

"The Happy Norwegian"
Olof Syhre

My grandfather Olof was born in a sod house on September 25, 1896, to Tollof and ~~Love~~^{Les}a Syhre who lived eight miles east of Pierpont, South Dakota. He joined four older sisters: ~~Lizzie~~^{Les}a, Lena, Hannah, and Lydia, and a brother Hagbert who was six years old at the time Olof arrived. His father Tollof had been a fisherman in Norway before coming to America and changing his lifestyle to that of a homesteader in South Dakota.

That early start as a fisherman built strength in Tollof as he piled thirty gallon barrels of fish three barrels high after each summer of fishing. Remembering this strength, Olof related an early memory of his father: Lars Gunderson, a family friend, had had too much to drink on one occasion and didn't wish to go home. Olof watched Tollof hitch up the team to a double-boxed wagon, hold on to the lines with one hand, and lift Lars up over the double box with his other hand.

His father also had a sense of humor displayed when a family portrait was taken. Olof was five years old at the time, and his father told him to hide his thumbs inside his hands or the camera would take them. When examining the portrait, one can see that both father and son are concealing their thumbs.

Olof remembers his mother ~~Love~~^{Les}a as a "very nice woman" who was ill during his early childhood and had to remain in bed. Olof was almost five when she died of tuberculosis on September 8, 1901. His father died of kidney failure soon after on February 18, 1902. The children stayed at home and were cared for by the eldest until 1903 when the three youngest, Hagbert, Lydia, and Olof went to live with the Paulsons: an aunt, uncle, and eight double cousins.

In the spring of 1906 Olof, Hagbert, and three of their sisters traveled to Saskatchewan, Canada, where Olof lived with Lena and Lydia in a one room sod house which was fourteen feet by twenty-two feet. Hagbert stayed with ^{Lesa}~~Lizzie~~ and her husband in a separate sod house. Here Olof milked cows, fed the pigs and chickens, worked in the fields, and dug and hauled rocks. When asked if he had any hard times in this place, he answered: "They were all hard times."

That first winter it snowed from October first through May first and often there would be four feet of snow on the ground. They had to drive a team of horses and a sleigh twenty miles to get to the nearest town and the trip would take all day. They had to go to the river and cut down dead trees for heat and borrowed straw and hay from the neighbors to stay warm during that initial winter. Olof was nine years old at this time and once got caught in a blizzard on his way home with his horse. The horse stumbled, throwing Olof off, and so he had to walk, leading the horse in the blinding snow.

On another occasion during that first winter, it was forty degrees below zero when the family was visiting the neighbors twelve miles away. A blizzard came up and they had to stay for three days before they could go home again.

Olof could only attend school off and on "when he didn't have to work"--driving five horses while he plowed the fields. When asked how he felt at the time about missing school, he replied: "Oh, I felt fine!" He had enjoyed arithmetic the most and reading the least. He once walked eleven miles each way to read for the minister. After this experience, the minister was kind enough to travel to

where Olof was working and he read for the minister while sitting on a binder.

In the fall of 1911 Olof returned to his birthplace of Pierpont and was confirmed in 1912. Farming was what he knew so he worked at that until he was drafted in 1918. He said, "We were going to get Kaiser Bill" and he was ready to go. He served for four months when the Armistice signed on November 11, 1918--one month before his unit was scheduled to go overseas.

Olof had met Emma Flattum, the little sister of his friend Sam's, before he went into the service with Sam and had written to her while he was in Camp Grant in Illinois and Camp McCarthy in Texas. They married when she was nineteen and he was twenty-two. Even during the Dirty Thirties Olof remarked: "Emma and I got along fine." His optimism during hard times is obvious and also his pride in his family as he points out that he has never been in any trouble and neither have any of his children. He said, "I never suffered for not having an education. I can't say I had a decent start...I always paid for everything I bought."

Now he says, "The main thing I do is entertaining old people--playing banjo." He loves playing with the Happy Norwegians--whether they're at the Legion Hall in Waubay or Jenkins Memorial in Watertown. At the age of 95 he drives downtown to the senior center almost every day for dinner, cooks suppers of potatoes and pork chops or chicken ("I can't afford the price of most meat"), and home-made soup, listens to the radio, and talks to his friends long-distance on the telephone. He's proud of his citation from Washington, D.C. for his "no accident" driving record. I'm really proud of him--for his hard work, his positive attitude, and his Norwegian charm!