A Family Sketchbook

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1. IN THE BEGINNING

Father, Otto Christensen, was born in 1875 on a farm that lay on the edge of the North Sea in Jutland, Denmark. When he was four his mother died and his father remarried. He spent his childhood tending sheep and cattle and playing in the sand dunes and heather along the sea. He must have spent much time dreaming his dreams.

His father had started a new family, so Father began to feel in the way. In 1892, when he was seventeen, he sailed for America to join two much older brothers who had come earlier with their growing families and had claimed homestead land in Akron, Colorado. They found life was too hard and the rain too scarce to eke out a living around Akron, so they moved 25 miles west into the South Platte river valley where irrigated land sold for $25 an acre. There my father worked as a farm-hand for his brothers, first for John the older. John was a hard task-master who could not appreciate that Father needed to take time out to look at a sunset or to smell a flower. Niels, the other brother, was a more compassionate boss, but it was clear to both of them that my father was not at heart a tiller of the soil and was completely inept at anything mechanical. He was a handsome, dashing young man, and he was a dreamer.

The two older brothers and a sister and her husband who came later were good farmers. They produced many sons and daughters and became "well off."

Father was torn between two loves. He had a profound commitment to the land of his birth, but now he found a new
love, America. Twice he returned to Denmark to seek an answer to his dilemma. His second trip came after spending the winter session at the Danish folk school in Nysted, Nebraska, where he had met a young man by the name of Niels Gade. Niels invited him to stop over to visit his family in Iowa on his way to Denmark. There he met Niels's beautiful younger sister, Mariane. It was love at first sight. He left her with an understanding that he would be back. This time the decision was easy. He still loved the verdant land of Denmark, he loved its history, and he loved its people. But it became completely clear that America was his destiny.

Waiting for him was his beautiful Mariane, my mother. There was a brief courtship, a wedding, and a long train ride out to the "wild west." When she stepped off the train in Brush on a dusty October day in 1904, viewing the barren hills around her, it must have been a shock. I can imagine what fear she must have felt facing this whole new family—Father's brothers and sister and well over 20 offspring of all ages from babies to young adults—all staring incredulously at the elegant young lady. These older cousins of mine have often told me since how awed they were with her style and beauty, and they were particularly impressed with her large-brimmed hat that had tassels all around it. And to all these she was now Tante Mariane. She was only 22 years old.

In that fall of 1904 my parents moved into their first home, a rented little one-room house on a 40-acre farm west of town. It being fall, farm chores were at a minimum, and the only livestock was the cow they were given by Father's brother Niels for a wedding gift. Mother tells how, on their first morning, she awakened to the cow mooing, begging to be fed and milked. She waited impatiently for her new husband to get up and do his duty. He slumbered peacefully on. She decided to shame him, got up, milked and fed the cow, lit the-wood stove, made breakfast and then woke him up. He was delighted. He kept it that way for the rest of his life.
But they did farm, come summer, and then in the following summer on August 12, 1906 they had their first baby, a 10-pound dark-haired boy who was good as gold. They named him Paul Erling, but he was never called anything but Erling.

When a second child was on the way, Father and Mother took the plunge and bought a little farm just two miles straight north of Brush. This larger farm sported a two-room house.

I don’t think my parents planned their family and their future very well, for in the next eleven years they managed to produce seven more children in quick succession: Christian Richard, always called Ric, Ernst Thorvald, Gerda Dorthea, Lisetta Kirstine, Eva Maria (me), Herluf Ansgar and Leo Wilson.

By then it had become clear to Father and Mother that there was no way they could bring up this flock of eight stuffed into that little two-room house. Father finally found what he wanted, at least as a temporary solution. It was a farm of about 160 acres of marginal bottom-land that lay beside the South Platte river. We called it the Aspinwall Place.

2. EARLY MEMORIES

THE OLD HOUSE

Our new home was a decrepit old house with five rooms downstairs and an enormous upstairs loft that could hold enough beds to accommodate all of us. It was already well populated with bedbugs and rats. But Father had inadvertently bought a playground for his children. The banks of the river held everything we needed in season—swimming, fishing, skating and hunting. It became a place for our church picnics. It was where we were to spend endless hours in childhood wonder.

I had just turned four when we moved to this old
house, so the earliest memories are obviously few and hazy, but certain things stand out clearly in my mind. There was an enormous cottonwood tree just outside the kitchen door. It shaded the kitchen from the hot afternoon sun and it was a great "climber" for the kids. The house itself was a two-story job. A long shed had been built along the whole length of the house, serving as a large kitchen and a good-sized dining area. There was a separate cellar, actually only a hole in the ground with a roof over it, to store roots and potatoes. We could climb up on this root cellar and from there onto the shed, and then onto the steep roof of the house itself. It probably was a very dangerous playground but no one seemed to notice or mind that we raced around on this roof and shed.

There was also a big barn and in it a hay loft. When it wasn't full of hay it was fun to play in. The hay had polished the pine floor to a high shine and it was good to slide on. The barn also had open windows. I loved to sit in the window sills and dangle my feet and look out. It had a good view of the river. There was also a badly neglected orchard; I think most of the trees had died. I remember only a berry bush of some kind that I could hide or sleep under.

THE SOUTH PLATTE RIVER

From this new home to the river was probably only a quarter of a mile, but it seemed a long way to a little girl of four. The Platte wanders in and out, spreading and fanning out into several Streams and coming back into one and spreading out again. At our vantage point there were three separate streams which we imaginatively named: First stream, Second stream, and Third stream.

In our early years, First stream was closest and best, for it was shallow enough for easy wading and splashing in for naked little girls and boys. It had nice sandy banks and many patches of pebbles. Besides wading and splashing, we spent much time looking for pretty stones for they were
smooth and cool and well waterworn. We were always on the look-out for arrowheads. When we'd find one we'd proudly add it to our collection which we kept in a shoebox that sat on the library table in the living room.

When we got a little bigger we ventured out to the Second stream. This was also the main stream. This is where there were fish and swimming holes. No one ever taught us to swim. We just moved into deeper and deeper water and splashed and thrashed about all we could, and there it was, suddenly we knew we were swimming.

The Third stream we seldom reached. It was clogged with brush, had no sandy beaches, and in general was uninteresting. We only got there when the cattle had roamed too far. Our land extended just across the Third stream and then ran right along the Union Pacific railroad track, separated from us only by a barbed wire fence.

Just before we got to the First stream there was a lovely meadow. In the middle of it stood the biggest cottonwood tree on the river for miles and miles. Beside the tree was a little one-room house, and in the house lived a family by the name of Hanley. The owner was burly man, who was always gone, and a fat, jolly, blonde wife, the mother of three children. Jack, the oldest, a curly-headed good-looking boy; Vivian was a girl Lisetta's age, about six then. And there was beautiful, blonde, curly-headed little Vera. For a while we had playmates, but unfortunately that did not last. The Hanleys owned 40 acres right in the middle of our land but Father soon bought them out because there was nothing that Mr. Hanley could do to make a living off that land. It was only meadowland, and he had no cattle.

The Hanley house was eventually moved and served as a temporary bunkhouse beside our house, leaving us with a beautiful clear meadow with lots of cottonwood and willow trees and of course the big cottonwood that we called "The Hanley Tree." This meadow became the favorite
community picnic spot—for schools, churches, and the Ladies Aid. Later it became a favorite place for necking (as we used to call it) much to Father’s consternation. He finally put a notice in the local newspaper pleading with the culprits to do their love-making elsewhere.

**GILL’S PASTURE**

To the east of our place, just across the road, was Gill’s pasture. It was a half-mile square so it must have been 160 acres. It became part of our life. There were always cattle and horses grazing, so we gradually became aware of the facts of life. One day Herluf and I were playing in the little gravel road that separated our house from the pasture when we noticed one of the cows making noises. Our attention was diverted, and when we looked at the cow again, there was a newborn calf. We were so sorry we had missed out on seeing the actual birth. One day Father sent Erling and Ric across the road into Gill’s pasture leading one of our cows. She was in heat and Mr. Gill’s bull was to perform the necessary. I was standing beside Mother watching this. The boys with our cow passed the cow with her newborn male calf. The precocious little calf, lifted his head, sniffed and then fell into line behind our cow. Mother grew indignant and snorted, “Men are all alike.” I had no idea then what she was talking about.

On the other side of the pasture, and across the road called the Snyder road, were two separate one-room shacks. In one of them a lonely man was dying of tuberculosis. Every morning Herluf and I were asked to take a half gallon of milk to him. He was always glad to see us, and he always gave us one ginger snap each. This was the highlight of my day.

In the other little shack lived a man with two boys. He was Mr. Larsen, and boys were Fred and Elmer. Fred was older and near the age of my older brothers, but Elmer was my age. For a very brief spell I was madly in love for the first time, at age five. We climbed the cottonwood tree by the
house, sat together in the hayloft window and swung our feet. He got into his brother’s Valentine’s cards and gave one to me. It was beautiful. I’d never had a Valentine before. One day Mr. Larsen moved away with his sons, and I never saw or heard of Elmer again; To my surprise, I survived this tragedy.

Sometime later Father set fire to Gill’s pasture. One Sunday, a gusty October day, the weeds on our side of the road were all dried and ready for burning. Father hated the sight of weeds and he always cleaned up his fences by burning the weeds in the fall. Of course with the gusty wind the inevitable happened. The fire jumped the little road and it really took off across Gill’s pasture. Father screamed for help. The whole family pitched in. Someone in the family knew that the only hope was using wet gunny-sacks. We had plenty of them. I could not have been more than six, but I remember that I, too, dragged a wet gunny-sack over the fire. Somebody must have gotten the cattle and horses herded to safety. The pasture was almost completely burned. What passed between Father and Mr. Gill over this incident I don’t know, but I do remember it was a pretty exciting day.

**PLAYING WITH FIRE**

Actually, the burning of Gill’s Pasture was my second fright from a runaway fire. A year earlier, on Election Day in 1920, I was not in school, but I should have been for I was six years old then. At any rate it was a bright, sunny, slightly windy November day. We had just had lunch. Leo, the little one, had been put down for his nap, and Mother and Father were having their regular noon nap, so Herluf and I had a chance for a little experimentation. We got up on a chair to fetch the matchbox holder, got a good handful, and found a spot in the middle of the yard to make a little bonfire. We gathered sticks and dried leaves and grass and put a match to it. It flickered a little and went out, so we tried another.
This one caught right off and we had us a very pretty little bonfire.

But a little puff of wind blew a spark onto a nearby tuft of dry grass; that caught fire, it jumped a few inches and another tuft of grass was on fire, and in the matter of a few seconds all grass surrounding the yard was on fire. It was just running wild. Fortunately the wind came from the northwest, away from the buildings, but it tore out into a field of ripened corn stalks. We rushed into the house, got buckets to draw water from the kitchen hand pump, and ran back and forth pumping and carrying water. I doubt that our little buckets of water could possibly have had any effect on such a grass fire but it finally burned itself out. Boy, were we scared!

We dared not face Father and Mother so we decided to run away from home. I don’t really know what we had in mind, but the river seemed the logical place to run. After wandering around aimlessly for a couple of hours, we decided to sneak home from around the back so the folks couldn’t see us. We hid in a little tunnel Ernst had burrowed out of the straw stack. We sat in there for more hours, it seemed, trembling and wondering what was going to happen to us.

It was getting dark and we were cold and hungry so we concluded that our punishment could not possibly be worse than starving and freezing to death in the straw stack. We quietly snuck into the house. Older brothers and sisters, now home from school, were busy doing their stuff, completely ignoring us; there was no sign of Mother and Father. We were told that they had gone to vote in Snyder, the little town a mile northeast across the river, so we continued to suffer the agony of fear. Finally Mother and Father returned. Now this was it. They came in and hung up their coats. Mother started supper, Father picked something to read. Not one word to us. That was the end of that, but I don’t think we ever played with fire again.
UNDER THE WEATHER

I don’t remember the exact sequence of events, but it seemed as though most of us had our childhood diseases in the three years we were on the Aspinwall place. First, I think, came the whooping cough. I know it was while Leo was still a little baby for Mother told me that she thought he would die. I know we were all terribly sick, and all at the same time. Our dining room table was long and narrow. At the end of the dining room was a door leading outdoors. Whichever one was at the time the most nauseated had to sit nearest the door so he or she could make a run for it and retch outside. God we were sick!

Then came the pink eye. That we all had, too, except Erling. He used to help Mother hold us down so she could put the medicine in our eyes. That also lasted a long time, and it was recurring. I think it ran through the family several times.

Then came the mumps. Erling got hit the worst when he was about 13. He had gone through his course, but before he was really healed, he made the mistake of getting on his beloved horse again, barebacked. You can imagine what happened. He had a very much worse case, and I gather an extremely painful one, in the other end. As a result of this it was confidently predicted that Erling would be sterile, but he in his turn sired four healthy children.

