

MY STORY

by

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## MY YEARS

A man must be born somewhere, and at some time. My year for it was 1883. The place I chose was Willmar, Minnesota. And it was a good place in which to grow up.

Willmar was a cozy town with about 2,500 inhabitants where almost everybody knew each other, at least who they were. There were two sections of the town, the north side and the south side, with the railroad tracks separating them. We lived on the north side, which was sometimes referred to as the "silk stocking ward" due to the fact that two or three of the most affluent citizens of the town lived there. But there was not much class distinction to trouble us. Our home was situated on the north side at the northern tip of the town on the banks of Foot Lake, with our house built on a knoll only a few yards from the lake.

What a place it was for a boy to grow up! Give any group of healthy boys a lake to play with and in. They would scarcely ask for more! In the summer it meant wading, swimming and fishing and in winter we had sliding, skating, games and home-made ice boats. Looking back, I may well say: "How Green Was My Valley."

There was only one small "fly in the ointment" and that was that my father had some absurd idea that everyone should work, because life was not all play, luxury and "taking it easy". His attitude disturbed us at times, especially when boys of our gang walked by merrily on their way to the old "swimming hole" and we were bound to some cleanup jobs, mowing the lawn or doing some other unwelcome chores.

Another daily task was added when my brother and I entered the chicken business. At our earnest request, Father had built for us a new chicken house across the street in the pasture reserved for our cow and two horses. We had big ideas and high hopes of amassing great wealth. But we didn't get too far. We did, however, invent the idea of government support for

farmers. It happened this way.

We sold our eggs to the family. The price for a dozen eggs in the summer was about ten cents and in winter about thirty cents. We started out with those prices. But we got a few eggs in the winter and many in the summer and discovered that we were not making enough money through the summer. So we faced this problem by demanding a set price for the whole year, as near the winter price as we thought Father would pay: twenty cents. He agreed to our proposal and maybe that's how the seed was planted for the present government supported prices now being paid the farmers. But we never got much credit for inventing the scheme.

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#### MY PARENTS

My father was named Lars O. Thorpe and he was born in Hardanger, Norway, in the year 1847 on a very small farm. This farm was on the brow of a hill overlooking the startling beauty of the great fjord, beyond which lay the large glacier covered with snow both in winter and summer. His mother was widowed earlier in life and was left with four children. She married again, however, and gave birth to two sons, Lars and Mikkel. They were still poor and the children had to be put to work wherever they could find it.

This led to Lars' going to work as cook's helper on board a small fishing vessel which would spend whole winters fishing up near the Arctic Circle, among the many small islands spread out along Norway's coast. He was nine years old and deprived almost completely of educational opportunities. It was a dismal life for a young boy, certainly one that could never lead to a bright future.

When he was sixteen things came to a head. He had to turn in some other direction. As he himself said, "I had to do something, but what? And then I remembered America and about all I knew was that there was a country by that name and there was a great war going on. It wouldn't seem the right place to

go, but I couldn't have it worse there than I have it here." So he arrived at a decision, but it was not the end of his troubles.

His mother had been widowed again and had to be convinced that Lars ought to take this great step, and in addition to that Lars had no money. His mother refused to let him go and summoned the village pastor to come and talk Lars out of the idea. This pastor informed Lars that he would be a total stranger in that land across the sea, as he did not know one single person there. Besides, there was a great war going on and he might very well be forced to become a soldier, or even be sold as a slave. But when all efforts to dissuade him failed, his loving mother gave in and with tears in her eyes put in his hands the few shillings she had saved through the years, and gave him her blessing. And it was a sad day for Lars when it came time to leave his home, probably forever, and to leave behind the only world he had ever known.

But on board the old sailing vessel he found himself facing a new problem. He had been able to buy a ticket but it was only to Quebec and he had been told that whatever Norwegians were in America were located further west than the Atlantic Coast. However, he was fortunate enough to become acquainted with a man who had previously been in America and he not only helped Lars to understand America better, but he also loaned him money enough to reach one of the Norwegian settlements. He arrived at his destination in Wisconsin but after a short while there he moved to southern Minnesota, somewhere between Winona and Rochester. There he was given a farm job and an opportunity to go to school and learn the English language. This was during the last year of the Civil War and men were still being drafted to serve as soldiers.

It happened one day that the farmer who employed Lars was being drafted and found himself in a great dilemma; he had a large family and it was hard to leave. Sensing the agony that now had come to this family and knowing that at that time it

was permissible to hire someone to substitute for the draft, Lars assured the farmer that he would take his place in the army. All he asked in return was that if he were killed in battle the farmer would send five hundred dollars to his mother in Norway. The deal was made and Lars set out for Rochester to enlist in the army. Upon arrival he discovered that he was an hour too late; the registration office had just closed and he would have to wait until the next day. That night the news that shook the world came: the great war was over - without Lars! He was within one hour of being a soldier.

The next few years he spent picking up such jobs as he could and at times attending school and organizing debating societies. But he was also to reach another turning point in life when he met and fell in love with a young Norwegian girl named Martha Kvale.

