

Biographical Notes on Bess Erickson and other Erickson's

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During the summer of 1943, I visited Dad in Minnesota. One evening we were alone. I told him I planned to visit Norway before long and I'd like to know something about Meråker so I could visit people he might know. He became quite talkative. The following is taken directly from the notes I took that evening when he was talking.

Dad was born east of Meråker in 1857. With a note of pride in his voice he said he was one year and one day older than the state of Minnesota.

When he was four years old, the family moved to Jemtland, Sweden. That was the first real memory he had of any events in his life. When they arrived in Lund at Jemtland, some small boys gathered around him and said, "Hva heit du? Hva heit du?"

(What is your name?)

They spent two years in Sweden and then went back to Norway to the place where he was born. There was a lake on the north and a bend in the river on the south. Their home was one English mile in the forest. There was no road; only a path led to it. In winter, skis were the only means of travel. Everything had to be carried on their backs.

The family lived on Dad's birthplace until he was nine years old. The year was 1866. They moved to another place where they lived two years; then moved back to the Øian place. Dad said that was the only place that seemed like home.

They lived deep in the forest. There was no school and they lived in dire poverty. They looked forward to Christmas. It was then the children received their big treat – a teaspoonful of sugar!

Living was a struggle. The two older brothers, Jens and Hemming, worked for some neighbors. Later, Jens married Marit, the daughter of the farmer for whom he worked. Then the three of them migrated to this country and settled near Sioux Falls, South Dakota. At home on the Øian place lived the father Erik Øian and his wife Ingeborg Hemmingsdatter with Bess, Sivert, Ole and Marit the baby sister.

In April 1869, tragedy struck the family in the woods. The father died. I asked Dad what caused the death. He did not know and did not seem to want to talk about it.

When I was in Norway I tried to find out more about the death. I checked the few available records in the Meråker Valley. Then I went to visit the parsonage to try to obtain information. The minister did not seem anxious to help and I could tell he hoped I would leave. I had no intention of giving up. I told him how far I had come to find my grandfather's grave, and if I found it I wanted to buy a monument for it. He finally realized what it meant to me and then he brought a book which contained the church records of a hundred years ago. In this hundred-year old book we found where Erik Øian's death was listed but no cause was given. As I continued to scrutinize the hand writing, I noted that 32 days had elapsed between the death and burial. I asked the pastor about it but he hesitated, then said it was likely due to one or both

of the following: they might have had to wait for the minister to come to conduct the funeral services, or there was no way to transport the body to the church.

After the father's death, Bess, at the age of 13, became the man of the family. Since the age of nine he had been a herd boy and had taken care of the neighbor's cows and goats. For this he was given food and some clothes. One day a bear came down the mountain and killed one of the cows. He was so frightened; afraid of the bear, and afraid he would lose his job. He was not harmed, and he did not lose his job. The following day, the men took their guns, spread out through the woods and up the mountain. The bear was found and killed. Dad said that from then on whenever he heard the slightest noise he expected to see a bear.

It was Dad's job to help feed the family. What he liked to do was to go up in the mountains and catch "ryper" - a bird much like the Minnesota prairie chicken. In the winter they were white. They fed on birch bark, small birch twigs and buds. Dad would set snares for them. The snares were made from a forked birch twig and horsehair. After he caught one he would run home because a "rype" meant soup!

When he was 14 years old he left home to take care of himself and hopefully to earn something to send his mother who was at home with the two younger brothers and his little sister. In 1877, he worked on the railroad that was being built between Norway and Sweden.

He wanted to enlist in the Norwegian Army, but because he had not attended school they would not accept him. During his entire life he had only six months of schooling. That included both Norwegian and English schools.

Jens and Hemming, the two brothers in South Dakota, decided to bring the family to America. They did not have enough money for tickets for all of them. I do not know how the arrangements were made, but a farmer in Durand, Illinois, paid \$53.00 for Dad's ticket. That obligated him to work for the farmer for one year.

He had not seen his two older brothers for many years. His responsibilities weighed heavily on his shoulders. He was not quite 22 years old when the family came to the United States.

It was early spring when they were ready to leave. Their ship was the first of the year to make the Trans-Atlantic crossing. Bess had never seen a ship before and he thought it looked big. Then he heard some men say that it was a very small boat for such a dangerous journey. His heart sank. He hoped his family had not heard it. How could he protect them?

Since the ship's destination was Quebec, the route traveled was the northernmost one: north of Scotland and the Orkney Islands, then westward across to the "Promised Land". The one-stack ship slowly plowed westward and Bess relaxed on the small deck.

Then one day, pieces of ice appeared among the waves. The blocks became larger and more numerous. They crowded in on the sides of the small vessel and some of them blocked the bow so at times the ship was unable to move. Daylight hours were bad; the nights worse. The officers tried to maneuver the ship through the ice floes, but the progress was measured in feet, and sometimes inches. Closer floated the giant ice floes and eventually the ship came to a groaning halt. It was Saturday. All day and through the long dark hours the officers struggled to free the ship, but to no avail.

It was customary for the captain to conduct Sunday services. That Sunday morning the captain entered the large room where the passengers were gathered. In a solemn voice he said, "There will be no service this morning. You know the situation. Only God can help us now. I want everyone of you to kneel and pray that He will help."