Then there was influenza, the killer. Schools had been closed all over, but after six weeks reopened. We had all been spared. I was not yet in school, but all the older ones went back. A couple of days later Lisetta came home a mighty sick girl and was put to bed. It was just wait and see. The rest went back to school; I was home and well. At about noon I was sent out in the field to keep the cows from wandering away from the house. When I got them turned around it hit me. I was so sick I barely got home. When the others returned from school most of them were sick too. Only Mother, Father
and Herluf escaped. To make things simpler for Mother, a couple, maybe three, beds were put together to make one bed in the downstairs bedroom.

So all of us, except Leo, the baby still in a crib, and Herluf, who was not sick, shared our pain and misery together. It was a kind of neat way to do it. I remember when old Doctor Turner came to pay us a visit he seemed real pleased with the arrangement. I don’t remember that we got any medicine, but Dr. Turner always made us feel better.

ON RATS AND BED BUGS

We knew that the Aspinwall house was infested with rats and bedbugs. This was not an unusual thing on farms at that time in eastern Colorado. The chicken coops always had bedbugs. The coops were sprayed with creosote regularly; that helped keep down the pest population. But in the house it was harder. First, one couldn’t spray the inside walls with creosote and secondly, the bedbugs would hide in the springs and mattresses, bedposts, cracks in the walls, and even in the attic. Somewhere Mother got the idea that the hot Colorado sunshine would kill bedbugs like it could kill anything else, particularly her setting of young tomatoes or cabbage plants. So every Saturday morning in the summer when the bedbugs came out, all the bedding and beds were dragged through the door that led out from the upstairs loft on to the roof of the shed over the kitchen and dining room. There they would be searched, baked, turned, searched and returned. What Mother never did figure out was that the hot Colorado sunshine only accelerated the hatching of the eggs, so she only kept speeding up the breeding process. There was no relief until we finally moved away from this scourge.

With the rats it was different. All farms had rats because of the corn and grains and animal food, hay, straw and horse manure, but at the Aspinwall place they also took up residence under the house. They really minded their own
business, but they had worn a hole in the kitchen floor. I never knew why this just wasn’t boarded up, but two incidents brought this whole issue to a climax. One happened after my brothers had brought back a sack full of carp from the river. What wasn’t eaten for supper, Mother put, because there was no refrigeration, in a large wash-boiler filled with cold water to keep them until morning. When she got up next morning, every carp was gone. The rats had stolen every one of them except for one, the biggest one. It was stuck in the hole in the floor for it was too big to be dragged through. A short time later at Sunday dinner, Lisetta was asked to carry a stack of dinner plates out to the kitchen. As she walked by the hole a large rat jumped out and ran up her leg. Needless to say it came as a shock to a little six-year-old girl. She screamed and dropped the plates. This was the last straw.

Father decided to take action. The strategy was this. We’d all go to bed early. A big board—probably part of an old gate or fence—was set up in the kitchen end of the shed and bait of some kind laid out. Father, armed with a loaded double-barreled shot gun, sat in waiting at the far end of the dining room. We lay in bed with our fingers pressed tightly against our ears. It was a long wait and we were all fast asleep when one blast came, then another. Next morning the casualty report was: one dead, two critically wounded. You’ve heard about rats leaving a sinking ship. What happened, I think, is that the critically injured limped back down under the house and spread the word. They never came back.

THE CHRISTMAS TREE

Christmas Eve was for us, as for all Danish children, the finest time of the year. We had never been taught to believe in Santa Claus. We knew it was to celebrate the birth of Jesus.
We took part in the children's Christmas program at the church when we'd be given a little sack of candy, nuts, an apple, and sometimes an orange. But the greatest ever was our beautiful Christmas tree, which stood in the center of the living room, with all its lights, tinsel, little paper Danish flags and bright shiny woven baskets holding candy. After a sumptuous dinner of roast pork, gravy, mashed potatoes, and rice pudding, Father and Mother would light the candles, real candles with real flames, and we'd all join hands walking slowly around the tree and sing our Danish Christmas songs. After we had sung all we knew, the pace got lively and the fun would begin. We'd sort of skip and hop around and around singing "nu har vi Jul igen, og nu har vi Jul igen, og Julen vare vist til Paaske" (now it's Christmas and Christmas will surely last until Easter). When we'd get dizzy we reversed direction and started all over again. When we were panting and tired we'd all sit down.

This was the big moment. What was our present going to be? We didn't expect more than one gift from Mother and Father, and there would be mittens from Grandmother. It was never much, but it always seemed just right for each of us. Then we played games with peppernuts, and finally a game of blind-man's bluff which Father joined. Only on Christmas Eve did Father ever play with us children. We always had a rousing time and when we were finally put to bed, we were happy about the whole lovely affair.

But one Christmas things looked bleak. Mother announced when we were leaving for school that she was sorry but there just wasn't any money that year to buy a Christmas tree. Big brother Ernst was sent down to the river to cut a little willow tree and that would have to do.

When we got home from school our usual mood of great anticipation was subdued. Everyone went about the special Christmas chores of bedding down the horses and cows with fresh straw, and giving the chickens an extra
feeding of corn, the cows more hay, the horses a good ration of oats. Then all of us gathered at our long table for our usual holiday feast. Mother and Father seemed unusually bright and cheerful. Finally the time came for the tree. Mother and Father went into the living room and shut the doors behind them. We all sat tense and a little dejected. It seemed to take an awfully long time, but finally the door opened. And there it stood. Nothing in all my memory was ever quite so awesome or so beautiful. It was a real Christmas tree. It reached clear to the ceiling. It seemed to have a thousand flickering candles and the tinsel dazzled. The little Danish flags were bright red and white. The woven baskets were popping with candy. We all stood transfixed.

Mother told us later that the old junk man had come by and bought and paid for in cash a number of our sheep pelts. Mother had then hitched up the old lumber wagon and driven to Snyder. Because it was the day before Christmas the owner of the country store let her have the Christmas tree for fifty cents; candles and candy and trim were all bought at half-price. When she came home with her loot she had snuck the tree into the bedroom put it on a stand and decorated it, and then closed and locked the door so we would not see it.

THE MEXICANS

When sugar beets were introduced to eastern Colorado, beet labor was needed. At that time the cheapest and best farm laborers were the immigrant Germans, called "low Germans." We called them “Rooshans” because they previously had moved from east Germany into Russia and it was from there that they migrated to the United States. These industrious, shrewd, German speaking immigrants knew and loved the land. Soon they became land-owners and it was time to find new and cheaper labor—enter the Mexicans. We children were still too young to be put in the fields, so Father made a contract (making a contract was the custom)
with a Guzman family. Included in the contract was the use of a little three-room house on a little hill on the upper acres. This became known as the Mexican Hill. The kids; Santos, Andreas, Guadeloupe, and Juan or “Johnny,” and later a new baby, eventually became our best playmates.

Upon their arrival, Erling had been assigned to fetch them, from where I don’t know. When they arrived, Herluf and I were out in the field beside the house. We knew that the “Mexicans were coming” but we had no idea what it meant. When we saw this dark little family we started yelling “Mexican donkey, Mexican donkey” over and over again. Why the “donkey” I’ll never know. Erling was most upset. He got us in the house and he and Mother confronted us. We were never physically whipped in our lives, but Mother’s disapproval of this conduct was so sharp, so firm, and so right. Never again was I to do or say anything so degrading to another race or human being.

THE DAY OF THE BIG FLOOD

The day of the Big Flood must have been in early June of 1920. It actually started with the Big Storm. That was on my sixth birthday, May 31. Lisetta and I had been sent down to the meadow to bring the cows home. When we left no one had particularly noticed the ominous black clouds in the west. We took our time about getting the cows back, playing a little here and there, probably picking buttercups to bring home to Mother. When we got the cows headed home, we got the bright idea to grab-onto the tails of a couple of calves that were following their mothers. I got my tail all right but lost it again. Lisetta had a firmer grip on hers. The calf panicked and took off with Lisette behind it. They charged on across the meadow, getting farther and farther from home. Suddenly I heard some yelling. Mother and Ernst had seen and heard the storm coming; hailstorms announce their approach with a thunderous roar. Mother remembered the
two of us, defenseless in the meadow. Ernst and Mother were running toward us screaming, "Come home quick." Lisetta was still clinging onto her calf's tail. Ernst took off after Lisetta, finally reached her and headed her and her calf back home. We all got back and got the cows in the barn just in time. The storm broke. The hailstones were as big as baseballs. All the windows in the nearby Great Western Sugar Company were shattered.

This was the day that all hell broke loose in Colorado, with cloudbursts in Pueblo, Denver, the Rocky Mountains, everywhere. Up to that date it was the worst storm in Colorado history. Radio was not common at that time, but within a few days we heard that all the water that had fallen on the eastern slope of the Rockies in Colorado was racing down the South Platte river toward our place. We started to get warning calls from relatives and friends. It was predicted that all the bottom land of the South Platte would be wiped out—and we lived on bottomland. At first it was only rumor, but then the warnings became insistent. Our only safe place of retreat was to join our Mexican beet labor on top of Mexican Hill. They came pleading for us to join them.

Ernst, who had a great imagination, was terrified. He clung to Mother and pleaded with them to move out. Mother and Father seemed calm but finally, at about our bedtime, it was decided that we would join the Mexicans. I don't remember the details, I do remember being bit by even more bedbugs. It seems to me that about four of us kids slept on a table. When we got up in the morning Father and Mother had gone home. I guess they decided at about midnight to go home and check on the river. The moonlight was bright. They found that the river hadn't even come to the top of its banks, so they just bedded down at home. In the morning we straggled back from the Mexicans' house. All of us felt a little cheated: it was such an anticlimax. However, the flood did finally come. It was a big one, and it lasted for weeks. The
water did get over the river banks, covered all the meadow and came rather close to the house. The three streams had become one and the docile little South Platte was now a mile wide torrent of muddy water.

THE OLD OVERLAND

The inevitable finally happened. Everyone around us was getting an automobile and finally in 1920 it was time for ours. I don’t remember any of the dickering, but I think Father got the Overland from Thorvald Elling, at least Father always held a grudge against him. He was the husband of Father’s niece, our cousin. Needless to say, it was a lemon. But I think that all cars of that vintage had that in common. The chief function of the car was to get us to church. It, of course, had to be cranked up to start. One had to be sure the spark and gas levers were reversed—the spark very low and the gas fairly high—or you’d get your arm kicked off. You had to have a strong arm and spin the crank as fast as you could. It could start right away, or it might take many tries. Often it wouldn’t start at all. Then Mother would get into the action. Father would unscrew the spark plugs, and Mother would clean them in kerosene, then we’d give it another try. If it was cold weather, Mother would have a kettle of hot water ready to pour on the manifold, or she’d put a lot of wool rags in the oven to heat them up and they would be wrapped around the manifold. If all that failed, a team of horses would be hitched up and we’d drag the car up and down the road. If that failed, Father would give up, gather us all in the house and pull out one of his books of sermons. He’d read to us then we’d sing a few songs, say a prayer, and that ended our Sunday rituals.

If and when the car did get started we’d all jump in. Mother and the little ones sat inside while the big brothers all stood on the running board because on the way we had to climb a little hill to get to the upper land. The Overland
couldn't make it alone so the boys could handily jump off the running board and push. Father, for some reason, always speeded up for corners and as we turned the last corner in front of the church, with everyone staring in dismay, the big boys would jump off and Mother and rest of us were left to our fate. Somehow we always stopped just in time.

I have mentioned that Father had no mechanical aptitude. He would never fix anything, and it seems he was incapable of operating anything. The few levers that the Overland had were beyond him. As I mentioned before, the gas and spark levers had to be reversed to start safely. But the minute the car was started, they had to be put back into the original position. With the gas lever at full capacity, the roar and vibration were intimidating. Father would stand in a state of shock, always wondering, "What do I do now?" After he finally got the car quieted down, he'd have to back it out of the garage, turn the wheel to the right so he could turn around and have it facing toward the road. He never remembered soon enough how to stop. He'd back the car out, turn the wheel, and off he'd go—smack into the side of the house. When he got to that point we figured it was safe to get into the car and head out to church.

After a while the hole in the house got bigger and bigger. Once after he had backed almost into the kitchen, Father came up with an ingenious idea. He'd build another door at the other end of the garage so all he had to do was drive through the damned garage; he would never have to back up again in our yard and into the house. There were many more Father-and-car stories, but his running battle with the Industrial Revolution is best summarized in this one. Several years later when the brothers had taken over the driving and a newer Model T Ford was in its place, the Overland was sold as salvage. When the junkman came to haul it away Father stood and grinned. As it passed out the gate he heaved a sigh of relief and muttered, "Good-bye
you sonofabitch." And a big smile spread over his face.

