

MEMORIES OF THE OLSON
FAMILY
by BERNICE DECKER CARLEY

Karen Hermanson Olson Ellison

One of my few bad memories had to do with Christmas. We always went north every week-end and all holidays. Well this year we got our normal hugs and kisses from Grandma and Grandpa and went looking for the Christmas tree. We did not put one up in Flint because it made a big mess and we weren't there for Christmas. No no tree at the farm either; I remember saying that Santa won't know where to find us. Well, lo and behold, in the morning there was the tree, all decorated and with presents underneath, waiting to be opened. I never did find out, after asking everyone, if the tree really came from Santa or if hard hearted Grandpa Alec had it hid in the grainery. (I still want to believe it was Santa.)

To me Grandma Karen was always old. (She spelt her name Kearn.) She was always short of breath and usually sitting in a chair or her rocker. She came to Flint often to see Dr. Curtin. She had what they then called dropsey. (today we call it congestive heart failure) Her legs would swell from the knee to the ankle. The doctor said if the swelling went above the knee she would probably die. This is exactly what happened to her.

Her trips to Flint to see the Dr. also included a stop at Kresges for a strawberry soda. She had gall bladder trouble and the soda really made her ill. We would wake during the night to find her rolling on her stomach on the floor to get relief. It worked, so who are we to judge.

She did not believe in medicine. Her cures were hot slings (HOT water, sugar and whiskey) and "sweat it out" for a cold. She used a mixture of turpentine and lard instead of Vicks, to rub on your chest. It burnt and stunk, but it worked. Maybe you got well so you didn't have to have more.

During 1932 we lived with Grandma and Grandpa and I went to the Norwegian School along with Berniece and Boyden Olson, Ed and Jerry Mahalak, some of the Timms and Rasmausens. It was a one room school and we walked both ways. One spring day the older kids (I was only 4) decided to walk thru the swamp to get home. Sure, you know who fell in and got blamed for the whole thing. ME..

Grandma never allowed anyone to slap a child. If you did a bad thing she gave you what I call the "evil eye". That was enough to make you behave for weeks. Imagine raising 6 boys alone and not swatting them at least once.

On the farm at the lake I was allowed to ride the horses when they were plowing. I would fall asleep on Flies fack. He never moved fast enough, or turned sharp enough, to make me fall off.

Another horse story: We were out by the barnyard when Alec let the horses out for the first run of the spring. "We" included Alec, Louie, Bernie and Sonny. Fly decided to jump the fence and Sonny was between the fence and the pump. The horse cleared the fence, next jumped Sonny and the pump. For being such a good horse and missing Sonny Grandpa gave Fly some oats. It seemed fair to me.

Remember them talking about Grandma getting stuck in the trap door going into the hay loft. Seems she started down and the ladder fell and she hung by her arms elbow out for 4 hours until the kids got home from school. At that time she weighed over 200 lbs. and was afraid if she let go she would break both legs and need help doing everything. She was a very independent person. (Wonder where the rest of us get this trait.)

During Prohibition the men made beer. It was stored in the root-cellar to age and stay cool. I had the job of going down in the dark to bring up full bottles. To find the full ones you put your finger on the top to see if it had a cap. That cellar had snakes, frogs, mice and spiders. I would not go down there today.

That same root cellar stored all the canned good so they were cold and did not freeze. Also had apples, potatoes, carrots and rutabagies.

During the late summer harvest season on Sundays the relatives from Alpena came out and we picniced in the front yard. Sometimes we had 75 people in the driveway circle. We kids caught yellow jackets on the lilac bushes along the creek. The women cooked and gossiped and the men drank beer and used the apples in the trees for target practice. Grandpa Alec refused to let me shoot anymore when I blew up a crab apple and he had missed all his. Sometimes you can be lucky and win.

When Grandma got ill at the last we were up in Spruce for Sunday. She sent us home in the early evening because Uncle Murt was there to help take care of her. We got back to Flint to find Uncle Olaf sitting on our front porch. He had received a telegram from Murt telling us Grandma was worse. We just got back in the car and went back to Spruce to help Grandma. Her last words to Joyce and I were in Norwegian telling us to get to bed and stop crying. At 3 in the morning Grandma Karen died. I will never forget seeing her in her bed looking like she was just sleeping.

