

Buffalo Tales



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Buffalo County Historical Society

March 1984

ROOTS OF BUFFALO COUNTY—THE SCANDINAVIANS

Part III

The Danes

by Margaret Stines Nielsen

Karen Jensen, born in Copenhagen, Denmark in 1842, was the oldest daughter of Jens and Christine Jensen who walked the Mormon Trail from Illinois to Omaha with their three children. Their possessions were loaded in a hand cart pushed by Jens and his brother Soren. Mr. Jensen contracted dysentery along the trail and died the day the family reached Omaha. Mrs. Jensen later married Soren and the children were reared on a farm in Sarpy County. Karen married Hans Peter Didriksen in 1850. After Hans served in the army during the Civil War, the couple returned to Omaha where they bought lots and built a home where Brandeis downtown store building now stands.

When Mr. Didriksen died in 1873, Karen brought her four children to Kearney to join her sister Mary who had married William Schramm, a druggist in the new town. She built a one-room house and took in boarders to support her family. Here she married Charles L. Larsen, a Norwegian who, in addition to farming, dug wells and freighted to the Black Hills. They moved Karen's house to Larsen's homestead on the tableland southwest of Riverdale. Soon they built a lean-to and another room to accommodate four more children born to the couple.

On a Sunday in November of 1877, Mrs. Larsen sent her 8 year old son, Will Didriksen, to drive home the cattle. By evening many of the cows had straggled in but the boy didn't return. The Larsens hunted most of the night in an area of steep ridges and canyons; by morning word of a lost child had reached Kearney where many closed their businesses to search for him. No trace of the boy was found through Tuesday when 150 people had joined the hunt. About noon on Wednesday, W. J. Perkins and William Schramm saw a figure walking on a high ridge in a remote area west of Riverdale. When they reached the boy he was emaciated and completely exhausted. He said he had eaten bird eggs, but he called repeatedly for water. He was lifted to the back of his uncle's horse and they began the tedious journey to his home miles away. Although somewhat disoriented for a few days, Will recovered and later moved to Kearney where he had a truck farm and later started a peony garden. He was also a member of the city council. Many years later the peony gardens were continued by his daughter Marguerite and her husband Gilbert Carver.

Jacobson

Christian Jacobson, born in Denmark in 1846, came to Orion, Illinois when he was twenty. He worked there as a farm-hand for two years, then returned to Denmark

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Trails and Rails Museum, Mardi Anderson, Director. Phone 234-3041

WITH THE SOCIETY

Sunday, March 25. The Buffalo County Historical Society will meet at the Elm Creek Community Building at 2:00 p.m. The subject of the program will be the Plum Creek Massacre and will be given by Clyde Wallace of Lexington. If the weather is good, Mr. Wallace will lead a tour to the site of the massacre.

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Sam Spahr of Gibbon, whose death occurred on February 18, was a past member of the Board of Directors of the Society. His knowledge of Buffalo County history was extensive. Sympathy is extended to Mrs. Spahr and the family.

At the Trails and Rails Museum work is progressing on outbuildings and equipment on the grounds around the schoolhouse. A pony barn, two outdoor toilets, a long-handled pump, and a playground merry-go-round have been donated to the Society for the schoolhouse area. The merry-go-round was manufactured locally by the Cornhusker Merry-Go-Round Company over fifty years ago.

Visit the Victorian Silverplate Exhibition at the Frank House from March 31 through April 30, 1:00 to 5:00 p.m., daily. \$1.50 donation.

Notice of Annual Meeting

Sunday, April 29. The annual meeting of the Buffalo County Historical Society will be held in the Fellowship Hall of the First United Presbyterian Church in Kearney, with a covered dish dinner at 1:00 p.m., followed by election of officers, a report of the past year's activities, and a look at the future.

where he served in the army. After about four years he returned to Orion where he found employment on the same farm. Here he married Charlotte Peterson, a native of Sweden and daughter of Sven (Swan) Peterson.¹ In 1879, with his younger brother Frederick and his sister Frederika (Rikke), Mr. and Mrs. Jacobson came to Buffalo county where they bought a quarter section of railroad land along the Wood River northwest of Riverdale. The brothers worked together until they had accumulated some 1500 acres of farm land when they divided the property.

Frederick Jacobson married Ida Erickson, they had eight children. Rikke married Fred Frederick and had nine children. Chris and his wife built a new home in 1894 to accommodate their seven children. It was at one of the community dances held in that home that Chris' daughter Eliza met her future husband, Ed Shovlain. After he retired Chris sold the home place to his son Carl who pioneered in irrigation in that area. Carl's son, Frederick, now farms the place. When Chris moved to Kearney in 1904 he went into the cement contracting business. The names of Jacobson-Edwards still appear on many sidewalks in Kearney. Mrs. Jacobson died in July, 1911. In 1914 Chris married Mary Kellam, a native of Yorkshire, England, who was organist of the Episcopal church for years.