3. A FAMILY GROWS UP

THE NEW HOME PLACE

One Sunday in the first part of November 1921 we moved again. This was another short move—just a mile to the other end of the farm. When Father had bought this cheap farm of poor alkali soil on South Platte river bottomland, he had not bought all of the 240 acres that he eventually acquired. As mentioned earlier he had bought out Mr. Hanley. Those 40 acres included what became our meadow and reached across the three-stream river all the way to the Union Pacific Railroad. It provided added grazing land for the cows and horses as well as drinking water and a little one room house. The southwest corner adjoining our land was 80 acres of much better land with a new little house that belonged to a Mr. Grady, but was rented out to a Doty family. In spite of the poor land and Father’s lack of farming skills, he must have made a little money. At one time—I believe it was during his first year on the Aspinwall place—he had a bumper alfalfa seed crop that netted a nice sum of money. I think this bonanza was also the source of funds for the Old Overland.

Anyway, he bought this new place to make our farm complete. It was decided that we should move to this new little house. Sizewise, it was a bum move. It had three tiny little bedrooms, two 8x10 feet, and one 10x10 feet; a small parlor/livingroom/dining room, separated only by an open room-divider; and a small kitchen and pantry. It had a large front porch that was never used and a small back porch. That was it, no shelves, no closets, no bathroom, and of course no running water and no electricity at that time. I was still quite young, just seven. I vaguely remember that two double beds were put in each of the small bedrooms; side by side they
completely filled the room, with only a foot leeway at the foot of the bed and just enough room left to shut the door. In one room, Erling, Ric, Ernst, and Herluf slept, and in the other Gerda, Lisetta and I, and our three-year old brother, Leo. How long this arrangement lasted I don’t know, but not too long. Here the shack on the Hanley place came in handy. It was hoisted on wheels of some sort and moved into place in the yard a little distance northeast of the house, close to the outhouse. When the four oldest boys were moved into this there was again room of a sort for us all.

I don’t remember the real reasons for leaving the Aspinwall house. It probably was falling apart. I’m sure that Mother was tired of the losing battle with bedbugs. The new place was a mile closer not only to Fairview School, but also to our church and the town of Brush. I know that Mother often reminisced about the wonderful view she used to have from her kitchen window of the trees on the river. She missed the kitchen pump and the cottonwood tree outside her kitchen door. As for us kids, we missed our wonderful playground, the roof of the Aspinwall house. The roof of our new house was too steep to play on.

BEDSTEFAR AND BEDSTEMOR

The little Danish settlement in Brush was not one that had been carefully planned, as many of the Danish communities throughout the midwest were. Just-before the turn of the century there appeared a very ambitious man with a vision, Pastor Madsen. Tuberculosis was a deadly killer all through the United States, as it had been in Denmark. This Pastor established a sanitarium one mile west of Brush. Afflicted Danes flocked in from all over the United States, but mostly from Nebraska and Iowa. Many of these recovered and left, but a great many just stayed in Brush, bought farms or founded little businesses. Other Danes had come via Akron, Colorado, just 25 miles east of Brush, where they had
tried unsuccessfully to eke out a living on homestead lands called the sand hills—hilly, sandy, infertile soil and practically no rain. They moved in and began to thrive on the rich deep soil of the South Platte river valley. Other Danes came out just because they were adventurous—there was still glamor in the "wild west."

More than half of the Danes were from the strict State Church of Denmark; they were accustomed to sermons on hell, sin and damnation. The rest of the Danes, including Father and Mother, belonged to the Free Church which taught about a loving God. These two groups vainly tried to share a little church out in the country, but they finally parted ways.

Not long after Mother and Father were married, Mother’s parents decided they too wanted to live in Brush. We knew them by their Danish appellation: Grandfather was "Bedstefar," Grandmother was "Bedstemor." I think Bedstefar must have been an adventurous man. He was a successful farmer in Iowa and left it all behind. He bought an acre of land on the outskirts of town, called Munn’s Addition, where he started a little truck gardening operation. This became our second home. Mother’s brother Niels followed shortly, and finally Mother’s spinster sister, Tante Ane, who came out to care for her aging mother and father. But she spent endless time on the care and nurture of the relentless flow of babies from her little sister, our mother.

Bedstefar did not have a high regard for Father. He considered him as a little bit of a fool, but they did share their belief in a loving God, and they were among the leaders in getting a church of their own. It finally came to pass. A little brick church was built just across the street from Bedstefar’s house. And on the other side was the already existing parsonage. My father was the church’s first secretary and often served as lay minister when they were without a preacher.

On the little acre of land that Bedstefar bought, there
was a little white two-bedroom house with a large porch and a big lawn. The land was a nice sandy loam that was perfect for gardening, and the land had water rights so it could be irrigated. Bedstefar had never worked on irrigated land before but he soon caught on, and he continued, until he died at 81 years, to produce the finest vegetables around Brush.

He was particularly good at raising sweet corn. One half of his acre was in sweet corn. He was always first on the market. His corn ears were always carefully selected and trimmed and he always gave 13 ears to the dozen so he got premium prices. When the sweet corn was finished the land was cleared and prepared for a second crop of turnips which were ready about November, so he managed a double crop. He also had beautiful strawberries, tomatoes, beans, beets and what have you.

There was a little barn on the place where he kept a horse. The horse’s name was Rocky. Rocky was a mean old devil. When he was being harnessed he could manage to turn his head all the way back, look you right in the eye with all his teeth bared and, when he had a chance, he’d have a good bite. This horse was used both to pull the cultivator and the little buggy that took Bedstefar everywhere, to visit friends and relatives or peddle his vegetables. Alongside the barn was a chicken coop. Besides the vegetables, Bedstefar always had eggs to sell, so his income was almost enough to keep them all going.

Also on this land was a little shack known as the wash house. In it were the washing machine, tubs and boilers used for washing, and an old cook stove to heat the wash-water. Besides the garden equipment and odds and ends being stored there, there was an enormous chest. It was as big as a coffin. (Actually, it was a coffin. When young Danes left home to hire out with other families they were provided with a box to hold all their belongings; it was the right size so that in case of death, a decent burial was assured.) It had a key a
foot long and an inch thick. It had come all the way from Denmark. Bedstemor had brought it with her with her linens and down comforters from her house in Denmark. This is where the winter bedding was stored in summer, but it also held a lot of other things like laces, and eyelet embroidery, underpants and petticoats no longer in fashion, ribbons and many other little things precious in a child’s eye.

This little home in town became our second home. Each of us kids, when we were old enough to leave Mother, would have at least a week in summer to stay with this trio. In a way we sort of dreaded it for at Bedstefar’s house we had to toe the line. Our own over-crowded house was always in a shambles. At home we were pretty much allowed to do as we pleased in the way of recreation—ball games in the house, playing train with all the chairs laid down on the floor, or whatever we could dream up in the absence of toys. Father just ignored us and Mother had long since ceased to care. When it was our turn to stay at Bedstefar’s house things were different. The boys, when they were just barely old enough, were put to work helping Bedstefar with his sweet corn or vegetables. As the next three girls came along, Tante Ane put us to work. We dusted, wiped dishes, swept floors, and when not otherwise occupied, Bedstemor and Tante Ane would sit us down to teach us to hem handkerchiefs and, later, to do embroidery. And at night there was no fooling around when bedtime came.

Even so, there was something special about going to Bedstefar’s house for, during that brief spell of a week or so, each of us became special in our turn. There was no competition. We were the complete center of attention. And we returned home after our visit armed with a new pair of patent leather shoes and white socks or maybe a new dress, always something. Usually we would come home with haughty ideas about ourselves but in a day or two the other siblings would have us whipped back into shape. But I think
we all come back with a longing and a belief that things could and would be better for us. Life was not really all poverty, confusion, and a godamn mess. Somehow there was a serenity and beauty in geraniums, lace curtains, and pretty vases.

MORE KIDS

So far I have only talked about the first eight Christensen children, each born about 18 months apart. Leo, the eighth, was only about nine months old when we moved to the Aspinwall place. Mother took a rest.

It was four and one half years later, on “the home place,” before the procession started again. It was in April, in the spring after our arrival there, that Helga Virginia was born. This caused quite a bit of trauma in Leo, who had monopolized Mother’s lap for years. He did not take kindly to this young rival. He had been pushed out to the bunkhouse the night of the birthing (all the babies were born at home). When he woke up in the morning to learn the sad news that there was a new baby in the house, he refused to come in. Eventually he did, but did not look at her. In due course he had to accept the fact that he had been aced out of his prize seat—as all the rest of us had been in our turn and had to accept and endure.

Mother got pregnant again right on her old schedule. She was due in December—just a year and a half—but that was the fall we almost lost Father. He had always suffered from belly pain, which is probably why he never cared much for anything but bread and milk to eat, but this fall he came up with a full-fledged bleeding ulcer. He had bled pretty profusely before old Doc Turner got out. He was put to bed and he stayed there for about six weeks. He had to be fed two kinds of medicine, one on the hour and one on the half hour, 24 hours a day. This was Mother’s job. It happened right in the height of the beet harvest. Niels Gade (Mother’s brother)
came to live with us to take Father's place. He and the big
brothers had to be fed well and regularly. This was also
Mother's job. Five little kids had to be readied and sent off to
school with lunches. This was also Mother's job. We little
girls did all we could to help, taking over the medicine
giving for brief periods so Mother could get some sleep. At
night, with a great deal of effort, we could stay awake until
9:00 or 10:00 o'clock to give Mother a little chance to rest.

Father did recover, the beet harvest ended, and
Mother had her baby. It was a little girl, Ellen Katherine.
Mother had this baby prematurely at Bedstefar's house in
town. Ellen was a frail baby from the start. She had a strange
bluish color. Dr. Turner said it was her heart. She was too frail
to be taken to church to be baptized, so one Sunday after­
noon many of the congregation and the preacher came out to
the farm and baptized her at home.

She was beginning to look better and act stronger
when she contracted erysipelas, a strep infection, which was
just too much and she died on a Sunday morning. She was in
her buggy, pathetically whimpering. I was terrified, and I
kept gently wheeling her back and forth. Then the whimpering
stopped and she was dead. Someone had said something to
the effect that I should have stopped the wheeling, so I
carried guilt with me for a long time.

Next morning Mother understandably sent us off to
school so we would not be underfoot while she and Father
were making funeral arrangements. The service was to be at
our home, not in the church. When we got to school our
teacher asked me how our little sister was. "She died" I said.
She was horrified. She and the other teacher got their heads
together and called us kids—Lisetta, Herluf, Leo and
myself—together and told us we had to go home. She also
added that our coming to school "was wicked." Mother, of
course, was not overjoyed to see us milling around, subdued
for a change, for in the parlor in the buggy was our dead sister.
The last two babies had come as surprises to us younger kids, but when Folmer, the last one, arrived, again spaced just at a year and a half, we were pretty much aware of the fact that Mother was going to have another baby. We knew the time had come when after supper Erling was sent off to get the midwife. All the kids were told to go to bed, the boys in the bunkhouse, Gerda and Lisetta to their room; and I, who was then sleeping with Father, was told I’d have to share the bed with Helga, where Mother usually slept. I was always a light sleeper. I heard Tante Anina come, then Dr. Turner’s voice, and Father’s running back and forth. I heard Mother’s muffled cries and then soothing encouraging voices. Then a sharp scream and a moment of complete silence, and then the cry of a baby. The voices started again. They were more relaxed voices and there were sounds that seemed like laughter. Somewhat later Father came into my room. I was still awake and he told me I had a little brother.

Next day came the shocker. All Mother’s babies had been big, all about 10-pounders except for Ric and Ellen. But this one tipped the scales at 15 pounds!

Mother was still only 43 and theoretically could have a few more. This last baby was the end of the line.

FRIENDS, RELATIVES, AND NEIGHBORS

The first person we were all to know was Doctor Turner. He delivered all of us children, except Ellen, at home assisted by a midwife, usually Tante Anina, Uncle Neils’ wife. In the beginning he made his housecalls in a little horse and buggy, and then he was one of the first to sport a little Model T Ford. He didn’t bother to register our births so when we grew up and needed birth certificates, Mother had to go with us to a Notary Public to confirm that we were born.

Dr. Turner was a compassionate and good doctor. He could always wait until the next beet harvest to get paid. He was one of the typical country doctors who thought first of
his patients. His personal wants were few. We all loved him and obeyed him in all he prescribed.

Our closest neighbors were Mr. Lamb and his family. They lived in a one-room sod house, or "soddy," on the northwest end of the farm and beside the gate to our pasture. He was an irresponsible and mean man who let his hogs run all over Father's cornfields and let his cattle run all over Father's pasture. When Father complained, he used a wire cutter and cut Father's fence to shreds. I've been told that Father finally paid him a formal visit, casually carrying his shotgun. After that there was no more trouble.

