional Network, and Pawnee County Historical Society. Always welcoming people into their home, the Sommerhalders hosted the Pavelka family from the Ukraine, families from Japan and Thailand through Lewiston Grange, and two exchange students from France and Panama.

While his work ethic was unmatched, he enjoyed taking time to travel. Some of his favorite vacations included visiting former ministers in Washington, Oregon, and California, his honeymoon with Mary to Niagara Falls, attending the World's Fair in Seattle, and trips to Alaska, Hawaii, Switzerland, Czechoslovakia, and Germany. He enjoyed playing cards, especially pitch and pinochle with his family. He also loved singing and dancing. He sang in the Salem Men's Choir for over 40 years and was a member of the Beatrice Homestead Harmonizers. His passion for agriculture followed him in his hobbies as well, as he loved riding horses and did so in several parades and participated in a corn husking contest, taking second in his age division.

Willard always had a sweet smile, laugh, and a quick wit. He never knew a stranger as he introduced himself to everyone he ran across. Even in his mid-nineties, he was an active part of the farming operation, cutting and baling hay until 2015. In his later years, he spent time at Colonial Acres in Humboldt. He passed peacefully in his sleep at the Pawnee County Hospital in the early morning hours of October 30, 2018. He reached the age of 96 years, 10 months, and 19 days.

Willard was preceded in death by his parents John and Anna Sommerhalder, siblings Clifford, Zeta, Emiline, Adelaide, and Lillian and numerous nieces, nephews, cousins, and friends.

Willard is survived by his wife Mary of Steinauer; daughter and spouse Marlene and Steve Kruse of Tecumseh; grandchildren and spouses Monique and Jamie Grotrian of Firth and their children Joslyn and Cooper; Shantille and Justin Campbell of Wellington, KS and their children Joselyn and Brooklyn; and Stetson and Julie Kruse of Adams and their children Harrison and Gwen.

Funeral services will be held Friday, November 2nd at 10:00 a.m at Salem United Church of Christ, rural Steinauer. Officiating is Pastor Eric Biehl. Visitation is Thursday, November 1st 9:00 a.m.- 8:00 p.m., with family greeting friends from 5:00 - 7:00 p.m. at Wherry Mortuary at 919 G Street, Pawnee City, NE. Interment at the Salem United Church of Christ Cemetery. Memorials to family's choice. Condolences may be shared online at [www.wherrymortuary.com](http://www.wherrymortuary.com).