Martha's parents had emigrated from Norway in the late 1840's and settled in one of the first Norwegian settlements in America, in Wisconsin. Here they found themselves exposed to untold hardships and dangers. Epidemics of one kind or another swept through many of the settlements and took a terrible toll. It was in one epidemic that Martha's father succumbed, leaving his wife and nine children alone to fight the rough world. Two of her sons were called into the Civil War and fought in the 15th Wisconsin Regiment which was noted for its courage and many fatalities. After the war the widow, with several of her grown sons, decided to move to Minnesota where new settlements were forming and land was free; they settled in the Rochester area. It was here that Lars and Martha met. Their wedding took place at a church a few miles from Kasson, Minnesota. I say at a church, not in.

It came about this way. A church was being built but was not yet completed and the services were held out of doors alongside of the church walls. The minister stood up in an ordinary lumber wagon and used it as a pulpit. The Thorpe-Kvale couple stood up before the pastor in the wagon for the marriage service, with horses and oxen tied to their posts and all the

people standing around. Now they were married - and what to do next?

Always alert for some opportunity to improve themselves and their lot, they decided to move to Minneapolis which was then a thriving little city with only a few thousand inhabitants. The year was 1870.

Briefly stated are these following facts:

They joined Our Savior's Church as charter members and Mother was instrumental in starting a Ladies Aid. Father found employment with the Minneapolis Tribune and later with the first Norwegian newspaper ever published in the United States. But then came a new turn to his career.

The Great Northern railroad had laid tracks some forty miles west as part of the system that was to reach the Pacific coast. There were none of the great earth-moving machines of today. They depended upon shovels and wheelbarrows and lots of men ready to work. Father conceived the idea of seeking a contract for building one mile of track bed, as that was the way they parcelled out the project. Upon securing this contract he rounded up some of the newly arrived immigrants who were anxious for employment. The undertaking was finally finished and Father had a part in helping the Great Northern reach the coast, even if it was only a mile.

But this did something for Father. It got him out of the city and turned his thoughts westward where a whole new world waited with all its opportunities. He followed the railroad west, first to Kandiyohi, a budding village which was for a time the western terminal of the railroad. A small newspaper was established there and Father got a job helping to publish it. But it didn't last long; when the railroad reached Willmar that town became the terminal and still is today.

As far as Lars was concerned, one of the advantages of Willmar was that land could still be acquired without cost by homesteading. The young couple took a homestead on a piece of land a few miles north of Willmar. However, farming operations

did not last long either, not because they tired of it but because destiny seemed to lead them to other things.

The county had recently been organized and friends urged Father to run for office. This he did, and was elected and re-elected to the office of Register of Deeds. About this time a bank was being organized, the Kandiyohi County Bank, and they needed someone to run it. Father was asked to do this although he certainly couldn't have known much about banking at that time. But he took it on and made a success of it and continued in this job almost fifty years. During this period he was also elected State Senator and held that office for twelve years.

He was also very active in church and served in various capacities in the church at large, such as the Board of Trustees and the Board of Charities. Significantly, when he retired from his job in the bank, he devoted himself to two projects: raising money for a memorial gift to Norway from those who had migrated from that country to become pioneers in this new land of opportunity, and secondly, soliciting funds for the Wild Rice Children's Home which had suffered complete loss of its buildings by fire. He put his whole heart into this project, for he remembered his own childhood of poverty. His heart went out to any children in need.

Christianity meant much to both Father and Mother. They practised it. Going to church was a regular thing; no one asked on Sunday morning if we were going to church. We just went. In fact, the only time my Father laid hands on me to punish me was one Sunday when one of my less pious friends misled me into playing "hookey" and missing the regular church service. This was at a time when our church services were held in the Norwegian language of which I understood very little at that time. But looking back, I can feel that it did more for me than I knew. Just to see the minister at the altar, surrounded by holy things, seeing all the rugged pioneers around me singing hymns as though they meant something to them, had an influence on me. Let no one say "It's no use taking children to church because they do not get much out of it." They may get more than you think.

Not only our church attendance was regular, but also our home devotions. Every morning these were held and we children were all called from our beds to listen, before we set out for school.

Our parents made a great home for all their children. In all, they had nine children: John and Ellen (died in infancy), Olaf (died at age 11), Dorothea (married to Joseph Estrem, died at age 39), Lawrence, Christian Scriver, Edith, Jane and Bertha. We were a happy family and all of us "arise" to call our parents blessed.

Father departed from this life at the age of seventy-one, and Mother went to her rest at the age of eighty-one. When Father died, the whole city of Willmar closed all places of business during the funeral hour. "An honored life, a peaceful end, and heaven to crown it all" - this might well be his epitaph. Both Father and Mother represented the finest of our pioneers who helped the great Upper Midwest come to life.

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#### I GO TO COLLEGE

Yes, I went to college in the fall of 1899. But it was not with much enthusiasm. I was at the age when I thought I had enough school and I had no definite plan for my life. Why go at all? The big reason was that Father, who had so little opportunity to gain "book knowledge", had revealed how much he would like to see his sons given better opportunity. My dear brother Lawrence had begun college but because of health had to give it up. So I was next, being the only other son in the family. I felt that I must not fail for Father's sake.

I went to Luther College in Decorah, Iowa. I had a little trouble in being accepted as they did not recognize the Academy from which I had graduated as a fully accredited one. This was taken care of by giving me an entrance examination, taken on the spot. I somehow stood the test and was accepted. Luther College was founded and maintained by Norwegian American people, members