Fortunately Mr. Lamb and his family sold out to the Underwood family. They built a new little two-bedroom house, leaving the old soddy to gradually crumble. It was a family of three children. We never saw Mrs. Underwood and an older daughter, but the two sons and Mr. Underwood were always around. For some reason our dog Alex suddenly took a great disliking to Mr. Underwood and his two sons, and he wouldn't let them on our place. The land on his farm was bottomland like our own, and not very productive, which is probably why Mr. Underwood soon sold out at an auction. When our cousin Severt, Uncle Niels' oldest son, bought the Underwood place, we were delighted. Severt was one of our favorite older cousins. He had a wife, Agnes, and two children: Irma, a little older than Helga, and Everett, a couple of years younger. Eventually they had four more children and whenever a new one was to arrive, Severt brought his children to our house for the day. With them we shared a lot.

Severt was in many ways like Father, somewhat casual about farming. He spent his spare time in Brush standing on the street corner gassing with other farmers about the state of affairs. Frequently he popped in on us of an evening and he and Father would sit for hours repeating stories of their past. Severt's stories were mostly of his cowboy days in the Big
Horn Basin in Wyoming.

Mother and Agnes found great comfort in each other. Like us, they had to pinch pennies. Agnes had a sister, married to a better off farmer, who pretty much put on the dog. Mother was the one that Agnes felt safe with. When Severt was out talking some place, she could get very lonely living at the end of the road, so when Father was working at that end of our farm she’d come out and invite him in for coffee. Needless to say he always accepted, leaving Mother holding coffee for him at home. But I don’t think Mother begrudged him that simple pleasure.

Agnes had the same hopeless situation as Mother—too many kids in too little space—so every week she asked Lisetta to help her clean up for Sunday. Her budget was meager but she paid what was then a good wage, a dollar a day.

A mile to the south lived the “Smaa Hansens” (little Hansens). Their farm reached all the way north to our place and I don’t know how far east. Two other houses on their farm were occupied by a constant stream of tenants. The only one I’ll mention of their five children was Walter. He remained a bachelor and spent all his spare time helping other people. He was on every church committee to solicit money for any cause. But we knew him best for his accordion. Whenever we gathered for dancing we sent word to him and he’d arrive full of laughter and eager to pump his little instrument and we’d dance like mad. He was always looking after those who were left out. During our “late blooming” years, he always remembered Lisetta and me. He saw to it that we got to the goose-fest, the annual feast of the Danish Brotherhood. At a dance he’d regularly give us a whirl. When we outgrew him, he gracefully bowed out, stepping down to help some other young girl get through the awkward age.

The Danielsens lived west of us. They were the honey people. The original Danielsens died before my time, but their two sons and a daughter remained. The daughter Mary,
it was said, was an old flame of my father's. When he left for Denmark on his last visit as a bachelor, she fully expected to become his bride when he returned. But Father came back with Mother. I never saw Mary, but she was around. But the important thing to us about the Danielsens was their honey. Father depended on their bees to pollinate his alfalfa seed, and Mother saved all her wornout cotton clothes to trade for our yearly supply of honey, two five gallon cans full. (The cotton rags were used to smoke out the bees.) The other important thing about the Danielsens was that they always had a very good watermelon patch, one Ernst cased every year for his watermelon-swiping escapades.

Our cousins, the offspring of Father's older brothers and sister, were too old for us to play with, but when Mother's brother Niels came to Brush, he found a bride. This lady, Bertha, was the oldest daughter of Father's brother, also named Niels. This marriage produced four kids and they were what we called "cousins-and-a-half." They became our playmates and our friends. Holger, the oldest, was Gerda's age; Harold, Lisetta's age; Hilda was just a little younger than I; and Alfred, a little younger than Leo. Uncle Niels was a good farmer on good land. They had a good income and they lived well. They never consciously tried to throw around their better economic position but we did sort of feel like "poor relations." Even so, we were good friends.

Tante Bertha loved to entertain. She was always throwing elaborate parties. They were always well organized and she always had new ideas to try out. She had joyous enthusiasm, but her health did not quite match it. She usually wore herself out and had to go to bed to rest for a couple of days after one of her -parties. I don't think Uncle Niels shared her enthusiasm for these affairs.

Cousin Hilda had long curls and dressed like a doll, in dresses full of lace and ribbons. She had a sweet childish voice which Aunt Bertha wanted everyone to hear at all
occasions, and she learned to play a good piano. Hilda and I went to different elementary schools but when we were in high school together, she joined us eating lunch with Tante Ane. One winter after Lisetta was gone, we both spent a winter living with Tante Ane when the snow was too deep to get back and forth between school and the farm. Later she became my roommate in my senior year in college. We remained dear friends for life.

Mrs. Chris Hansen was a widow with six kids who lived in Munn’s Addition, close to Bedstefar’s house. Egon, the youngest son, became Ernst’s best friend. They were always together on the river, hunting or fishing. Marie, my age, and Aase, the youngest, and I were inseparable during that week each summer that I was allowed to stay with Bedstefar and Tante Ane. Magda, the oldest, was like a mother to her two little sisters; she was the first Danish girl to get a teaching certificate and later taught at Fairview School, teaching the two youngest in our family, Helga and Folmer.

In the summer Aase and Marie and I spent Sunday afternoons swimming in the little irrigation ditch that ran through Munn’s Addition. They always got the Sunday paper, and after Sunday school we’d rush over to their house to read the “funnies.” With Hilda and Aase and Marie, I had such an uncomplicated life. We were on equal terms, we shared everything. It was such a joy to be accepted after the constant rejection I felt at Fairview School.

Then there were the preachers. The preachers were important to us for they represented the church, and the church was a big part of our life. Father spent a great deal of time with the preachers. He needed them for his spiritual stimulation, and he could usually get a lively conversation started with these revered men.

The first in my memory was Pastor Jessen. I don’t really remember him personally. He came in my first year and stayed around long enough for me to remember his son,
Hans Olaf. Hans Olaf, being the preacher’s son, had to sit on the front seat at church with his mother. He was quiet during all the preliminaries of singing and praying but the moment his father started the sermon he’d start in a loud whisper for all to hear, “Mama, I got to pee, Mama I got to pee.” After several minutes of this she’d lead him out and, after a few minutes, return alone. I always wondered how he got away with that.

Pastor Jessen left when I was six. Then came a Pastor Khyl, a gloomy, depressed bachelor. He had all his meals with Bedstefar, Bedstemor and Tante Ane. He liked me for some reason, and one summer when I was in Grandfather’s house he invited me to go with him downtown where he treated me to a big strawberry sundae. This was not his usual behavior, so I felt rather special. He lasted only a couple of years.

Next came the Støtrup’s. There were seven kids: Harold, Ingrid, Svend, Leif, Erling, Sigurd, and Helge. That required extensive remodeling of the parsonage. This bunch of kids had all the traits one might expect of preacher’s kids. It was now a toss-up between the preacher’s kids and Ernst who could think up the most bizarre schemes. I soon fell madly in love with Leif, a little older than me, but he saw me not.

Pastor Støtrup got sick with a severe backache that was finally diagnosed as rheumatoid arthritis. After lying in bed all summer he had to give up preaching and the family went back to their farm in Askov, Minnesota. Mr. Støtrup never got out of bed again.

Next came Erik Møller when I was about 12. He was a young unmarried man who brought along his aunt whom he called “Faster,” short for “Father’s sister.” He was a great surprise. He was, oh, so handsome. He could preach a sermon that could sway anyone, and he sang like an angel. All the female population in the congregation, from grandmothers

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on down, fell in love with him, it really came as a shock to all when he announced he was getting married. It was even more of a shock when we saw his bride. She was a very plain shy girl, as drab as a mouse. She in no way took the shine from her husband. But we finally got over our shock, accepted her as a fine, young, spiritual lady, and settled down to concentrate on other things about Erik Møller. He was great with the young adults and during summer school, which we called “Dane School,” he ended each day telling us a hair-raising fairy tale. I’ve never known anyone who could so enthral little kids. But he left too. He had dreams of opening up a folk school back east some place.

Then came Johannes Mortensen. Johannes had everything against him. He was shy, he was not handsome, he could not sing, and he could not preach, but he was friendly and he tried. He rattled around in the big parsonage all by himself so Tante Ane, in her usual generosity, invited him to dinner frequently. It was in the worst part of the Depression and no one could spare a dime for the preacher. When his salary could not be met, he was urged to resign. He did and had to take up field work—beet-thinning—to make a living. Lisetta and I called him Johnny. He was very important to us for he helped us through the awkward age. He was our friend; we in our adolescence harbored a secret love for him. And we missed him when he finally left town because even the part-time farm work ran out.

**OUR ANIMALS**

When you live on a farm animals become a part of your life. The horses were kept to serve; when they were crippled or too old to work anymore they were destroyed, their hide saved to sell, and the carcass fed to the hogs and the chickens. Cows were raised and fed to breed and be milked; when those functions ended they were sold. Male calves were castrated and sold as steers. Hogs were raised to be sold,
except for one or two of the best saved for our own meat supply. The baby chicks were raised in a brooder house; at about three months the young roosters were either sold or were slaughtered for our own table.

We had many dogs over a long period of time. None of them were ever bought or even given to us. They were all strays, usually found along the river. Fido, the first dog in my memory, followed us, running behind the old Overland, wherever we went. This meant he got to church every week and he waited for us on Bedstefar’s porch. He took a liking to this and decided he wanted to stay for good. No matter how often we brought him home to the farm he directly returned to Bedstefar. Our Grandfather did the only thing he knew would solve the problem. He tied a rope around Fido’s neck and strangled him.

On two different occasions we had two little white dogs. Our cousin Severt shot them for they barked too much and he said they scared his kids.

Alex was the only one who lived out his life with us, and he came with the house, refusing to stay with the Doty’s who had moved to Snyder when we moved in. He was a good watchdog, loved by all. In his old age, when he became too crippled with arthritis to walk, he was mercifully put out of his misery with a shot through the head.

Cats, we had many of, but they never became part of the family. We never fed the cats, and they were never allowed in the house, but minded their own business, taking care of the rat and mouse population.

Horses were bought for work. Many entered and left our lives with little notice.

Our only real pet was Babe. The story was that Babe had originally been a racehorse. She certainly had the lines of a thoroughbred—maybe a little small—and she certainly had the speed. But the problem with Babe was that she was “locoed.” To be locoed a horse has to eat the loco weed. It
grows prevalently in the sand hills and sage brush drylands of eastern Colorado. The loco weed simply makes a horse go crazy; it never recovers. Babe’s major symptom was her flat refusal to be led. She could sometimes be pushed into position but never pulled. This made it very hard to get her in and out of a barn and to saddle up and, in my case, hard to ride bareback. I was too small to mount her without starting from a raised position like the side of our cement water tank, and to maneuver her into such a position was at least as difficult. She also had to be urged to go in any direction away from the barn and her feed box. However, we all managed in some way or another, with the help of whip or hand, to get to our destination. But it was the ride back that was the thrill. In this direction she validated the rumor that she was a racehorse. Whatever errand we were on had to be accomplished with alacrity for when she considered the job done, she took off at full speed. Pulling the reins with all one’s might never fazed her. Her pace never slowed until she came to an abrupt halt at the barn door.

My first experience with this was when I was very young, maybe four or five. I was riding bareback behind Ric on an errand in the pasture. Her behavior was as expected. Homeward bound we tore off like lightning. As we approached we saw that the corral gate was closed. I don’t think Babe noticed this, for she continued full speed right to the gate. At the last minute she planted both front feet solidly and stopped dead two inches from the gate. Ric and I sailed neatly up and over the gate into the soft manure.

One day Gerda had taken Babe to fetch the mail which was delivered R.F.D. to our box a mile up the road. After the usual urging and nudging to get her there, and with the mail safely put in a sack, off she went. Gerda was doing real well handling Babe at her usual high speed until she got to the little hill above our place. Here we younger children were playing with our rubber tires, rolling them down the hill.

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When we saw her coming we all jumped out to scare the horse. We succeeded admirably. Babe made a wild lurch to avoid us then took off faster and faster. She took the corner into our driveway without faltering. Gerda just kept right on going straight, landing on her back on the wooden bridge. :

In spite of all Babe's craziness, we still loved her. She could be very gentle. When I used to take her to fetch the cattle and I let her graze a bit she would let me ride standing up on her back. She had been taught to herd cattle and she never let a cow or calf slip out of the herd. Babe served us long and well. She did what she was supposed to do—get us to and from places (even if it did take some persuasion) and round up the cattle and horses and get the mail. Gerda even used her for getting to high school in her freshman year, but the Model T had for the most part made Babe obsolete. Also another riding horse was added, one much more reliable but not nearly so colorful. Babe stood mostly idle for her last years.

Cows were never really pets. They were a necessary nuisance. We needed milk, cream, cheese and butter to eat, and we needed the money that milk sales brought in. We all hated to milk. Usually it was the boys' or Father's job, but we girls also had to do it sometimes. The only cow that we could classify as a pet was really a young heifer. When we had the Mexican laborers, their new baby was starving to death because the mother had no milk and they were feeding it beans. Father lent them a cow. This cow had a calf while they had her. The young Mexicans, with bull fighting in their blood, decided to train this female calf to serve as a bull and playact at bull fighting. I don't know how they managed it. When they left town, they returned the cow and the calf to us. We now had on our hands a full-sized yearling who thought she was a bull. This misguided heifer would charge any time there was any sudden movement in the barnyard. The boys got a kick out of this and encouraged it. "Mexican
Cow’s Calf, as we called her, finally grew out of her antics, and became a mother cow and joined our row of milking cows in the cowshed.