Christian Jacobson home, Riverdale, 1894.

From left to right: Christian Jacobson (father), Frederick Jacobson, Eliza Jacobson (Mrs. Ed Shovlain), Carl Jacobson, Charlotte Jacobson (mother) holding Laura (Mrs. Chas. Robbins), Hannah Jacobson (Mrs. Wm. Collard); little boys in front, Martin and Walter Jacobson.

Madsen

In his youth C. F. Madsen, a native of Denmark, led a life "on the briny deep". Shipping for ports in Spain and Turkey, he sailed "under the flags of the world". When he came to Kearney he first worked for R. L. Downing Lumber. He married Sophia Rose, daughter of M. P. Rose. Sophia was a seamstress, said to be as much a perfectionist in the clothing she turned out as her father was as a carpenter. Madsen

¹Sven Peterson came to the Green Hill area about 1877. His son John married Othelia Gronborg, also a native of Sweden. John gave land for a school which was named Green Hill, the English translation of Gronborg.

later bought the Downing plant in Elm Creek where he sold lumber, coal and agricultural implements, as well as many other products, bringing him into conflict with other merchants of the town. He also did some importing from China. The Madsens had a son and a daughter.

Sorensen

Peter Sorensen, born in Norre Ansold, Denmark in 1872, came to this country in 1889. Mr. Sorensen had a livery stable in Upland, Nebraska until 1918 and also farmed. He married Emma Olson who was born in a sod house near Campbell. When Mrs. Sorensen died in 1959 the couple had been married 63 years. Moving to Buffalo County in 1918, they lived at the Empire Ranch west of Kearney until they bought a farm north of what is now the Deyle Construction Co. They also acquired land on which the Cattleman's Mining Company stands.

The Sorensens had thirteen children. Those surviving are Caroline (Randolph), May (Sear), Grace (Asay), and Blanche (Frederick) all of Kearney; Annie (Sear) of Lexington, Martha (Frederick), Coverdale, California and Carl of Hastings.

Helleberg

John P. Helleberg was born in Thisted, Denmark on November 28, 1890. His father, N. Pedersen Helleberg, who was a professional musician with the Denmark Symphony, died when John was ten. In 1909, at the age of eighteen, John came to Grand Island, where he attended the Baptist College. After about a year in California, he came back to Nebraska, entering the architectural office of Wurdeman and Grabe of Columbus, becoming a partner in 1914 with Mr. Grabe.

In 1916 he married Elena Staab of Grand Island, whose parents were both Danish. In 1923, after the partnership was terminated, John came to Kearney to set up an office. The Hellebergs had four children, Angelene (Camp), John P., Jr., Rex, and Christine (May). Mrs. Helleberg died in 1943. In 1945 John married Edna Anderson of Hastings, who was also of Danish ancestry.

John, Jr. and Rex entered into practice with their father in the firm of Helleberg and Helleberg, Architects. They designed many schools and churches throughout Nebraska. After fifty years of practice, Mr. Helleberg retired in 1964. He died July 1, 1980. Survivors are his wife, Edna, and son, Rex of Kearney, and daughter, Mrs. Christine May of Fresno, California.

The Norwegians

Tollefsen

Emil Tollefsen, born in Posgrund, Norway in 1858, came to Racine, Wisconsin with his parents at the age of four. His father, who had established a store where he sold custom-made shoes, died when Emil was sixteen, leaving him the mainstay of a family including his mother, a brother and two sisters.

In 1878 he took a pre-emption on a farm in Cedar township northeast of Kearney. The next year he married Clara J. George who had come from Massachusetts to Gibbon with the Soldier's Free Homestead Colony in 1872. The couple farmed until 1886 when Emil, who had always wanted to be in the lumber business, took a position with the C. N. Deitz Lumber Co. After working for the firm in

Omaha for eighteen months he took a job with the F. H. Gilcrest Lumber Co. in Kearney. In 1889 he was installed as manager of the Deitz yard in Lincoln. During the five years he remained there he studied law in the office of William Jennings Bryan, and at the Central Law School. When the school was incorporated with the University of Nebraska he was a member of the first graduating class of the Law College, in 1892.

After the Lincoln lumber firm was sold, Emil operated the Gilcrest yard in Gibbon, and later in Kearney where he remained until 1917. At that time he bought in with the W. L. Stickel Lumber Co. which later became the Tollefsen-Elliott Lumber Co.

