

From Indifference to Obsession

By Becky Olson Johnson for Tre-Lag Stevne, Sioux City, South Dakota

My friend and I were very young girls playing when I asked my dad, "What is your mother's name?" I don't remember what he said, but we shyly giggled. I remember father telling me about his brother, Julius that built church steeples. When we took drives, sometimes our route would take us by the family farm where I would hear the disappointment in his voice about not living there. His brother Johnny had taken over the family farm. When Johnny died, it was sold and no longer in the family. The family Bible held some information, but when it came to his parents, it was simply stated ma and pa with birth and death dates. Uffda, that's just not much to go on when your father has died and your mother's eyes have deteriorated and her memory is failing.

One must know that my mother's family history had been well documented and discussed on a regular basis. There were often family reunions for the maternal side of the family, but I only attended a couple. I knew the names from my mother and her sister talking about their cousins and families, but we did not live close, so when I attended a family reunion, there was no connection. That has since changed with my family history obsession. I now work on all branches of the family and a few limbs. I remember my mother discussing her family history with her sister, brothers and other family members; sometimes it would end in disagreements. Not always, but when you discuss family history as often as they did, it is bound to happen. In my young adult life, I remember telling mother to leave those dead people alone, let them rest in peace. Uffda!! That's all I can say about my attitude. Fortunately, researching our family history has given me a new light.

With my new journey into family history came a new attitude. Conrad Johnson (1942-2011), a second cousin, was my inspiration. As far back as I can remember, Conrad was interested in our Olson Family History. He had many questions mother and I could not answer. My father, Otto William Olson and Conrad's grandfather, John Albert (Johnny) Olson were brothers. On Conrad's visit in about 2003, I realized his interest was to have someone do the research and that someone was *ME*. I was married by now and ready for the task. If there was going to be any research, I had better start. The next year he came for another visit and with him came documents and pictures from his Arizona home. His father was a great collector of family documents and photo albums for both sides of the family.

We made several trips on his visits to Minnesota from Arizona. We visited the home of my great grandparents, Andreas & Agnette Tollefson Lunde, which was also the home of my grandparents, Mathias and Antonette (Lunde) Olson until their move to Holt, Minnesota via Hawley, Minnesota. The Lunde home farm was near Preston, Minnesota. My grandmother, Antonette was also raised in this home. For Conrad this would have been his Great Great Grandparents and Great Grandmother. We traveled to cemeteries, churches and met many new relatives. We also had the opportunity to see the inside of the Olson Home near Holt, Minnesota. No one is living in the home and it is not heated. It had the same wallpaper as when Conrad was a young boy. If we were wealthy, we dreamed about purchasing, moving and restoring the home. Maybe it could be a summer cottage on the farm where Curtis and I live and Conrad could come and stay in the home during the summer while Arizona was so hot.

As I stated earlier, I didn't know very much about my father's family. I didn't know the name of his parents, but I did know where to look. The family Bible, right? Well, at least it said ma and pa. I don't remember how I found their names, but the first obituary opened the door for so much more. It was suggested by Charleen Haugen at the Roseau County Museum that I use a family history program to gather my research and to find obituaries, then the census. I found a family history program and started documenting everything our family could remember along with every document and photo that was collected. Memories and documents from my brothers made for a nice collection. It was amazing to me, the story that started to develop with the bits of memory and documents that were gathered. The clues that this information supplied for further investigation.

Mother was watching the Winter Olympic Games from Lillehammer, Norway and out of the blue she said, "You know your Grandfather, Mathias, was a master carpenter in Lillehammer." Now that was news to me. She is living with us by this time, not able to live on her own. Where in her memory bank this came, I do not know. It makes sense; his son, Julius, built church steeples in Roseau County, Minnesota. I'm sure it was a trade learned from his father.

My grandfather was born in 1854, my father in 1893, me in 1948, my youngest nephew in 1986. That's a spread of 132 years for four generations. Wow! My grandfather, Mathias was born 94 years before me. I'm sure this is not making history, but it sure feels like it.

I credit Eleanor Lunde Schneider, Sara Greely Tollefson and Maylene Pansch Chaska for sharing what they had gathered on the Tollefson/Lunde Family. They were very helpful in understanding the early history of the Tollefson/Lunde family in America and on where they came from in Norway. With a computer report from Maylene, I would trace branches of the family looking for living descendants. Making many phone calls gathering what I could of the Lunde family, but also hoping it would lead to more information of Mathias Olson's family. The Tollefson/Lunde Family and the Olson Family both came from Ringsaker. I was wondering and looking for anything that would show a connection between the two families.

With so much research on the Lunde Family, there was still Mathias with no further information. Where did he come from in Norway? How did he arrive in America in 1869? Through Union Prairie Church, Lanesboro, Minnesota church records, it was found that he came from Tørtop, Brøttum, Ringsaker, Hedmark, Norway. Now it was possible to find his birth, baptism records and find his family. With a lot of support from other genealogists and The Norway List the project was advancing. In my frustration of not knowing enough Norwegian History and Traditions, I made a post on the Norway List stating my lack of skills and abilities, asking if anyone would be willing to help research my family. This was the fall of 2009. In a very short time, I had an email from Even telling me he was a distant relative and would send me a report. Shortly, the ancestor report came tracing back 18 generations and a descendant report came using the eldest ancestor that contained 22 generations (Over 300 pages in small print). Uffda again!!! Blessed, yes - that is true. Overwhelmed, oh ya! I had struggled to find the roots of Mathias for several years and now the floodgates had opened. I was thrilled. I was feeling blessed. I was also overwhelmed to the point; I could not really study the report for over a year. I cannot explain the emotional roller coaster of my feelings. That being said, I was and am so thankful to Even for his willingness to share his work. I am in the process of entering the data into my family history program. It will take awhile to enter the data, but so grateful. It is such a wonderful feeling to know where all the branches of my family came from for several generations back. Being able to see the affect they have had on my life through the generations.

So you could say, I was very indifferent until I gained knowledge of my family. When I meet someone that is not interested in family history, I do understand. I have been there.

Now family history is one of my hobbies. Obsessed, maybe at times. I enjoy helping others get their start. When they say they don't know anything about their family, I remember my beginnings and try to encourage them. Knowing my family history has changed me. I have learned how much I love my family. It has taught me a lot about life and a better prospective on what is important. I believe that it has helped shape me into a better person. It has affected the inner core of my wellbeing. My personal growth will continue as the work on my family history continues. Thank you, thank you to all that have helped me on this journey.

The hope is to stand one day on the soil of my grandfather's home farm in Norway. The place his parents and sisters once lived, laughed, cried, ate, prayed, learned, and gathered to celebrate family events - and to visit the Ringsaker Church where he was baptized, confirmed and family is buried. Hopefully, this will provide me the opportunity to meet living descendants in Norway and to find more pictures. What a day of Rejoicing that will be.

*Written by Becky Olson Johnson -2011
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The Hour Glass Report of Otto William Olson