We had an odd assortment of names for this motley bunch of milk cows that Father had acquired as bargains at various auctions. At one given time we had cows named, Mexican Cow, Mexican Cow’s Calf, Parkhill Cow (we bought her from the Parkhill’s), and a very gentle cow named Daisy, origin unknown. There also was “Trip og Traer” (probably translated “tripping and treading”), she nervously bounced up and down from foot to foot all the time she was being milked. Then there was High Kicker—she lived up to this once with me. I was milking her when on my first kick she got her foot in the left pocket of my smock and pulled it off. A few minutes later she tore out the right pocket, and before I had finished, she had planted her foot right in the milk bucket.

There were other pets. One was a ram our neighbor sold to my father. He didn’t tell Father why he wanted to get rid of it. He had kept it back from a shipment of sheep to the market for his sons to play with. He turned out to be a copy of Mexican Cow’s Calf. He was a good old-fashioned ram whose sole purpose in life was to ram people against fences. We got a real kick out of this. We would see if we could fox him into chasing us and then we’d jump the fence. But one day he got Mother pinned against the barn when she had an apron full of eggs she was carrying to the house. I guess this was reason enough to have him slaughtered. Father sold half of the carcass of our pet ram to Aunt Bertha, Niels Gade’s wife, who had the insensitivity to invite us kids all down to Easter dinner to dine on “Easter Lamb.”

One day Ric ran into a guy who really had a bargain. He had a donkey who came fully equipped with harness and a cart. I think Ric bought him for five or ten dollars. When he brought him home we were ecstatic. This was really an
amazing little animal. Hitched up to the cart, he was as docile as a lamb. He would carry a load of two or three kids around the yard and up and down the road. But the novelty of this wore off. It was discovered that when the harness and bridle were off, his docile nature disappeared. With just a halter on and with a kid on his back, he'd turn into a wild animal. No one could stay on his back. The word went around and that fall all the young boys from far and wide came to try their hand at staying on the little donkey. We had many delightful Sunday afternoons watching one boy right after the other being thrown to the winds. When winter came the fun was over. Father didn't feel he could afford to feed a worthless donkey, so he was put in the pasture to forage for himself, which he did by escaping in search of greener pastures. We never saw the little donkey again.

Finally there was our goat. It all started with our little brother Folmer when he was four years old. It was early summer and all the menfolk were getting big-brimmed straw hats. All Folmer wanted was a straw hat. Erling loved his little brother, so one Saturday when he was going to town he promised Folmer he'd buy him a straw hat. The day was endless for Folmer who waited breathlessly. When Erling came home he had a sack under his arm. It didn't look much like a straw hat. Erling handed him the sack. Folmer opened it and out came a little baby goat. I don't know what poor Folmer thought. His disappointment must have been very great, but the goat stepped right out and began immediately to take over our hearts. He grew fast and he was clever. His tricks were limitless. There were a lot of old cars in various states of repair in the yard. These cars were his playground. He could bound up and down endlessly from one to the other. When Mother got up in the morning to start the kitchen fire for breakfast, he greeted her and wished her good morning by getting up on the railing leading to the bunkhouse and doing a jig. No visitors ever drove away
without the imprints of his hooves on the top of their cars. He chased the dogs, teased the cats. He got old enough that he started to smell, as an old goat should, and he also began to be destructive. He had given us many many laughs. But in time he too had to go. I suspect we wound up eating him.

HUNTING, FISHING, AND TRAPPING

Father, as long as I could remember, always had a shotgun. Whether he ever hunted with it I don’t remember, but my three big brothers really took to it. This was a sport my Mother approved of because it was a source of meat for her ever-growing family. When Father made out his projected budget for farm expenses to present to the banker, Mr. Pettys, for the next year, he never included household expenses—food, clothing, medicine, doctor, or anything. All these she had to come by with her own wits: egg money, milk money, making over hand-me-downs, stretching hamburger with dry bread or whatever. Meat of any kind was most welcome.

I think all the boys hunted, and ducks were their main passion. They started coming in toward the end of October and were around most of the winter. It was almost a daily affair that Mother would wake them up on cold winter mornings. She’d have hot food ready for them so they wouldn’t freeze to death before they got a good sight on a bunch of ducks. I don’t think any of my brothers ever bothered getting a license; it may not even have been required. They were not real sportsman who would only shoot ducks on the wing. They shot them in bunches sitting together in an open spot on the ice looking for food, and they’d come home boasting of getting 10 with one shot. Mother never blinked at this mass murder. She was just glad to see them. What we couldn’t eat she’d just hang on nails on the north side of the house where they’d freeze and keep until spring.

Mother also made good use of the feathers. All the
breast feathers—never the back or wings—we kept in a big barrel in the basement. Come summer she’d buy good ticking and make pillows. This was something we could always use. Also for The Ladies Aid Bazaar every year she’d make a pair of pillows which brought top price.

The boys’ great dream was to someday shoot a wild goose. We often heard them honking overhead on their flight south. On many occasions the boys were sure they had seen some landing and they’d be off on the run, but to my knowledge they never shot one goose. However, one summer Ernst came home with a really fine specimen of a bird. It looked exactly like a mallard drake, with the band around the neck and the blue green curled feather in its tail, but it was very much larger. Ernst explained to us that it was a Brant, a special kind of wild duck. Years later Ernst confessed that, in his excitement, he had lost his reason and had shot Mr. Danielsen’s tame drake. We had all thought his story was a little suspicious.

Jack rabbits were everywhere. They were mostly shot just to reduce the population, for they were hard on crops. The carcasses were brought home for the chickens; they needed protein too. Once in a while, if the rabbit looked young, Mother would have them save just the hindlegs which really made good eating. But the cottontail rabbit was the best. Many times we had tried to raise tame rabbits as pets, but they always escaped, ran wild and mated with the cottontails, so we had a hybrid and good meat.

On the river in the early days there were turtles, not sand turtles, but leatherbacks. They had a soft back and grew to a good size, sometimes as much as two feet across. We had seen the Mexicans drag these home to eat. One day the boys brought home a really big one and Mother figured let’s give it a try. She had read somewhere that turtles made good soup. She got the boys excited about it and agreeable to help kill it and get it ready for the pot. On chickens, when we
butchered them, their head and neck was just stretched over a chopping block and one swing of the ax and it was over. With a turtle it was not so easy. To get the turtles neck stretched out and held there took some doing. They hadn’t figured on the toughness of a turtle neck. I don’t remember how they finally got the head off, but they did. The bad part is that even with the head off the turtle didn’t just die. It was decided to put it in a large tub of water and wait. There was the myth that reptiles that keep up the squirming will cease at sundown. At sundown it was still squirming. At dark we all went to bed, figuring all we had to do is wait ‘til dawn. Next morning there it was in the tub, still squirming. I really can’t remember how Mother got it cut up enough to get in a pot but I do remember sometime later, how long I don’t know, we did have a fine clear tasteful soup. It was deemed a success, but never tried again.

Fishing was something else Mother was in favor of. The fish we got were mostly carp, a lousy, bony fish, but it was food. I think it was Ernst who was the expert at this. He’d use a threetined pitch-fork from Father’s barn and just spear them in the shallow stream.

We didn’t like this fish because eating it with all its bones was tricky, but I enjoyed the cleaning. The carp has an airsack in its back that we called “floats” or “pops.” We used them as toys Making believe they were ships, we sailed them in the stock tank I once got a carp bone stuck in my throat that stayed there for days, so I had a dim view of eating carp.

Erling was the only real trapper. In the winter, after the animals put on their winter coat, he set out his trapping line. Muskrats were the most plentiful and the easiest to catch. His first chore each winter morning was to check his line. His catch was carefully skinned and stretched on frames he made out of shingles. Each muskrat was different in size so he had to make these forms to fit the rat. The muskrats were all in the river but he also had another route where he
laid out traps for skunks. He had pretty good luck with them too. They were kinda smelly, but he never was directly sprayed so his smell wasn’t unbearable. These pelts were also put on frames inside-out for drying. Mother had Erling save all the skunk fat he scraped off his pelts. She would put this fat in a tin can on the bak of the stove to render it out. The pure fat she mixed with turpentine, with the true belief it was a cure-all for everthing: chest colds, the itch, strained muscles. Maybe she had something. Best evidence that it worked is that we lived throught it.

GAMES, TOYS, AND MAKE-BELIEVE

Gift-giving was not a great issue at our house. We had never believed in Santa Claus, so we didn’t expect and didn’t get much on that holiday. The clothes we got were most useful, but if there was a toy, it was a cheap one and had a short life. Homemade playthings and make-believe could take the sting out of poverty and force us into our own land of enchantment.

Birthdays I don’t remember as any big deal. However my birthday was always remembered because it came the day after Memorial Day. Because it was a holiday we usually celebrated by Bedstefar and Bedstemor and Tante Ane having dinner with us after we had gone out to the cemetery to watch some soldiers shoot off some rifles and to see all the decorated graves.

On my fifth birthday I was honored a day early. After finishing dinner, which was always at noon on the farm, Ric brought me a lovely little handmade wagon. It was about 10 inches long, and actually had wheels that turned. All the kids older and younger pounced on this treasure. Ric’s first fruit of a hammer, saw, nails and a slab of wood was not made to survive this onslaught. When the little wagon could take no more I sat expectantly waiting for my other presents. When it became evident that there weren’t going to be anymore, I
burst out crying, "Is that all I'm going to get?" My outburst brought no sympathy, it only showed that I was an ungrateful wretch.

When Mother put me to bed that night I was still sorrowfully moping, I think she must have felt the injustice of it all, so the next morning, my real birthday, she gave me a little doll made from one of her clothespins, the old kind that had a round head and two "legs." I was pacified and played with this little doll for weeks. My imagination made her a lovely princess.

It took little to spark our imaginations. Pretty stones could be people, pots and pans could be boats, cars or drums. Our paper dolls came from the Montgomery Ward Catalog. We took long trips to all parts of the world behind the wheel of the old Overland while it remained parked beside the house. We made up our own fairy tales.

Just a couple hundred yards south of the home place, running parallel to the road, was an obsolete irrigation ditch. It was covered over with sod grass, Russian thistle, and pig weed, but mostly with something we called "horse weeds." I think it was really a weed in the sunflower family. It grew very tall, with only a few leaves on it and, in the fall when everything was withered and dry, the stocks on these weeds turned hard and tough. They were perfect for make-believe horses. We'd cut outselves several of these. Some we even adorned with a horse-head made out of cardboard attached with a string. We'd all have a stable full of these great steeds.

We all became expert stilt makers and stilt-walkers. They were easy to make. It only took a couple of discarded bed slats, a block of wood and a couple nails. Usually we placed the block of wood about three or four feet off the ground, and attached a leather strap around it to keep the foot in place.

Balls were made out of string. Old tires made wonderful swings, or make-believe cars as we'd urge them down
the road, slapping them with one hand. In bad weather we made our ball of rolled up socks, and had a rousing game of ball in the house.

As we grew older our games began to include most all of us, except for the very youngest, and maybe Erling at the top. The best fun of all our play was swimming. We started playing in the water as soon as we could hobble down to the river, and as we grew older we sought out more challenging water than the shallow eddies and rivulets of the first stream. In the second stream we could find good swimming holes as deep as our waist or even higher. These holes would be particularly appealing if next to a high bank so we could run and jump or dive in. We all swam naked until, one by one, the big boys reached puberty and selfconsciously bowed out of the family sport. Swimming suits were out of the question, that would have been just too extravagant. Later, Gerda, Lisetta and I eventually reached that adolescent stage, and a little cotton swim suit was added to the short list of clothes for the summer.

We had found a new swimming hole. The river just didn’t have enough challenge for us as we got bigger but we found a better solution. The lower ditch, the main irrigation canal a mile up the road on higher ground, had a water-control check. The water tumbling over the check would gouge out a nice big hole in the bottom. The water rushing over the check and down the cement chute was really inviting. The hole often was over our heads, and the cement sidings were great for a long running dive into the turbulent water. Swimming again became a family affair. We now had a new Model T, and we’d all jump on, seats filled up, and the rest stood on the running board. The check was about a mile from home. On these trips everyone went, from Erling on down. Many times even Mother would come along. She had no swimming suit, but she would just go in in her dress. She loved it most of all. Not having a bathtub at home she really
appreciated the feeling of the rushing water. She of course did not dive, just sat in a pool and enjoyed.