There were audible prayers and there were silent prayers. Each one appealing for Divine help, fully realizing the awful alternative. After several minutes, perhaps half an hour, the captain left them to go up on the bridge. He came to the top of the steps and shouted to the people, "Come and see!" They hurried up on deck to see an unbelievable

sight. Ahead of the bow the ice parted and a wide lane entirely free of dangerous floes stretched westward as far as the eye could see. No longer did the ice grind against the hull of the ship. During the rest of the voyage they saw ice, and even icebergs, but they stayed at a respectful distance as if ordered to do so.

The tickets for the family took them safely to Sioux Falls, but Bess had some difficulty with his. Not knowing a word of English, his frustrations were increased. He was supposed to change trains in a town called McGregor, but he found he was in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. There in the station he found a map. He studied it and concluded that the train he had been on was going to Durand. He dashed out and jumped on the steps as it was pulling out. The conductor recognized him, winked at him, and never looked at his ticket.

He finally arrived at the farmer's home. He worked from 14-16 hours a day. He did not get enough to eat. At night, after he had gone to bed, he heard the family in the kitchen preparing something to eat for themselves. That was the most difficult part of his Illinois stay.

He had made up his mind not to leave Durand until he had learned enough English to find his way. He worked an entire year to pay for the \$53.00 ticket. When the time was up he was given \$10.00. This brought him joy. Now he could buy a ticket to Sioux Falls and join his family. On May 24, 1880, he arrived.

Bess did not differ from the other immigrants. Their dream was land – their own piece of land. He was constantly hunting for a piece of ground. Rumor was rampant that an area in northern Minnesota was to be opened for homesteading. He left Sioux Falls and went to Osakis, Minnesota, where he grubbed stumps to clear land. Later he went to Starbuck, Minnesota, and worked during haying and harvest. Then came the news: 13 townships farther north were opened for homesteaders.

He packed his belongings and started out that very day. He walked most of the way, often wading in water up to his knees. At last he arrived in the 13 Towns area only to find out that the land had been claimed. The early arrivals were mostly Norwegians and Swedes, and they were friendly and cooperative. They told him about a Frenchman who had filed a claim on a quarter section, but he had gone away and not made any of the required improvements. Dad decided to "jump" the claim. He walked to Crookston about 50 miles away. There he paid \$100.00 and filed on the land claimed previously by the Frenchman. After a few months the latter returned and the settlers expected trouble, but when he learned that all the settlers were Scandinavians he decided to go elsewhere.

Bess felled trees, grubbed out the stumps, and started to clear the land. As soon as he had enough logs he built his cabin. It was about 13 feet square. The table was a piece of oak eight

inches wide and four feet long. This board was laid on two pegs in the wall. In the corner was the bed. In the middle of the cabin was a stump for chopping wood. During the spring thaw, the mud was six inches deep on the floor. Behind the door was a rifle that had belonged to his father in Norway. To get his meat he would open the door and shoot a rabbit, partridge, or a prairie chicken.

The first summer, a family moved in with Bess. It was a couple looking for land but they were not successful. The wife was a half-sister to Peter Vik. Some time after their arrival, a baby girl was born to this couple. When the couple and infant were able to travel they moved on. They told Bess that they were going to the Sandwich Islands in the Pacific, and perhaps later they would go to Argentina in South America.

About the year 1942, Dad had a letter from a department in the State Capitol in St. Paul, Minnesota. It stated that a letter had been received from a lady in Argentina who wanted to come to the U.S. She insisted that she was an American citizen but had no proof. She only knew that she was born in a settler's cabin, and the name of the settler was Bess. The authorities knew of only one person in northern Minnesota by that name so they asked if he knew any details. He verified the statement, giving the month and year of her birth. Later the lady came to northern Minnesota to visit him, but unfortunately Bess had passed away before her arrival.

Money was extremely scarce for the pioneers. When Bess had fulfilled the requirements on his homestead he went to Fertile, Minnesota to work. He worked for two years for "Store Jon's" father for \$12.00 a year.

During the winter of 1888 and 1889, Dad took some wheat to Fertile to have it ground into flour. When the miller saw the wheat he refused to grind it because it was of such poor quality. He had borrowed a team of oxen to make the trip of 20 miles and had hoped to get some money for the wheat. It was winter and it was cold. He had no overcoat and no overshoes and no money for overnight. He finally found a place for the oxen and himself. Another pioneer invited him to spend the night. All of them, including the settler's wife, slept on the floor.

A settler named Torehus lent Dad a team of oxen to use during the winter. In return they were fed and taken care of. This gave Dad an opportunity to prepare the logs for the stable he planned to build the next summer.

He and three other pioneers were anxious to improve their English. They excavated a cave in the hillside and that was their school. If someone had heard a new word he would tell the others and they would all practice using it. If one of them had been to Crookston or Fertile and had been lucky enough to find an old paper, or a piece of one, that would become lesson material for several sessions.

They wanted to practice writing too, but they had no pencils or paper. They tried to use charred pieces of wood and chips of poplar wood, but it did not work. Any scrap of paper, with or without printed words, became some of Dad's most prized possessions at the time he was carving a home out in the wilderness.

I have known no one who had the intense desire to learn that my father had. Although he had only six month's schooling I considered him an educated man and he was an inspiration to me.