

What's in a name: Olson/Olsen/Bjerknes

Norwegians formed family names by giving the oldest son his father's first name with "son" or "sen" added. (Rural people like our grandparent's used a Swedish influenced form of Norwegian, "son"; while urban Norwegians were influenced by Danish, "sen".) Everyone else used the family name, often a "place name" reflecting the actual area of the family's origin.

I always understood that the oldest brother whose name was "Olson" did not come over, but that may not be the case. Elling was either the oldest or the second brother.

Four brothers came together: Elling, Chris, John and Andrew. They sent later for their mother and the youngest brother, Frederick, my grandfather.

They all used "Bjerknes" until they all had a bunch of kids; then decided to use a more "American" name and took that of the older brother--"Olsen/Olson." The spelling was mostly influenced by whoever was writing the birth certificate.

In Daddy's family, the older four, Harold, Hilda, Olaf and Myrto Alfred, were born in Alpena and had Bjerknes birth certificates. The younger four, Karl Frijof (sp?), Lena, Elmer and John, were born "on the county line," the family farm, and had no birth certificates until adulthood.

"Bjerknes" is clearly a place name. "Bjørk" or "bjerk" means "birch tree", and "nes" means "small running water" - a stream or creek.

When Annette studied in Germany in 1987, she met a Norwegian student whose mother's name had been Bjerknes and who came from Leer, the town of our grandparents. He said it was not a common name in Norway, so he might have been a distant relative.

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Addendum:

We have since learned that there were two brothers and a sister who remained in Norway.

Our grandfather's citizenship papers show that he spelled his name "Fredrik Bjartnes. He later went by Frank Olson. Our Uncle Olaf says that Frank hand-wrote a will shortly before he died and signed it Fredrik Bjartnes. As Uncle Olie said, "They disallowed it" because the judge said his name was Frank Olson.

We have also since learned that Bjartnes is an estate in Norway. Frank and his brothers were unlanded peasants who would have used this place name, but would not have been related to the owners who employed them.

(H. Olson, 2014)