In the summer, fall and spring there were all sorts of yard games. With everyone taking part and even Father sometimes roped in, we could manage to make up not full but adequate baseball teams. Very often there were guests on Sunday afternoon, so then our games could be pretty interesting. This in later years developed into touch football. Shinny was a good game although a little rough for the girls. But visiting boys could add up to enough for a nice rough game. In the spring there was always marbles.

And then there was the plum brush flanking all the north side of the house. It was an impregnable thorny hedge measuring a good 70-feet long and at least 15-feet across. We first cleared tunnels through this formidable thicket. When we had secret passages done we started our games of tag or hide-and-go-seek. This truly became a wild game. It left many a scratch, and I don’t know how many torn clothes.

Every year has its winter and we had to bend with it. In many ways winter was the best. Except when it got down to 10 or more below zero, we were quite comfortable. The bedrooms were all closed off. With a big heating stove in the living room and the cook stove in the kitchen we all kept warm, except for Father’s feet. He always felt a draft and would take down all the coats and jackets hanging on their nails and lay them on the floor by the doors leading to the bedroom to keep the draft out. Besides that he’d pace the floor up and down for hours until he went to bed where he kept a sheep pelt inside the covers at the foot of his bed.

Winter meant we had to find a different kind of entertainment. We had no radio—it was way before television—and not even a phonograph. Reading material was very scarce, so we had to resort to other things. A deck of cards was probably God’s gift to kids in our situation. We started out with simple games like Old Maid, on to “I Doubt It.” This
led into a more complicated Hearts. Then it became "Michigan Rummy," finally into Black Jack, and Poker. Ernst, when he came home from college, introduced us to Bridge.

Erling was always the star player. We admired him and wondered why he always won. Of course we hoped that someday we could beat him. I don't know who it was that figured it out, it must have been Ernst, but there had to be a way to outsmart Erling. Then is when we gradually got introduced to cheating. Now our games became not a matter of skill in playing, but of skill in cheating without getting caught. This became a free-for-all and even the younger boys could compete now.

Our games were mostly improvised but we wound up as strong, alert, healthy kids. Our work in the fields had strengthened and toned our bodies. When Gerda got into high school she started playing basketball. She was very good, and helped her team win the state championship in her junior year and runner-up in her senior year. Herluf, when he got to high school, made the football first team as a freshman and played all four years without being substituted: he was chosen All-State center. As a center he had a unique position. He is, as far as I know, the only center who called signals, and at six-foot-four and 148 pounds, he may have been the leanest.

These were the days of softball under lights during the summer months, post-Depression. One summer five brothers, two cousins, a cousin-in-law, and a little guy from Mississippi played on the farmers' co-op team. They did not finish first, but they showed well. At the same time I was part-time pitcher, part-time short stop for the only Brush girls' softball team. So the swinging in trees, swimming in waterholes, and topping sugar beets had been good conditioning for us.
Father was not a good farmer. It was not all his fault. It was just not in his nature to be so practical and to work so hard. But there was also a little bad luck. Much of that farm laying on the bottomland along the South Platte river just wasn’t any good. In the spring the naked field gleamed white with alkali and crops on these lands were sparse. The jackrabbits and grasshoppers took their toll. When the big hail storms blew in from the west, sweeping along north of the river, they often crossed over where it took a bend at the end of the farm and swept across our land, leaving devastation behind.

By the mid-Twenties things were getting much better. Father’s acquisition of the last parcel of much better land was giving the farm a much better yield of crops, and prices were soaring. In quick succession the three older boys, Erling, Ric, and Ernst, were getting bigger and stronger and could do most of the many chores, haying, hoeing, irrigating, harvesting, and hauling of sugar beets. Then when the next three girls, Gerda, Lisetta, and I, came of working age, we too were put in the fields. Father released the Guzman family, our Mexican beet laborers, and he saved all the labor cost, which was a sizeable amount.

On the outside all this new prosperity was showing: new tractors, new trucks, new cultivators, new machine shed, new every thing. But nothing extra went into the ordinary cost of running the house. When Father went on his spring trip to the bank for his farm loan to buy seed and new equipment, and in the fall to get loans to buy feeder lambs that he fattened in the winter from the farm produce (hay, straw, barley, corn, beet-tops, and beet pulp), he’d make out his budget with all the funds very carefully listed and justified. But he never once added a penny for the running of the household, for clothes, food or recreation.

This was all up to Mother to get out of her eggs and
milk sales money. With the growing kids the cost of these household necessities skyrocketed. There was a general merchandise store owned by Mr. Pitkin. He gave credit, and he'd let that get pretty high, counting on Father's check from the Beet Sugar Company in the fall. We got our underwear, shoes and stockings there. But keeping food on the table was the problem. We shopped at Piggly Wiggly which was on a strictly cash basis, but they would accept eggs as part payment which helped. In the summer when Mother's hens were laying eggs madly, there was plenty of egg money; hundreds of young roosters supplied meat for the table or ready cash. Vegetables from Bedstefar's garden helped a lot. But in winter hens weren't that cooperative, and we'd be lucky to get five eggs a day, and that pretty much went into our cookery. This was also when we needed warm clothing: long-handled underwear, overshoes, overcoats, and work gloves. Much care was taken in selecting the cheapest, or best buy. "Economy buying" usually backfired, for the lowest prices we also got the lowest quality and much that we bought wouldn't last the winter. One dollar and ninety-eight cents was sort of the pegged price we were allowed to pay for a pair of shoes. They usually were ill-fitting and the hole in the bottom developed within the first month; that's when we started the cardboard stuffing.

Father was beginning to feel flush. He began to envision himself like his two older brothers. Their sons were adults and were marrying right and left. Uncle John would give his sons a farm for a wedding present, but I don't know if this was true of Uncle Niels.

On a trip to a church convention in western Nebraska in 1927, Father was told of the great virgin prairie still out there that could be bought for a song. Dad got excited, found half a section, 320 acres of land, still in the original sod looking over the Niobrara River, near Hay Springs. He bought it with a down payment he borrowed from Mr. Pettys, his banker,
and began to get his eldest son Erling set up in business. This took a lot more than he had anticipated. The new Case tractor was hauled all that way to Nebraska to help break the sod. A shed to house Erling and a helper plus the tractor had to be built, but the project got off to a good start.

The next year the Danish synod was sponsoring a tour of Denmark. As Father and Mother were celebrating their 25th anniversary the next year, Father decided to take this tour with Mother in a pre-celebration of this event. When Father went to the bank for a loan for this, old Mr. Pettys was delighted and offered him an extra $1,000, "Just so you can do it right." Ric was put in charge of the farm, and Lisetta and I were in charge of the house. They were gone most of the summer of 1928.

The trip was a great success, but in spite of the fact that this was supposed to have been the celebration of their 25th anniversary, Father still felt it had to be further celebrated on the exact date. The real anniversary was the 18th of October, 1929—right in the middle of sugarbeet harvest. Father stopped all harvest operations, butchered a pig, hired-the I.O.O.F. Hall in Brush invited the whole congregation (over 100 persons) for a full banquet with a dance 'til dawn. It was quite an affair. Friends helped us. Lisetta and I, then in high school, pitched in to help. The food was sumptuous. There were all kinds of speeches, and Father’s eloquence topped them all. After a day of rest, we were to return to the beet fields, but it had begun to rain, the temperature dropped, and the rain turned to snow. Then the wind came up and turned the newly fallen snow into a blizzard, leaving drifts fifteen feet high in some places, and then came the freeze. The beets were frozen solid and stayed in the ground until spring.

Then came the 24th of October, the Wall Street Crash. We were not immediately aware of what it all meant, but we were soon to find out. First came the loss of the beet check.
We lost about half of that, which meant Mr. Pitkins couldn't be paid in full, and the doctor bills went unpaid. The cost of the party had drained the coffers. Things were getting tense. At the same time the beets froze, snow buried the beet tops and the grain stubble in the alfalfa and corn fields that the sheep were supposed to graze on until they were put into feedlots. This meant the sheep had to be put in feedlots early. Father soon had to buy more hay and grains and the normally cheap beet pulp supply at the Great Western Sugar Company also was very limited that year.

Mr. Pettys was no longer generous. He demanded full payment of Father's loans before other creditors could have their share. The next year when Father came in with his request for his spring loan Mr. Pettys drastically slashed Father's already pared-down budget. The drain on the farm venture in Peters, Nebraska really hurt. Father tried bravely to meet his payments. It was eventually given up and Father lost his whole investment and Erling came back to help at home.

It was not long before the gloom set in and it lingered for years. I don't think anyone had any idea that it could get that bad for that long. It affected almost everyone. Because we earlier had experienced subsistence living, we could cope with it emotionally better than those who were used to better things. We were used to hand-me-down clothes, we were used to patches on clothing, we had always stretched out hamburger, usually with leftover oatmeal mush, so that a pound could feed a family of ten. But it wasn't easy.

One winter, the very cold winter of 1931-32, we had no money for coal for cooking or heating. The flatlands of eastern Colorado had no pine trees for cutting. We had only cottonwood or willow trees that grew on the river. These were cut and brought home to burn. The trick was to get them started, for it was green wood. Father would scavenge around the place for any loose pieces of lumber that might be
spared from a fence or a post that could be cut up as kindling to start the fires in the kitchen stove and the living room heater. Corn cobs were gathered up from the pigpens and soaked in kerosene and burned to help the green cottonwood ignite. When and if it finally did get started, the fire would flicker sadly in a sputtering flame, dripping little drops of water into the firebox beneath it. During the coldest part of that winter we spent all our waking hours in the closed-off kitchen. Needless to say the unheated beds were not very inviting when it got to 20 degrees below zero.

But we survived, and in the spring, when Lisetta and I were in high school, we did not question that we could not go to senior sneak day, for lack of $1.50, nor could we belong to the Pep Club for we had no money for uniforms. The class ring was out, so were graduation pictures.

It was sad that we had to be so poor as kids, but it was even harder, when the time came when we as adults should have been able to move on and make good and carve out a better life for ourselves, that there were no jobs. Erling was home now helping Father, Ric for the most part was, too. When the slack time came on the farm there was a great deal of movement and searching. Their old second hand cars served them in their search for work, or they hitchhiked. Ric at one time sorted potatoes in Fargo, North Dakota, worked during the wheat harvest in Montana, spent some time in Solvang, California, working as a busboy and as a ranch hand in Solvang. He also worked several summers haying in Elk Mountain, Wyoming, where Lisetta, Ernst, and I all worked later.

Gerda had left home after graduating from high school in 1928 to attend Danebod College, a Danish Folk school, in Tyler, Minnesota for the summer session, and stayed over the next winter to work as the baker for the winter session (the session for men). By then she had already found her man there, Vagn Duus. They came home for a summer,
then went on to Montana to work in the wheat harvest. Gerda decided to try California, and ended up finding a job as a cook in one of the better homes in Santa Barbara. Vagn followed her and found work at a dairy, milking cows. Lisetta wound up in Des Moines doing housework. I had a stint in Minneapolis also doing housework. Ernst decided that college was for him. He enrolled at the University at Boulder, doing all sorts of jobs to make his way. He had no help from anyone. One summer he hitchhiked to New York City and got a job delivering ice.

In all this wandering and searching for work, our brothers met other young men on the same quest. When there were no jobs for anyone, our brothers would come home with their friends to tide them over until another job might crop up. While they waited, Father put them to work on the farm and Mother stretched the food with more potatoes or beans.

Time was passing, and still things got worse. Eggs were now selling for only nine cents a dozen, and Erling had to sell a large batch of shoats weighing over 50 pounds for only 35 cents apiece.

Still there was some good that came out of all this. The Depression was a great leveler. Gradually those older cousins who had seemed so formidable began to act like regular human beings. Some of them were really having a hard time, as bad or even worse than we were. The things other people did for amusement we could now afford because they didn’t cost anything. Our home was a great hangout for the young people. Some winters the river froze over and they all gathered for skating and ended up at our house where Mother would be waiting with her regular 20 quart canning pot of cocoa, and pans of hot cinnamon rolls or stacks of egg sandwiches. In the summer they’d meet at our house for softball or round games, and usually they’d stay for supper of egg sandwiches and cocoa. Walter Hansen, our bachelor
neighbor, would bring his accordion and we’d dance all night. The I.O.O.F. Hall staged regular dances where the admission was 10 cents apiece—girls had to pay too. Everybody loved to come to our lovely meadow for picnics and ballgames.

By the time the Depression was over, we were mostly grown up. During those hard years, Gerda, Ric, Erling, Lisetta, and Ernst all married. They married on a shoestring, but they all had a toughness, and they all survived.

4. FATHER AND MOTHER

OUR FATHER

So far in mentioning Father I might have seemed a little unkind. That was not meant. You might think that Father was a very simple man, and he was in—many ways. His needs were few. I have made allusions to our simple fare in the way of food, but that was mostly the way he liked it. Many times for supper he’d ask if he could please only have a bowl of hot milk. In this he’d break a thick slice of Mother’s bran bread, and that was it. He had been a handsome young man, and he retained his good looks, and usually looked neat, but I don’t think he ever noticed what we had on. I don’t think he envied his older brothers their much better homes, cars, barns, and clothes. He never seemed to notice or mind our meager, worn out, or broken-down furniture.

