



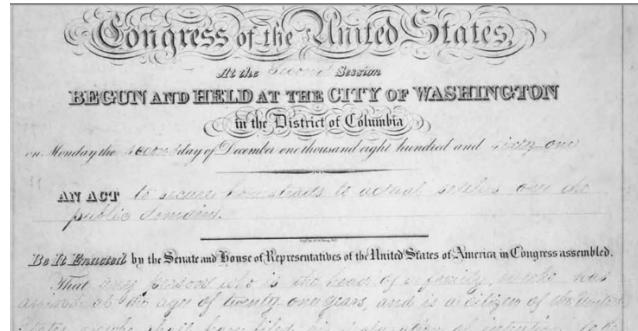
## A Brief History of the Kowalik Ranch

*The Sala-Orkisz family has deep roots in Poland. A recent discovery shows the Kowalik branch of the family immigrating to the United States earlier than originally thought. While many Poles came through Ellis Island in the early 1900s, there was a large wave of Polish immigration in the 1870s. Franciszek Kowalik was one of those immigrants.*

## From Poland to Chicago

In 1870, at age 19, Franciszek Kowalik decided to leave Rosocice, Poland for a better life in the United States. He found a sponsor in New York and made arrangements for the ocean crossing. When he arrived, he worked odd jobs for several months, struggling to learn basic English, before deciding to move on to Chicago where there was a large Polish community. He settled on the west side of Chicago in an area that became known as "Old Polonia" and worked in the stockyards. Life was full of ups and downs. While Francis missed Poland at times, he had found a new circle of friends that became like family to him.

It was here that he met Justyna Hajto, who had just recently arrived in Chicago from Poland. They fell in love and started to dream of a new life out West. One evening at a local bar, Francis met a man who had established a general store in The Dalles, a small city in Oregon on the Columbia River, which had been settled just 25 years earlier. He encouraged Francis to come West and own his own land, as part of the Homestead Claim Act.



*The Homestead Act of 1862 offered settlers a quarter-section of land, 160 acres, in "public domain" states, with five-year residency on the claimed land.*

After 7 years in Chicago, in 1877, Francis, age 26, and his new wife Justyna, age 18, packed up what little they had and boarded a Northern Pacific passenger train headed West.

## Arrival in the West

When Francis and Justyna arrived in The Dalles, Oregon, they learned of another Polish family who had established a successful claim across the river in the hills of Washington State. Being close to the river had its advantages. Cities were growing in the area with many people arriving after months on the Oregon Trail. And the route downriver to Fort Vancouver and the Hudson Bay Company provided connections for commerce and trade.

Francis and Justyna selected a parcel for their first 160 acres. They set about building a structure and cultivating the land to secure their claim. The first structures were a barn and corral, built in 1878 (still standing). They stayed in a small rustic cabin with a dirt floor and no windows.



It was through the kindness of their neighbors that Francis and Justyna made it through those first few years. They decided to raise sheep, leveraging Francis's experience in Chicago's stockyards. The

area was advantageous because the land was fertile for ranching and the dry farming method could be used.

The claim offered a valuable water source: Eightmile Creek. The area along the creek was densely wooded with white poplars and bitter cherry bushes. A nearby pond provided water for an orchard of apples, apricots, and peaches. The creek was a reliable water source which allowed them to rapidly increase the size of the sheep herd. By 1880, they had 500 sheep and were producing 5,000 pounds of wool each year. (10 lbs of wool is enough to make 6 sweaters, 3 suits, or to cover a large sofa.)



Backbreaking labor, solitude and natural disasters brought hard times. But there were good times, too. After 14 years of marriage, they had a daughter: Kunegunda was born in 1892. Franciszek was 41. Justyna was 33. They continued to work hard and progressively made a better life for their family. Justyna was committed to Kunegunda's education. She taught her to read and write and instilled in her a love of learning.

## Protecting the herd

Francis and Justyna had to be vigilant to protect their growing sheep herd, and not only from coyotes. A German neighbor, John Zenger, started grazing his sheep on meadowland owned by the Kowalik's. Francis warned him that he was trespassing but Zenger would not move his sheep off of the property. Gunfire was exchanged resulting in Zenger's death. Francis immediately reported the incident to the local justice of the peace in The Dalles. A grand jury later refused to indict him citing self-defense.



Range wars between cattlemen and sheepherders posed an additional challenge. It was generally a one-sided war with armed cattlemen attacking sheep herds, often killing hundreds of sheep in a single raid. For the most part, Kowalik's herds escaped this slaughter.

