

The Christening Dress  
by Helen Olson

I suppose the reason we spend time thinking about the little family stories is that we keep trying to figure out just what made our parents and grandparents "tick," what notions did they have about some of life's basic operational tools that influenced the way they acted. Behind all of this, of course, we're trying to figure out what makes us "tick," what family generalities have carried over into our sense of life's "givens" and the way we behave. Here are two little seemingly unrelated stories about our grandmother, Karen Hermanson Olson Allison, that I think might give us a better notion of who she was.

We've all heard about our grandmother's generosity with food. We know about the time Mother, as a young teenager before she became a daughter-in-law, went back to grandma's with Daddy late one Saturday night after a dance and Uncle Elmer, always a scalawag, declared himself hungry, went into the pantry and fetched the Sunday cake which he cut up and fed to the assembled gang. When our proper Scottish-bred and-raised mother tried to apologize the next day, protesting that she had attempted to stop them, Grandma waved her away with, "I made it for to eat." And we know how Grandma suffered and felt she would have to answer for the death by tuberculosis of a young Indian woman whom she had turned away (the only time) because she herself was out of food. Here is another story of touching generosity.

When Sonny (Francis, Frank) was born, Grandma was anxious that he be baptized right away. She didn't want Mother to drive anywhere with him before she had driven him to the church. This, I might add, from a woman who didn't hesitate to express her disagreements at times with the organized church--the Lutheran one. Mother had made by hand, with a needle and thread, two stitches forward and one back, a white dress and slip which we all four were baptized in. Grandma apologized to Mother for not having the beautiful long traditional Christening robes which she had made for her own eight children. (I think she made it in Norway and brought it with her in her dowry trunk before she married our grandfather.)

It had been a beautiful set. All of the children had been baptized in it; Johnny (our Dad) had been the last. She had meant to keep it for her grandchildren. But poor Mrs. LaBonte (I'm not sure that the right French Canadian neighbor). They had so many children, you know. And so little money. And Grandma, though she wasn't a trained midwife, often had to go help with the birthing. It was a long, hard labor and the baby was born dead. And the poor little woman, she cried so hard and she was so distraught because she didn't have anything to bury the baby in. And Grandma couldn't stand to see her suffering so. So even though she knew it wouldn't make any difference to the baby, she went home and got the slip from the Christening set and took it to put on the baby before they put it in its little home-made wooden box.

The next year, Grandma was again fetched to help Mrs. LaBonte give birth to another still-born baby. Grandma said her heart was breaking, but she knew what she had to do. She went home and fetched the Christening dress from its storage place in her special trunk. She said she cried a long time over that dress before she took it to bury the baby in, but she knew she had done the right thing. She was sorry, though, that she had denied her grandchildren.

That was one side of our Grandmother, but there was another (probably many).

Before he was drafted into the Army, Uncle Olaf went to work in the mills in Alpena. He saved his money and bought the forty next to Grandma's farm on the county line (Alpena and Alcona

counties.) He went off to World War I and while he was gone, Grandma first worked and then sold the farm. Uncle Olie never saw a penny of the money. At age 97, he's still mad about it.

And Grandma tended to manipulate her children. Mother said that one thing was a given: when everyone got ready to go out on a Saturday night, Uncle Elmer left in the best topcoat and the best car and with money in his pocket whether any of the above were his or not. The other sons would be furious and Grandma would excuse her maneuvering on Elmer's behalf with, "Every mother has one child who doesn't grow up."

Aunt Helen tells me that one of the early difficulties of our parents' marriage was that Daddy tended to run up bills so he could keep cash in his pocket. This didn't set well with our Scottish mother. But Grandma's response to her complaints was, "If people are dumb enough to lend him money, they can wait to get it back."

Mother often said that Daddy's family tended to live "high of the hog" when they had money, and low when they didn't. All of this fluctuated from year to year, depending on the crops, the horses Grandpa Alec, our step-grandfather, raised, his lumbering operation "across the lake," and how many hunters from the city hired him as a guide. Their weekly money, like that of most people in the area, came from the sale of cream. A little family rule dictated that Grandma got the bills and Grandpa Alec got the change. The weekly ritual of dividing up the cash was always the scene of a pleasant sport, with Grandma chuckling when she would slide him only a few pennies and Grandpa gloating when his share came to ninety-eight or nine cents.

It's hard to know in retrospect what motivated our grandmother about her handling of money and goods, but I suspect that the tensions between her and her children had to do with what I sometimes call the "generation chasm" between immigrant people and their children. In this country, the individual and individual rights are of paramount importance, and the country's children catch on quickly. That is not the case in nearly any other country. In other parts of the world, families rule and children are expected to succumb to the needs of the family. In addition, I suspect that Grandma Karen thought of money only as a means to something, not as something of worth in itself. And of course there's the possibility that she was simply trying to meet the needs of the day one day at a time as best she could using whatever she had at her disposal. In any event, I would hazard a guess that she would tell quite a different story about her son's cars and topcoats and cash and about Uncle Olie's farm than the one they told.

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