But he had his complexities. He was deeply religious. I don’t think anyone else in the Christensen family, in Denmark or in Brush, took religion to be anything more than what you did on Sunday, a reason to put on nice clothes, a place for kids to go to Sunday school, and the center of social events. Father lived his religion every day. His God went where he went. Where he got this I’m not sure. This awakening to Christ may have come when he attended the Danish Folk school at Nysted, Nebraska, or it may have been the influence
of Bedstefar (Mother’s father), a deeply religious man, having been caught up in the New Awakening of the Free Church and the philosopher Grundtvig many years earlier.

Father was a dreamer, with the soul of a poet. He had only the equivalent of an eighth-grade education in Denmark, but when he settled in Brush to work for his brothers he went to night school at the Morey country school to learn English, and eventually get his citizenship. He read everything he could get his hands on. He could read over and over his beloved Danish history and the many historical romances about the ancient Danish kings. He had read as a young boy the Danish translations of James Fenimore Cooper’s books, particularly *The Deerslayer*, which sparked his dreams of America. He loved American history, especially the Civil War period. As we grew up and brought history books home to study, he read them. Our college history books were handed over to him. He subscribed to all the Danish church literature, the *Brush Tribune*, *Capper’s Weekly*, and the *Pathfinder*. At one time he got hold of some romantic novels. There must have been something in them that he thought we ought not read, for as he read each page he’d tear it out and stick it in the stove and burn it. All the while he was doing this tears-were streaming down his cheeks. We used to get a great kick out of watching this. I don’t remember that we were ever curious about what he was reading.

Strangely, Father never seemed to encourage his children to read. One time at a farm sale Father bid on and got a 20-volume set of *Stoddard’s Lectures*, a beautiful leather-bound set of stories of travel all over the world, well illustrated with photographs. These books were eventually worn to shreds. We all must have got our yearning for travel while fingering our way through them time and time again. These books were the only books I ever remember him buying. Once Mrs. Laugeson gave me about two or three year’s old issues of *Ladies Home Journal*. I was entranced, and every
spare minute I would rush back to the bedroom and read. I don’t know why Father was so angry about that. Whenever he was around and missed me, he’d come charging into the bedroom and demand, “You get up and help Mother.” Mother herself would be reading The Brush Tribune or whatever.

Whenever Father wasn’t busy in his free hours either walking or reading, he was writing letters. Most of his letters were written in Danish. He would retreat to the rolltop desk in his bedroom for these long drawn out affairs. He corresponded with many of the ministers of the Danish Synod; often he would contribute articles to newspapers and, of course, wrote letters to the editors. But he was not content to stick to the Danish. Whenever he was outraged at anything he’d write a letter. Father was not fluent in writing the English language, and he spoke with a thick accent. This did not interfere with his determination to express his point of view with the written word. But for this he needed help, particularly in spelling. Then he would sit at the kitchen table and solicit help from anyone who was around. He had a very spirited way of making a point of whatever grievance it was that was on his mind. I’m sure that many of his letters were passed around in business offices, or the editorial rooms of publications, as classics in getting directly to the point.

Father was usually optimistic if not practical. He was always working with a stub of a pencil on any scrap of paper he hadn’t already burned, putting down figures, adding and subtracting, and finally announcing, “Next year we’ll be rich.”

He loved to give speeches. We were always too embarrassed to hear what he was saying. We used to think the laughing was at him, but I came to think he was genuinely a delightfully funny man. He was the one picked to be the lay minister when our preacher was out of town or sick, or during interim periods when we had no preacher. Here, too, Father thoroughly enjoyed himself.
Father had trouble handling his children when they were in their early teens; he hated smart Alec remarks. During those years it was Mother who gave the orders. But as we emerged as adults he again found that he could tolerate us; we even could engage in interesting dialogue.

When Erling was eighteen his time had come to go to the Danish Folk High School. Father’s session at Nysted, Nebraska, had been the highlight of his youth, so Erling was sent there too. We kids really missed our oldest brother and we couldn’t wait until he got back. Somehow Erling never once mentioned anything about God, the glories of Danish History or anything either spiritual or intellectual. He had a good Danish gymnast as gym teacher who had done wonders with his body. He could turn perfect cartwheels, do front flips, and backward somersaults, and walk on his hands. It was great. But one thing was really a shocker. There had been a number of Danish immigrant young men there, and they passed on to Erling something we had never heard in our home, swearing in Danish. He put Mother and Father in a state of shock. Satan’s name was flung about right and left. Fortunately Erling gave that up rather fast. All the rest of us were sent off for our Danish Folk school experience when our turn came.

Father was an incurable romantic. He sensed the need of the older boys to go courting. He never made a public display of this, but on Saturday night he’d slip Erling some money and grant the use of the car. Erling usually saved 25 cents of this to go to the late movie, and Sunday night he would gather us all together, sit down, and tell us the whole movie. Erling had also become gifted with words. He could not only put the pictures in our mind, but he also supplied the real words which the silent movies never did. We loved those Sunday evenings.

Something else Father believed in was travel. He himself was always restless. In the winter when work was
slack, and he was shipping sheep to market, he was entitled to a free ride in the caboose of the freight train. Father, and later one of the brothers, would take advantage of that free ride to Chicago, and then he would slowly wend his way home, stopping at all the little Danish communities in Iowa and Nebraska to visit friends and relatives, but mostly the preachers he corresponded with.

Whenever, every summer, there was a church young people's convention, somehow Father could dig up some traveling money, and allow the use of the car, for those old enough. I think he saw that both the Folk schools and conventions provided a chance for his sons and later his daughters to find them a proper Danish mate. When both Erling and Ric did in fact find romance separately at one of these conventions, Father was most enthusiastic. But I think his enthusiasm soured the match. In Ric's case the girl was the daughter of one of the outstanding preachers, and Father was really excited. He took it upon himself to write to the lady in question (what about, I don't know), and that put a rather sudden end to the romance. However, on the whole he did have pretty good luck because four of the oldest five married Danes.

Father loved, more than anything, to talk, discuss and argue. He loved to sit at the head of the table in his captain's chair and expound his views. He also liked to break bread with someone—anyone would do. These impulsive invitations, "Come on in and eat with us," really would get Mother's dander up, for she could be put in a very embarrassing situation.

One such winter day when all the kids were in school, I was home sick and Ric or Erling might have been home helping Father at the time. The old man who came regularly to skin our dead animals and then buy the hides was working at his grisly chore; lunch time came, and Father extended his generous invitation. The man accepted. I need to add that the
old man was Jewish. When Mother saw this blood-smeared man, his long matted locks and beard fanned out in all directions, entering the house she gasped. But she dutifully put the big tureen of soup on the table, filled with large chunks of potatoes, carrots, cabbage, onions and parsnips. The man started scooping-in the food. Father calmly went ahead and said his blessing and ignored him. Mother went back to the stove and brought over the meat platter. It was a leg of pork Mother had cooked the soup on. The man picked up his fork, took another look, dropped his fork, and fled from the house.

There was a family in our church by-the name of Johansen. They originally lived in Munn’s Addition, but later moved south of Brush onto a farm that was not very productive. I think their finances were pretty rough, but the Johansens put up a very nice front. The three girls I remember best. They were always dressed beautifully, and the food they cooked was always cooked in real butter, their cakes were the richest, their roast was the most lavish, and their Aebleskiver were out of this world. The problem was that they had moved a long way from town so coming to church was one thing, but when there was a church function in the afternoon it was too much for them to go way back home and then come in again. Somehow the Johansens never thought to bring a picnic lunch so when there was such a dual function, they’d stand around longingly looking for an invitation which they usually got. One Sunday I guess Father felt expansive and needed a discussion with Mr. Johansen about the state of affairs. Anyway, he was most warm in his invitation for them to join us for Sunday dinner. This was one time Mother was really mad. Her day hadn’t been too good anyway, what with getting all the kids dressed, and getting Father properly shaved. She had no time to prepare anything for Sunday dinner. There was nothing in the house but a pot of cold left-over potatoes and a slab of salt pork. All she
could muster up for dessert was rød grød pudding which had managed to get lumpy.

We had got home a little ahead of them, trying to straighten up the house which was in a shambles as usual. Since the Johansen girls came in their pretty silk dresses, they viewed our chairs with terror written on their faces. Mother was frying the salt pork, and warming up the potatoes in a milk gravy. We set our oilcloth table with our cracked dishes, nothing matching. All were seated around the table on the benches, Father presiding proudly saying grace. Nobody seemed to be very hungry. Mr. Johansen and Father seemed to be getting along all right. I don’t know what the topic was, probably “The Hard Times.” After a long dissertation Father firmly declared, “I tell you, it’s the shits.” There was complete silence. Fortunately we did have to go right back to church for that meeting so we did not prolong this festive occasion.

Father, for the most part, wore blinders. He seldom saw the bad side; he had a way of complete detachment. When the kids would be tearing down the house, he never even looked up from his reading. He never saw the patched clothing. He never saw the suffering. But he saw the beauty of the sunset, he took time to smell the roses, and he never lost his eye for a pretty girl. Mother would sort of laugh at this—I think a little bit miffed—and call him an old goat.

I mentioned Sunday mornings. This was always the worst day of all for Mother. There was just too much to do, but right in the middle of it all was the time for Father to shave. This he did only on Sundays. Father had a particularly tough beard and it seemed to grow in fertile soil. Anyway the operation was not accomplished with a little shaving soap and a swipe with the razor blade. The beard had to be soaked, not once but twice. Mother would put on a pot to get very hot water, Father would prop up the mirror against the water bucket set on the dining room table. Mother would
soak and wring out a small terry towel. This Father held to his face; a dry towel had to be put over the damp towel for it was much too hot for Father's hands. After a long soaking, Father did the first scraping, then the whole procedure would be repeated. Then Father, neat and clean, put on his Sunday suit and took off to walk the four miles to church, leaving Mother to handle whatever else needed to be done, which was of course everything. So it was not surprising that sometimes there was not a big Sunday dinner waiting for us when we came home.

Father smoked a pipe. It was his steady companion. He only had one pipe, and it could get most awfully sour, and the house would get pretty smelly. One day Ernst had read that by shaving bits of horse hooves into pipe tobacco, one could create such a stink that it would cure a man of smoking forever. He tried it, and he was right about the stink. Everyone had to get out of the house but Father; he kept right on smoking. In self-defense we had to throw away the rest of the can of tobacco and get him a new one. The problem was still there because the pipe was forever contaminated. We finally got that away from him. One day many months later he had mislaid his new pipe and looking around he found the contaminated pipe, lit it up, and we - had to evacuate the house again. He never blinked an eye.

Father began to realize that smoking was costing him money. He was already saving on matches that were always blowing out by using pages from the catalog. These he would fold and ignite in Mother's kitchen stove, cooling the fire Mother needed for cooking dinner. One day Father found an ad in the Capper's Weekly for raw tobacco leaves—about 20 pounds for not much more than a pound of tobacco would cost. This seemed like a bargain so he sent for it with a check. When it arrived it came wrapped in several layers of burlap. He crumbled some and stoked up his pipe and it about took his head off. Someone advised him to tame it down about
half and half with cherry leaves—we had lots of cherry trees. It did mellow it down and in time he got used to it so for years we had to put up with this new stench.

There are so many stories about Father. He never was a dull person to be around. We were all getting older and going our own way. Whenever the word got around that anyone was going on some quick trip to Denver—the 90 miles now took less than two hours to drive—Father would show up with his straw hat in hand and a jacket on, announcing he'd like a ride, "Just drop me off at the Museum." Denver has a really fine Museum of Natural History; he would spend the whole day lost in the wonder of it all. When whoever the driver was finished his business, he'd pick him up again. Father had had yet another wonderful day.

He had a friend called Mr. Owenby who was the agent down at the Union Pacific depot in Snyder. As his now young adult offspring were scattering about, Father would pay a visit to Mr. Owenby every few months and tell him all the doings of the Christensen flock. Father never praised us as kids, but I gather he did some bragging to Mr. Owenby. Mr. Owenby wrote a little local column for the Brush Tribune. It was one of the best things in the Tribune, a folksy low key report on happenings around Snyder, done with a nice subtle sense of humor, repeating exactly what he had heard. Whenever Father paid him a visit the Otto Christensen family news was read in all the homes around Brush the next week.

I'll let the many other stories rest, but just dwell briefly on Christmas. Christmas was our family's real celebration. We were always just us. When we were little kids, Father came out of his shell on Christmas Eve. He sang the Christmas song the loudest, his eyes sparkled the brightest, and on that one night of the year a he got down on his hands and knees and played games with us. Blind Man's Bluff was the favorite. He never knew anything about giving gifts.
Mother did the shrewd and careful shopping with the few pennies she had.