By 1889, the Kowalik sheep herd had grown to 2,000 animals. However, that winter was long and extremely cold with deep snow. As a result, only

400 sheep survived the season. It took many years to recover and rebuild the herd.

After a short illness, Justyna died in 1901. Kunegunda was 9 years old.



## Keeping the ranch going

Francis and Kunegunda continued to work hard, with hired hands staying on the ranch to help manage the herd. Their friend at the general store in The Dalles was a great source to find labor for the ranch. Men were always coming and going, particularly during the very busy spring season during shearing and lambing. Visits to The Dalles were frequent for the wool trade. By then Francis had bought nearby land and the sheep herd numbered close to 3,000. They were producing 30,000 pounds of wool a year.

In 1905, Francis had saved enough money to build a proper home, which is still standing today. Kunegunda, age 13, received support and mentorship from the nearby Polish neighbors. She was responsible for running the farm and orchard – cooking and cleaning for the four or five men who would stay at the ranch at any time – depending on the season and what needed to be done.

Four years later in 1909, Francis died. He was thrown from a horse and never recovered.

## Kunegunda the homesteader

Kunegunda, at age 17, would run the Kowalik Ranch on her own. It wasn't that unusual for a woman to be an independent homesteader. Before 1900, women accounted for less than 10 percent of the homesteaders. But with increased publicity, homesteading opportunities for women grew significantly increasing to about 15 percent. At the time, a significant portion of Oregon's dry-farming homesteaders, perhaps as many as one in six, were young, single women.



Spring and summers were hard and were taken up with branding, shearing, lambing and doctoring the sheep and cattle, while maintaining a small farm and orchard. But with the arrival of fall, Kunegunda would find time to explore and camp. She even traveled by herself to Fort Vancouver to visit the Hudson's Bay Company, in part for the adventure and in part to continue to secure a strong market for her wool. She also served as a midwife and teacher to her neighbors.

## Raising their family



Kunegunda had been running the ranch on her own for 8 years when she met Stanley Sala in 1917 in the general store in The Dalles. He was one of the many men over the years hired to help work the ranch. His skills in building and maintaining the fencing on the ranch and at the farm were especially helpful and the two of them enjoyed playing cards together in the evenings.

Stanley had come through Quebec City in Canada in 1912. He traveled from Winnipeg, Canada by rail and entered the United States in Noyes, Minnesota. He lived in Chicago for many years before deciding to try life out West.

After a brief romance, they married. She was 25. He was 29.



Soon, their children Walter (1918) and Lillian (1928) were born. When the Great Depression hit in 1929, times were tough on the ranch but the family made it through, safe from bank foreclosure. The wool trade was stable. During the 1930's, the construction of the nearby Bonneville Dam, as part of President Roosevelt's New Deal, the Civilian Conservation Corp (CCC) and the Works Projects Administration (WPA) brought jobs and a growing population to the area. The Kowalik Ranch would continue to thrive.

In 1936, at age 18, Walter attended the University of Washington, having passed a general admission examination. His formal education was limited to time at a small school house in The Dalles but he was gifted with an innate knowledge of engineering.

While visiting The Dalles two years later during a break from his studies, Walter met a man at the general store who told him about high paying jobs in the automobile industry back East. The family considered making the move. Stanley's fond memories of life in Chicago provided motivation, and both Kunegunda and Stanley were ready for a break from the hardships of ranching life. The family decided to move together to Detroit. They sold the ranch to the Crawford family: \$10,000 for the land and two dollars for every head of sheep.

## The move to Detroit

Detroit in 1938 was a hotbed of industry and culture the likes of which this ranching family had never seen. As Walter went off to work as an engineer's apprentice at Ford Motor Company, Stanley (age 50), Kunegunda (age 46), and Lillian (age 10) bought and settled into a small building with an apartment above and Stanley started the Sala Hardware shop, bringing his knowledge of fencing and metal work to this urban setting.



It was a good life. Lillian would go on to meet Edward Orkisz in 1946, just off a ship from his time in the Merchant Marines. They married the following year. And Kunegunda and Stanley, though at times it was difficult to adjust to life in the city, found a new rhythm in the days in Hamtramck. They never forgot their early years together out West.

The Kowalik House still stands in the hills above the Columbia River.

*This is a work of historical fiction, written in honor of Jo Ann's 75<sup>th</sup> birthday in 2025. We are grateful for the many ways she keeps our family stories alive. All characters including their birth, wedding and death dates are real.*

*The story, of course, is not.*

*With love, Lisa: March 2025*