The casket was in the front parlor and the house was full of people for the next three days. There were lots of tears shed. Like a normal Olson get together there was also a lot of remembering and laughing. Grandma would have wanted it like that.

When they dedicated the window in the Lutheran Church all the family came home to Spruce. Harold, Olaf, Murt, Elmer, Johnny and Lena and families. Dedication was on Sunday but they partied on Saturday Night. Oh, did they party and pay for it with hangovers on Sunday morning.

Grandpa Frederick (called Frank) Olson

Not many stories about Grandpa Olson. Everyone assumed he had TB because of the shortness of breath and he coughed up blood.

Originally he must have been a very strong man. He came over on a boat from Norway and worked in Alpena at the saw mills. When Grandma came over later they saved enough money so they bought the 80 acre farm on the County Line. They first needed to clear the trees and stones off the land. This wood was used to build the house, barn, grainery and animal shed.

Frank was named after Grandpa Olson.

Grandpa Alec Ellison

Alec had two sets of step-children but none of his own. His first set were Theodore and Randolph Rasmausen. These boys had farms just across the road from Alec's. Inez Olson and Melvin Rasmausen were Randolph's children. Lets see if I can remember the names of Theodore's family, wife was Annie. Children were Florence, Don, Einer and Gordon.

Next he married Grandma Karen and her family. Just think a ready made family of eight. Naturally the whole family would have rather stayed on the County Line instead of moving to Alec's place.

Grandpa Alec always wanted oatmeal for breakfast and the coffee pot was a fixture on the stove. Before every meal Alec washed his hands, face and hair with a bar of either P & G or Fels Naptha soap. He wore long underwear winter and summer and changed all his clothes on Saturday even if they didn't need changing.

Alec could be a very gruff person but with children he was very tender. He smoked a pipe all his life and the smell of Red Man tobacco brings back memories.

Aunt Hilda Olson ?

This is all the memories of what I have been told over the years. She was a very happily married woman and came home to Grandma to give birth to her first child. Grandma helped a lot of the women in the area give birth to their children.

Hilda went into labor but things were not going well, so someone took horse and buggy to Alpena to get the Doctor. 22 miles each way and when the Dr. arrived he found Hilda had just died trying to deliver a breech baby. Mother and child both died.

Harold Olson

Harold always seemed to be the most reserved one of the family. He married Aunt Louise and there were no children. She worked for Rhodes Department Store in Seattle, Washington and the store

managers often sent her to Detroit on buying trips. She always reminded me of the Duchess of Windsor as she sure did own nice clothing. I never saw her with a hair out of place, or a wrinkled dress.

Sometimes when she came to Detroit Harold came along. If it could be arranged those who could come to Spruce for a family reunion.

Harold and Louise volunteered to pay for Virginia and I to go to college in Seattle. They lived very close to the University so we would have stayed with them. Neither one of us accepted. We did not want to be out of Michigan for four years.

There is a story Uncle Ollie likes to tell about Harold. It seems Harold liked to use an electric razor. The odd thing was, he shaved sitting in his recliner chair in the living room. Mother (Lena) said when she was out there and Harold and Louise went to work she cleaned the chair.

Olaf Olson

We lived just one block from Olaf, Lola and Ginnea on Stevenson Street when Grandma Karen was sick. Lena went north and she and Aunt Isabel took care of Grandma. Joyce went north with Mother as she was pre-school, but I went to live with Uncle Ollie.

My school was only one block from their house so I could keep up with my studies. I could do that when Aunt Lola did not insist the Virginia and I play practice bridge with her. (Every day from 4 to 5:30) Then, we went to get Uncle Olaf at work and hurried home for a quick supper. The double feature at the show started at 7. We watched and Uncle Olaf slept and snored.

Aunt Lola went into a diabetic shock and only lived 12 hours. She is buried in Flint Memorial Park.

Uncle Olaf married Aunt Iva (his former sister-in-law). Her daughter Maxine had always been very close to Virginia. When Aunt Iva died she was buried at Flint Memorial Park. (When Olaf dies he will be buried between Lola and Iva. I have teased him for years about which way he wants to face. He can face Lola or Iva. He says it makes no difference to him as they will only gossip over the top of his head anyway.