During the later years Ric would get himself fortified with a bottle of whiskey which he kept in the garage for the male members of the family. But he always invited Father to have a sip Father would come in glowing like the Christmas tree itself.

On the whole I think Father was a happy man. He did crazy and bizarre things that used to embarrass the hell out of us growing children. He carried in his pocket his little red song book which he’d pull out anytime—on a bus, waiting on a street corner, or walking along the road—and sing his favorite songs. People must have thought he was nuts. He loved to talk, and he loved people. His favorite sport was argumentation; he could argue any side with equal eloquence and conviction. He loved to make speeches. He loved to travel. He believed in education. Money could always be found for a session at one of the Folk schools for all of us when our age of enlightenment came.

He was the happiest man in the world when he retired at 70, and moved into Bedstefar’s house in Munn’s Addition. He was finally a free man. No cows mooing, no hay to mow, no sheep to be fed. He could now devote all his time to what he loved—walking at sunset, reading again and again his beloved Danish and American history and his romantic novels. He could visit with his friends as long as he wanted and he could travel to his heart’s content. And he was deeply in love with Mother until the day he died. He was a man fulfilled.

MOTHER

Our older cousins remember so vividly the day Mother first joined the growing Christensen families. They often reminisced about her getting off the train in Brush on a dusty fall day in her stylish clothes—a neatly fitting suit
trimmed in velvet, and a memorable large-brimmed hat with tassels—her wasp waist, and lovely face, grey eyes and black hair.

Mother had not always been so elegant. In her childhood and youth she was a real tomboy. My Tante Ane told me once that when Mother was 13 it was decided that it was time that she became a lady and wore full-length dresses. She flatly refused and stayed as she was, fulfilling her childhood, chasing her young friends, tearing through the house with muddy bare feet, wrestling on the living room floor, and playing hide-and-seek in the bushes. Bedstemor, who kept an immaculate house, sat back shaking her head and quietly weeping.

Mother was really a free spirit. She was completely honest. She said exactly what she thought. She always championed the underdog. She gave warm and comforting care where it was needed, but ignored the fakes. She was brought up a farmer’s daughter, practical and hard-working, and never floated around in unrealistic dreams.

The only remnant of her stylish days was a pair of fox furs. These we had somehow inherited as playthings. These lovely furs had the little fox faces with button eyes, four little feet and long tails. They beat a teddy bear anytime. In make-believe they became all the wonders of the wild animal world until Father one day, in one of his burning streaks, disposed of them as he did all things that had outlived their usefulness. We were sad and Mother was very angry.

Another early memory was that Mother was always good at inventing things for us to do. With practically no toys, she and we had to stretch our imaginations. I remember sitting on the kitchen floor with Herluf and Leo while Mother was working. We had all her pots and pans laid out on the floor, using them variously as musical instruments, automobiles or boats. All the dining room and living room chairs could be converted into long trains by lining them up in a row; or laid down, they could make rooms to live in; or
pig pens when we pretended to be pigs. Father was never very happy about all this, especially if we were playing on the roof, but Mother never seemed to mind. I think her feeling was "let those kids have all the fun they can." I know she knew that life "out there" could be, and very often was, cruel. When the devastating hailstorms swept across our fields, laying waste to all in their path, we knew all too well the tragedy of our lost or severely damaged crop. It was crying time. But Mother looked out the window pointing at the mounded hailstones. "Quick," she said, "Let's make some ice cream." Somehow we weathered those storms.

There never was any nagging. We were all assigned our chores as soon as we were old enough. They included bringing in all the water, two pails for the stove reservoir and two pails for the table with the wash basin. Wood had to be chopped for both living room and kitchen stoves, eggs had to be gathered, the chickens fed, the coal buckets filled, the cows milked (the big boys did that), and the dishes washed (that job belonged to the "women-folk," us three little girls). We did all these with no questions asked, and we never stalled. When we worked in the fields we were excused from all these chores except for milking. During those periods I guess Mother somehow did them all herself.

One Sunday several families decided to go out together to Fremont Buttes after church for a picnic. It was a great success, but after lunch a little boy by the name of Leon decided he wanted to go home. He started whining, fidgeting, simpering, pulling at his mother's skirt and in general being a plain pain in the neck. We were all sitting on a shady ledge, overlooking the surrounding buttes, with about a 20-foot drop off the edge. Mother had had all she could take. Suddenly she got up, took the boy by the arm and demanded, "You shut up or I'll throw you down there," and she pointed over the ledge. There was dead silence—not only the boy but the grown-ups too were shocked into silence. Conversation
gradually resumed, but Leon was struck dumb until we were all finally ready to go home.

Helga, as she reached adolescence, became a bit of a daredevil. On a dare she might do any foolish thing. One summer the young people’s convention being held in Brush was extended to a three day trip in the Rocky Mountains at a camp in Estes Park. Mother had gone along to help with the cooking. The group of young people all went on a hike to climb to the top of Eagle Rock, close to the camp. It was an easy ascent and descent from the back, but the face was almost a sheer drop. Somehow someone dared Helga, and she accepted, to go down the face. A young fellow, also foolish, agreed to join her. When attempts to dissuade them failed, the rest of the group returned to camp waiting in fear of what would happen to the two daredevils. After several hours the two, subdued considerably by the mountain, returned. Mother greeted them, not with open arms or tears of joy, but with a scathing censure: “You two fools. If you had been killed it would have ruined the party for everyone.” Helga didn’t take silly dares again.

On one occasion celebrating Erling’s 21st birthday everyone was there. Another tall and very shy and awkward young man, who was also celebrating his 21st, managed to knock the gas Coleman lantern (our only source of light) off its hook with his head. Everyone panicked. The lantern lay on the floor sputtering as all the young people dashed out of the house covering their heads waiting for the explosion. Mother heard the racket from the kitchen, calmly went over and picked up the lantern, carried it outside and left it in the yard to sputter itself out harmlessly.

When we, sometimes with friends, would gather around that same kitchen table that served for everything—eating, hog butchering, Father’s shaving, quilt-making, reading or conversation—we could get pretty silly. Mother was usually in the background, never saying anything, but she
never missed a word. You could see a big grin on her face whenever someone would come up with a good story.

Mother stood up for the down-trodden. She told us about the Indians, and how badly they had been treated. Never did we believe that the Indians were bad guys. Eskimos we loved, knowing very little about them. The Mexicans' children became our best playmates. Negroes were high on her list of the badly treated people. We had never seen any of these poor people until one summer afternoon when we little kids had gone with Father and Mother to Fort Morgan. While they were busy at the Court House we were left in the old Overland. A group of big boys came by and they decided to stick around for a while to have a little sport teasing us. The biggest was blackskinned. We figured this had to be one of the Negroes Mother had talked about, but he wasn't anything like the Uncle Tom story we had heard. He was the biggest of the bunch of boys and he was downright mean in his taunting criticism of our clothes, our car, everything. It took a bit of persuading on Mother's part later to convince us that he must have been the exception.

Mother and Father always exercised their right to vote. For years Mother voted for Socialist Norman Thomas for President. Father vacillated, voting for whomever he thought would win.

As we grew older Mother was the one we confided in. She heard all our stories and our complaints and dreamed with us about our future but she never tried to persuade us to accept her views. Our decisions were our own, and she backed us up one hundred per cent in whatever we chose to do. It was the same confidence she showed in us when we as little kids would all be lined up on the roof of the house, or roaming the fields or swimming in the river. When in later years we went out on dates or on long trips, she never sat up all night waiting for us to get home. She never pried into our affairs or questioned what we had done. Life was ours to
live. I remember once when I was in high school I told her that one of the things that I loved her for was that she left us alone and never worried about us. She gave me a long, long look, and asked, “What makes you think I never worried about you?” She had great wisdom.

Mother was the practical one. Bedstefar had instilled in her the basics of farm life, the long hours, the hard work, and the big family. She must have been a bit put out when she discovered that her new husband took the land, the animals and the crops so casually. She soon found that the only way to get things done was to constantly prod Father to get at it but often, to save the crops, she’d have to do it herself. In the early years Mother had always led the horse while Father steered the cultivator, for Father seemed unable to do both. One day after a heavy rain followed by the bright Colorado sunshine, the young beets were dying in the caked and cracked soil. Father had gone to town hours ago but had lingered on and on talking to his friends. Mother was literally watching the year’s beet crop die before her eyes. In desperation she hitched up the horse and did both the jobs that Father didn’t think could be done alone. When he got home the beets had been cultivated and saved. Mother was seven months pregnant when this happened. From then on, Father did it himself. This was one time Father was shamed into doing better.

It must have been hard on Mother, all those children and never knowing where the clothes and food would come from. Would the income from the egg and milk sales stretch to buy the necessities? She knew all the tricks. She could stretch a pound of hamburger to feed ten. A chicken was cut into 12 pieces, one for each so someone was stuck with either the neck or the gizzard. I know how deep was her sorrow when she had to send us to school with only a jelly sandwich, or stockings that were beyond darning.

I would often catch Mother staring blankly into space.
It would frighten me for she looked so sad. I could only guess that she was wondering, “How did I get caught up in all this?” I’m sure she married for love and I’m sure she loved him through it all—all his impracticality, his day-dreaming, his sometimes embarrassing spontaneity, and even his foolishness. I’m sure life did not bring fulfillment of all her dreams, but she loved us all. Always she believed in us and gave us courage to chase our dreams. In later years she suffered excruciating pain from ulcerated varicose veins that would not heal, then diabetes, gradually going blind. Her last 10 years she spent in a wheelchair suffering a broken hip that did not mend.

One thing I’m sure she knew—we all adored her.

Mother and Father never made a show of affection. Only once did I see Father reach out to embrace and kiss Mother and she pushed him away. Only once did I hear harsh words between them. We were little children then and we started to cry. However, we never questioned their love and their loyalty.

One memory that stays with me says everything. Father and Mother were retired and living in the house beside the church. It was Christmas. Father wanted to give something special to Mother that year and he had asked Leo for an idea. He suggested a flower. Mr. Blouer had a greenhouse down the road a couple of blocks. Mr. Blouer was getting to be a very old man and his remaining stock was limited. When Father got there he had only one poinsettia left. It was miserable, withered and limp. It also suffered from frost-bite. Father took this pathetic little plant home to Mother. At the very same time a delivery truck came from the Fort Morgan Nursery to deliver a poinsettia. It was the most beautiful lush green and bright red flower I’d ever seen. Someone else had sent it to Mother. I stood watching the look that went between them. In his eyes was a desperate appeal for her to understand, and in her eyes was something I had
never seen before—forgiveness for all the hardship, all
the pain, all the sorrow. And in her eyes there was love.
Then I understood the all-encompassing love they had for
each other.

Book Review

Union of Opposites. Letters from Rå Svane Wengel
Edited by Craig W. Miller
Reviewed by ROLF BUSCHARDT CHRISTENSEN

The book Union of Opposites is about the life of Rå
Wengel, who was born for Svane in Frederiksdal. Her
mother was a captain and her family lived in a lovely
villa with a view of the Alanderry Hotel. After graduating
from the University of Copenhagen in about 1925, she became a
governess for the daughter of Baron Elisabeth de Lert of
Olebygaard near Frederikshavn on the island of Lolland. Here
she met Poul Wengel, the gardener. In about 1931, Poul
Wengel emigrated to Canada, where he opened a farm in
Saskatchewan, outside Prince Albert. Fourteen years later, in
1925, she gave up her position as governess at Olebygaard
and left for Canada to join Poul Wengel.

Shortly after her arrival in Canada, Mrs. Rå Wengel
met Alice Miller, whose husband owned a clothing store in
Prince Albert. From 1926 to her death in 1959, Mrs. Wengel
wrote letters to Mrs. Miller. There were of course letters in
both directions, but only Mrs. Wengel’s letters have survived.
Those letters were found by Mrs. Miller’s son, Craig, after his
mother’s death. After reading the collection of letters, Craig
Miller thought there was material here for a book. And what
a book!
One thing I'm sure she knew—we all adored her. Mother and Father never made a show of affection. Only once did I see Father reach out to embrace and kiss Mother and she pushed him away. Only once did I hear harsh words between them. We were little children then and we started to cry. However, we never questioned their love and their loyalty.

One memory that stays with me stays everywhere. Father and Mother were retired and living in the house beside the church. It was Christmas. Father wanted to give something special to Mother that year and he had asked Lee for an idea. He suggested a flower. Mr. Blouer had a greenhouse down the road a couple of blocks. Mr. Blouer was getting to be a very old man and his remaining stock was limited. When Father got there he had only one poinsettia left. It was miserable, withered and limp. It also suffered from frost-bite. Father took this pathetic little plant home for Mother. At the very same time a delivery truck came from the Fort Morgan Nursery to deliver a poinsettia. It was the most beautiful lush green and bright red flower I'd ever seen. Someone else had sent it to Mother. I stood watching the truck that went between them. In his eyes was a desperate appeal for his understanding, and in her eyes was something I had