

THE STORY OF
TWO FAMILIES
AND THEIR
TIMES



CHAPTER 13

MEMORIES....

I want to include a few “memories” about some of the descendants of John and Hattie Chilstrom whom I knew as a child and young man. Because my father Walfred was the youngest of the family, because he married late (age 33), and because I was the fifth of his eight children, all of these aunts and uncles and most of my Chilstrom cousins were much older than I. I hope these memories will be a keepsake for the descendants of some of those older relatives and that these brief notes will stimulate others to capture their own memories of these folks.

Anton Theodor Chillstrom

This photo of Anton is from his younger days when he served on board of deacons at First Lutheran Church, Litchfield, MN. He continued in that office for more than thirty years. Since he was the oldest son at home after the death of his father and brother Edward, one might have expected him to stay on the family farm. I have no idea why he left home. It may be that when he and Alma got serious, he realized that there would not be room for two women in the kitchen. For whatever reason, he married and moved to his own farm south of Litchfield for several years. Then he moved into Litchfield and had a small dairy operation for several years at the south end of Marshall Street, probably selling milk door to door. His major employment was with the Farmer’s Elevator Company. I recall how he loaded coal from rail cars and delivered it to homes with a horse-drawn wagon -- wheels in the summer and skids in the winter. He wore a huge fur coat in winter to protect himself from chill after working up a sweat shoveling coal. When he came to our home Mother always invited him in for coffee. During WW II he worked in Minneapolis at the Carlson Sash and Door Company that built pontoon bridges for the military. After the War he returned to Litchfield and worked for the Land ‘O Lakes dairy.



Alma, Anton’s wife, was the light of his life. Cousin Don, her grandson, and I like to refer to her as the “classy lady.” She was full of life and enthusiasm, in contrast to Anton, who was quieter and less talkative. She was a woman of deep faith. She introduced me as a young man to the writings of the great Swedish evangelist Carl O. Rosenius. She gave me a copy of Rosenius’ book, “A Faithful Guide to Peace with God.”

When I was about 6 or 7 years old I stayed with Anton and Alma and Dorothy. Coming from a

family of seven children at the time, I could scarcely believe that one little rascal of a boy could be the object of so much attention! Most vivid is the memory of the day Alma set before me a whole cupful of coconut -- a favorite then and to this day. I could eat all I wanted! I thought I had died and gone to heaven!

I never knew until I worked on this family history that Anton and Alma lost a child -- Leroy -- just days after his birth. Another great sorrow was the death of their son Reuben in young adulthood. He contracted TB when he was in his early 20s. I recall how Alma pointed to the small building in their back yard that had once been a chicken coop. When Reuben could no longer be in the house because of fear of contagion, they fixed up the coop and he lived there for a time. They would bring his meals to him. Though their means were very limited, but possibly in desperation, Anton and Alma sent Reuben to the Swedish sanitarium in Colorado. There he had an operation on his lung. Word came that he was in critical condition. Alma was prepared to board the train to travel to Colorado when word came that he had died at age 23.

Another great sorrow was the disappointment they felt over their oldest son Edward. He was the first of the Chil(l)stroms to go to college -- Gustavus Adolphus. He was an excellent writer and effective speaker. He may have been thinking of becoming a pastor. One summer he served the Swedish Lutheran congregation in the gold mining town of Lead, SD. He spent part of another summer teaching summer school for the children at Lebanon Lutheran Church in New London, MN -- the same congregation his great grandparents had belonged to when they lived in that area in the early 1860s. Edward married his college sweetheart Signe Carlson. After college they moved to Grand Forks, ND where he worked for an implement company, before moving to Warren, MN where he was a partner in Lundgren and Chillstrom Implement company. Edward and Signe had two children, Sandra and Peter, now both deceased. For whatever reason, the marriage did not survive and Edward and Signe separated, but never divorced. Alma and Signe remained fast friends through the years. Edward lived in a variety of places, including Willmar, MN, the island of Guam, and in several places in CA. He died in the early 1950s when he was caught in a snowstorm and froze to death near Pickstown, SD where he was selling seed corn. I recall my visit with Alma after Edward's death. She took great comfort in a note that was found in his pocket, assuring his family that he had peace with God.

Anton and Alma's home was a happy and a godly one. Life ended for him, however, on a rather sad note. In his old age, possibly because of strokes, Anton suffered a rather profound personality change, turning him from the quiet, agreeable man his family had known him to be, into one who became so unmanageable that he had to be moved from his home. Son Oscar recalls it as one of the most difficult days of his life. Alma lived on for several years and enjoyed her family and friends.