He lived with Virginia and Jim for a short while. Later he met and married Goldie Shephardson. They have a house built for them on Greenfield in Flint. It was strange to watch them pay the household bills. Telephone local they split, long distance they each paid for their calls. They split the light and gas bill.

I would go and get them and take them out for breakfast about once a month. Every time Ollie said he would pay next time. I am still waiting so I guess we know how he kept all his money.

PAGE 5

a number of wints Olaf, Murt, Carl, Elmer and wives spent in Zephyrhills, Florida. Seems to me they always had a big fight every spring, but they made up the next fall.

Carl Olson

With Carl living in California it was a real treat the very few times he came home. He was first married to Aunt Bessie and they were divorced. (Real scandal in those days.)

He next married Aunt Olive and acquired 2 step-daughters (Olivanna and Shirley). When they came to Michigan they would stay with Lena for a few days and then go north. Carl always went to see his old school teacher on every trip.

Carl was without a doubt the biggest flirt of the bunch. When you compare him to Elmer, that makes Carl and BIG flirt.

After he retired he and Alice spent part of each year traveling in their travel trailer. They spent time in Florida, New Orleans, Las Vegas, Seattle and Biloxi, Mississippi. He spent his time, like all the Olson's talking with people.

He moved to California after being in the Navy in WW1. He had only an 8th grade education like most of the brothers. He was very proud of what he had achieved, with that background. He had a very responsible job with Otis Elevators in Los Angeles.

Myrto Olson

The only bachelor in the family. Murt lived with the Deckers off and on after 1937.

He was with us on Edmund Street during World War 11. He worked at the Buick and spent at least 10 hours per day 7 days per week on the job. Closer to the end of the war he was working 12 hours per day and still 7 days per week on the job.

He went to local doughnut shops and restaurants for coffee and gossip every day. He also smoked none stop all day long.

Murt loved to tease everyone but his favorite targets were the younger generation. I remember my first day of school at Long-fellow School. Of course I got new shoes to wear on the great day. Mother, Joyce and I looked all over the house for my shoes until we saw Murt's sill grin. Yes he had hid them on top of the dining room light fixture.

Going North with Murt one day Joyce and I had our diddy-dolls along in the car. We went to Forwards in Standish for lunch, and of course were told to use the bathroom before getting back in the car. Got to car and Murt told us our dolls smelled. He said he thought they had messed there diapers. He had put mustard

in the diapers and thought that was really funny. We never got the stains off the dolls butts.

You must all remember riding in the car when Murt was the only person who could drive!!!! He kept pulling down his pant legs and twisting all over the seat. If he had another person with a drivers license in the car they drove. This also held true if the person was a hitch-hicker.

We had all volunteered to fly to Florida and drive Murt home the last trip he made. I know I for one really said goodbye to him in the yard at Holcombes in Flint. He was sick when he left but did not get any less independent at the end. His last words to me were "I am old enough to take care of myself and I will have pork roast at your house 3 days from now". He died on the way home and I know he is happy he always lived life his way and had the rest of us willing to agree with him.

Elmer Olson

Well we all know Elmer was the spoiled brat of the family. He always had the nicest clothes and most money in his pocket. Grandma thought that was his due. She said one of your children never grows up. The was Elmer.

He lived in Loraine, Ohio with his wife Betty and her two children, John and Valeria Simmons. Elmer worked in the steel mills for years and then they bought a bar. Elmer was the bar tender and bouncer and Betty was the cook. If you went to visit them when they had the bar you had all your meals in the bar.

After he sold the bar they moved around more than the rest of the family. Once Grandma found them a place to live in Spruce and one Sunday discovered they had just packed and left. They also lived in a rental house in Seattle owned by Uncle Harold and just left there also. Uncle Harold found the house key in the mailbox.

We would go for months and hear nothing from Elmer. Now if the door bell rang at 3 in the morning you knew it was Elmer and Betty. This meant Joyce and I ended up sleeping on the roll-away bed and they took over our bed.