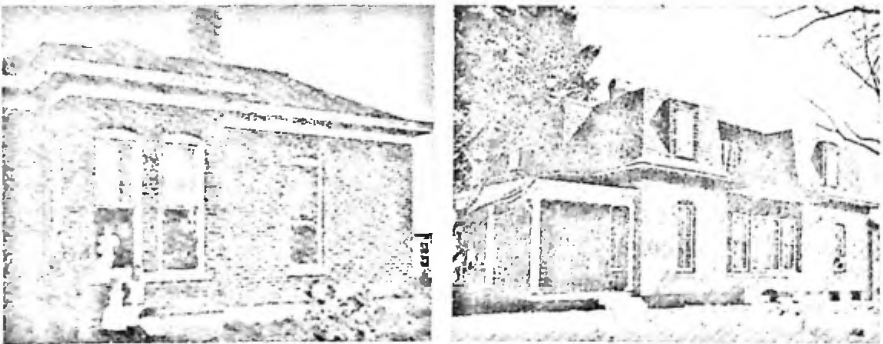
The Tollefsens had six children. Edward D. Tollefsen succeeded his father, Albert, as operator of the lumber yard. Other grandsons of Emil living in Kearney are Emil and Gaylord Tollefsen.

Knutzen

Waldemar (Walter) Knutzen was born in Mandal, Norway in 1848. After five years in the cabinet making trade he shipped as a sailor to ports in America, England, France and Holland. In 1872 he went to Chicago and later to Houghton County, Michigan where he worked as a carpenter.

In 1879 he married Abalone Jensen, also a native of Mandel, and they moved to Kearney in the spring of that year. Mr. Knutzen built a small square house at 318 West 30th, later adding a second floor. The home is now owned by Grete Sandberg (also a Norwegian) and her husband, Dr. Thomas B. Murray.

The Knutzens had five children. Walter became a successful contractor and builder, with many public buildings in Colorado and Nebraska to his credit. Among those in Kearney were Longfellow High School and St. Lukes Episcopal Church. His son Henry later joined him in the business.



Walter Knutzen home at 318 West 30th.

The original home (left) was considerably enlarged in 1906, and remodeled in 1969 (right).

Olson

Austin T. Olson born near Oslo, Norway in 1875 came to Axtell at the age of 18 to be with a brother. He clerked in a store in Axtell, then went to Washington and Oregon to work.

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In 1896 he married Anna L. Anderson, who was working in her brother's photography studio in Kearney at the time. The marriage was held in the A. T. Anderson home on south 5th Avenue. The Olsons lived in Axtell, Bertrand, Hildreth and Red Oak, Iowa while A. T. traveled, selling lubricants for farm implements.

In 1908 they bought the Downing Saddlery from Wallace Downing. They also bought a house at 706 West 25th. The Olsons had four boys and four girls. The four daughters surviving are Helen Kring and Margaret Norris of Kearney; Vergie Murphy, Seattle; Doris Beshore, Pinehurst, North Carolina. The Olsons were married for 68 years.

Some Scandinavians, in their desire to become "real Americans" soon discarded many of their old customs, while others have cherished them to this day—something the reader might want to ponder during that most prevalent of all Scandinavian traditions—the coffee break.

SOURCES

A. T. Anderson papers; **Kearney Daily Press**, **Kearney Daily Hub**, **Kearney New Era**, **The Kearney Enterprise**; Bassett, **History of Buffalo County**, 1916; Andreas, **History of the State of Nebraska, 1882**; **Biographical Souvenir, Buffalo, Kearney and Phelps Counties**, 1890; **Where the Buffalo Roamed**, 1967; Maude Marston Burrows Scrapbook; Kearney Public Library vertical files; First Lutheran Church 60th anniversary booklet; records of First Lutheran Church, 1899-1914, compiled by Ruth Gitchell Anderson; Evangelical Free Church 75th Anniversary booklet; **History of Phelps County, 1883-1983**; **The Mattson Family News**, Jan. 29, 1959; Letter from Doris Eck, Prescott, AZ, Nov. 12, 1983; Cemetery Index compiled by Ft. Kearney Genealogical Society; Interviews with Virginia Carlson, August, 1983; Helen Olson Kring, November 1983; Miriam Anderson Worlock, Charlotte Shovlin Robinson, Eleanor Saunders Dale, January 1984. Others providing information: Virginia Bodinson McKinney, Ruth Gitchell Anderson Lee Peterson family, Theodora Nelson, Verne Freeman, Henrietta Mattson Boyd, Margaret Olson Norris, Alice Howell, Margaret Mitchell Palmer, Rex Helleberg, Ed Tollefsen, and Jeannette Mercer.

Pictures loaned by Virginia McKinney and Charlotte Robinson.

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