Anton and his descendants are the ones who spell the name with two "l"s -- Chillstrom. I have no idea when or why they decided to change to that spelling. I wish, in retrospect, that the whole family had decided to do so. It is the closest rendition to the Swedish -- Kjällerström.

Kristina Katarina Malvina (Chilstrom) Nygren

I never knew until recently that her full baptismal name was Kristina Katarina Malvina!

Were she still alive, aunt Malvina might not appreciate this photograph being included in this



book. Then again, she and cousin Annie (Chilstrom) Morris are the only ones in the Chilstrom clan and cousin Lydia (Nelson) Nelson is the only one in the Nelson clan -- thus far -- who have attained the age of 100. This photograph was taken of her with me on her 100th birthday in October 1977. She lived on for a few more months.

After the death of her father and brother Edward, Malvina, as I noted earlier, apparently remained on the farm to help her mother with household duties. I can't

imagine that she ever helped with outdoor activities on the farm, but I could be wrong.

I guess we always thought of Malvina as the “old maid” type. Then one day I came across several post cards sent by an unsigned, ardent lover. The postmark is theyear 1910 when Malvina was in her early 30s. Here are a couple of examples.



On one cards is



of the this touching

poem:

*You ask me if this love of mine, Sweetheart, will never die,
 If time will change my feelings dear, I answer with a sigh:
 While life will last, while flowers bloom, While birds sing sweet their lay,
 The love so deep within my heart Will live each night and day.*

They were mailed from Litchfield, just five miles away. Why unsigned? Probably because the rural mail carrier read all the post cards as his horse plodded from one mail box to the next, giving him ample time to pick up any gossip worth passing along.



Malvina as a younger woman.

Well, for 1910 that was a rather intense expression of affection. But, whoever this mysterious lover may have been, the relationship never blossomed into marriage. She continued to live with her mother Hattie and brother Sig until 1921 when, at age 34, she married Charles Nygren, the man who had been married to her older sister Minnie, who died in the early 1890s. When his second wife died, Charles married Malvina. After four more years of farming, Charles retired and he and Malvina moved to Litchfield where they lived for the rest of their days. Charles died in 1941 and Malvina lived on for another 36 years. She suffered from glaucoma and was virtually blind in the final decades of her life.

Sigfred John Chilstrom

Uncle Sig was a favorite. A single man, he seemed to take special interest in all of his nephews and nieces. He's the one who stayed on the farm with his widowed mother Hattie and eventually owned it. Like his brother Anton, he was a respected leader in his church, in this case Beckville. On Sundays when the pastor could not be present, Sig would "read" the message for the day -- probably a prepared reading that the pastor gave him to deliver.



For all of his adult life he had a special friend -- Esther Mortenson. I recall as a boy seeing Sig's car parked in front of her home in Litchfield when he was in town for business. I have no idea what their relationship was like. I wonder, of course, if they wanted to marry but felt it would not work well with Sig's mother Hattie in the house.

Sig was a very good farmer, always keeping up with advances in agriculture. Before rural electrification I have memories of seeing him walk from barn to house on winter nights with a pail of milk in one hand and a lantern in the other.

A favorite recollection is that every Christmas our family gift from Sig was a full box of delicious apples, each wrapped in soft tissue. We enjoyed all three -- the apples for consumption, the box for my sisters' play house in the lilac bushes, and the tissue for the outhouse!

Sig loved his horses. He quit farming and held an auction sale on October 24, 1944. I was standing at his side when his favorite team, a pair of huge dapple gray horses, was sold to Boyd Nystrom, a young neighbor. Sig seldom showed much emotion. But on that day, as Nystrom walked the team down the driveway toward his farm, I looked up and saw tears streaming down Uncle Sig's cheeks. Though I was only 13 at the time, I can feel the emotion of that moment even as I write these sentences.

My most pleasant memories of childhood are those days when I could go to the farm and be with

Uncle Sig. At times I would hang around the creamery in Litchfield and hook a ride with a neighbor who would bring me to Sig's driveway. He was always pleasant, always gentle, with never an unkind or profane word. He let me bring in the cows, release the tension bar so the windmill could sing in the stiff breezes, and help in the grain fields at harvest time. The Swedish male way was never to give a hug or to say "I love you." But with Uncle Sig there was never a doubt.

Like Anton, Sig's last years were overshadowed by physical problems. After some pleasant years living with his sister Malvina, he suffered a severe stroke that left him speechless and unable to write for more than a dozen years. He could function in every other way, but could do no more than utter the word, "furth." It was extremely painful and frustrating for him and his visitors to carry on a conversation.