Up on the farm I had a dog that I called mine. One night when Elmer was there he picked me up by my feet and stood me on my head. Naturally the dog bit Elmer in the calf of his leg. The next morning Grandpa shot my dog for being mean.

Elmer and Betty also ended up in Florida for the winters along with Murt, Olaf and Goldie, plus Carl and Alice. Murt said it was always the women who started the fights and you had to take sides. Even Howard and Velma Holcomb got into the fights.

There was a Spruce picnic in Zephyrhills every year and they really got a large crowd.

Johnny (Jack) Olson

Uncle Johnny was the youngest in the family. He took me along on some dates with Aunt Isabel. If they took me they also got the use of Dad's car.

Jack and Murt sailed on a Great Lakes freighter together. We would go to Alpena and meet the boat and see them both. Once I got to go on board for Sunday dinner. Jack was an oiler and Murt was assistant cook. They took me all over the ship and I met all the crew and even the Captain.

When I went on board it was up a ladder on the outside. Not bad when the ship was loaded but coming off I nearly had a heart attack. Coal had been unloaded while we ate and ship sure was up in the air. This happened when I was only 8 so you can imagine how proud I felt.

After Uncle Johnny stopped sailing and went back to Spruce we saw a lot more of him. We stayed at their house while we were literally shoveling out the house on the County Line.

Uncle Johnny used to take us on hay rides out in the woods on the back of his farm. We would get back and Aunt Isabel would be fixing corn-on-the-cob for dinner and we ate everything.

One morning we had pancakes for breakfast and Aunt Isabel made homemade syrup. She watched everyone all day and on the next morning informed us she had used Fletchers Castoria (the childrens laxative) instead of the vanilla. Everyone had a good laugh about the for years to come.

Lena Olson Decker

Mother told a story about her and Elmer when they were both of dating age. Elmer got home late from the dance and left his clothes all over the place. Lena told him to pick them up and his reply was something like that was womens work. She got mad and drove the broom handle right thru his brand new straw hat.

During World War 11 Mom had a houseful to cook for. Dad worked 7 to 6. Joyce and I went to school at 8:15. Murt worked 8 PM to 8 AM and Berniece Olson worked 2 PM to Midnight. Now Mom had to have mealson the table for everyone at all hours plus do this with food rationing. Mom did all the cooking, cleaning and laundry for everyone. One day the Red Cross came over and asked her to donate time at the hospital. After they heard her schedule at the house they agreed she was doing enough for the War effort.

One Sunday on the County Line during the war we looked up from the table to see a plane at eye level, out the window. I don't know who was more frightened, the pilot or us. They were using the orchard, house and barn to practice hedge hopping. From then on they did not us the place on weekends.

PAGE 8

When we went up to Spruce we begged and borrowed gas stamps. The farmers got gas for their tractors and Murt bought gas stamps from others at work. During the trips up there we packed just enough food to last 1 day and took the left-overs back to Flint.

The folks bought the lot at the Lake after the war. They sold the County Line farm and we all proceeded to built the lake house. Old Ed Mahalak was supervisor so everything was almost finished before you went onto the next part of the project.

When the floor was only half laid there was a family reunion. Mom was trying to walk the joists and fell off. Really lucky she fell between the joists and only had bruises for the next 6 months.

Mom was sure proud the year she shot her own buck. Dad had been getting his for years and this proved to her she was as good a shot as Dad.

Must have been hard work for Mom for years when Grandma was still alive. Sunday was the day to cook, sweep and dust for the week. Laundry went back to Flint with us as farm had no electricity during Grandma's life.

The Olson's were brought up to be just drop in guests. Remember when you had company coffee and sweets were required. Sometimes all you had was home-made bread and jam but it went on the table for the company.

Addendum: Shortly after we mailed our cousin Bernice Decker Carley her notebook of stories in 1993, I got a phone call. "You sure know how to make an old lady cry," she said. "I'll tell you what I'm gonna do. I'm the oldest, so I remember the old folks the best. I'm gonna write something about all of them and send it to you." Bernie could type 100 words a minute on a manual typewriter, and I'm sure she was going that fast when she wrote these memories.

(h. olson, 2014)