Agnes Victoria Louisa (Chilstrom) Quist

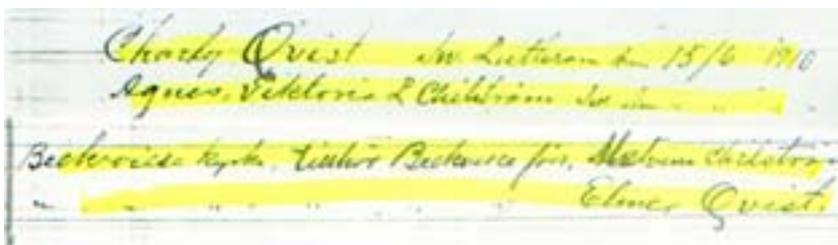
It wasn't until I did this study of the family history that I that "Aunt Victoria" was really "Agnes Victoria Louisa." always assumed that "Charlie" was a nickname for "Charles." But the records show that his baptismal name actually was "Charlie" or "Charley." The best way I can describe her is to say that she was "my jolly aunt." She was ready with a smile and a hearty laugh -- a good trait she on to her children and grandchildren. Victoria was the shortest of the Chilstrom children. There were always delicious cookies in her kitchen, even when we dropped in unexpectedly.



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She and her husband Charlie farmed for a number of years in the Greenleaf/Beckville community where they were active members of the congregation. Then, like many others at the time of the Great Depression, they decided that life in Litchfield looked better than struggling to make a living on the farm. Charlie worked at several different jobs, including the one I remember best -- a pleasant service station attendant.



In the Beckville Church records I found this notation of Victoria's wedding to Charley Quist, with sister

Malvina and Elmer Quist as attendants.

Victoria had two wonderful sons-in-law -- Ruth's first and second husbands, Victor Peterson and Nels Warren. It was always great fun to be with Victor. He loved children. I was ten years old when the sad and shocking news came to us that he had been kicked by a horse and died a short time later. Having learned to love the horses at Uncle Sig's farm, I couldn't imagine such a thing.

It was my first experience with the sudden and violent death of someone in our family circle. I can still recall how shaken and troubled I was by his death.

Victoria outlived Charlie by a number of years. Her last days were spent in a pleasant small apartment at the nursing home.

Walfred Emmanuel Chilstrom

Even though he was my father, I don't have a clear picture of Walfred's early years. How I wish I had asked more questions about his childhood and youth. He was the one who probably suffered most from the sudden death of his father and older brother. I see him as one who was unusually close to his mother during his childhood and youth and even into adulthood. I recall how hard he wept at her funeral, even though she was in her nineties at the time of her death.



His main duty on the farm, in addition to milking and chores, was the garden. He carried that love with him for life. Even after a hard day of work at the milk plant, the garden for an hour was his delight.

It always puzzled me that such a handsome young man didn't marry until he was on the eve of his 33rd birthday. Was he waiting for someone special? When they married, Ruth was more than 12 years younger. But if lost years meant catching up, Wally did a good job of it. In the next 20 years he and Ruth would have as many children -- eight -- as all of his siblings put together!

Like many others, Wally and Ruth quit farming in the mid-1930s and opted for life in Litchfield. There he worked first for the WPA (the "Works Project Administration -- part of President F.D. Roosevelt's "New Deal" program), building the local golf course, the park at Lake Ripley, miles of sidewalks in the summer, and clearing snow-packed roads in the winter. Then he was employed by the City of Litchfield, sweeping the downtown streets in the dark of the night and cutting grass in city parks in the morning.

When World War II came along he went to Minneapolis to work with brother Anton building pontoon bridges for the military. But that lasted only a short time. Being with his family was worth more than whatever higher wages he was paid. I still recall the day I came home from school and found him hoeing weeds in the garden. It was a wonderful surprise. I was so happy to have him with us again. Shortly after that he got a job at the local milk drying plant and kept at it until his mid-60s. All the while he and Ruth -- and the whole family -- were custodians at First Lutheran Church, a position he kept until his death at age 77.

In May of 1988, the year he would have turned 100 years of age, Wally's children wrote some memories of him. A few excerpts: Adeline: "*His strongest characteristic was to always see the best in everything and in everyone who crossed his path.*" Lorraine: "*My Dad was a very quiet, humble person. He was always grateful for the way our Mother could stretch a dollar to feed and*

clothe our family.” Winnifred: “He was a happy, caring person, whose family and faith were always number one on his list.” Virginia: “Even though he was not a person who could say he loved you, he told you over and over with his eyes and acts.” Herbert: “Love oozed out of him. You could feel it. You could see it in his smile, his misty eyes, and an occasional tear.” Martha: “Daddy was a good grandpa and he really loved his grandkids.” Janet: (Reflecting on Psalm 84 that had been read at his funeral.) “That’s how Dad was...that all would be taken care of if we trusted in God.” To all of which brother David would say: “Yah, that’s for sure!”